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Written Testimony - House Interim Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, and Water

Dear Committee Members,

I know that you will be hearing highlights of recent legislative drought investments and hopefully many success stories related to those investments made by the State.

First, and with that theme in mind, the \$5.5 million directed to North Unit Irrigation District, administered through the Dept. of Administrative Services, was literally a lifeline for many of our North Unit farmers. Many farmers in our district are struggling to survive following several years of severe drought and drought related water shortages. The States investment allowed North Unit to reimburse North Unit patrons, as a credit, for water expenses and assessments for the 2021 irrigation season. By doing so, it provided relief to individual irrigation district farmers while ensuring North Unit remained solvent and able to deliver irrigation water to its patrons in 2022.

Second, North Unit anticipates sharing another success story with the House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, and Water in the future as we prepare to undertake a significant conservation project with the assistance of the States drought investment.

Due to North Unit's junior water rights, multi-year drought, and voluntary Habitat Conservation Plan obligations intended to help rehabilitate endangered species and river ecosystems, North Unit and its farmers are faced with restricted water supplies for irrigation. In 2021, North Unit farmers struggled with less than 50% of a normal water allocation, as well as mid-season reductions and a premature shut-off when crops were most vulnerable. Worse yet, water allocations for 2022 are just 25% of normal, irrigation reservoirs remain at historic lows, and natural inflows are insufficient to provide much hope for winter recharge and drought recovery in the near-term. The upcoming drought investment of \$2 million, administered via OWEB, will be used to help fund an irrigation modernization project that will provide real, on the ground, conservation benefits to improve drought resiliency for North Unit while also providing instream benefits for basin fish and wildlife, including ESA listed species.

The State's investment in North Unit's irrigation modernization project will be used to pipe 27.5 miles of North Unit's infrastructure by converting open-ditch irrigation conveyance systems to a buried, closed-pipe system. The irrigation modernization project will reduce water loss from seepage and evaporation, saving up to an estimated 6,089 acre-feet annually, will provide pressurized water to point of use locations, and place up to 4.6 cubic feet per second of water instream to benefit fish and wildlife. Further, the State's investment will be used, in part, to meet a 25% cost-share requirement of a \$25 million funding opportunity made available through the Natural Resources Conservation Service/U.S. Dept. of Agriculture PL566 program.

Finally, it is with great appreciation and gratitude that the State can provide the much-needed investments to support irrigated agriculture in central Oregon and during North Unit's most trying times. I look forward to appearing before the commission in the future to share the importance and success of those investments in North Unit.

Respectfully submitted,

Mike Britton

Executive Manager