

2 March 2021

To Committee Chair Witt, Vice Chair Breese-Iverson, Vice Chair Hudson and members of the House Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee:

I share this letter as an expansion of my spoken testimony later today, in opposition to House Bill 2357 (and the portion of HB2379) that seeks the elimination of OFRI.

My wife and I are new woodland owners. After years of retirement saving and dreaming, in 2019 we were able to purchase a small forest property in Vida. From years of backpacking and hiking, we knew that we loved mountains and forests, but we knew next to nothing about what caring for a forest might look like—or, indeed, what might be expected of us as new woodland owners.

Thank goodness—and the Oregon legislature in 1991—for OFRI. Even before the Extension, OFRI was one of the first discoveries we made. Funded by harvest tax dollars, OFRI is free to all who want to learn about Oregon forests. We marveled at the wealth of resources available at the click of a button: find your ODF stewardship forester; learn about Oregon's Forest Practice Rules; learn about the trees in your forest; learn about threats to tree health; learn about management options for diversity and resilience, for wildlife and watersheds, for carbon sequestration and storage. Although overwhelmed by the options at first, ultimately OFRI allowed us to feel that we might be up to the challenge of successfully thinking through those options and determining objectives that matched our values, so that we might actually end up managing—for health and diversity and wildlife and watersheds and carbon sequestration and storage—rather than damaging our forest.

From the plethora of resources available through the website to the invaluable array of partnerships that it contributes to and supports—the Partnership for Forestry Education key among them, OFRI has made it possible for our learning to continue even through the pandemic, with TreeSchool Online. Afters hours of logging on and taking notes and reading and discussing, we are beginning to feel forest literate.

As former educators, we have appreciated the non-biased, science-based approach of OFRI, from resources to workshops. Even when we might have wanted someone to tell us what to do, the consistent OFRI refrain is “it depends on your management objectives.” To harvest or not harvest, to manage for carbon sequestration and storage—or for habitat or biodiversity or fire recovery or simply a resilient, healthy forest to hand on to future generations—OFRI is there to provide pointers to information, not a blueprint, not arguing on behalf of any particular constituency other than Oregon's forests themselves.

Without OFRI—and all the forest literacy efforts it supports, from TreeSchool Online for adults to Talk About Trees for preschoolers through eighth-graders, we—both the two of us and Oregon overall—would be lost, victims of the agendas of other interest groups who have more invested in “winning” the argument, even as Oregonians are divided more and more amongst themselves, than in insuring a beautiful, fire resilient, healthy forested Oregon for generations to come. In the midst of the polarized and polarizing whirlwind that characterizes the forestry “conversation” in Oregon, OFRI is a reliable, calm, vital center. While it is the forest sector's commodity commission, funded by harvest taxes, OFRI's mission is forest literacy for all Oregonians; its constituency is Oregon's forests. The fact that OFRI's existence is even in question is indicative of how very much we need it.

Thinking beyond just ourselves, here are a few additional things for you, as representatives of the interests of our whole state, to bear in mind as you consider these proposed tax bills:

OFRI is funded exclusively through the Forest Products Harvest Tax, a volumetric tax on harvested timber paid only by timber growers. OFRI receives no General Fund dollars. This bears repeating: *although all Oregonians benefit from OFRI, only forest landowners pay for it.*

OFRI is the state's commodity commission for timber. There are 22 other commodity commissions for agricultural crops such as wheat, beef, blueberries, hazelnuts and others. Yet unlike the other commodity commissions, OFRI cannot lobby or directly levy assessments to industry, and requires a legislative appointee.

Currently, the Secretary of State's office is conducting a performance audit of OFRI, with a report expected no later than this summer. No changes should be made to OFRI until the audit is complete.

OFRI's invaluable role in increasing forest literacy among all Oregonians is clear from how it allocates its resources:

21% for K-12 education:

Every year OFRI reimburses classrooms for the cost of transportation for field trips that focus on forestry-related studies

In 2018-2019 alone:

- roughly 170,000 students across Oregon participated in OFRI-sponsored classroom and field-forest education programs
- more than 100,000 Oregon students benefitted from in-class programs funded by OFRI
- more than 1,000 Oregon teachers were served by OFRI's forestry education workshops
- roughly 60% of the fourth- to sixth-grade students who visited the Rediscovery Forest at the Oregon Garden Natural Resources Education Program, came from Title 1 schools, which serve a high percentage of lower income families

13% for landowner education:

OFRI produces (and regularly updates) an Oregon's Forest Protection Laws Manual—a 300+ page illustrated reference for forest landowners, managers and operators to understand and follow the Oregon Forest Practices Act in 2019-2020 alone

- 78 trainings were offered, attended by over 6,000 landowners
- OFRI was instrumental in providing 20 Tree School Online webinars for forest landowners

56% for public education:

- TV and radio advertising about the Oregon Forest Practices Act
- County Economic Fact Sheets (how the forest products industry impacts Oregon's 36 counties)
- Bi-annual Oregon Forest Facts booklet about Oregon's forests and forest industry
- In-depth special reports on topics like water quality, carbon storage, harvest methods, and wildfire

As woodland owners forced into a premature, salvage harvest by the Holiday Farm Fire, one of the things that makes the prospect of paying our harvest tax less onerous is knowing that a portion of it will go to OFRI. It is a tax we are not only willing, but happy to pay, knowing that it is, in a sense, paying it forward to the other new woodland owners seeking to understand the responsibility of forest ownership, to insure that Oregon's forests stay healthy, resilient and beautiful for the long haul—and for all Oregonians to enjoy. Oregon's forests need OFRI, Oregon's forest landowners need OFRI, Oregon forest lovers need OFRI—*Oregon* needs OFRI.

Thank you for including the above testimony in your deliberations.

Kathryn McMichael