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House Committee on Water

Testimony on HB 2257: Harney Basin Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program

Submitted by: Amelia Porterfield, Senior Policy Advisor

Chair Helm and Members of the Committee:

We write to express our support of HB 2257, which appropriates funds to the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) to leverage federal support for the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) in the Harney Basin.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a science-based, non-partisan organization committed to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Oregon, TNC has over 80,000 supporters and members in every county. Based in communities around the state, we manage lands and waters in varied ecosystems and partner with ranchers, farmers, fishers, timber and environmental interests on some of the most challenging conservation issues facing people and nature.

TNC supports Place-Based Planning as a method of water management that directly addresses ecological priorities and impacts to frontline communities, and we are active participants in the Harney Basin Community-Based Water Planning Collaborative. This collaborative is comprised of a wide range of stakeholders, including state agencies, irrigators, conservation organizations, and domestic well users. Together, these participants have made significant progress to identify critical water resource solutions that will benefit a sustainable economy, diverse ecosystems, and resilient water supplies, but they need additional support.

Incentive programs like the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program are valuable tools to reduce water use while offering an economic glidepath for small businesses that are dependent upon groundwater. If implemented in Oregon, a CREP would also achieve ecological outcomes by incentivizing reductions in groundwater use that would otherwise affect groundwater-dependent ecosystems. As an invited member of the CREP Technical Team, The Nature Conservancy has identified and prioritized areas where groundwater-dependent ecosystems would benefit from a reduction in groundwater use.

An incentive program like CREP can only be successful if OWRD has the capacity to evaluate applicant eligibility, ensure accountability of enrollees, and increase trust in the community that the program is meeting its goals. Though the agency is resource limited and would require additional capacity to fulfill these roles, this program would primarily be funded through federal match with at least a 70/30 ratio, ensuring Oregon's investment would secure sorely needed resources for the region.

We appreciate Rep. Owens for bringing this legislation forward and encourage you to advance it to Ways & Means for funding consideration.

Thank you.