

Chair Helm and Members of the House Committee on Water,

On behalf of the 350PDX Forest Defense Team, I urge you to support HB 2594, which is an important step towards improving drinking water quality from forested watersheds.

The Department of Environmental Quality has found that many heavily logged watersheds are out of compliance with the Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) under the Federal Clean Water Act, especially the TMDLs for temperature and turbidity. These violations were the subject of a memorandum of understanding between the Oregon Department of Forestry and the Department of Environmental Quality in 1998, but the problems persist today. By directing the Department of Forestry to reevaluate stream qualifications, stream protections, and slowly move towards a process that could consider whether a watershed needs additional protections, this bill has potential to improve drinking water quality in Oregon. Even modest improvements to the status quo deserve support.

But water managers ultimately need better tools to protect drinking water. Towns with heavily logged watersheds, like Rockaway Beach and Corbett have been forced to spend millions on new water treatment facilities to purify drinking water filled with sedimentation from clearcut logging upstream, while upstream timber operations face few repercussions. The shield law protects them from responsibility for water quality as long as they are in compliance with the relatively weak laws of the Forest Practices Act.

Climate change will exacerbate the problems faced by community watersheds. As temperatures warm, more precipitation will fall as rain and less as snow. Spring snowmelt releases water slowly, while rainstorms can result in turbid runoff. Higher summer temperatures also can lead to drought directly due to high rates of soil moisture evaporation. Oregon State University scientists recently found that clearcut-plantation forestry can reduce water levels during summer months by 50% when compared to adjacent, unlogged watersheds. The reductions in streamflow persist for over five decades. Drought and flow reductions can be existential risks for towns that rely on small forested rivers for their drinking water.

Thank you for supporting legislation to address the issues that are faced by communities downstream of forested watersheds.

Sincerely,
Felice Kelly, Ph.D.
Co-lead, Forest Defense Team
350PDX

