



Oregon

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**To: The Honorable Brad Witt, Chair
House Committee on Natural Resources**



House Bill 2171

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Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

The Department appreciates the opportunity to discuss House bill 2171 with you today. The bill extends and funds the Oregon Conservation & Recreation Fund (OCRF) program that was established by the 2019 Legislature. The program is an important opportunity to diversify how the state of Oregon supports fish and wildlife conservation.

The 2016 Joint Interim Task Force on Funding for Fish, Wildlife and Related Outdoor Recreation and Education recommended the creation of the OCRF as a new and sustainable source of revenue to supplement existing funding and enable ODFW to better meet its statutory mission and Legislatively-assigned responsibilities. The Task Force also found that ODFW's future should not be limited by the traditional model of hunting and fishing fees, but by a more diversified source of revenues, which will allow a more holistic and equitable approach to fish and wildlife conservation, management, recreation and education.

The creation of the OCRF by House bill 2829 by the 2019 Legislature was a first step in fulfilling the Task Force's recommendations. Implementing House bill 2829 consisted of three primary workflows in the 2019-2021 on which the Department has made substantial progress: (1) A campaign to generate \$1 million for the Fund from private sources; (2) Expending all moneys from the OCRF by the end of the 2021-2023 biennium to accommodate the July 1, 2021 sunset date; and (3) Forming a new Oregon Conservation and Recreation Advisory Committee to advise the Fish and Wildlife Commission on expenditures from the OCRF.

The OCRF supports implementation of the Oregon Conservation Strategy and connecting people with the outdoor opportunities. Throughout 2020, the Fund invested in projects to connect youth, families, diverse and underserved communities to the outdoors; engage Oregonians in the science and research needed to improve our understanding of Oregon's diverse species; and restore healthy ecosystems to benefit Oregon's fish and wildlife and improve the health of our environment for future generations.

By the end of January 2021, the Fund generated over \$250,000 from more than 15,000 individuals and multiple foundations. The Conservation & Recreation Advisory Committee, while only able to

meet virtually, obligated \$221,789 for 17 projects around the state. These projects range from examining the feasibility of reintroducing sea otters to Oregon's coast to searching for elusive mammals in the Willowa Mountains and engaging Portland teens on their first camping trip. The Advisory Committee is also managing an approved list of conservation and recreation projects that are funded as soon as new donations are made to ensure that every dollar will support conservation and recreation around the state before the program sunsets at the end of the biennium.

The Advisory Committee members realized from their very first conversations that seeking to close gaps in equitable access to Oregon's outdoors and wildlife-associated recreation opportunities was an important part of their charge. The Committee developed an Expenditure Framework that lays out a variety of Program Priorities, while also stating that, "In all priority areas, the Advisory Committee will prioritize projects that engage Oregonians in the solution to a key conservation issue or in recreational opportunities that reach out to and engage people who have not participated in the past because of language barriers, financial barriers, access barriers, etc." The first round of funding did not yield applications from organizations explicitly seeking to reduce barriers to equitable outdoor opportunities, so the Committee formed an Outdoor Equity Subcommittee with the purpose of intentionally reaching out to and connecting with people, communities and organizations that are seeking to break down barriers. The Subcommittee's work resulted in seven Outdoor Equity projects being recommended in the second funding opportunity.

HB 2171 repeals the sunset dates for the Oregon Conservation & Recreation Fund and the associated Advisory Committee. It also restores the \$1 million General Fund match commitment made in the 2019 session that was eliminated in the second 2020 special session and requires the Advisory Committee to consult with the Office of Outdoor Recreation on expenditures from the Oregon Conservation & Recreation Fund. The Department supports these provisions.

Removing the sunset date and restoring the General Fund commitment would give the Department and partners more time to overcome the private fundraising delays introduced by the 2020 pandemic and associated recession. It will also allow the program to grow to fill the tremendous and growing need to invest in Oregon's relationship with our fish, wildlife, and the outdoors identified by the 2016 Task Force and the Advisory Committee throughout 2020.

The Fish and Wildlife Commission adopted regulations to create the Conservation & Recreation Advisory Committee in October 2019. These rules include formal consultation with the Office of Outdoor Recreation through an ex officio membership on the Committee, "(g) The Director of the Oregon Office of Outdoor Recreation may serve as a non-voting ex officio member of the advisory committee" (OAR 635-098-0040). The Director has participated in a majority of the Committee meetings in the last year.

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