



HARNEY COUNTY COURT

Office of Judge Pete Runnels

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Feb. 1st, 2021

Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources

Re: Support for HB 2298

Chair Helm and members of the Committee,

Harney County faces a number of economic and environmental challenges. As one of the state's most geographically diverse and sparsely populated counties, we desperately seek investment and innovation in our county, particularly when it affects agriculture and our water quantity challenges. HB 3132 is a conduit to additional conservation efforts as well as potentially beneficial to our farms and ranches. I urge your support.

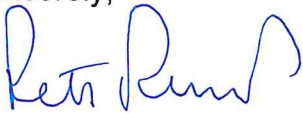
Nearly three years ago, I attended an eco-tour and meeting where several members of this committee came to Frontier Oregon to see first-hand the riparian restoration at Silvies Valley Ranch. We also met with community leaders and businesses from Grant and Harney Counties to talk about the unique challenges in Frontier Oregon and potential approaches to agricultural practices, land-use and business development that can help our citizens thrive.

A few of the significant challenges we face: more than 70 percent of grade school students in some Frontier Oregon cities eligible for free breakfast in schools; high unemployment rates given the growing challenges and costs in agriculture and complete decimation of the forest products industry; "brain drain" or lack of jobs for young people to return to after education; an aging work force; and, a desperate need for upgraded infrastructure water, power, broadband, transportation. Finally, inconsistent management of forests, streams, and natural resources have taken a substantial toll on our landscape and wages in our community. This affects not only the morale of our Frontier Oregon citizens, but the tax rolls our county, towns, and schools depend on.

Fortunately, our unique and beloved region of the state also has opportunities: Big, beautiful big vistas; abundance of wildlife; Highways 20, 395 as well as several good local airports; the legacies of our existing cattle and hay ranches that are still squeaking by economically; small businesses catering to local communities (but lack the knowledge and facilities to address the needs and wants of destination tourists). Fortunately, the legislature has acknowledged that Frontier Oregon is different from urban or rural parts of the state - passed a law enabling the Silvies Valley Ranch pilot project in 2011 (HB 3465) and the new guest ranch law in 2018 (HB 4031).

HB 2298 is yet another approach specifically tailored to our unique geography and focused on ecological and economic benefits for our landscape and those managing our working lands. This bill recognizes two things: the changing hydrology of the upper basins that feed into Malheur lake, and the benefits of streamlining the regulatory process to get our farmers and ranchers to address erosion and riparian degradation. I've seen first-hand the ecological benefits AND economic benefits of restoring ancient floodplains and putting these meadows back to productive use for fish, birds, elk, deer AND ranchers. Potentially of even greater importance, this work results in creation of fire breaks in watersheds, a critical issue for all Oregonians.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Pete Runnels". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Pete" and last name "Runnels" clearly distinguishable.

Pete Runnels
Harney County Judge