



# OREGON TRAIL ELECTRIC COOPERATIVE

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February 2, 2022

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative  
Testimony, Senate Bill 1545  
Senate Committee on Labor and Business

Chair Taylor, Vice Chair Knopp, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Tucker Billman and I am the Manager of Government Affairs for Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative (OTEC). OTEC is a member-owned and governed electric cooperative that serves more than 60,000 residents in Baker, Grant, Harney and Union counties in Eastern Oregon.

Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony regarding Senate Bill (SB) 1545. OTEC has been in close communication with Baker Technical Institute (BTI) and Eastern Oregon University (EOU) to better understand how SB 1545 will impact both of those entities in their efforts to further develop a workforce in Eastern Oregon.

It is important to provide some context about the relationship between OTEC and EOU and BTI. OTEC is investing heavily in building strong relationships with both of those entities to help facilitate a growing workforce that can serve the needs of Eastern Oregon businesses, volunteer organizations, and the community more broadly. This partnership is so important to OTEC that we have dedicated an organization-wide strategic initiative to that partnership. The work BTI is doing directly benefits businesses in Eastern Oregon by ensuring an adequate flow of labor to fill open positions at businesses throughout our communities, helping to keep these businesses viable and operating. Their workforce programs are growing, and OTEC is doing all we can to support the growth of BTI and the impact it will have on Eastern Oregon. We do not believe the value that BTI provides to Eastern Oregon can be overstated.

OTEC believes that SB 1545 is a step in the right direction, but we offer the following suggestions to improve its reach for Oregonians. OTEC is pleased to see the clear focus on prioritizing workforce development in rural communities. We believe this may be one of the most important components of the legislation. Rural Oregon is struggling to attract employers who will bring new jobs to the region. We're also struggling to build new homes for a growing population. Those issues are both directly linked to the need for an increasingly robust workforce in Eastern Oregon. Focusing on rural communities is an important step in solving those issues, and we're happy to see this legislation prioritizing workforce development in rural Oregon.

One concern we have is the narrowly tailored focus on three particular industries – manufacturing, healthcare, and construction. While we certainly understand and recognize the very real need for further

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*Proudly serving Baker, Grant, Harney and Union counties*

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workforce development in those sectors, we think this legislation would bring significant additional value if there was less specificity about what sectors would qualify for the funding in the legislation. As an electric cooperative, we are constantly in need of additional electrical and line workers. SB 762 from the 2021 legislative session created the requirement that utilities have wildfire mitigation plans that will necessitate significant vegetation management practices. However, electric cooperatives across the State are struggling to find enough vegetation management capacity to meet the standards of the wildfire mitigation rules. Additionally, as federal infrastructure funds related to electric vehicle chargers, renewable technologies, and broadband are made available, additional expertise and capacity will be needed in all of those arenas to avoid labor shortages that will slow the deployment of those resources. We would recommend the bill remove language specifying what sectors are eligible for the funding, and instead lean on local workforce development boards and educational institutions to determine what the needs of their respective communities are and how to best utilize the funding to meet those needs.

Another concern we have is the focus of Sections 5 and 11 on Community Colleges. Focusing a significant amount of funding on Community Colleges certainly has benefits, but our service territory has no prominent Community Colleges and will be unable to access millions of dollars in workforce development funds being appropriated by SB 1545. Again, we believe that less specificity in who is eligible for the funds, and making all the funds more competitive, will benefit our region and other rural communities around the State.

It is important to note that Baker Technical Institute is one of the largest providers of trainings to Native American populations across the Pacific Northwest. Baker Technical Institute is also one of the largest training providers to those living under the poverty line and formerly incarcerated individuals in the State of Oregon. Finally, Baker Technical Institute is headquartered in Baker City, Oregon and trains individuals to fill jobs all through rural Oregon. Bottom line, Baker Technical Institute is leading the region in training many of the priority populations outlined in this legislation. We'd encourage you to do away with the limitations and open up all of the appropriated funds to a competitive process that entities like BTI would be eligible for.

Beyond these key points, OTEC appreciates the Committee's focus on further developing workforce in rural Oregon. Our members will benefit from the increased job creation, accessibility of a workforce for potential new employers, and the opportunities for further workforce development that may come in future years as a direct result of this legislation. Thank you for the opportunity to offer this testimony. Do not hesitate to contact me at [tbillman@otec.coop](mailto:tbillman@otec.coop) or 541-519-3553.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'TB' followed by a horizontal line.

Tucker Billman

Manager of Government Affairs

Oregon Trail Electric Cooperative