

June 5th, 2023

To: Senate Rules Committee

Re: SB 775 Soil Water Conservation District Board Eligibility

Chair Lieber and Committee Members,

I would like to submit this letter of support for SB 775. SB 775 seeks to update the eligibility rules for soil and water conservation districts so candidates for zoned seats in districts with populations of over 250,000 do not have to own or manage at least 10 acres of land. I live in Senate District 22 with Senator Lou Frederick and House District 43 with Representative Tawna Sanchez and within East Multnomah Soil Water Conservation District (SWCD). As a resident of one of the six affected SWCD, I strongly believe this is a long overdue update to the current statute.

I believe the current statute's limits on eligibility are not realistic for urban areas and we are currently missing strong opportunity to improve urban conservation. Destructive ecosystem-wide natural events are happening more frequently as we experience the effects of climate change. SWCD's mission and purpose are even more critical as we implement wide-scale mitigation and adaptation approaches. However, solutions to these problems can't be limited to private property and rural areas. Best practices and education are needed for public land stewardship, urban-rural habitat connectivity, and urban conservation. SB 775 would allow the six impacted SWCD in Oregon to adequately focus on urban tree canopy, stormwater runoff, pesticide use in back yards, heat islands, drought tolerant plants and other issues that are critical in the urban environment. I live in an urban neighborhood in East Multnomah SWCD and it is unrealistic that anyone in my neighborhood would own or manage 10 or more acres of land. These SWCDs are needed leaders in urban zones, and it is time to update board governance structures to reflect this prioritization.

The current statute severely restricts diversity and representation on the boards because land ownership is deeply rooted in racist and exclusionary systems in the United States. In Oregon, black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) residents couldn't own land until 1926.¹ The racist and exclusionary language wasn't voted out of the state's constitution until 2002, and 30% of Oregon residents voted against this revision.² Tying board governance to land ownership and management is an explicit perpetuation of the racist roots of this state. Not only do we need to make concerted efforts to reconcile the past, but BIPOC communities are also disproportionately impacted by the adverse effects of contaminated water, polluted air, and climate change disaster events. SWCD leadership needs to represent those disproportionately impacted and systemically excluded.³ (*Farming 'White Utopia,'* 2022).

¹ Camhi, T. (2020, June 9). A racist history shows why Oregon is still so white. *Oregon Public Broadcasting*. Retrieved from <https://www.opb.org/news/article/oregon-white-history-racist-foundations-black-exclusion-laws/>.

² Camhi, T. (2020).

³ *Farming in a 'White Utopia': BIPOC Farmer Development Coalition Strategic Plan 2022-2024*. (2022).

Congressional Hunger Center. *YouTube*. Retrieved March 6, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oEyixZTgOVM>.

SB 775 will help SWCDs reduce discriminatory barriers to participate in urban areas, promote representative leadership, and equitably prioritize conservation, adaptation, and mitigation strategies.

Thank you for your consideration,
Katie Gavares

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