



**BAKER COUNTY ASSOCIATION OF CONSERVATION DISTRICTS**  
**BAKER VALLEY • BURNT RIVER • EAGLE VALLEY • KEATING**

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**3990 Midway Drive • Baker City, OR 97814 • (541) 523-7121 • Tim Kerns, Chairman**

March 8, 2023

To Whom It May Concern:

The Baker County Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCD) consisting of Baker Valley, Burnt River, Eagle Valley and Keating SWCD Board of Directors, are submitting this letter in strong opposition to proposed Senate Bill 775 that would amend the Oregon Revised Statutes that govern soil and water conservation districts statewide; specifically ORS 568.560. The proposed language would remove zone director eligibility requirements for counties over a yet-to-be determined population.

The argument in favor of removing eligibility requirements has been that the zone positions are exclusionary; this could not be further from the truth. Current statute lists several options in terms of eligibility for zone directors; they may either own or manage 10+ acres within the zone that they represent, OR reside within the zone that they represent and indicate an interest in natural resources conservation. This can be accomplished by serving as an Associate Director on the board for a one year term, and by having an SWCD-approved conservation plan in place.

The Baker County SWCDs feel strongly that an indicated interest in natural resources should be the very minimum pre-requisite for any and all SWCD directors, whether in a zone position or not. Policy, priorities, and SWCD scopes of work should be implemented by directors who have the same vested interest in stewardship and land management as the constituents they represent, and who understand the potential financial impact policy can have on local economies, particularly private landowners and commodity producers; those who utilize SWCD services the most.

Current statute reads: *To ensure proper representation of all the people in the district and to facilitate district functions, the State Department of Agriculture shall provide for the zoning of each district, and shall provide each time directors are elected or appointed for the proper and equitable representation for each zone.* This language exists because zone positions are crucial to the appropriate representation of people within a district. All Oregonians have the right to clean water and soil; the Baker County SWCDs could not agree more; however, virtually all SWCD programs and policies directly impact private landowners and commodity producers, both in terms of land management practices as well as financial impacts. All counties and districts, despite population size, have many identified land use zones, particularly when it comes to agricultural use. SWCD directors that represent a zone will have unmatched knowledge and experience regarding that particular land use area, and can far-better facilitate SWCD programs and assist constituents within those areas.

Soil and water conservation districts were founded to “promote and assist in voluntary natural resource conservation, especially of agricultural and forest land”. While SWCDs are not regulatory agencies, they have been tasked with acting as a liaison for landowners and



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producers who have legal obligations and responsibilities, such as those with waters of the state running through their property, for example. A landowner with a .5 acre lot with a river-view within city limits does not have the same legal responsibilities as a landowner who manages 30 acres of pasture ground with a perennial stream running through it. A director who represents that agricultural zone will have knowledge of the Ag Water Quality Plan and experience with the rules set forth in Senate Bill 1010, and can better assist landowners who are in a similar position. Senate Bill 1010 is not voluntary, and can have very-real consequences for those who fall within its jurisdiction; this is just one example of why it is critical that directors have zone-specific knowledge and understanding.

Director eligibility requirements have been discussed at length during quarterly Soil and Water Conservation Commission meetings, which host SWCD directors and staff from across the state. It has been clear during discussions that a majority of the Oregon SWCD directors are against changing current statute for the very reasons listed in this letter. The Baker County SWCDs have reached out to Senator Frederick, who is sponsoring the newly proposed bill, to better explain director responsibilities as well as the goals and objectives of a soil and water conservation district, in hopes to relay how effective zone directors really are. To date, there has been no response from Senator Frederick's office, or any effort to facilitate a conversation, which is extremely disappointing to say the least.

The four Baker County SWCD Board of Directors' vehemently reject all proposed language in Senate Bill 775, and are encouraging other districts across the state, as well as partnering agencies to make their voices heard and do the same. Legislature should allow Oregon soil and water districts to focus on the vital conservation work we have been implementing for over 83 years.

Signed,

Whitney M. Collins, District Manager and Representing the Baker Valley, Burnt River, Eagle Valley and Keating SWCD Board of Directors