



June 20, 2023

To Senate Committee on Finance and Revenue

From: Oregon Association of Conservation Districts

Re: Support for HB 2527 – ODFW Wildlife Tax Deferral Program

Chair Senator Meek and Committee Members,

The Oregon Association of Conservation Districts (OACD) represents Oregon's 45 Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), special districts governed by elected boards. The Districts protect and enhance soil quality, water quality and quantity, and habitat by supporting voluntary conservation in partnership with private landowners and managers as well as federal, state, and nonprofit partners.

OACD supports HB 2527 which promotes a valuable tool for protection of important wildlife habitats through the Wildlife Habitat Conservation and Management Program. Landowners can obtain tax deferrals for actively managing agricultural and forest lands, but the incentive is not widely available for wildlife habitat. In many cases landowners have lands that are highly suited for wildlife habitat, but they can't afford to promote this use because of the lack of incentive. Oak woodlands are a great example. In many cases soils and other land characteristics in oak woodlands are not suitable for agriculture or forestry, yet they are very important for wildlife.

It is important to recognize that managing for wildlife can be costly due to initial restoration costs and ongoing maintenance costs. Yet there is rarely any return on investment. Thus, the tax deferral incentive is very important.

While the private benefit of managing wildlife habitat is low, the public benefit is high. Public benefits include healthy ecosystems, fire resilience, and beautiful landscapes. It can also help to moderate conversion of important habitat to developed land uses.

The Wildlife Habitat Conservation Management Program is an existing program in statute, and it was partially implemented by the Oregon Department of Fish and wildlife (ODFW). Unfortunately, it took a substantial amount of time to administer the program and it was put on hold. Over the last few years, ODWF has worked with stakeholders to find ways to streamline the program, and HB 2527 will implement the recommendations. Several of the key features include:

- Providing ODFW more discretion on when to monitor a property
- Prioritizing projects based on Oregon Conservation Strategy habitats, and
- Allowing Soil and Water Conservation Districts and other qualified entities to provide the technical assistance needed to help prospective enrollees be successful.

There are lands across the state that are ready to enroll to protect and improve wildlife habitat and achieve the goals of the Oregon Conservation Strategy. This bill helps us get there.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input.

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