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On Behalf Of:

Committee: Senate Committee On Natural Resources

Measure: SB679

Testimony in support of SB 679: Oregon Coast Trail

February 20, 2023

Bonnie Henderson

I write in support of funding closure of gaps in the Oregon Coast Trail, which is truly one of Oregon's most exceptional and least well-known recreational assets.

I am a hiking guidebook author; my most recent title is "Hiking the Oregon Coast Trail" (Mountaineers Books: 2021). But my motivation in writing today isn't personal enrichment; I can assure you I don't make any money off my guidebooks. I am motivated by an irrational love of this trail, having hiked the whole 400-mile trail twice and parts dozens of times. On my first hike 15 years ago I met no other "thru-hikers" (people walking the entire trail). Most recently, in 2019, I ran into thru-hikers from all over the country and even more from overseas: New Zealand, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, and beyond.

I have also hiked trails of similar length in England and France, and I can state that, even in its unfinished state, the Oregon Coast Trail provides an exceptional experience, as good or better than any of those trails. The only thing that diminishes it is the 40+ miles where no beach or trail exists and hikers are forced to walk on the shoulder of US Highway 101 for anywhere from 0.5 mile to a dozen miles. The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, the federal Department of Transportation, other federal, state, and county agencies and hundreds of volunteer citizens have been working together for years and have nearly completed the Oregon Coast Trail Action Plan, which proposes alternatives that will for the most part take hikers off the highway and onto the safety of trails or back roads. Obviously this is an important step in completion of this world-class asset, one that will not only enhance the trail experience but substantially improve its safety. All it takes is money, for land and easement acquisition and trail construction.

The Oregon Coast Trail is an ideal recreational resource. Particularly since the pandemic and under the influence of social media, parking areas at popular beach access sites, especially on the North Coast, have been strained by overcrowding, while other parts of the coast stand empty. Part of the genius of the OCT is its minimal impact. These self-propelled visitors don't use roads or parking spaces, but they do stop off regularly at restaurants and shops. They camp at state park group sites that require no reservations, as well as private RV parks that invite tent camping. They pay outfitters to shuttle them across bay mouths. They also stay in

lodgings, as it's possible to hike nearly the entire trail inn-to-inn, and it will be easier to do so when luggage transfer businesses appear as they do on the UK trails I mention above. The OCT provides business development opportunities on the Oregon Coast without further straining the already overcrowded parts of our coast.

Long-distance hiking has become a significant recreational activity worldwide, not only among 20somethings but among healthy retirees with the assets to fly and spend money on lodging and dining. The Oregon Coast Trail is already attracting the more adventurous of this class of travelers. And every dime spent on the OCT also makes it more accessible to day-hiking Oregonians or those seeking not a 400-mile adventure but a short multiday hiking trip close to home. Fully funding completion of the OCT would be a relatively small investment in exactly the kind of tourism we want more of on our coast.