

**HB 3159 testimony by Anneliese Koehler, Legislative Affairs
Manager
House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources and
Water
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Metro is the elected regional government that serves nearly 1.7 million people in the 24 cities and three counties of the Portland metropolitan area. We provide a broad range of public services that includes land use and transportation planning, solid waste and recycling operations, housing and homeless services, management of parks and natural areas, and operation of major visitor facilities like the Oregon Convention Center and the Oregon Zoo.

Metro supports increased funding for the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund. For most of Oregon's wildlife – nearly 90 percent of all species living here – there is no dedicated stream of conservation support.

Conservation organizations like the Oregon Zoo help make up for the lack of state resources by working to restore imperiled species such as the western pond turtle and the Oregon silverspot butterfly. Metro has also preserved and restored thousands of acres of wildlife habitat through its voter-supported natural area programs. We're also outspoken in our advocacy for securing federal funding for state conservation efforts, including the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. And we have directly provided financial and outreach support for the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund. But these efforts are still insufficient to protect our most imperiled species and their habitats.

Our state's Conservation Strategy is one of the strongest in the nation. To adequately implement it, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife needs diversified and sustainable sources of revenue for programs like the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund.

However, Metro also has concerns about the dedicated funding source identified in HB 3159. In addition to running the Oregon Zoo, Metro also owns and operates the Oregon Convention Center. Increasing the current transient lodging tax rate and devoting new resources primarily to conservation efforts will harm the state's ability to continue attracting lucrative convention groups.

When national conventions and other large group businesses are considering locations, they consider tourism taxes while making their decisions. Ensuring that we have a comparable tourism tax to other mid-size cities ensures that Portland remains competitive to convention planners. We are concerned that increasing the state transient lodging tax by 1.5 percent will make Portland less competitive for this critical part of the state and region's business mix.

Convention business is an important component of Oregon's tourism industry. Conventioneers spend more money per capita than leisure travelers, so the economic benefits of group travel

are significant -- consumer spending totals more than \$500 million each year as a result of the convention center's business. Most of these convention groups come in the rainy "shoulder" season (October, November, February and March). These months are when our hotels and restaurants particularly need business.

This is all the more important as we work to rebuild our convention and group business after the COVID-19 pandemic and negative perceptions of the Portland region around crime and homelessness. We are struggling more than ever to remain competitive and to secure future conventions.