



March 3, 2023

House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water

Re: Support for HB 3222; Input on Opportunities for Native Trout

Dear Chair Helm, Vice-Chairs Hartman and Owens, and Members of the Committee,

Trout Unlimited (“TU”) is a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of cold-water fish (such as trout, salmon, and steelhead) and their habitats. TU has more than 350,000 members and supporters nationwide, including many members in Oregon. The Oregon members of TU are affiliated with our entity, the Oregon Council of Trout Unlimited (“OCTU”).

HB 3222 would appropriate \$2,000,000 to the High Desert Partnership for work related to “restoring or maintaining wet meadow, wetland and lake conditions for birds, farmers and ranchers on the Silvies River Floodplain, on the Donner und Blitzen River Floodplain, at Malheur Lake and in the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge...”

OCTU supports this bill, but we wish to emphasize the opportunity to also improve conditions for native reband trout in the Harney Basin, and potentially, with this funding.

The Harney Basin is home to unique populations of desert reband rainbow trout. There is *tremendous* potential in the Donner und Blitzen River, Malheur Lake, and their innumerable tributaries to improve and restore habitat and streamflow conditions for these fish.

Reband trout express three distinct life histories in the Harney Basin, and that diversity is important to protect. According to ODFW, in the Malheur Lakes species management unit:

The *stream resident form* is the predominant life history strategy in all populations. Resident trout remain in smaller tributary streams for their entire life cycle, never out-migrating to larger more productive habitats to rear and mature. In small systems (less than 35 stream kilometers of fish distribution), such as the disjunct streams east of Burns (Rattlesnake, Prater, Cow, Coffeepot and Poison creeks), that do not have hydrologic connection to larger rivers and lakes, the habitat is capable of supporting only a resident life history type. *Adfluvial* and *fluvial* migratory forms are suspected to exist in most other populations when habitat conditions are suitable (Bowers et al. 1999). An *adfluvial* fish is one that spawns in small headwater streams and migrates to a large productive lake to rear and mature; a *fluvial* fish migrates to larger stream and

river habitats to rear and mature before returning to its spawning reaches upstream. Currently, only redband trout in the Blitzen River have consistent access to Malheur Lake to rear. Redband trout in Silver Creek and Silvies River have the potential to express a migratory life history when conditions in connected rivers/streams allow.¹

As the climate changes, this life history diversity serves as a form of “portfolio” that mitigates risk (akin to financial investments), thereby ensuring resilience of the species in the Harney Basin. The fluvial and adfluvial life histories described above are an especially ecologically valuable form of redband trout, because those individuals move throughout a watershed, using widely varying habitats to suit their needs throughout the year (and in some instances, as water conditions change).

Anglers also prize fluvial and adfluvial fish for their size, beauty, and recreational opportunity. In [Attachment 1](#), we have provided a historical photo that provides a sense of how large this species—in this place—can grow, if given the right streamflow and habitat conditions.

OCTU appreciates and encourages the funding described in this bill for improving wet meadow and lake conditions for farmers and birds. However, it’s important that our native coldwater fish be remembered and given due consideration with regard to water and habitat needs (and related on-ground project work) in the Harney Basin.

When it comes to the opportunities at hand to conserve wildlife in the Harney Basin with this legislation and funding, we simply wish to provide a reminder of the possibility to take actions that help native fish, too.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments.

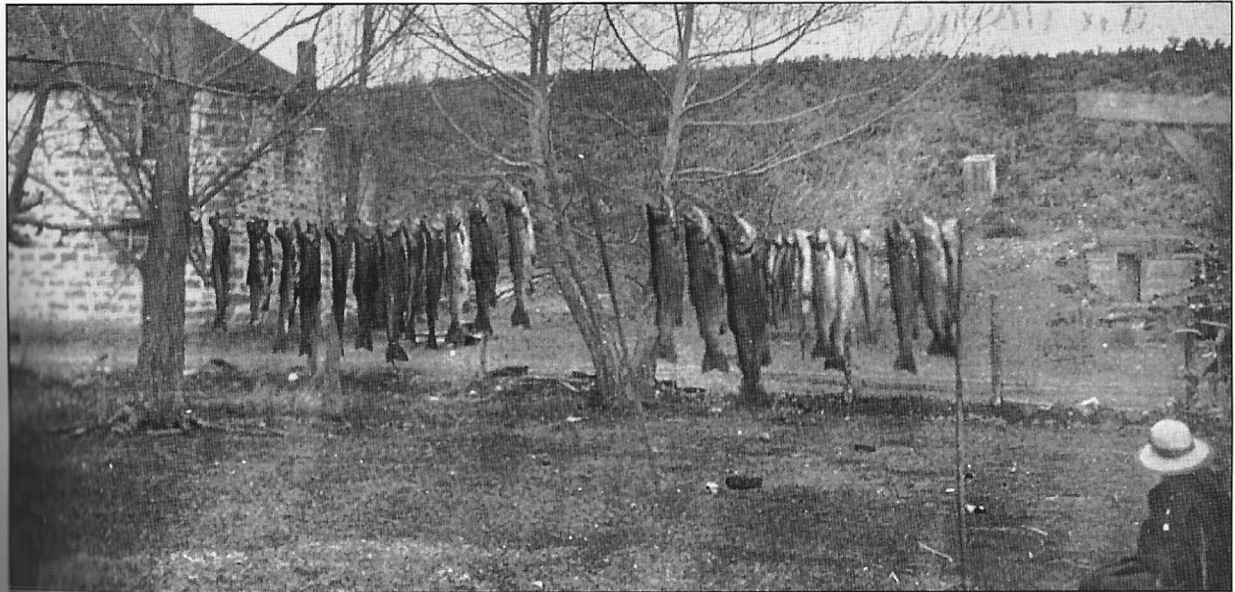
Sincerely,

Mark Rogers
Chair, Oregon Council of Trout Unlimited
Sandy, Oregon
marwrog@gmail.com

¹ ODFW, Malheur Lakes Redband Trout Conservation Plan, Public Draft, pp. 10-11, 4/13/2018 (available at <https://www.dfw.state.or.us/fish/CRP/docs/DRAFT%20Malheur%20Lk%20Redband%20Plan%204-13-18.pdf>).

Attachment 1

Caption: "The rivers and creeks in the Blitzen Valley on the western slopes of Steens Mountain were notable for good fishing in earlier years. One family of five is said to have camped on the Little Blitzen for a week and taken over 500 fish. John Scharff, refuge manager from 1935 through 1970, remembered a time when people along all the little creeks had a fish trap in use. This photograph taken at Diamond shows off a large catch."



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Source: Karen Nitz, Images of America: Harney County, Arcadia Publishing (Feb. 2009).