



March 9, 2023 Oral Testimony on HB 3099-1

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

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Thank you Chair Helm and members of the committee for this opportunity to testify in support of HB 3099.

My name is Ryan Houston and I am the Executive Director of the Oregon Natural Desert Association (ONDA), a conservation organization based in Bend, Oregon. We work on behalf of 14,000 members and supporters to protect and restore public lands, waters and wildlife across ~12 million acres of Oregon's high desert. We support HB 3099 because it will contribute to the restoration and improved management of Lake Abert and the Chewaucan River watershed.

Lake Abert is Oregon's only hypersaline lake, the largest saline lake in the Pacific Northwest and a uniquely important and vulnerable ecosystem. The lake plays a pivotal role on the Pacific Flyway, with more than 80 species of migratory birds traveling from as far away as Alaska and Argentina stopping there to feast on the invertebrates that number in the hundreds of billions when the lake is healthy. These tiny organisms can create a total biomass greater than that of an adult blue whale, ultimately supporting more than 300,000 migratory birds in some years. Among hypersaline lakes in the West, only Utah's Great Salt Lake sees more birds than Lake Abert.

As reported in news media outlets statewide, the lake has been threatened by recurring drying events, most recently in 2021. These episodes undermine the delicate ecology of the system, causing the food web to collapse and ultimately eliminating a critically-important habitat for migrating birds.

HB 3099 will support important collaborative, science-based efforts to improve management for Lake Abert and the entire Chewaucan River watershed. Water management is ecologically, technically and politically complex, but key provisions in HB 3099 will help support successful outcomes for the lake and the communities and wildlife in this region. Three of these key provisions are:

1. Establishment of a professionally-managed, balanced and inclusive collaborative group that will work to address water management needs for Lake Abert and the Chewaucan River watershed;
2. Support for state agencies to collect and evaluate information to support science-based management of the lake and watershed. We believe in the phrase "you can't manage what you don't measure" and we support this bill because it provides for some of the basic science needed to inform better management.
3. Clarity that the activities funded in the legislation shall occur in addition to, not in place of or not to the hindrance of, existing state agency duties, obligations or priorities. This helps ensure the work under this legislation complements ongoing agency activities, therefore contributing to a net-gain for the ecosystem and overall management in the watershed.

Thank you for your support of HB 3099 and for this incredibly important work to improve management for one of Oregon's most unique, fragile and important high desert ecosystems.