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March 14, 2023

House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water
Chair Ken Helm,
Vice-Chair Mark Owens,
Vice-Chair Annessa Hartman,
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

RE: Testimony on HB 3100

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

The Oregon Water Resources Congress (OWRC) is providing testimony on HB 3100, related to the integrated state water resources strategy. We are supportive of Oregon's formal Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRS) and components in HB 3100 designed to improve the IWRS process. We have reviewed the proposed draft amendment, which we are generally supportive of, and look forward to additional discussions on the bill and the IWRS.

OWRC is a nonprofit trade association representing irrigation districts, water control districts, drainage districts, water improvement districts, and other local government entities delivering agricultural water supplies throughout Oregon. These water stewards operate complex water management systems, including water supply reservoirs, canals, pipelines, and hydropower facilities. OWRC members deliver water to approximately 600,000 acres of farmland in Oregon, which is over one-third of all the irrigated land in the state.

OWRC was actively engaged and supported the legislation (HB 3369, 2009 Session) authorizing the original Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRS). OWRC Board members served on the policy advisory groups used to inform the first IWRS and its update in 2017. OWRC staff also monitored the policy advisory groups and engaged in subsequent related meetings between stakeholders and Oregon Water Resources Department (WRD). We also participated in the IWRS predecessor, the Oregon Water Supply and Conservation Initiative funded by the 2007 Session, which according to WRD staff reports, was designed to be "the beginning stages of a long term, integrated water supply and conservation strategy for the state of Oregon." As active participants in all of these discussions, we know Oregon has a plethora of water challenges and we collectively must find a way to better identify, fund, and implement potential solutions to our current and future water needs.

OWRC has also provided formal feedback as part of WRD's current work on the IWRS update in partnership with the Oregon Kitchen Table. Our understanding is that will result in a report later this year that can help inform the next update to the IWRS, including enhanced outreach and engagement. In light of this work, it may be better to postpone several elements in the introduced version of HB 3100 (particularly Section 2) until after the assessment is complete.

The mission of the Oregon Water Resources Congress is to promote the protection and use of water rights and the wise stewardship of water resources

As such we are supportive of the proposed amendment that would remove Section 2. If the IWRS were to shift to a state water plan, we would support creation of some sort of advisory group that includes a broad set of water stakeholders and robust public outreach and engagement. However, the current IWRS is not a state water plan and therefore does not require a standing committee.

We are supportive of components in Section 1, specifically providing for a longer period of time between updates to the IWRS. Providing longer than five years will allow WRD to enhance the update process, collect necessary data, and feedback from stakeholders and the general public that will help better inform updates to the IWRS. Requiring reports to the Legislature on the IWRS is helpful but we caution being overly prescriptive on biennial work plans without providing resources and direction to ensure WRD can successfully produce and implement a meaningful work plan.

The current IWRS is chocked full of information about Oregon's instream and out-of-stream water current and future water needs. The document has many ideas but lacks prioritization and is largely aspirational. There is also a lack of funding to address virtually every identified need, ranging from data collection and agency staff capacity to addressing aging infrastructure and mitigating for climate change. This is a product of its design—it is only a strategy, an additional step towards a water plan. Other states use various forms of state water plans to plan for and implement projects and programs to meet their identified priority water quantity and water quality needs. These efforts include formal advisory groups, various forms of stakeholder engagement, and place-based components that fit within a statewide structure of policies and funding support implementation at regional and state levels.

Another option to improve how we address recommended actions in the IWRS is to determine how much resources are needed for applicable agencies to participate and direct the WRD to develop an integrated state water plan. This would require a multi-biennial investment in WRD and other related water agencies and a multi-layered stakeholder engagement process. HB 3100 could be further amended to provide this direction.

If the goal is to help Oregon make progress towards addressing the numerous water challenges facing every sector of water, then perhaps the solution is not a new strategy, but a well thought out plan, informed by diverse stakeholder input, and developed with funding and policy mechanisms to implement adopted plan components. It will require time and concerted investment to properly do but fortunately we have a strong foundation from the IWRS and multiple other state examples to learn from. In absence of a formal state water plan, making modest improvements to the IWRS will ensure the progress we've made continues and provides a platform for further discussions about how Oregon can meet its current and future water needs.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony.

Sincerely,
April Snell
Executive Director