



March 24, 2023

Senator James Manning Jr., Chair
Senator Kim Thatcher, Vice-Chair
Senate Committee on Veterans, Emergency Management, Federal and World Affairs

Re: Support for SB 956-2

Dear Chair Manning, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and Members of the Committee,

Trout Unlimited (TU) is a non-profit organization dedicated to conserving 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.

SB 956-2 instructs the Water Resources Commission to take certain actions related to the Walla Walla Water 2050 Strategic Plan.

Trout Unlimited supports Senate Bill 956-2.

The Walla Walla River is a tributary of the Columbia River. Its headwaters are located in the Blue Mountains of northeast Oregon, and the river flows north and west across the state line into Washington before entering the Columbia.

Native fish species in the Walla Walla River, including summer steelhead, migrate across state lines. At different points in their life cycles, those fish may inhabit Oregon or Washington portions of the watershed. For example, a summer steelhead born in the South Fork or North Fork Walla Walla (southeast of Milton Freewater, Oregon) would migrate downriver, across the state line, and past the towns of Walla Walla and Touchet, Washington en route to the ocean. After a couple years in the ocean, that steelhead would travel the same course in reverse on the way back to spawning in Oregon's Blue Mountains.

The unique geography and fishery management issues in the Walla Walla River raise the need for bi-state management of this river unlike most other streams in Oregon. One ongoing issue in the watershed regards instream flow restoration, such as instream leases, and how that water may be legally protected across state lines. For example, an instream lease approved by Oregon Water Resources Department can currently only be protected downstream so far as the state line. After crossing the state line, Washington water users can divert and use that water for agricultural purposes (because Washington does not recognize Oregon instream leases).

This bill will recognize a well-vetted collaborative plan to foster bi-state management of water in the Walla Walla River. There is broad support among stakeholders in both Washington and Oregon to work collaboratively in managing water in the Walla Walla River, but the lack of legal tools has hindered that effort on the ground. A companion bill in the Washington legislature (HB

1322)¹ would provide Washington state the authority to work with Oregon on these bi-state water management issues; that bill is now making progress in Olympia.

TU believes one benefit of this legislation will be the ability to legally protect water instream across the state line, to the benefit of native fish and water quality.

Thank you for this opportunity to provide comments, and please let me know if you have questions.

Sincerely,

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¹ See Washington State Legislature, HB 1322 (2023), available at: <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=1322&Initiative=false&Year=2023> .