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April 4, 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 in Support of HB 3124, the Bipartisan Drought Relief and Water Security Package

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

I am writing on behalf of North Unit irrigation District to express strong support for House Bill 3124, the Bipartisan Drought Relief and Water Security Package proposed by Representative Helm and Representative Owens. I particularly want to highlight the importance of provisions that provide match, or cost share, funding for irrigation districts to unlock federal dollars for irrigation modernization projects and help districts like ours be more resilient to drought and water scarcity.

North Unit Irrigation District is the second largest irrigation district in the state and the largest in the Deschutes Basin providing irrigation water to nearly 60,000 acres of diverse irrigated agriculture in Jefferson County. As a junior water right holder in the Deschutes Basin, North Unit suffers from perennial water supply shortages that threatens not only our regional agricultural industry but also the communities that have economic ties to our irrigated agriculture. Much of the infrastructure that the district relies on is over 75 years old, inefficient, and increasingly expensive to annually operate and maintain. The modernization projects that the district is pursuing will allow for increased water efficiency, improved water quality, enhanced streamflows, more reliable water deliveries to patrons and most importantly aid in drought resiliency.

As you know, much of Oregon remains in some form of drought with portions of Central Oregon still categorized as being in Extreme and Exceptional drought (U.S. Drought Monitor March 31, 2023). According to the U.S. Drought Monitor, Crook County is the only region in the Western states that remains predominantly in Exceptional drought. Central Oregon and the Deschutes Basin have been severely impacted by years of lingering drought. Last year approximately 60% of the nearly 60,000 acres in North Unit Irrigation District sat idle due to shortages in water supplies. Further, North Unit has had reduced water allocations to its farmers each year since 2017 culminating in record low allocations in the district's 78-year history.

In order to implement large-scale, multi-benefit projects to modernize irrigation infrastructure and be more resilient to drought, many districts, including ours, have utilized federal programs such as NRCS's Watershed & Flood Prevention Operations or Bureau of Reclamation's WaterSMART for support. These programs play a key role in planning, designing, and implementing projects, but still require some portion of project funding to come from non-federal sources. Our district is committed to modernizing our system, but we require state funding to meet cost share requirements for implementing identified projects in 2023-2025 and beyond. HB 3124 contains the cost share funding districts need to fully utilize and leverage the infrastructure dollars that the federal government has made available.

I urge you to support the important funding components in HB 3124 and ensure that state cost share funding for irrigation modernization projects remains a part of the final bill. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,
Mike Britton
Executive Manager