

April 19, 2023

Chair Nathanson, Vice Chairs Walters and Reschke, members of the committee. For the record, my name is Branden Pursinger, and I am the Legislative Affairs Manager for Natural Resource related issues at the Association of Oregon Counties.

I am here today to speak in support of HB 2527 and the Wildlife Habitat Conservation and Management Plan program administered by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. This bill attempts to make changes to the program, so it is easier to administer by ODFW.

This program is one that is a cooperative effort between the state and local governments as well as private landowners to voluntarily conserve native wildlife habitat.

As was previously alluded to, there are 15 counties that participate in this program which includes roughly 376 landowners and a total of 73,477 acres. Most of these enrollees reside in Clackamas, Yamhill, and Polk Counties.

I thought it might be helpful to briefly address how the program works on the county end. Many counties are similar, however this is the process in Washington County, as an example

Applications for Wildlife Habitat are received by the County Assessor's office no later than April 1st preceding the initial tax year that they are applying to begin in the program. The application must contain a comprehensive wildlife management plan drafted by a representative from ODFW. Only Exclusive Farm Use, AF20 land – or lands that are zoned Agricultural/Forest Land and are a minimum of 80 acres, and EFC – or Exclusive Forest and Conservation Districts with a minimum lot size of 80 acres are eligible for participation. If the application is approved, the acreage that is designated as Wildlife Habitat receives a special taxing assessment at the low farm value table as determined by soil type – which correlates to Class VII soils. It is possible for a landowner to have only a portion of their lot in habitat conservation, it is not a requirement that it be the entirety of the property. The Approved properties are monitored by ODFW. The property will then stay in that habitat conservation role until the landowner decides otherwise.

If the land is found to not be following wildlife habitat rules or it is not following the comprehensive wildlife management plan on file, the land will be disqualified from the program. The landowner is then placed back on the tax rolls at the regular rate, and, in many counties, the owner is liable for deferred tax, dependent on the number of years they were in the program, with a cap at 10 years.

Again, this is a voluntary program that landowners choose to enter with ODFW and counties. For the counties that participate in the program, we are happy to implement per ORS and OAR requirements.

Only landowners that reside in a county that is a participant is eligible to be in the program. I will say, not every county participates in this program, however. Currently there are 15 counties that participate, those counties include: Columbia, Multnomah, Washington, Clackamas, Yamhill, Polk, Marion, Benton, Lane, Douglas, Deschutes, Sherman, Morrow, Wheeler, and Lake. Some of you might be curious why only 15 counties participate in the program. When AOC reached out to the counties to see why they don't, the main issue raised was due to the potential loss of revenue being collected. There are not any



incentives for a county to join this program other than doing this to meet their broader conservation goals. This all being said however, the WHCMP is a voluntary program, and whether a county wishes to participate or not is up to them.

AOC is in support of this voluntary conservation program that counties partner with ODFW on, and we encourage your support of HB 2527, the Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Management Program.

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