

February 14, 2024

Dear Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and members of the committee:

This is my valentine to Oregon trails via you.

Please pass **SB 1576-3** with language that clearly restores recreational immunity for public and private landowners and clearly applies to both improved and unimproved trails.

As a long-term lover, user, promoter, builder, and supporter of the amazing trails Oregon offers to all, I have great concern about the status of Oregon's recreational immunity. It is dismaying that some beloved coastal trails have closed due to this issue.

Recreational immunity is a law that encourages landowners to open lands to the public for recreational use by protecting the landowner if a recreational user seeks damages after an injury. Recreational immunity is important to both public landowners and parks providers as well as land trusts and private landowners who open their lands to the public through trail easements or other allowances.

Trails and access to nature and outdoor recreation provide so many benefits to individuals and communities including physical fitness and health benefits, mental health benefits, connection to and appreciation for nature, economic benefits to communities of outdoor recreation visitors and related businesses, safety benefits of alternatives to roadways for walking and biking, community connections.

However, recreating in constantly changing outdoor environments also carries possible risk of injury. Without recreational immunity, landowners fear the real risk of expensive lawsuits and cannot afford to keep their trails and lands open to the public. They are especially concerned about increased liability of making trail improvements like bridges, railings, and boardwalks, even though such construction both can better protect sensitive habitat and make trails recreation destinations like beaches, rivers, etc. more accessible to all ages and abilities.

This bill provides a critical emergency fix, and we're also eager to see a permanent fix to provide landowners with the assurance they need to plan for future recreation access.

It is important to restore recreational immunity to:

- Encourage land managers to keep trails, especially trails providing access to beaches and other recreational areas open to the public.
- Provide landowners with the clarity they need to keep planned trail improvement and development projects on track for the benefit of the public and for the preservation of sensitive habitats.
- To ensure that access to recreation areas is equitable, by providing basic protections to land managers who make trail improvements that increase access for a broad range of physical abilities.
- To support local outdoor recreation and tourism economies.
- To ensure that limited public resources and taxpayer dollars can be spent on park and trail maintenance, management, and development that directly benefits the public and not on fighting lawsuits or on measures that shield landowners from liability without directly benefiting the public.
- To ensure that we don't create disincentives to developing off-street paths and keeping them open when we know that even when off-street paths need maintenance, they provide much safer alternatives to walking or riding on high traffic/high speed roadways.

Thank you for your thoughtful deliberation on this critical matter for Oregon trails. Your support of SB 1576-3 continues the current and future equitable access to Oregon's pathways to amazing beauty.

Sincerely,

Christian L. Watchie

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