

## **A Citizen's Plea: Stewardship for Oregon's Wildlife**

Today, I will tell you a short story in third person.

Mark Labhart's drive over from Sisters this morning had given him time to collect his thoughts. Today clearly wasn't about his role as an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Commissioner or a representative of the Commission. Today, he was here as a concerned citizen, a voice for Oregon's wildlife and the people trying to help them.

Chair Lively and Vice-Chairs Gamba and Levy presided. His name was called. The murmurs of the room quieted as Mark began to speak, his voice steady but impassioned.

"Good morning. My name is Mark Labhart. I'm in my fifth year as an ODF&W Commissioner, but today, to be clear, I'm here simply as a citizen of Oregon who cares deeply about this issue."

There was no room for hesitation. He had four minutes to deliver his story—a story rooted in years of work and the collective voices of wildlife advocates across the state.

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The proposed bill was straightforward but transformative. It would establish a Wildlife Stewardship Program under ODF&W, administer a grant program to support wildlife rehabilitation centers, and provide crucial funding. These measures aimed to address a growing problem: the escalating conflicts between people and wildlife in Oregon.

Mark painted a vivid picture of the challenges:

- **A raccoon in an attic.**
- **A fawn limping away after being hit by a car.**
- **Elk decimating crops.**
- **Coyotes preying on cats—or worse, chasing children in a neighborhood.**
- **A Cougar walking down an alley just off main street in Sisters on Jan. 27th.**
- **Birds crashing into windows.**
- **Bears in garbage cans throughout neighborhoods**

- **Numerous stray and sick animals asking for help**
- **Wildlife response Centers overwhelmed with calls for help**

“Who do people call?” Mark asked, invoking the humor of the *Ghostbusters* movie, though the reality was anything but funny. These interactions often landed on the shoulders of city police, sheriffs, state police, or animal control—agencies stretched thin and often unequipped to handle such incidents. The result? Problems escalated. And the public’s frustration with the system grew.

“Wildlife rehab centers are on the front lines,” Mark emphasized. “They handle thousands of calls every year, operating on shoestring budgets, relying on volunteers and donations. Bob Salinger, previously with Portland Audubon told Mark they had handled over 10,000 wildlife-related calls annually. Across the state, rehab centers faced similar volumes, all while operating with little to no state funding.

Without them, these problems would fall primarily on ODF&W, an agency already stretched too thin to respond effectively.”

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The bill offered hope. It proposed:

- **Education campaigns** in communities.
- **Biologists stationed strategically** to support local governments, schools, and community groups.
- **Training sessions** for law enforcement, animal control, and other first responders.
- **Collaboration with wildlife rehab centers.**
- **A grant program**—modest but impactful—of \$200,000 to support these essential centers.

“This bill,” Mark concluded, “is about providing coordination, support, and education to reduce wildlife conflicts—for the benefit of both people and animals.”

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Mark's final words carried the weight of urgency. "This bill has broad support—from groups that don't always agree on wildlife issues but see eye-to-eye on this one. Let's get it done this time he said. Let's give our rehab centers the resources they need. Let's educate the public and create a system that works—for everyone."

As he stepped away from the table, Mark felt the weight of his words settle in the room. The faces of the committee members were thoughtful, some nodding in agreement. It wasn't a guarantee, but it was a start.

As I told you in third person, I am Mark Labhart and I'm here today to ask you to make a decision that will positively impact the wildlife of Oregon. **I speak for them.** I most respectfully ask you to do so too.