

February 20, 2025

Joint Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Natural Resources

Testimony on SB 5543 (OWRD 2025 – 2027 Budget)

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Co-Chair Frederick, Co-Chair Levy, and Members of the Subcommittee:

The Nature Conservancy **supports the several key investments and continuing service level for Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) but suggests adding back proposed Package 090 Reductions** to enable OWRD to accomplish its mission.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a science-based, non-partisan organization committed to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Oregon, TNC has over 80,000 supporters and members in every community around the state, where we manage lands and waters in varied ecosystems and partner with ranchers, farmers, fishers, and environmental interests on some of the most challenging conservation issues facing people and nature.

The Governor's Recommended Budget for OWRD proposes a 7% decrease from the 2023 – 25 Legislatively Approved Budget. However, water scarcity and water conflict are increasing over time, requiring continued support for state agency staff and resourcing. In 2021, Oregon experienced a megadrought that was considered to be the worst drought in 1,200 years. New evidence suggests that within two decades, Oregon will experience droughts of similar magnitude recur 20 times more frequently. By the end of the century, Oregon will experience droughts of that magnitude 200 times more frequently, or once every six years.] Historical underinvestment in OWRD has caused substantial economic and ecological impacts that continue to affect Oregonians. That lack of investment was identified in a recent Oregon Secretary of State Advisory Report as a limiting factor hindering the success of natural resource agencies. The Nature Conservancy urges the Subcommittee on Natural Resources to maintain continuing service level for OWRD, to fund key packages described below, and to add back proposed reductions in the 090 Package.

The Nature Conservancy especially supports key investments in grant programs that achieve water management outcomes for Oregon. These include:

Package 103 – Harney Conservation Reserve Enhancement Fund, which will enable a voluntary solution for one of Oregon's most over-allocated aquifers.

Package 104 – Feasibility Studies, Water Projects, and Wells, which funds programs to help vulnerable communities dealing with the impacts of water scarcity (i.e., Well Abandonment, Repair, and Replacement Fund) and helps organizations implement projects to save water for people and nature (i.e., Feasibility Study Grants and Water Projects Grants & Loans programs).

Package 106 – ARPA carryover, which continues funding originally authorized in the 2021 – 23 budget to benefit place-based collaborative planning and groundwater data collection.

We oppose the reductions described in Package 090 and request that the Subcommittee add them back to OWRD’s 2025 – 27 budget. In particular, The Nature Conservancy suggests prioritizing:

\$796,000 for Groundwater investigations: Oregon only has modern groundwater investigations in five of its twenty administrative basins. We need to accelerate the resourcing of additional investigations, not slow the pace down. These studies are foundational for understanding sustainability for people and nature.

\$272,000 for Streamgaging stations: Oregon has a continued need for stream gaging to benefit public safety, to understand the impacts of drought, and to plan for a changing climate.

\$114,000 for evapotranspiration: Oregon is one of the pioneering states to leverage satellite-based remote sensing to understand evapotranspiration and water use. That work is highly dependent upon state funds. Continuing to fund OWRD to do this work is critical to leverage momentum from investments in prior biennia.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.