

February 19, 2025

Joint Committee on Ways and Means, Subcommittee on Natural Resources
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Central Oregon LandWatch Testimony on HB 5543- Support

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

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 5543. Central Oregon LandWatch (“LandWatch”) is an Oregon non-profit, public interest organization of about 950 members. Its offices are located in Bend, Oregon. LandWatch’s mission is to defend and plan for Central Oregon’s livable future, and it has advocated for the preservation of natural resources in Central Oregon for over 30 years.

Our communities across Oregon are facing increasingly severe water challenges. In the Upper Deschutes Basin, for example, assessments of supply and demand indicate median annual water shortages of “135,000 acre-feet, increasing to 350,000 acre-feet for dry years.”¹ This represents a significant shortfall—even during wetter years—that affects a broad range of Basin interests, spanning both instream and out-of-stream needs. With escalating drought conditions and rising demand, these challenges are poised to intensify, putting even more pressure on our already strained water resources.

To effectively address these challenges and ensure a sustainable water future for Oregon, it is critical that we invest in the Oregon Water Resources Department (OWRD) and strengthen its capacity to meet both current and future water demands.

LandWatch strongly urges the committee to support OWRD’s proposed budget and respectfully requests the following considerations:

1. Maintain OWRD’s Current Service Levels:

Water scarcity is an urgent issue, and in order to adequately respond, we must invest in OWRD’s ability to fulfill its mission. This requires ensuring that OWRD has the necessary staff and resources to carry out its responsibilities effectively.

2. Reject Package 090 Reductions (\$2,521,000 GF) – Data and Services:

Accurate, reliable data is fundamental to effective water management. The proposed reduction

¹ Bureau of Reclamation. 2019. *Upper Deschutes River Basin Study*. Prepared in partnership with Oregon Water Resource Department and Basin Study Work Group.



in funding would undermine OWRD's ability to make informed decisions that are crucial to meeting the state's water needs. We strongly urge the committee to reject these cuts.

3. **Support Package 104 – Feasibility Studies, Water Projects, and Wells:**

This package includes vital investments in water conservation projects, including in the Deschutes Basin. These efforts are essential to meet the water needs of Oregonians.

4. **Support Package 106 – American Rescue Plan Act Carryover:**

This proposal would carry forward federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), which were authorized in the 2021-2023 budget. This funding will provide critical support for water projects in the Deschutes Basin, contributing to more resilient and sustainable water systems.

5. **Support Package 107 – Strategic Modernization of IT Systems and Tools:**

OWRD must modernize its IT infrastructure to keep pace with the evolving demands of water management.

6. **Support Package 110 – State Scenic Waterway Revenue Gap:**

This proposal seeks to backfill a growing funding gap for six existing positions (partial FTEs) by providing additional General Fund support. These positions are crucial to the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department's work on State Scenic Waterways.

7. **Add Funding for Groundwater Studies:**

Sustainable groundwater management is critical to Oregon's water future. In addition to restoring Package 090 Reductions to groundwater studies, we urge the committee to add back cuts applied in the 2023-2025 budget process.

In conclusion, to secure a sustainable water future for all Oregonians, we must invest in the vital work of OWRD. We appreciate the committee's consideration of these important funding priorities and urge support for the full restoration and funding of these critical programs.

Sincerely,



Jeremy Austin
Wild Lands & Water Program Director
Central Oregon LandWatchSM

