

March 12, 2024

House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Central Oregon LandWatch Testimony on HB 3806 – Support

Co-Chair Helm and Owens, Vice-Chair Finger McDonald, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on HB 3806. 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.

LandWatch is pleased to support HB 3806, which proposes a pilot program that would provide a valuable tool to improve water supplies for rivers, junior irrigation districts, and municipalities in the Deschutes Basin. We believe this is an important step forward for the Basin and one that will benefit a broad array of stakeholders.

As you may know, the Deschutes Basin has faced long-standing challenges with water scarcity. By 1913, surface water rights in the basin were already over-allocated, and recent water supply assessments for the Upper Deschutes Basin have revealed a concerning median annual shortfall of 135,000 acre-feet, increasing to 350,000 acre-feet in dry years. For context, Wickiup Reservoir holds around 200,000 acre-feet of water, highlighting just how significant these shortages can be.

Throughout all years, our rivers and creeks bear the brunt of these shortages, experiencing disruptions in both flow and temperature that threaten the health of our ecosystems. At the same time, farms in the northern part of the basin are seeing irrigation water cut off early due to a century-old priority system.

To better understand and address these challenges, in 2019 an effort funded by the Bureau of Reclamation and the Oregon Water Resources Department published the Upper Deschutes River Basin Study, which provides a detailed analysis of water demands in the region.



In that report, the greatest opportunities identified for increasing water supplies fell under two management options: water conservation projects (e.g. piping projects, and on-farm infrastructure upgrades) and market-based incentives (e.g. water leasing, transfers, and duty reduction).

Market-based solutions are precisely what HB 3806 aims to facilitate in the Deschutes Basin.

We want to emphasize that a balanced approach to addressing our water scarcity issues is key to our success. While infrastructure investments are absolutely necessary, the Basin study helped highlight that these efforts must be complemented by market-based solutions like the water bank pilot program to ensure that we can meet the diverse needs of our Basin. Without this balance, we risk continuing to fall short of meeting our water needs.

In simple terms, improving our ability to move water efficiently is critical to tackling the water scarcity challenges we face. HB 3806 would pilot expanded opportunities to address water shortages, benefiting both our rivers and food-producing farms. Importantly, it does so within a carefully designed framework that protects the interests of all stakeholders involved, ensuring a fair and sustainable solution for the entire Deschutes Basin.

We appreciate the opportunity to work on this important issue and thank you for your consideration of HB 3806.

Sincerely,



Jeremy Austin
Wild Lands & Water Program Director
Central Oregon LandWatch
2843 NW Lolo Dr St. 200
Bend, OR 97703

