

Testimony of Anneliese Koehler, Legislative Affairs Manager

Neutral on HB 4134

House Committee on Revenue

February 4, 2026



Metro

Metro is neutral on HB 4134. We strongly support finding a permanent source of funding for wildlife conservation, but we have concerns about efforts to raise the state's transient lodging tax that aren't targeted at rebuilding our state's tourist economy.

Oregon critically needs a permanent source of funding for wildlife conservation

Oregon's biodiversity is facing multiple, complex challenges and needs strong leadership from the Department of Fish and Wildlife, the state agency tasked with fish, wildlife and habitat conservation. Oregon's 2026 State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) identifies 320 Species of Greatest Conservation Need, many at risk of being listed as threatened or endangered. The SWAP also identifies priority habitat types and conservation issues in each ecoregion needing strategic investment. While the Oregon Zoo, Metro Parks and Nature and our partners are working to recover these species and habitats, meaningful progress and lasting success requires both strong state-level leadership and a reliable, statewide funding system.

Our Zoo and Foundation have long championed the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Fund to support projects that advance the Oregon Conservation Strategy. We have also strongly advocated for federal investments in underfunded state wildlife programs, including the Recovering America's Wildlife Act. By securing permanent state funding, ODFW would be able to provide the required match for federal dollars and reduce vulnerability to fluctuations in federal conservation funding.

This funding gap affects all Oregonians. Many species once considered common—including pollinators and amphibians—are in decline. Proactive conservation also benefits taxpayers and businesses: too often, action is delayed until a species is listed under the Endangered Species Act, when recovery is more difficult, more expensive and more disruptive to business. Dedicated funding would enable ODFW to meet critical staffing needs and provide essential support to the state's many conservation partners—helping restore wildlife before declines become crises.

Stable conservation funding helps prevent the collapse of ecosystems that also power Oregon's economy. Wildlife-based recreation generates \$1.2 billion each year and supports more than 11,000 jobs statewide. Wildlife watching alone brings in \$579 million in direct spending and \$23.5 million in state and local tax revenue. As species decline, these economic benefits decline with them. Securing sustainable funding will protect wildlife, strengthen partnerships, and ensure Oregon remains a place where both nature and people thrive.

Raising Oregon's transient lodging tax will harm our hospitality industry

Metro owns and/or operates several large statewide venues including the Oregon Convention Center, the Oregon Zoo, the Portland Expo Center and Portland'5 Center for the Arts. Our statewide venues provide significant economic benefits to our state's hospitality

industry and our economy at large. We are still rebuilding from the pandemic impacts and are yet to fully recover. To regain our footing, we need to maintain Portland's competitive cost advantage related to lodging taxes and fees.

A catalyst for economic development

The Oregon Convention Center serves as a catalyst for Oregon's economy. In addition to the thousands of jobs supported by the facility, consumer spending driven by the Convention Center business totaled more than \$330 million in a recent year. This spending is widespread. It starts with entry into the state through the Portland International Airport then with taxi and ride-sharing services to overnight accommodations across the Portland region. Hotels, shops, restaurants, and other service providers support guests during their stay. We encourage visitors to extend their stay to explore the state with an adventure to wine-country, Mount Hood, or the Oregon Coast. Most of this business is generated in the rainy spring and fall "shoulder" seasons when Oregon restaurants and hotels particularly need business.

We need to retain Portland's competitive cost advantage

Increases to the state transient lodging tax would make Portland's lodging taxes and fees higher than almost all the cities we compete against for convention business. This will make it harder and more expensive to attract future conventions. Convention organizers tell us that cost is their number one consideration when choosing between locations. Portland needs to remain cost competitive to continue to successfully secure conventions and events.

Events are returning but we still have ground to make up

This is even more important as the convention center and hotels continue to rebuild from the pandemic. Convention and consumer show activity is returning, but the Convention Center event counts and enterprise revenues remain below pre-pandemic levels. Hotel occupancy considerably lags pre-pandemic levels. The hospitality industry needs every advantage to regain its footing in the Portland region and doing anything to reduce our competitive advantage could further delay the City of Portland's recovery. We are experiencing this softness in consumer spending levels as well. Prior to the pandemic, convention center annual economic impact fell in the \$500-600 million range. Recently, it was \$330 million.