

Date: February 6, 2026
To: House Committee on Revenue
From: Stephen M. Staten
Re: Testimony in Support of HB 4134 – 1.25% for Wildlife

Dear Chair Nathanson, Vice-Chair Reschke, Vice-Chair Walters, and members of the House Committee on Revenue:

I am an Oregon resident and outdoor recreationist writing in support of HB 4134. I spend a significant amount of my free time on Oregon's trails, waterways, and public lands, and over the past decade, I've watched some of those places quietly diminish. Streams that once held native fish run thinner. Wildfire scars replace the forests I used to hike through. These aren't abstract trends to me; they're changes I can see from the places I stand. HB 4134 represents the most direct opportunity this legislature has had in years to address what's driving those losses, and I urge you to support it.

The funding mechanism is smart and proportionate. Oregon currently has the third lowest state lodging tax rate in the country at 1.5%. Even with this 1.25 percentage point increase, Oregon would remain third lowest. For context, travelers to comparable Western destinations already pay significantly higher lodging tax rates. The increase amounts to roughly \$1.56 on a \$125-per-night hotel room, a figure unlikely to change anyone's travel plans, but collectively sufficient to fund conservation programs that have gone chronically underfunded for decades. This is a Revenue Committee, and the math here is favorable: a modest rate adjustment on a broad base, generating dedicated revenue without touching the General Fund.

Oregon has the plans, what's been missing is the funding. The State Wildlife Action Plan already identifies more than 300 vulnerable species and the strategies needed to recover them.

The Department of Fish and Wildlife, the Oregon State Police, and the Department of Agriculture all have existing programs for anti-poaching enforcement, invasive species control, and wolf depredation compensation that operate below the levels needed to be effective. HB 4134 doesn't create new bureaucracy; it funds execution of work that's already been designed, vetted, and is ready to implement. The bill also directs funds to the Oregon Conservation Corps for wildfire risk reduction and natural resources workforce development, programs that serve rural communities directly.

This protects the asset that drives Oregon tourism. Outdoor recreation is an \$8 billion industry in Oregon, representing 2.6% of the state's GDP. Visitors come to Oregon for what's outside the hotel, not for low lodging taxes. Degraded landscapes, declining wildlife populations, and wildfire-scarred forests represent a far greater long-term threat to tourism revenue than a modest increase in the transient lodging tax. The bill's requirement that lodging receipts label the increase as a "nature conservation fee" makes the reinvestment visible and intuitive to visitors, many of whom, in my experience, would welcome knowing their stay contributes to protecting the places they came to see.

I want to address the strongest arguments against this bill directly, because they deserve honest engagement.

Opponents argue that raising the transient lodging tax will harm Oregon's tourism competitiveness and suppress demand. This is a reasonable concern in the abstract, but it doesn't hold up against the actual numbers. Oregon's ranking as third lowest in the nation would not change. While some Oregon destinations do layer local taxes on top of the state rate, even those combined rates remain at or below comparably situated communities in competing states. The

Corvallis Chamber notes that local occupancy stood at 49.8% at the end of 2025, but that figure reflects broader economic conditions, not the state lodging tax rate. An additional \$1.56 per night is not the variable that determines whether a meeting planner books Bend or Boise.

Others contend that transient lodging tax revenue should remain dedicated exclusively to tourism promotion, and that funding conservation represents mission creep. I understand the instinct to protect a proven funding stream. But critically, HB 4134 does not redirect a single dollar of existing TLT revenue. The current 1.5% and its dedication to the Oregon Tourism Commission remain entirely intact. The bill adds a new, separately labeled revenue stream for conservation. And the premise that conservation is “unrelated” to tourism misreads the relationship. Healthy ecosystems are not a side benefit of Oregon’s tourism economy, they are the foundation of it. Funding their protection is not a departure from tourism strategy; it’s the most important investment in its long-term viability.

Finally, some opponents note that nearly 30% of Oregon lodging use comes from in-state travelers, meaning Oregonians would bear part of this cost. That’s true, and worth acknowledging. But 65% of the tax falls on out-of-state visitors, while 100% of the conservation benefits stay in Oregon. The tax applies only to overnight lodging, which is a discretionary, occasional expense for residents, not a cost-of-living increase on groceries or housing. And the programs it funds, from wildfire risk reduction to invasive species control to anti-poaching enforcement, deliver tangible benefits to Oregon communities, particularly rural ones.

It’s uncommon for a conservation funding bill to arrive with bipartisan sponsorship, broad stakeholder support, a clean dedicated revenue mechanism, and a price tag that doesn’t change Oregon’s competitive standing. HB 4134 is that bill. Oregon has spent years building the

scientific and policy framework for wildlife recovery. This committee has the opportunity to fund it.

I respectfully urge a yes vote on HB 4134.

Sincerely,

Stephen M. Staten

Salem, Oregon