

To House Revenue Committee Members:

I give my full support for HB 4134 with the dash one amendment. My profession is in natural resource science, policy, and management. My expertise in the conservation of endangered species spans 4 decades, 3 federal agencies, and many years in Oregon.

Please understand the seriousness of the extinction risks in Oregon: Without a permanent source of protection for Oregon's 300-plus declining species of wildlife, not only will populations of some species become unviable, but Oregon citizens and businesses will experience the consequences that come with additional species listed as Federal and State "Endangered" or "Threatened".

I listened to oral testimony on February 4 and I will trust that you can discern facts from fearmongering. If anyone wants to complain about a 1.25 percent tax impact to businesses, when the "law of last resort"; the Endangered Species Act, is all that stands between functional ecosystems and ecological dysfunction, then I suggest examining case studies where the obligations that came with an Endangered Species Act listing surmounted all other prior objectives of business owners. In other words, it is a lot easier and cheaper to conserve species before they are nearly extinct. Or examine what becomes of societies and economies where environmental degradation of wildlife habitat led to soil erosion, floods, droughts, fires, or landslides: not great places to run a business.

Some citizens protest: Why should small businesses, particularly lodges, foot the bill of conservation? Again, businesses will not "foot the bill." The customer pays and two thirds of them are from another State. Surveys show that most of the other third (Oregon residents) love wildlife and support wildlife conservation. Furthermore, this claim has no regard for the fact that a network of small businesses, including lodges, will benefit from this bill. To break it down: Nature is the number one attraction to Oregon. Short term lodging exists in Oregon to the extent that it does because people want to see what my profession would call "wildlife habitat" and what tourists call "beautiful". To sustain that nature, and hence small businesses, active management is necessary by professionals, and in the case of wildlife, that means Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW) biologists. To not adequately finance this function is to hurt multiple layers of businesses across our State.

It became clear to me during the oral testimony that Eugene and Portland entities confessed to having a taxing issue, and it appears that poor choices in the past regarding ramping up County and City taxes are unfairly being painted as a problem that this nature conservation tax can be blamed for. The tax issues that trouble Eugene and Portland businesses should be dealt with by Eugene and Portland County and City leaders, not the State legislature.

What was also exposed is that the current Transient Lodging Tax system appears to be favoring the tourism marketing entities over the tourism service providers. Again, that is not a problem for you or the sponsors of HB 4134 to take responsibility for.

But the narrative that stung me the most was the alarmist rhetoric by athletic and arts leaders over the idea that visitors may stay fewer nights in hotels when coming here to watch a track meet or hear a symphony. The “values” contrast between the intrinsic right of species to survive, against the personal pleasure of relatively few humans, was an unexpected gut-punch. Please assure the rest of us Oregonians that you do not concur with the myopic view that the desire of some members of the Homo sapiens species to have the luxury of entertainment is of greater importance than the ability of 300 species to just exist.

By now, I would hope most people understand why biological diversity matters. Even if one doesn’t understand the concept of “right to exist,” but only understands money, this bill is an economic investment. Multi-million-dollar economic industries in recreation, tourism, and agriculture have been relying on a strong foundation of the State’s natural resources. Our State has failed to make effective investments into sustaining biological resources and without that, the fragile ecosystems will suffer under human pressures. Consequently, the recreation, tourism, and agriculture sectors of Oregon’s economy will be impacted if we continue to lose species.

The diversity of success stories that can come from this one bill will be something you can be proud of and could serve as a model for other States. Beyond the ODFW management actions to recover hundreds of species at risk of extinction, the passage of HB 4134 will result in:

- a dedicated funding source for wildlife rehabilitation centers,
- jobs with Oregon Conservation Corps to reduce wildfire risk,
- increased beaver habitat (hence wildfire risk reduction),
- added wolf-predation compensation for ranchers,
- reduction in wildlife-vehicle collisions,
- more anti-poaching law enforcement,
- improved invasive species control,
- expanded habitat restoration,
- more outdoor education.

I absolutely believe most visitors, as well as most Oregonians, will be proud and grateful to know they are helping to save what they value. Oregon’s lodging tax is the third lowest in the nation and this small increase in this lodging tax will still keep Oregon’s lodging tax rate at one of the lowest in the nation. I support this bipartisan bill and urge you to vote yes on HB 4134 with the dash one amendment. Thank you.

Monica Tomosy