



Oregon Water Resources Congress

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Oregon Congressional Delegation Members:

I am writing on behalf of the Oregon Water Resources Congress (OWRC) to express concerns about draft legislation titled “the Sustainable Watershed Planning Act,” that is being developed for consideration by the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. Oregon has had a robust watershed planning program for over ten years and OWRC is deeply concerned that the Sustainable Watershed Planning Act will usurp the state’s role in watershed planning. Revised legislation that provides funding for state level planning without a federally-driven process would better serve Oregon.

Oregon is the model for watershed planning and does not need a new federal agency or Executive Branch office to continue watershed planning. Watershed planning in Oregon formally began in 1995 with the development of the Oregon Plan for Salmon Recovery and Watershed Enhancement, a statewide strategy developed in response to the federal listing of several fish species. This strategy led to the creation of the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB), a state agency and policy oversight board that funds and promotes voluntary and collaborative efforts that “help create and maintain healthy watersheds and natural habitats that support thriving communities and strong economies” in 1999.

Oregon’s success in watershed planning illustrates that planning efforts work best when diverse interests develop and implement plans at the local watershed level with support from state government. Planning activities are conducted through local watershed councils, volunteer-driven organizations that work with local, state and federal agencies, economic and environmental interests, agricultural, industrial and municipal water users, local landowners, tribes, and other members of the community. There are over 60 individual watershed councils in Oregon that are already deeply engaged in watershed planning and restoration activities. We are concerned that these efforts will be derailed and that new efforts will be postponed while the regional boards described in the Sustainable Watershed Planning Act are created.

Local level planning allows stakeholders to have ownership over the locally made decisions and helps ensure compliance once the plan is implemented. Additionally, high-level policy makers like those proposed for the regional boards cannot be expected to understand the nuances of each local area. Legislation that mirrors the success of Oregon and other state watershed planning programs would work much better than the cumbersome one-size-fits-all federally driven process created by this legislation.

Successful watershed planning is based on a solid understanding of the watershed and its specific characteristics. The scale proposed in the Sustainable Watershed Planning Act, based on the forty-two Army Corps of Engineers districts, would likely lead to plans based on generalizations rather than specifics. The Columbia River Basin is the fourth

The mission of the Oregon Water Resources Congress is to promote the protection and use of water rights and the wise stewardship of water resources.

largest in the country, and covers roughly 75% of Oregon (all except the southwest quadrant of the state and the entire coast), so it should not be surprising that there are many differences within the various tributary basins within that very large basin. Within the four sub-basins located in Oregon, there are smaller tributary basins that feed into the Columbia River system. For example, Deschutes and Umatilla Basins are part of the Middle Columbia River Basin and the Owyhee River Basin is part of the Middle Snake River Basin which is the largest tributary of the Columbia River Basin. Because of these differences, Oregon uses 5th level USGS hydrologic unit codes, which are still an average of 58,218 acres. To try to plan for a watershed at a larger level will result in non-specific plans lacking detailed action plans that lead to successful watershed planning.

Current water uses and future needs; methods for increased water efficiency, type and severity of water quality issues; and ecosystem management concerns can be very different for each specific river basin. Focusing on the appropriate watershed level is essential to accurately capture these nuances and develop solutions that will work on-the ground. Establishing sub-regional planning boards is step in the right direction, but because this level of planning is optional under the Act, it may not get done.

States can benefit from financial assistance and greater participation from federal agencies in local and regional watershed planning efforts. However, states like Oregon with established watershed planning programs do not need a new federal policy, federal agency, and a regional board to dictate how watershed planning should be done. In a time when our nation is struggling to return to the path of economic prosperity, OWRC believes funding for watershed planning should be channeled through existing state and federal programs, rather than to create a cumbersome federal planning process that can derail important projects already underway.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments.

Sincerely,

Anita Winkler
Executive Director

Further information about Oregon's watershed planning efforts:

- Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board: <http://www.oregon.gov/OWEB/>
- Oregon Plan: <http://www.oregon.gov/OPSW/>
- Network of Watershed Councils: <http://www.oregonwatersheds.org/>