



February 8, 2016

The Honorable Ron Wyden  
U.S. Senate  
221 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Jeff Merkley  
U.S. Senate  
313 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Greg Walden  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2185 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Senator Wyden, Senator Merkley, and Congressman Walden:

I am writing on behalf of the 41 district members of the Oregon Water Resources Congress (OWRC). Established in 1912, OWRC is a nonprofit association representing irrigation districts, water control districts, improvement districts, drainage districts and other government entities delivering agricultural water supplies. The water stewards we represent operate complex water management systems, including water supply reservoirs, canals, pipelines, and hydropower production, and deliver water to roughly 1/3 of all irrigated land in Oregon. The land served by our members produce a bounty of agricultural products that are vital to the economy and food supply of Oregon, the United States, and the world.

Two lawsuits filed in federal court by environmental groups may threaten several of Oregon's most promising water conservation and fisheries restoration effort in the Deschutes Basin. Local irrigation districts, and OWRC members, are leading these collaborative, science-based initiatives, which include the pending Deschutes Basin Habitat Conservation Plan (Deschutes HCP). OWRC has been pleased with your collective support of the Deschutes HCP, and your recognition that collaborative, science-based efforts are important, invaluable tools for improving both societal values and environmental conditions. Unfortunately, these controversial lawsuits may jeopardize these collaborative efforts.

Late last year and earlier this year, the Center for Biological Diversity and WaterWatch of Oregon filed separate lawsuits under the Endangered Species Act against the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and three irrigation districts (Central Oregon, North Unit and Tumalo). The districts convey water supplies to thousands of small family farms and ranches, businesses, and homeowners, as well as to schools, parks, and for other uses. In the ensuing litigation, the environmental groups will likely demand changes in the annual operations of three reservoirs (Crane Prairie, Crescent, and Wickiup) that were authorized and constructed for the purposes of flood protection and supplying irrigation water supplies to these communities. Over the years, these facilities have successfully increased public safety, provided recreation, and have helped to sustain an instrumental part of Oregon's agricultural production.

***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.***

These groups argue the operations of these reservoirs harm the Oregon spotted frog, a species listed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as “threatened” in 2014. Their solution will likely be to call for a massive reallocation of water from communities including Bend, Madras, Redmond, and others. Yet today, thousands of families rely on these water supplies for their businesses, for farming, for gardens, their horses, and other animals. Any involuntary reallocation of water from these districts may significantly affect the districts, the communities, and hundreds of family farm and ranch families.

Why should the districts and their patrons be penalized? All they have done is work hard and invest millions of dollars in collaborative efforts with local, state and federal agencies, and conservation groups, to successfully conserve water and improve fish and wildlife habitat in the Deschutes River and its tributaries. In a September 23, 2015 Bend Bulletin newspaper op-ed, jointly written by representatives of Trout Unlimited (Mike Tripp) and the Upper Deschutes River Coalition (Jeff Wieland), they stated:

*“Over the past 15 years, irrigation districts, conservation groups and agencies have restored 80,000 acre-feet of water to Whychus Creek, Tumalo Creek, the Middle Deschutes and the Crooked River through methods such as irrigation district efficiencies and in-stream leasing. The Deschutes Basin is held up as a model of collaborative flow restoration throughout the West.”*

Collaboration on water issues isn't easy or cheap. It requires commitment, resolve and the support of local, state and federal officials - especially when the very people who are working hard to improve social conditions are being threatened with litigation. The courts, as we have all learned painfully in Oregon, will not produce a credible, sustainable solution. The Deschutes HCP is the only effort that will produce an acceptable, long-term solution for this region's economy and environment.

We are calling upon you to support this collaborative process and prevent an unacceptable social, economic, and even environmental outcome for this region. OWRC and its members have worked too hard to improve environmental values, and these districts and their patrons should not now be penalized for their collaboration.

Sincerely,



April Snell  
Executive Director

cc: Oregon Governor Kate Brown  
Department of Interior Secretary Sally Jewell  
Oregon State Legislature