

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on Fisheries Conservation, Wildlife and Oceans

Statement

Testimony of Geoffrey M. Huntington
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Thank you Mr. Chairman for the opportunity to present testimony regarding Oregon's efforts to restore endangered salmon and the health of our watersheds.

The Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds.

Oregon's efforts to recover listed anadromous fish runs is guided by a unique blend of efforts integrated to deliver a single mission:

"To restore our native fish populations - and the aquatic systems that support them - to productive and sustainable levels that will provide substantial environmental, cultural, and economic values to Oregonians."

The Oregon Plan has four components: coordinated delivery of agency programs promoting improved habitat, water quality, and riparian functions; funding of local and private watershed restoration actions; monitoring the effectiveness of recovery efforts; and independent scientific review and oversight. The plan has been institutionalized in statute, executive order, agency regulations, and dedicated funding to sustain voluntary restoration and habitat improvement efforts by landowners.

While the Oregon Plan is built on a foundation of existing federal and state laws, the backbone of Oregon's recovery efforts is the State's local citizen efforts to restore habitat and improve water quality through watershed councils and soil and water conservation districts. There will be no recovery of native salmon stocks without the active (and voluntary) participation of landowners who control more than 60 percent of the freshwater habitat of coho salmon runs. Successful recovery will be accomplished only by investing in watershed enhancements on these private lands that comprise mile after mile of critical stream reaches throughout the state.

Currently, Oregon has a network of over 90 local councils and 45 districts comprised of landowners, local conservation groups, private companies with land holdings, and state and federal agencies - most operating by consensus to encourage, support, and implement voluntary habitat restoration projects on private lands in their local watershed. This restoration infrastructure was established for a variety of reasons, not simply listing of salmon stocks under the federal ESA; and it is thriving across the state. Local groups are implementing a multitude of projects including assessments of watershed conditions, fencing and planting

stream banks for vegetation recovery, replacing road culverts that block fish passage, eliminating roads or resurfacing roads to eliminate sediment delivery to streams, placing large wood and boulders in streams to enhance habitat, modifying inefficient (and often unscreened) irrigation systems in order to return water for instream flows, and encouraging new agricultural land management practices to improve water quality.

In all, these efforts are changing the outlook for recovering dwindling fish runs by improving riparian habitat conditions beyond that which is needed for individual landowners to simply avoid "take" under the federal ESA. The work is slow however, because the accomplishments occur stream mile by stream mile in every tributary that is key to survival of the wild salmon; and stable funding is critical to sustaining progress.

Administrating and Funding Voluntary Efforts.

The Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) is the state agency in Oregon that is responsible for supporting the watershed council infrastructure and strategically funding restoration projects. OWEB funds assessments of watershed health to help direct restoration at the watershed scale, as well as monitoring of recovery efforts and maintenance of a statewide database of restoration projects completed each year. OWEB also funds public education and outreach for the Oregon Plan, and the scientific review panel associated with the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds. OWEB's investments of public funds in watershed restoration efforts is guided by a 17 member board comprised of a representative from each of the state's natural resources commissions, Native American tribes, five federal agencies, the land grant university extension service, and five distinguished citizens from different parts of the state. Criteria for assessing proposals and awarding funds are established by rule, and are applied by regional teams comprised of state and federal natural resource field staff with first hand knowledge of local conditions. These teams use their collective expertise to review grant applications and make funding recommendations to the OWEB Board. Virtually any entity owning land, local council, private non-profit, or governmental entity may seek funding for restoration activities that will improve habitat or watershed health generally; and OWEB considers nearly 500 such requests annually.

Oregon has been promoting and funding voluntary restoration activities for more than 12 years. OWEB currently administers \$17 million in active watershed restoration grants (of a historical total of \$45 million) implementing over 499 projects and activities around the state. The Board is responsible for investing up to approximately \$15 million annually from lottery funds dedicated to watershed and salmon habitat improvement, along with other private and federal funds that it administers. The \$9 million appropriation to the State of Oregon by this Congress will be administered by OWEB in tandem with the state funds using the eligibility criteria and funding mechanisms currently in place. This is important because it allows flexibility for the Board to target its investments to both respond to watershed council needs and achieve significant, long-term benefits supporting the State's species recovery and watershed enhancement objectives. Addition of federal funds is critical to the success of Oregon's efforts because they can be targeted to significantly enhance the State's current efforts to assess and monitor recovery efforts, in addition to supporting on-the-ground projects.

Fiscal and Effectiveness Accountability.

An independent audit of OWEB's fiscal controls, grant award criteria, and grant management program completed in March, 2000 found the program has in place appropriate financial controls and grant review criteria to ensure accountability for use of public funds. OWEB and the National Marine Fisheries Service have entered into an agreement governing expenditure of current and any future money distributed from the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Program. That agreement ensures that the federal funds will be

administered for activities supporting recovery of the listed anadromous salmon using OWEB's existing project funding criteria. This means that the federal funds will be used for the same types of voluntary restoration projects and watershed assessment and monitoring work that the Board is currently investing in; and with same emphasis on fiscal accountability.

Short and long-term effectiveness monitoring of restoration efforts is a component of both individual investments in projects by the Board, and of targeted, programmatic investments planned for monitoring the effectiveness of all recovery efforts on a watershed scale. OWEB is collaborating with the federal government, the Oregon Plan monitoring team, and the scientific review panel to ensure that investments of all public funds, state and federal, will result in demonstrable improvements to critical habitat and sustainable watershed health over time.

Importance of Continued Federal Funding.

Federal funding will play a critical role in Oregon's efforts to ensure survival of our native salmon runs. Current efforts will succeed so long as the local, state, and federal investments in restoration activities continue to be integrated and delivered through the current process that has a track record of success and trust with private landowners across the state. The first appropriation to the Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Program accomplished this goal by allowing Oregon and NMFS to ensure that the investment of federal funds in restoration activities can be tailored by OWEB to fit the unique circumstances of each watershed. It is critical that the next appropriation of funds allow for the same outcome.

Availability of additional federal funds will be particularly important as Oregon works to systematically complete assessments of watershed conditions in key basins and implement a comprehensive effectiveness monitoring program in support of Oregon Plan efforts. The foundation is in place, and critical restoration work is well underway; but success will depend on sustaining the effort over time. For this, Oregon's recovery efforts need the partnership of the federal government for multiple generations of native salmon.

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