NETWORK of OREGON
WATERSHED COUNCILS

June 5th, 2020

Dear Members of the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board:

Thank you for the opportunity to share comments regarding the 2019-2021 Budget Projections / OWEB Spending Plan and how they might affect Watershed Councils across Oregon.

As one of the Oregon Conservation Partners (OrCP), we recently helped to conduct a survey to gauge the many ways the pandemic affects our organizations, receiving responses from 33 Watershed Councils across the state (out of 70 total responses). The survey data clearly show that Watershed Councils have been impacted by the challenges imposed by social distancing requirements, reduced access to field work sites and outreach venues, slow-downs in permitting and other processes, etc. For these reasons, the work often takes longer, and/or costs more than originally planned.

Watershed Councils have been greatly affected by the sudden change in the funding landscape, from OWEB and other public and private funding agencies, as well as loss of unrestricted private donations, cancelled fundraisers, volunteer events, etc. *"All of the legs of the stool are getting wobblier",* was one survey respondent's observation. It is clear that the continued loss of these funds will increase in impact over time, with 64% of Watershed Council respondents forecasting the possibility of reducing staff within the next twelve months.

For these reasons, **NOWC supports OWEB's decision to fully fund the current open solicitation grants and supports the OWEB staff recommendation to choose "Option C", with the hope that it will maintain operations for the greatest number of Watershed Councils.**

In particular, **we approve OWEB's recommendation to continue funding Watershed Council capacity grants during the current biennium and strongly recommend that OWEB continue to fully fund these grants in the 2021-2023 biennium.** The capacity grants are the "load-bearing wall" for most Watershed Councils; reductions in capacity funding would cause an existential crisis, especially for smaller organizations. Capacity grants enable Watershed Councils to:

·   Maintain ties and trust with partners and local communities, especially landowners, which have often taken years to cultivate;

·   Leverage other funding sources which do not fund capacity to accomplish the OWEB mission;

·   Level the playing field among Oregon's geographic regions and economies, allowing Watershed Councils to work equitably among a diverse range of stakeholders;

·   Continue to plan conservation/restoration projects so we will be "shovel-ready" and able to employ workers in an economic recovery.

In the event that OWEB's funding situation were to improve during this biennium, **NOWC also strongly recommends that OWEB prioritize re-funding Monitoring grants as soon as possible.** As you are aware, an interruption in monitoring activity for the 36 currently funded monitoring projects will disrupt important longitudinal datasets, thereby diluting OWEB's long-term investment in these efforts. Monitoring data is the foundation of any "story" that OWEB can share about the impact of conservation/restoration work and its relation to the well-being of communities, as described in its Strategic Plan Priority 1. With broken datasets, the story is not as credible. Many monitoring activities are scale-able in nature: smaller amounts of funding could support essential activities/smaller collections/shorter time durations, while preserving the overall integrity of datasets. Additionally, monitoring is an activity that spreads funds across many organizations and supports local capacity -- OWEB's re-investment in these activities would certainly help to support valuable components of Oregon's rural economy.

Healthy watersheds are places that many Oregonians treasure, and Watershed Councils are key contributors to conserving and restoring these important places. We appreciate OWEB's efforts to navigate this economic downturn with an eye towards NOWC members' ability to persist.

Sincerely,

Vanessa Green

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Network of Oregon Watershed Councils