

MEMORANDUM

TO: Water Resources Commission

FROM: Paul R. Cleary, Director

SUBJECT: Agenda Item H, April 18, 2003
Water Resources Commission Meeting

Informational Report on the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds Biennial 2001 - 2003

I. Issue Statement

Geoff Huntington, Executive Director of the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB); and Jay Nicholas, OWEB Science and Policy Advisor, will present an overview of the 2001-2003 Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds Biennial Report (Biennial Report). This staff report highlights a few items from the Biennial Report for Commission discussion.

II. Background

Under Senate Bill 945, passed by the 2001 Legislature and codified at ORS 541.420, OWEB is required to report biennially to the Governor and to the Legislature on the implementation and effectiveness of the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds (Oregon Plan).

The Biennial Report provides an update on voluntary restoration actions, federal conservation efforts, and monitoring efforts conducted under the Oregon Plan. State natural resource agencies, including the Department, are required by statute to provide information at the request of OWEB for inclusion in the Biennial Report.

By statute, the report must also provide the following information for each drainage basin in the state:

- (a) A status report on watershed and key habitat conditions in the drainage basin based on available information;
- (b) An assessment of data and information needs deemed critical to monitoring and evaluating watershed and habitat enhancement programs and efforts;
- (c) An overview of state agency programs addressing watershed conditions;

- (d) An overview of voluntary restoration activities addressing watershed conditions;
- (e) A summary of investments made by the board from funds; and
- (f) The recommendations of the board for enhancing the effectiveness of Oregon Plan implementation in each drainage basin.

III. Discussion

The 2001-2003 Oregon Plan Biennial Report is provided as an attachment. A few items from the report are highlighted below for Commission discussion, and opportunities for continued collaboration with OWEB are identified.

Streamflow Restoration

As highlighted in the Biennial Report, stabilizing or enhancing instream flows for fish is critical to the success of the Oregon Plan. The Department promotes voluntary streamflow restoration through water use efficiency and conservation programs, and water right leases and transfers. In 2002 there were 182 active leases, instream transfers, and allocations of conserved water with 390 cubic feet per second (cfs) protected instream. This represents a 250% increase in streamflow restoration actions since the Oregon Plan was adopted in 1997.

According to the Biennial Report, insufficient streamflows continue to pose a threat to listed fish stocks. While we have made strides at returning water instream, the Department continues to look for ways to restore streamflows by relying on voluntary actions and building partnerships with water users and other interests. OWEB also facilitates streamflow restoration as the state agency responsible for funding flow restoration efforts under the Oregon Plan. The Department and OWEB continue to look for opportunities to coordinate our voluntary flow restoration efforts. For instance, OWEB uses the high priority streamflow restoration watersheds developed jointly by the Department and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife when considering water acquisition grant applications. OWEB has also been working with the Department to provide funding for drought instream leases in response to low water conditions anticipated this year. The Biennial Report notes that controversy continues to surround instream flow enhancement efforts in some basins. A coordinated outreach effort by the Department, OWEB, and other partners might be one approach to reducing local anxiety over streamflow restoration.

Conserved Water Program

According to the Biennial Report, one of the Department's voluntary flow restoration tools, the conserved water program, has been underutilized. In fact, the Department received only seven applications during the first 10 years of the program. However, during the last 3 years, the Department has received 4 to 5 applications per year. This year, staff expect conserved water application rates to further increase as the Department implements the Deschutes Mitigation Program.

While the allocation of conserved water program continues to grow, the number of water users interested in the program remains low in comparison to other voluntary flow restoration programs administered by the Department. This is partly due to the complexity of water allocation decisions necessary for processing conserved water application. For example, the Department must review allocations of conserved water for impacts on other rights when the conserved water is applied to new uses. The high cost of many types of conservation projects, such as canal lining and piping, may also decrease interest in pursuing allocations of conserved water. Irrigation efficiency projects can also give rise to ownership issues and competing values (e.g., aesthetics of water features). All of these factors may contribute to the low participation of water users in the conserved water program compared to other voluntary streamflow restoration programs such as leasing. However, continued coordination between the Department and OWEB on these types of projects will help ensure that this program is accessible to those interested in restoring flows through allocations of conserved water.

IV. Recommendation

This is an informational report. No Commission action is required.

Attachment:

Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds Biennial 2001 - 2003

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