



The League of Women Voters of Oregon is a 100-year-old grassroots nonpartisan political organization that encourages informed and active participation in government. We envision informed Oregonians participating in a fully accessible, responsive, and transparent government to achieve the common good. LWVOR Legislative Action is based on advocacy positions formed through studies and member consensus. The League never supports or opposes any candidate or political party.

July 22, 2020

To: Senator Kathleen Taylor and Representative Jeff Reardon, Co-Chairs
Members of the Committee
Jt. Interim Committee on Ways and Means
Subcommittee on Natural Resources
Email jwmnr.exhibits@oregonlegislature.gov

Re: Co-Chair Rebalance Plan for Natural Resource Agency Reductions

Co-Chairs and Committee Members:

The League of Women Voters of Oregon and the League of Women Voters of the U.S. have studied a variety of natural resource issues and our members have adopted positions upon which this letter is based. We provided testimony before you during the 2019 and 2020 sessions on the budgets of most of the natural resource agencies. Like you, we have been devastated by this Covid-19 health crisis and the subsequent economic crisis. It is with that understanding that we provide comments on the Co-Chairs' Rebalance Plan for Natural Resource agencies.

A general comment: Agencies often "offered up" vacancies during their 17% cuts exercise but some of those positions are important to the agency and were only vacant due to retirement or a staffer moving or changing jobs. **The duties of some of those positions are critical to the mission of the agency and especially so related to the public health of Oregonians. As you consider these cuts, please ask the agencies the reason for the vacancy.**

With the potential of even more devastating cuts in 2021, it may be time to have more conversations around how agencies can share resources or even be combined in order to seek some savings while assuring that the missions of these agencies are met.

Dept. of Agriculture: We appreciate your prioritizing agriculture water quality and the Pesticide Stewardship Partnership.

Dept. of Environmental Quality: This agency is responsible for Oregon's clean air, water and land. These are public health issues. Although we appreciate the Co-Chairs' saving existing filled positions in the Air and Water Quality programs, the League had hoped that the Air Quality program could continue to address air quality in Oregon with the staffing secured during the 2019 session. **With the virus, good air quality is especially critical to the public health of Oregonians. Reducing the amount of vacancy savings (#220 and 221) should be seriously considered.**

You have worked over the years to move the Water Quality Program forward. The 2019-21 water quality permitting budget was premised on the consultant work and stakeholder participation you funded the last few years. **Loss of positions under #232 will again set us back. Any positions that can be saved would be appreciated.**

From a recent [report](#) to the Environmental Quality Commission:

*DEQ's Water Quality program has had a longstanding backlog of NPDES wastewater permits. The 2015 Oregon Legislature directed DEQ to hire an independent consultant to evaluate and recommend solutions to improve NPDES permit quality and timeliness. This evaluation culminated in a permit program review by MWH in 2016 and a subsequent NPDES permit issuance review evaluation by PG Environmental in 2018. The [slide show](#) may be easier to read! **The last slide indicates how far behind we still are in getting permits current.***

Dept. of Fish and Wildlife: Again, we are concerned about the “vacancy savings” in #239. The duties of these positions are important to our marine fisheries. We appreciate prioritizing the water quality program staffing.

Dept. of Forestry: The cuts continue to gut this agency just as they are restructuring and working with their contractor to get their billing up to speed. #265 reduces administrative services across the agency besides the cuts suggested in specific divisions. We know you are aware of and are planning monies for the Emergency Board in case the 2020 fire season is as bad as the drought and weather may make it and that is appreciated. But, **if we want a functioning forestry agency, a rethinking of how the agency should be funded is needed.** This industry is important to Oregon, but, just as you recently supported the Memorandum of Understanding between the forest industry and conservation groups, we need to keep the staffing to be sure the day to day work is done for all.

Dept. of Geology and Mineral Industries: We are concerned about the elimination of the Chief Information Officer (#278). Much of what DOGAMI does is data driven and that data is important to local jurisdictions, to industry and to the general public's safety. This agency is SO small that the loss of such a position may affect the work provided. The League has discussed before that, with these cuts and those we may see in 2021, it's time to see how to best provide the services of this agency by a restructuring or shared agency work.

Dept. of Land Conservation and Development: We appreciate that the staffing for the HB 2001/2003 housing legislative work is protected. We serve on the rulemaking for this work and have been impressed by the level of staff expertise and the broad and inclusive membership of the rulemaking committees. We understand that local jurisdictions did not take advantage of the full grant funding provided by you so can accept the reduction in #281 and #282. However, **#295 accepts keeping a vacancy where a staffer has moved but this planner is the representative for the Mid-Willamette Valley, a high growth area with many jurisdictions where state expertise can help with housing and economic development issues.** This is a great example where, just because there is a vacancy, the position is critical to, not only the agency's mission, but to local governments in this area. We also note that #309 reduces the Metro area (with 27 cities, 3 counties and Metro) to one planner to help these jurisdictions address Oregon's land use Goals. This reduction might also inhibit these jurisdictions as they work on both housing and jobs.

Since we follow these agencies, we also have concerns that an accounting position (#308) is being held vacant. As the fiscal arm of the legislature, you know how important it is that these agencies are good stewards of our limited dollars. It seems important that the agency assure you that their fiscal records will be able to be sound with the loss of this position.

Water Resources Dept.: With drought throughout Oregon, this agency has a critical job to assure we have “water for all”. The loss of field service personnel (#315), people who monitor and assist the fair regulation of water use may well be another public health issue, as well as critical to our agriculture industry. We are saddened by the loss of the groundwater basin study we all worked so hard to get funded. Back to 30 years before Oregon has a good handle on its groundwater. Sad. **Most concerning is that the agency needs additional funding to pay for their Attorney General services. Without that additional funding, the bills still need to be paid and that means yet additional reductions which could require 10-20 additional staff reductions at the agency.**

We note that the General Fund reductions in these agencies is 8.93%. That cut amount is a greater percentage than in the other areas of the state's budget. Yes, the League supports these other areas and we are working with others to find additional revenue to help cover the current revenue losses. But we ask that you also consider accessing not just the Education Stability Fund for education but the Rainy Day Fund to some extent to ameliorate these cuts. These agencies protect the public health of Oregonians. They assure we have clean air, clean and adequate water and good planning for housing and jobs.

Please consider our comments as you deliberate and make recommendations and final decisions on these important budgets. Thank you for listening and for your hard work during these tough times.

Sincerely,



Rebecca Gladstone
LWVOR President



Peggy Lynch
LWVOR Natural Resources Coordinator

Cc: Co-Chairs Senators Elizabeth Steiner Hayward and Betsy Johnson and Representative Dan Rayfield
Jason Miner, Governor's Natural Resources Advisor