



The League of Women Voters of Oregon, established in 1920, is a 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.

February 20, 2025

To: [Sen. Lew Frederick](#) and [Rep. Emerson Levy](#), Co-Chairs
Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means [Subcommittee on Natural Resources](#)

Re: [SB 5543](#) – Water Resources Dept. Budget – Support with Additions

The League has strong positions on both water quality and quantity. We have studied water issues since 1969. We had a seat on both the 2012 and 2017 Integrated Water Resources Strategy (IWRSS) Policy Advisory Groups. We have engaged as the 2025 IWRSS is being completed. Members attend Water Resources Commission meetings and work group meetings. As a result of that window into the department's responsibilities, **we provide testimony today in support of the General Fund and Lottery Fund request for the base budget/activities and for additions to help this department meet its important mission:** *“to serve the public by practicing and promoting responsible water management through two key goals: To directly address Oregon's water supply needs; To restore and protect streamflows and watersheds in order to ensure the long-term sustainability of Oregon's ecosystems, economy, and quality of life.”*

A reminder: “All water within the State from all sources of water belongs to the public.” With the infusion of significant resources since 2021, the League has supported the reorganization of the agency in order to address both water management and policy implementation. The League was actively engaged in the modernization of both the dam safety and well programs as passed by the legislature and we continue to support that work. The League has also been supportive of the staffing increases you have provided these past years. But we hope the committee recognizes that **increasing staff takes time not only to hire, but to train to do very specific technical work, and often the staff increases have only provided the department with assistance for one of the two-year biennia.**

For 2025, we **support the Governor's Recommended Budget, with additions, while rejecting the POP 090 Reductions.** And we are supportive of a number of policy bills that will help direct this agency as it works to fulfill its mission. Of importance to the League include:

Support for POP 090 Additions to invest in IT to update the agency's water use tracking and reporting system. Frankly, the agency has a critical need to upgrade its entire IT system. So, **we also support POP 107, IT modernization, to move this conversation forward and assist the agency and the general public in accessing important water data. And we support POP 111 that improves accessibility of the agency's website. Accessibility and transparency are hallmarks of the League's values.** LFO's [budget review](#) notes: *“...there is a short supply of water data, which limits the Department's ability to effectively identify, analyze, and manage water sources.”*

POP 090 Additions also includes providing an infusion of monies for legal costs to continue the agency's good work toward reducing cases which we also support.

The League engaged with the agency and others during the interim and **supports [HB 2808](#) and [HB 2803](#)**, start card, licensing, various permits and dam safety fee increases. We realize that increases can affect our members as well as others, but the work of this agency is too important not to find revenue for maintaining the staffing and program work needed to address Oregon's water needs. Since 2009, the League has supported the 50/50 split between applicants and the General Fund (the public's money) because we believe that managing the public's water should be a shared responsibility. We note that the water right fee schedule is reviewed every four years and was last modified in 2021. **We would encourage a more regular fee review with a 3-5% annual increase to address inflation costs and provide for more manageable increases over time.**

POP 104 provides monies for a variety of grants and loans. **The League supports monies for Feasibility Studies for the Water Well Repair and Replacement Fund (We have provided [testimony](#) in support of [HB 2168](#) that would increase the water well funding to \$5 million.) and for the Water Projects Grant and Loan Program. We are supportive of funding for Place-Based Planning as well.**

We can support the packages around the American Rescue Plan Act Carryover and the Harney Basin Fund as reasonable budget actions.

The League has engaged with the State Scenic Waterway program at the Oregon Parks and Recreation Dept. **POP 110 is important** to backfill the six existing split-funded positions above the existing contracted amount with the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. Oregonians benefit greatly from this program, and assuring it is working as intended means supporting this agency's role in that program.

The League uses Key Performance Measure (KPM) data to help understand the agency's needs and where improvement or investment may be needed. (See starting on page 92 of the agency reference [materials](#).)

We note that KPM #1 & 2, relating to streamflow are below target. Yes, drought is a big factor and not under the agency's control. But **the information should be used by the legislature to consider policies that would help enhance streamflows.**

We would like to see **more funding for stream gages**, so critical to water management—related to **KMP #4**.

We would like the legislature to **consider increasing the target on KPM #5, groundwater**. The League was VERY supportive of the updated groundwater rules. It's positive to see that the current target was met. So maybe increasing that target should be considered.

KPM #7 indicates a need for updating/upgrading web information, supporting your investment in the agency's IT requests.

Processing water rights transactions and transfers continues to be challenging as noted in KPMs #10 and 11. As we ask for fee increases, the ask becomes harder to request and advocate; But new staff that needs to be trained and more complex applications are now part of the mix as water becomes scarcer. We are hopeful that the discussions on efficiencies of processing these past few months will provide some opportunities for lesser processing time. But the League also wants to be sure that applications approved will meet Oregon's water laws and protect these public waters.

The League has grave concerns around the availability of federal funds for all water needs. We are also concerned that a reduction in federal employees that deal with water issues may make this agency's (and others') work more challenging and may need additional help to address water management.

The League was pleased to hear Rep. Lively's questions around exempt wells. It is a conversation needed as we see up to 3,000 new wells a year. But it will be a tough one.

The League appreciated Rep. Breese-Iverson's questions and concerns around this agency's rulemaking processes. Having been a part of many of those processes, in part due to our water studies ([Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)), the League is pleased to report the agency's inclusiveness, outreach and programs such as Place-Based Planning and other collaborative processes that provide local community members with the ability to understand water issues, and we can feel more comfortable engaging in these rulemaking processes.

The League also appreciated Sen. Anderson's acknowledgement that we need to be looking to the future. Besides the community conversations as mentioned by the agency, the League has been supporting the state's funding of water infrastructure—for sewer and drinking water projects and for irrigation upgrades. Of course, we also support increased conservation efforts. The Metro area's Regional Water Providers Consortium is one example of a way to help urban Oregonians be part of that solution.

We couldn't complete this testimony without recognizing the work of this legislature's Water Caucus and the House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources and Water Co-Chairs Helm and Owens and staff. Their efforts to seek solutions to Oregon's water needs may well provide you all with the opportunity to pass legislation to help address these challenging issues you heard about these past two days.

We sincerely thank you for considering our extensive testimony on this agency's budget. We understand that this agency, not unlike many natural resource agencies, relies heavily on the General Fund. **Unless we can find another source of funding, we urge the legislature to recognize the value of this agency's work and fund it appropriately.** We are available to discuss each request and look forward to seeing continuing progress from this agency in 2025.

We urge your Support for SB 5543 with additions to continue the work started in 2021 toward truly managing Oregon's water supply.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this legislation.



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Cc: [Ivan Gall](#), Oregon Water Resources Dept. Director