



Testimony of the  
Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation  
to the  
Senate Environment and Natural Resources Committee

**S.B. 1517**

Oregon Legislative Assembly  
Salem, Oregon  
February 3, 2016

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation (CTUIR) appreciates this opportunity to share our thoughts with the Committee on S.B. 1517, on creating, restoring, and enhancing wetlands.

We first learned of this 35-page bill only two days ago. It is a dense, complex proposal addressing a complicated issue. Amendments have been circulated, including ones received just last night. The bill and amendments are frequently confusing, and may perhaps prove unsatisfactory to all parties with an interest in this matter.

The CTUIR would welcome additional time to review the bill and more fully analyze its many elements. However, we understand that may not be possible—particularly in this short session—and we will therefore express our initial concerns now.

The CTUIR welcomes fair scrutiny of wetlands protection and revitalization efforts. Wetlands are a vital component of overall ecosystem health, and are essential to sustaining so many of the tribal First Foods that are such an indelible part of our lives, culture, and well-being. Wetland habitats are also crucial for nurturing plentiful salmon and other fish populations on which many commercial fishers and fishing communities rely. We recognize that wetland creation and restoration have sometimes resulted in contentious situations. We should avoid further polarized debates that falsely pit agriculture versus environmental interests, as this bill unfortunately threatens to do.

The CTUIR urges you to reconsider this legislative approach and explore other ways to deal with the need to effectively balance thriving agricultural economies with resilient, functioning wetland and aquatic ecosystems for us and our children.

The CTUIR is familiar with these circumstances. In the Umatilla River Basin, salmon had been eradicated for nearly three-quarters of a century, in large part because of excessive water withdrawals for irrigation and habitat degradation. Beginning three decades ago, the tribes began to work internally and with our neighbors—farmers, ranchers and other stakeholders—to craft solutions that would accommodate both a healthy economy and a healthy river, with water and fish in it. While more work is necessary, salmon have been restored, and the farm economy in Northeast Oregon continues unimpaired.

This result was achieved by thoughtful dialogue, and honest give-and-take. It was not easy and it was not brief. It was a process not unlike that which occurred more recently under the “Oregon Solutions” umbrella, which has also been employed successfully in our Basin and in which we participated. The same or a similar approach should be explored to address this issue, instead of a bill that seeks to micro-manage intricate environmental matters via an unwieldy statutory framework.

If the Committee chooses to continue with legislative mechanisms, the CTUIR suggests that it would be more beneficial and productive to devote more time and attention to the subject, with a thorough and transparent development process, such as would be available during the regular 2017 session. Perspectives from landowners, conservation groups, tribes and agencies need to be further vetted and documented. The practicalities of implementing legislation like this should also be examined.

The Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation thanks you for your attention to our concerns. Again, we ask that you table this bill at the present time and work with stakeholders to focus on the issues that this bill tries, but ultimately fails, to properly resolve.