

Chair Macdonald and Members of the Oregon Climate Action Commission (OCAC):

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on the Natural and Working Lands (NWL) Fund Update and Draft Legislative Report shared at the most recent OCAC meeting. This fund is a significant step towards ensuring that Oregon's natural and working lands continue and increase their contributions to climate change mitigation.

The Oregon Natural Climate Solutions (NCS) Coalition, a group comprised of climate, conservation, and working lands focused organizations, is committed to helping increase the pace and scale of natural climate solutions, and coalition members are dedicated to seeing the NWL funds distributed *efficiently and equitably* across the state to land managers, and community organizations supporting them. Coalition members work directly with farmers, ranchers, and forest owners and managers to implement these practices and are eager to see these funds distributed quickly. We've been monitoring this process closely and are excited to see the projects and programs receiving NWL funds begin to take shape and appreciate the agencies' work to get foundational staffing and processes in place to use and distribute these funds.

We appreciated the agencies' transparency regarding the challenges in staffing and adjusting programs and understand that the agencies only just received the funds in spring of this year. Given these challenges and the urgency of deploying these funds to benefit Oregon's lands, communities, and climate mitigation efforts, we welcome opportunities such as outreach and engagement where our organizations can actively support agency implementation.

We offer the following support and comments regarding the urgency of distributing these funds, community engagement, fund implementation and the importance of sustained NWL fund allocations over time.

**Outreach to Communities.** As agencies adjust program design to deliver these funds, it is critical to consider outreach approaches and opportunities. The agencies will need to balance outreach efforts to inform immediate opportunities with input to inform program development in the longer term. Many land managers advocated for the Natural Climate Solutions Bill and are eager to apply for the funds.

However, they are often not attending agency commission meetings or tracking agency implementation and may not know when or how to apply. We encourage agencies to think creatively on how to reach communities and to work collaboratively with partner organizations, like ours, to identify potential applicants, to help share and present materials, and to conduct outreach and education on the fund.

NCS coalition members are well connected to the people and communities they serve, such as farmers and ranchers, soil and water conservation districts, and environmental justice organizations. We would welcome collaborative efforts to engage in outreach for these funding opportunities and hope the agencies will take advantage of our support and partnership, to help distribute this funding as quickly, equitably, and effectively as possible.

**Importance of strong agency coordination.** Working across multiple agencies allows for broader program reach but can bring coordination challenges. We are encouraged to hear that the Oregon Department of Energy has posted its NWL position and hope this position will allow ODOE to support the OCAC in coordinating fund implementation and reporting across agencies. The coordination support provided by the Governor's Office during the fund allocation proposal development led to a strong foundation for the NWL fund and a central leadership role is vital to sustain this level of coordination among agencies into the implementation phase.

**Focus on intentional hiring.** We recognize that successful delivery of these funds requires increased agency staff capacity. We strongly encourage agencies to continue their efforts to hire for the positions outlined in HB 3409 and to be intentional in scoping positions, with a focus on relationship development and outreach efforts. This is particularly important as new program staff work to mobilize state funds in partnership with small organizations and environmental justice communities. Adding staff through this fund offers an opportunity for agencies to increase their capacity to engage with communities and partners, to listen deeply to understand their needs related to NCS, to adapt program delivery to meet those needs, and to have the capacity to apply for and secure federal funds to bolster NWL fund projects.

**Looking Ahead.** Agencies are focused on implementation of the current NWL funding at the moment, but the OCAC must also engage to sustain funding for this work over time. Continuity of funding is critical! When funding is available one year and not the next, interest in the programs decreases, and it becomes difficult for land managers and community organizations to anticipate what will be available and take best advantage of it.

Given the time and legislative approval required to allocate funds and the fact that agencies anticipate spending the majority of funds by the end of FY25, it's important to look ahead and ensure funds will be available to continue offering incentives and technical assistance beyond this initial funding.

We appreciate this recent progress report, but also want to note the next report to the legislature in December 2024. This will be a critical time to demonstrate progress and success, as it will be the last report before the 2025 legislative session begins, where the legislature will consider reinvesting in the Natural and Working Lands Fund.

Signed,

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Steering Committee

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