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February 14, 2024

House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water

Testimony in support of HB 4128 -3 Amendment, Section 2

Submitted by: Zach Freed, Sustainable Water Program Director

Chair Helm, Vice Chairs Hartman and Owens, and Members of the Committee:

The Nature Conservancy **supports funding for the Well Abandonment, Repair, and Replacement Fund in Section (2) of the -3 amendment to House Bill 4128.** The Well Abandonment, Repair, and Replacement Fund is a key resource for Oregon's most vulnerable frontline communities who are experiencing the first and worst impacts of drought and unsustainable water extraction.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a science-based, non-partisan organization committed to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Oregon, TNC has over 80,000 supporters and members in every community around the state, where we manage lands and waters in varied ecosystems and partner with ranchers, farmers, fishers, and environmental interests on some of the most challenging conservation issues facing people and nature.

The Well Abandonment, Repair, and Replacement Fund was established in 2021 and was funded through a combination of one-time American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds and General Fund monies. Since then, the Fund has successfully served hundreds of Oregonians who have lost access to safe, secure drinking water in their domestic wells. The Fund's emphasis on low-to-moderate income households has helped Oregon's most vulnerable rural populations pay for the excessive costs of water scarcity. These households are the least likely to be able to afford the \$20,000 to \$80,000+ costs of deepening or replacing their water source.

The Nature Conservancy has worked with rural communities across the state to increase water security and find creative, voluntary solutions to the threat of water scarcity. Through our work, we have learned that many vulnerable domestic well owners are unaware of the relatively new Well Abandonment, Repair, and Replacement Fund. We expect the Fund to have increased utilization over time as more Oregonians learn of this resource. However, the Fund is no longer accepting applications because it has fully allocated the existing funding. **The Nature Conservancy strongly supports allocating \$3,000,000 to the Well Abandonment, Repair, and Replacement Fund in 2024, to serve more of our most vulnerable community members.**

We appreciate your leadership on this issue. The Nature Conservancy remains neutral on other sections of House Bill 4128.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input.