

Linda Zahl
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Columbia County Commissioners

Re: Proposed Wetland Rules revisions / amendments to comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance
Local file TA 22-02 and PA 22-02

Columbia County Board of Commissioners:

I am concerned about the incompleteness of the report made by Westbrook in the matter of amending the County Ordinances in wetland management.

Westbrook acknowledges that wetlands are important to the well being of wildlife and people and even to property values. They also point out that the County's current ordinances relating to wetland protections is not acceptable to the State of Oregon. Further, Westbrook states that the current ordinances impede development particularly to the poor (who cannot afford lawyers and pay for environmental studies) and to industry (who can afford lawyers and environmental studies but have problems getting infrastructure to pass through wetlands). The report gives three options for the County to consider: continue full wetland protections, have limited wetland protections, or have no wetland protections at the county level. Great thought is given to the second and third options while almost no time is given in the report to option 1: continuing full wetland protections.

How can an informed decision be made if all three options are not explored? Although great time is spent in the report describing what limited and no protections would look like, little is given to what steps are needed and the estimated costs of continuing full wetland protections. This is an incomplete report and until the public and the Commissioners know about this crucial missing data, a decision should be delayed.

I am also concerned that the Commissioners did not reach out to any local agencies who understand Columbia County's wetlands, citizens, and industry such as the Scappoose Bay Watershed Council or the Soil and Water Conservation District. In fact, when I contacted both agencies, they did not even know that this was being considered or that the county had already received the completed report from Westbrook. I am sure that this report could have been made by one of our own agencies first and then if more information were needed, Westbrook could have been hired. This is a formal request for the financials of how much Westbrook charged us taxpayers. Please, in the future, draw upon the expertise that already exists here in the county.

Local control of our resources is important. Who is better in determining how our county should look today and into the future but our own residents. Westbrook's document seems to recommend getting rid of local control of wetlands and turning it all over to the State and to the Federal Government. In fact, for most counties in Oregon, giving all responsibility for their wetlands over to the State and Federal agencies is a good idea since they do not have much wetlands. We, however, have more wetlands than almost any other county in Oregon and therefore, we should have more wetland protections than other counties. Just as a county that is on the Ocean should have more oceanfront/marine protections than we do (since we have no oceanfront) we need more wetland protections than other wetland poor counties.

Lastly, I would like to ask the Commissioners to consider creating a Natural Resources Position at the county. Wetlands are only one of our wonderful natural resources that need to be properly managed at the county level in order to ensure the health of our people, plants and animals. The Natural Resources manager would maintain our forestry ecosystems, the fragile migration paths, and our wetlands for the benefit of not only jobs today but for generations to come.

In conclusion, the Westbrook report is not complete and I ask that the county not make a decision until we understand what needs to be done and the cost involved in "Full Wetland Protection". I ask that the Commissioners seek out local agencies before hiring outside entities. I ask for the financial statement of what was paid to Westbrook. Lastly, I ask that the Commissioners look into creating a Natural Resources position for future management of our abundant and critical resources that Columbia County is the steward of.

Thank you for your time,

Linda Zahl