



AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

This agenda item involves an approval by the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission of a person with fish and wildlife interests to serve as a member on the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Commission.

The Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program (OAHP) was established in 2017 to help farms and ranches face the challenges caused by land fragmentation, conversion to non-farm uses, complex regulations, and planning for generational transfers.

Administered by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB), the OAHP establishes grant programs for farmers and ranchers to support practices that maintain or enhance both agriculture and natural resources such as fish and wildlife on agricultural lands. The Oregon Agricultural Heritage Commission (OAHC) oversees the program and makes funding recommendations to OWEB's Board.

The OAHC consists of 12 members appointed by the OWEB Board. By statute, two of the voting members must be recommended by the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission and have expertise in fish and wildlife habitat. The term of office for each voting member of the OAHC is four years. Once recommended by the Commission, the voting members of the OAHC are appointed by the OWEB Board. Currently there is one fish and wildlife seat open on the OAHC.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

OWEB recruited applications for the fish and wildlife member to serve on the OAHC on October 7, 2024 through an announcement on their OAHP web page and through their GovDelivery email lists. Members of the public were invited to submit interest forms directly to OWEB. OWEB received three applications.

ISSUE

The Commission needs to recommend a person to serve as a fish and wildlife habitat member on the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Commission. The recommendation is provided to OWEB for their consideration and appointment.

ANALYSIS

A team of ODFW staff reviewed the three applications for the fish and wildlife member seat on the OAHC. Each applicant was reviewed according to their fish/wildlife/habitat expertise and background, education, experience in managing or conserving working lands, and their demonstrated commitment to collaboration and group decision-making. Given that the OAHP strives for a Commission that represents different interests from across the state, applicants were also evaluated for their geographic distribution relative to existing committee membership. A summary of each applicant is provided below, and their redacted application materials are provided as an attachment.

MARK VARGAS

Location: Medford, Oregon

Occupation: Sheep/Hay Ranch Operator; Retired ODFW (Rogue Watershed District)

Experience/Involvement: Mark's background involves a 37-year career in fish and wildlife management as well as 20 years as a sheep/hay ranch owner and manager in southwestern Oregon. Mark has experience in both managing and conserving lands, with a good balance between state level experience and community level involvement. Mark has served on multiple boards and committees including those with an agricultural focus. Mark's application demonstrated an ability to see the big picture of working lands and wildlife conservation.

KELLY WARREN

Location: Philomath, Oregon

Occupation: Western Oregon Regional Biologist, Ducks Unlimited

Experience/Involvement: Kelly has a high level of background in fish and wildlife conservation, with documented experience working with the agricultural community and being part of a family farm. Kelly's work with Ducks Unlimited and with Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs has been focused on wildlife conservation in the Willamette Valley. Kelly's application demonstrated a keen understanding of the challenges agricultural landowners face in modern times, and an understanding of the role of the OAHP.

KAY BROWN

Location: Columbia City, Oregon

Occupation: Retired ODFW (Fish Division)

Experience/Involvement: Kay Brown worked for ODFW for 30 years as a fish biologist and as Fish Division Operations Manager. Kay also recently completed 8 years of volunteer service on the Oregon Restoration and Enhancement Board (R&E), which is an advisory board to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission. On the R&E Board, Kay was a demonstrated voice of reason, collegial, and committed to the purpose of the R&E Program and the ODFW mission.

OPTIONS

1. Approve staff's recommendation to recommend Mark Vargas to the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board for his appointment to the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Commission.
2. Approve one of the other applicants as the Commission's recommendation to the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board for their appointment to the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Commission.
3. Not approve any candidates for recommendation to the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board for appointment to the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Commission.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

While the other applicants had strong applications, background and experience, and appreciation for conserving wildlife habitats and working lands, **ODFW staff recommend advancing Mark Vargas to OWEB as the Commission's recommended fish and wildlife habitat member of the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Commission (OAHC), to serve a four-year term beginning January 2025.**

Mark Vargas's many years of experience in public service, fish and wildlife management, and his demonstrated commitment to finding the balance between working lands sustainability and wildlife conservation make him an excellent candidate for the position. Mark is also a landowner and sheep operator in Jackson County, which is an under-represented geography and perspective on the OAHC. Mark's background working on boards and committees demonstrates his ability to set aside personal interests for the sake of a committee's decision, which staff believe is an important consideration when representing the Fish and Wildlife Commission.

DRAFT MOTION:

I move we approve the recommendation of Mark Vargas to the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board for his appointment to the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Commission as a fish and wildlife habitat member, for a four-year term beginning January 2025.

Effective Date: December 13, 2024