



Association of Northwest Steelheaders

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GOOD, BAD AND UGLY — Northwest Steelheaders in the 2011 Oregon Legislative Session

By Bob Oleson, Steelheaders lobbyist

The legislative session ended on June 30. There were a few things to like and many not to like. This year almost everything was driven by the ongoing state budget crisis and leaders in both parties were able to guide their members through many difficult decisions in a way that led to a balanced budget. There were also reductions in some important state services. The conservative business side of the aisle kept talking about the importance of corporate tax breaks and the progressive union side seemed fixated on providing financial support for schools and teachers.

Please take note of the fact that the natural resources agencies important to us (such as ODFW) were able to essentially maintain current service levels for their programs by the one-time use of federal and other funds. Uncertainties with continuing this arrangement raises the possibility of agency cuts next biennium. (In other reports you can read about our continuing struggle to reform the Columbia River salmon allocation for the sports fishing public. Not yet a completed assignment at the Capitol, this effort continues to be a priority for ANWS. Furthermore, more progress can be expected as we work closely with NSIA and give the SAFE concepts much more political attention—also keep in mind that anglers have a supportive new Governor who is appointing new and balanced ODFW commissioners.)

Here is a little more inside baseball about the 2011 legislature: The 30/30 power sharing arrangement of the two parties in the House gets much of the credit for keeping legislators focused on the important political middle. It also gets credit for seeing some good conservation and angling bills bottled up in committee. This year is was easier than normal for a couple extreme legislators (or narrowly positioned special interest groups) to stop good proposals. At times ,it was hard to tell who was responsible for making what decisions — it seemed that many deals were made behind closed doors. When it came to enacting important new laws for the public good, this was not an extremely productive session for us or our good partners in the fishing and outdoor conservation community.

Despite negative reviews, there is another important side of the 2011 legislative story that is more positive, suggesting a better future for our interests. For the anglers of our state, a number of bad bills were in play for months and not finally resolved until late in the session. Something that caused us to expend

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considerable energy. Nonetheless, I believe this was an important watershed year as we performed a greatly elevated role in helping to achieve good results with most of these measures.

Although most participants found the 2011 session to be one of the strangest and most difficult of their careers, I would also argue that this is the year NW Steelheaders entered the political big league. At the Capitol, we were centrally involved in influencing a wide range of issues affecting our membership.

Hopefully, at the grass roots level we can develop even more support for the proactive public policy changes that we will be seeking in the future.

It is time to mention some specific highlights from the final part of the 2011 legislature —featuring some subjects that are likely to require more of our attention in the years ahead. For example, several river raiding and excessive water storage proposals were finally stopped late in the session, but the special interests behind these efforts and various flow control plans show no signs of giving up.

The measure dealing with ground water mitigation in the Deschutes basin was improved and passed during the rush to adjournment (HB 3623). An aggressively lobbied bill to exempt certain hydroelectric projects from fish screens and passage devices passed the House by a landslide, but despite wearing the seal of approval from green energy reps, it was sidelined in the Senate when several of us fish advocates worked with Sen. Jackie Dingfelder to increase awareness of this dangerous fish-killing bill. She was also instrumental in working with us to delay moves by the agri-business lobby to largely eliminate DEQ regulation of agricultural water pollution and to increase stream removal-fill limits. Expect to hear more about new and troubling attacks on various state regulatory and environmental protection systems.

There are a few more representative measures that will be of interest to many anglers. A bill was passed that allows greater penalties to be applied to egregious fish and wildlife offenders (SB 924). Following up on the hard work done by Steelheaders and other organizations two years ago, via SB 626 this legislature has authorized ODFW to work with interested parties to develop a program of quality waters (“trophy fishing”). ANWS and other organization started to move in the right direction by starting to increase non-license funding for ODFW conservation strategies — the programs for non-consumptive activities such as bird watching and big game viewing. Much more needs to be done in this arena. In the years ahead, Oregonians can count on confronting great challenges from invasive species and destructive fish predation; nonetheless, this legislature did pass modestly helpful laws in both policy areas, HB 3399 and HB 3255. Also worth noting, is that the marine reserves proposal did not get all of the way through

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the legislature due to the messy “let’s make a deal” attempts by various House leaders; the Senate president was able to block some of these more obscene exercises in horse trading. Regarding marine reserves, the Governor may get the last word by implementing a similar program via executive order.

HB 2632 was introduced by co-speaker Roblan of Coos county after he spent a couple years collecting ideas from local fishermen for improving coastal fishing — this interesting hodgepodge of ideas did not get enacted, but did receive extensive hearings and, as intended, did get the attention of ODFW and others. One of our major projects at the legislature was to work with Rep. Roblan to develop and promote a comprehensive new coastal salmon fishing program that should benefit all salmon fishermen. It begins with the study and use of unfed fry and increased smolt releases; there is an intention to increase wild coho production in coastal streams while studying ways to achieve fishery enhancement and collect important data involving extensive new fry releases. This is a big deal. ANWS was the only angling and conservation organization joining in the meeting with Roblan and the ODFW director as these program ideas were discussed and finalized.

ANWS worked at the legislature to help expand funding sources for conservation strategies so ODFW can maintain these important services (such as wildlife viewing and bird watching) without further depleting limited fishing and hunting license dollars. ANWS and the Audubon Society led the charge at the major hearings on HB 2127 (passed) and HB 3374 (failed); the latter bill would have placed an excise tax on wild bird seed — ANWS plans to stay active in this arena, and with continued involvement, we can expect such good ideas to eventually prevail.

Note that ODFW recently released to legislative leaders an interesting report on the status of disease in Oregon Hatcheries — it summarizes and comments on the agency study of pathogens in our hatchery system. The document came out of a previous legislative mandate that Steelheaders were involved with last session. In order to help provide Oregonians with the best hatcheries and fish possible, ANWS will continue to be active in discussing and following this important subject.

During the session, ANWS worked with Sen Dingfelder and others to totally rework SB 600 so it could be turned from a bad bill into a good regulatory program involving stream fill removal. Efforts to work with the DSL agency to make the measure an administratively effective one have already started. This is an example of why ANWS Government Affairs expects to have a busy interim period on numerous fronts as Oregon has entered the age of annual legislative sessions. We also supported Rep Jenson in his good and successful effort to give the state the authority to stop and submit watercraft to

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inspections for invasive species, HB 3399. On behalf of the anglers of our state, ANWS will continue to work with anyone anytime, including such legislative leaders in both political parties.

A few concluding comments. This session ANWS closely monitored well over 50 legislative measures, some being reworked many times via numerous hearings and amendments; we were deeply involved in seeing a positive result in about 20 of the most important bills. (Let Government Affairs chair Norm Ritchie or me know if you want a current list of these specific bills and their final status. Also let us know when you have comments or a recommendation on future priorities.) I enjoyed working with over two dozen Steelheaders activists at the Capitol this year. There was no problem in me giving testimony in routine or short notice situations, but it carries considerable weight when volunteer members are the ones speaking out on key topics at major hearings — those of you helping to build up this capacity are greatly appreciated. And please keep working to strengthen political relationships. Encourage your chapter leaders to help identify and track relevant policy issues. Now that Oregon has initiated annual legislative sessions it's important to stay continually connected to the legislative process. This is a good way for OUR public policy recommendations to compete with powerful special interest groups.