

To the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts (OACD) and the Soil and Water Conservation Commission (SWCC),

The East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District (EMSWCD) and West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District (WMSWCD) Boards of Directors appreciate the opportunity to participate in the recent survey to inform your deliberations related to potential revisions to eligibility criteria for SWCD directors.

In addition to the individual opinions expressed in the survey responses, we would like to express deep concern over the nature of this process. A central tenant of equity work is to involve those most affected in defining problems and solutions. By surveying only sitting SWCD board members, this process is essentially polling those who have most benefitted from the current policies and reinforced the exclusion of those who have not. We urge you to consider the statements attached here, from our partners at Voz and the North East Coalition of Neighbors (NECN), and to seek guidance and leadership from them and other BIPOC-led organizations engaged in this work. Voz and NECN are rooted in some of the communities most frequently excluded by the land ownership requirements. These are our trusted partners and we strongly encourage you to listen closely to their words and conduct additional investigation on this issue. Their expertise, experience, and connection to community is valuable.

Furthermore, the EMSWCD and WMSWCD Directors believe that all criteria related to land ownership and management should be removed as eligibility requirements for the zoned positions due to the points below:

- The idea that only landowners and managers have the expertise to fulfill the duties of this role is flawed, particularly for an elected office. All human beings depend on soil and water for their survival and therefore all people have a fundamental reason to be interested in how natural resources are cared for. Many who do not own land and do not have access to land are that much more passionate and knowledgeable about its conservation, and about access to local food and farm business opportunities. If these are democratically elected seats, let them be so. Voters should be the ones to decide who is best qualified to represent their interests, just as they do for our state and federal legislature and the President of the United States, all of which have less restrictive eligibility requirements than SWCD board seats.
- The idea that only landowners should have the right to serve on the board of directors is flawed. All SWCDs are supported by public funds, and particularly for those Districts with a tax base, the majority of property taxpayers are severely limited avenues for participating in how those dollars are spent.
- Land ownership in Oregon today is the product of a racist system and centuries of racist policies that reduced or removed access to land for people of color. Any discussion related to land ownership must begin within the context of that unfortunate and unjust history. The beginning of Oregon's statehood is marred by the removal and killing of Native Americans and a constitutional amendment prohibiting African Americans from residing in the state or owning land. Following that, the internment of Japanese Americans, redlining, and racist lending and banking practices further barred people of color from land ownership. Defending the land ownership requirement for zone directors today is not likely an intentionally racist act, but it does reinforce and perpetuate the damage done by those policies.

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- The path to board membership through the associate board member positions is similarly flawed. Sitting board members that vote to approve associate directors are unlikely to represent the diversity of the district for the reasons described above. Needing the attention and approval of those board members in order to become an associate board member is another way in which the current system reinforces the patterns of power and privilege associated with land ownership and access in Oregon.

Thank you for investigating this problematic policy, and for the opportunity to provide comment. We hope you also seek input and leadership in this process going forward from the BIPOC organizations that can better represent communities of color and define an equitable solution set.