



The Oregonian

Oregon means business on sustainability

New laws - Firms can formally declare they are environmentally, socially responsible

Monday, December 31, 2007

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The Oregonian

Other bills passed in 2007 by the Legislature reflect the state's emergence as a leader in the broadening field of sustainability.

House Bill 2826, for example, specifically allows companies to include in their Oregon articles of incorporation a statement that they will do business in a way that is environmentally and socially responsible.

It's not an empty gesture. One of the principles of business law is that corporations must act in the best interests of their shareholders. Some courts have narrowly interpreted that to mean companies must act only to maximize profits, even if the action runs roughshod over wider community interests.

The new bill allows corporate boards to take into account what Portland attorney Dick Roy calls the "triple bottom line," meaning environmental and social impacts are considered along with economic issues. Oregon apparently is the first state to pass such legislation.

"It makes the concept of sustainability explicit in the statute," said Roy, whose group, Oregon Lawyers for a Sustainable Future, drafted the legislation.

Newly organized corporations may adopt the standard, and existing corporations may amend their state filings to adopt it as well, Roy said.

Senate Bill 420 establishes an Environmental Justice Task Force. The intent is to involve minority and low-income communities in environmental decisions made by state agencies. Its creation stems from the issue of "environmental racism," such as putting toxic material dumps or polluting industries in poor or minority neighborhoods.

The task force will have 12 members. The legislation directs the governor to appoint one each from the state commissions on Asian, Black, Hispanic affairs and from the Commission on Indian Services. The group will make an annual report to the Legislature.

Senate Bill 514 is designed to encourage landowners to set aside areas for fish and wildlife habitat. It establishes a property tax special assessment for conservation easements -- areas that won't be developed. Land already assessed as farmland and forestland can be transferred to the new classification without additional taxes. The bill was backed by Defenders of Wildlife and was hailed by the Oregon League of Conservation Voters as among the environmental victories of the 2007 session.

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