

My name is Erika Bentsen and I've been a rancher in the Sprague River valley for 20 years. I am here to support House Bill 4044.

This past summer I got my first taste of how quickly government restrictions on surface water use can ruin the livelihoods of family ranchers. I had to sell over 50% of my herd because of lack of grass. I worked hard to build this herd and it broke my heart to have to sell them. Now OWRD wants to kill the rest of my ranch by shutting off ALL my water. If that happens, I'm done.

Last summer, wells were all that saved me from being forced to sell all my cows. Unfortunately, the wells which provide vital irrigation water and livestock drinking water to the pastures where I run my cows and raise hay are on the shut off list. Next summer, unless you help me, I'll be forced out of business.

OWRD recently decided that every well within a mile of any stream, creek, river or mud hole is interfering with surface water. What proof do they have? None. There is, in fact, a lot of evidence to the contrary. Geologists can go into detail about all that underground stuff. What I can say is every certified, water-righted well in Oregon has already had to prove there was no interference issues. That's how these water rights are established in the first place.

But now OWRD has this "really cool" computer model that they're going to use to ruin my life and the lives of others in my valley back home. This is unfair, and it is wrong.

What I don't get is why is OWRD opposed to this bill? All it does is require them to prove that there is substantial interference before I get shut off. Why does this scare them? If there is interference, of course the well should be shut down. If they think they have the science to back it up, what difference does it make to them? Don't they believe that geologic field studies will support their model?

You here in this room are the ones who will decide my fate. This is your call. What you choose to do today will affect me forever. Eventually it will affect everyone else in this state as well.

Politicians always promise to look out for the little guy. That's me. I'm not a big corporation. I'm not a factory farm. I'm just a rancher, like others in my valley. We're out here trying to make ends meet while doing what we think is best for our land, our community, and our country.

We're not trying to overgraze or pollute or abuse animals. We're here because we love this land and want to see it prosper. We ARE sustainable agriculture. We're doing this for our families. We're doing this to be good stewards of the land and feed people locally and globally. We're in this for the long haul. This is where we put down our roots. The ranch where I live has been my dream since I was a little girl. Please don't let them take it away from me on the strength of a flawed computer model. If I'm doing something wrong prove it and I'll stop, otherwise, leave me the heck alone.

Guilty until proven innocent is not the America that I know. Please, think carefully before you decide my fate. I wasn't hired to come here and speak. I'm here today because your decision will impact my life forever.

Thank you so much for listening.

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