

Wednesday, February 12, 2014

Chair Hass, Senators Tim Knopp, Lee Beyer, Jeff Kruse and Arnie Roblan:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on SB 1554. My name is Mary Wahl. My siblings and I own two sheep and timber ranches in northern Curry County, and are the fourth generation of our family to operate these ranches. My perspectives on SB 1554 are based on our experience ranching, and integrating natural resource conservation into our ranch operations.

I urge you to vote no on SB 1554. This bill would undermine important tools Oregon farmers and ranchers have to stay on their land, keep Oregon farms and ranches in production, and conserve critical natural resources that exist on those properties. Please do not take away, or create new barriers to, the agricultural easements, conservation easements and other ways Oregon farmers and ranchers have to conserve farm land and natural resources. We are short on both farmland and habitat, and these tools provide paths and incentives for farmers and ranchers to conserve both. This bill creates disincentives so large as to essentially ban these important tools, and would eliminate a key way many farmers and ranchers across the country are choosing to prevent loss of farms and ranches.

For several reasons, including those listed here, I think SB 1554 is a bad idea for Oregon as well as for ranchers and farmers:

1. Agricultural easements (also called conservation easements) are a voluntary activity on ranches and farms, many agricultural landowners have found effective ways to integrate natural resource conservation into their operations, and have even in some cases been able to get a financial return for their efforts. Putting barriers in the way of landowners willing to restore habitat, remove development rights, or otherwise protect the land and natural resources is clearly a disincentive to the protections Oregon and the US Department of Agriculture have long been trying to encourage;
2. Farmers and ranchers who want to stay on the land and continue producing, even through the transition from one generation to the next, have an important pathway to make that happen through agricultural/ conservation easements. Often, the family members wishing to stay and farm don't have the revenue to hold onto the property other than monetizing the development rights. With this tool, they can monetize part or all of the development rights on their property, use that revenue to expand or upgrade ranch operations, or to pay those members of the family who don't want to farm anymore. And monetizing the development rights achieves important public goals by conserving both agricultural land and natural resources like habitat;
3. Farmers and ranchers consider themselves good land stewards, and this is a key way we demonstrate our stewardship and join other segments of Oregon's economy such as the timber industry in protecting natural resources. Oregon should not put new hurdles in front of ranchers and farmers doing their part for conservation;
4. On our ranch at the mouth of Elk River, just over twenty-five percent of the total area on the ~850 acre ranch is set aside for conservation. This includes the river and creek riparian areas, the bluff above the ocean, and several wetland restoration areas. Production has not suffered as

the conservation areas have been protected and taken out of production. In fact, production on the ranch is more than four times what it was before the conservation efforts started. Much of the increased production is from operational improvements, and some of it is from concentrating time, effort and “inputs” like fertilizer and compost on the most productive acres. Importantly, it also turns out that conservation can and does provide substantial benefits to the agricultural operations; and

5. One additional argument in favor of keeping these tools to conserve agricultural and natural resources lands is that they help keep local farm and ranch operations in production – which produces at least as much for the rural economies as would be saved by these destructive disincentives.

I hope you will consider voting “no” on SB 1554 so Oregon can continue to encourage rather than discourage landowners who are willing to do restoration and other conservation practices on their farms and ranches.

Thank you!
Mary Wahl