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Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
State Capitol
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

February 23, 2015

RE: In opposition to SB 25 – Legislation to suspend Oregon’s statewide land use program in eight counties

Chair Edwards and members of the committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony opposing SB 25, legislation to suspend Oregon’s statewide land use planning program in eight counties. 1000 Friends of Oregon is a nonprofit, membership organization that works with Oregonians to support livable urban and rural communities; protect family farms, forests and natural areas; and provide transportation and housing choice.

SB 25 suspends the goals of Oregon’s statewide land use program in eight Oregon counties.¹ SB 25 would allow sprawling subdivisions on lands that have been in continuous farm or forest use for generations or that have other important natural resource values. This bill would allow certain counties to re-designate all resource lands for development even if they are still in active production or are vital for wildlife. Protecting farmland, forestland, and other natural areas is a fundamental mission of Oregon’s land use program. Increased uncertainty for farm operators near cities will cause them to decrease investments in their lands, bringing valuable agriculture land out of production and making farming even more difficult for their neighbors. Furthermore, taking farms and forestlands out of production will cost Oregon jobs.

Agriculture remains Oregon’s second largest industry: 1 out of 8 jobs in this state is agriculture-related, and the industry is directly and indirectly linked to about \$22 billion in sales of goods and services, accounting for 15% of the statewide total of sales involving all industry sectors. Agriculture is traded-sector – 80% is sold out of state and 40% is exported out of the country, bringing new dollars into Oregon. And those figures have been increasing almost steadily for two decades. No other Oregon industry can tell that story.

1000 Friends of Oregon believes we should protect this key asset: agricultural land should stay in agricultural use to support Oregon second largest industry and the hundreds of thousands of Oregonians who depend on it. Removing these counties from the land use program does not serve the agricultural community and will result in taking more farmlands out of farm use and the loss of farm jobs.

¹ This would apparently apply to Baker, Gilliam, Grant, Harney, Malheur, Sherman, Wallowa and Wheeler counties.

SB 25 is limited to eight Eastern Oregon counties. So why protect agriculture in what some may say is the barren wasteland of Eastern Oregon? It turns out that Eastern Oregon is not a barren wasteland. Much of it is very productive agricultural land. Three of Oregon's top five producing agricultural counties are in Eastern Oregon. The top five are Marion County at \$616.9 million, Umatilla County at \$503.2 million, Morrow County at \$477.1 million, Clackamas County at \$332.9 million, and Malheur County at \$296.1 million.

How is this possible? Six of the eight highest grossing agricultural commodities in the state have a strong nexus to Eastern Oregon. The top eight are Cattle and Calves at \$779.8 million, Nursery/Greenhouse at \$641.1 million, Dairy at \$523.9 million, Wheat at \$521.5 million, Hay at \$413.6 million, Grass seed at \$294.9 million, Potatoes at \$165.2 million, and Onions at \$132.6 million. Agriculture is the economic engine of Eastern Oregon.

In the eight counties, the bill would also decouple transportation planning, infrastructure planning, planning for needed housing, protection of wildlife and natural places, avoidance of natural hazards, and citizen participation from each other and from land use planning.

This could have wide-ranging effects. For example, the land use program is the method that Oregon has identified as its secret weapon for protecting sage grouse. The "all lands all threats" initiative has been embraced by various OCN groups and has land use at its heart. This highlights the importance of the land use program in Eastern Oregon to wildlife.

Another aspect of Oregon's land use law that is beneficial to conservation and environmental goals is the protection of farmland as farmland and forestland in forest status. These working lands provide a matrix between wilderness and wildlands, provide viable migratory corridors, and in general provide a better landscape for environmental and conservation goals than the alternative: subdivision and development. 80% of wildlife in Oregon spend at least part of their lifecycle on farm or forest lands.

In addition, there is no evidence that there will be an economic boon in Eastern Oregon if SB 25 passes. In fact, the evidence points the other direction. Washington state provides that evidence. Its Growth Management Act went into full effect in 1990. It allows rural counties to opt out of the program. Ten counties have taken advantage of this and opted out. Twenty-one rural counties have opted in. The counties that have chosen to opt-in saw their median household incomes rise by 39.61% from 1990 to 2010 while the opt-out counties had theirs rise by only 36.18% -- more than 3 percentage points less. The rural counties in Washington that have embraced the GMA have benefitted economically.

How is this possible if the land use program is such a job-killer? The simple answer is that it is not a job-killer. In fact the Oregon Office of Economic Analysis (OEA) summed up Northeast Oregon as follows: "the 1990 and 2001 recessions had only minor impacts on local employment. The region took a hit during the Great Recession, however only about half as large as the state overall. . . ." This is because the top four industries in the region -- animal production, ag and forestry support, food manufacturing, and crop production -- are all agriculture related and are not as sensitive to economic downturns. Even in a recession, people still need to eat.

The four counties in Southeast and South Central Oregon are also dominated by agriculture. According to the OEA they “contain just under 3 percent of the state’s population, 35 percent of its landmass and nearly 15 percent of all agricultural sales and 8 percent of agricultural employment.” Agriculture is the economic driver for these counties. Throwing it under the bus at this point makes no sense.

Finally, despite a noisy minority that decries it, Oregon’s land use program enjoys strong support across the state. According to the Oregon Values and Beliefs Survey, “[t]wo-thirds of Oregonians (66%) consider protection of productive farm and forest land from development very or somewhat important. The question leading to this result made clear that saying important implied support for some increase or reallocation in tax dollars to improve these protections.”² These results were fairly consistent across urban and rural regions. Oregonians see an economic value in protecting our natural resource lands.

Further, Oregonians support the primary land use tool that we use to protect these important lands. “[T]wo-thirds of Oregonians (66%) favor the statement that new development should occur within existing cities and towns to save farmland and stop sprawl. . . .” Oregonians overwhelmingly support urban growth boundaries and protection of resource lands.³

Perhaps this is because Oregonians have seen firsthand the success of the land use program. It has prevented rural sprawl – between the 2000 census and the 2010 census no net rural housing units were added in Oregon while in Washington rural housing units went up by 6.2% and in Idaho they went up 16.7%. As a result, farmers can keep farming and foresters can keep managing forests without conflict from incompatible uses. In fact, ninety-eight percent of all non-Federal land in Oregon that was in resource land uses in 1974 remained in these uses in 2009.⁴ In short, the land use program has broad support within Oregon and it works.

To protect Oregon’s working landscapes we ask you to oppose SB 25

Respectfully submitted,

Jason Miner
Executive Director

² The findings are drawn “from three surveys conducted in April and May 2013. Final sample sizes were 3971 respondents for Survey #1, 1958 for Survey #2, and 1865 for Survey #3. The questionnaires and findings are available at www.oregonvaluesproject.org.”

³ Farmlands and forest lands are collectively referred to as “resource lands.”

⁴ Oregon Department of Forestry, “Land use Change on Non-federal Land in Oregon and Washington” available at http://www.oregon.gov/odf/RESOURCE_PLANNING/land_use_in_OR_WA_web_edited.pdf