

03/13/2017

Dear Members of the House Committee on Human Services and Housing:

The following written testimony is in direct response to House Bill 2937, which is under consideration in Oregon State; though my testimony it is also part of a larger desire to share another story of farming in Multnomah County/Oregon. My hope in writing and sharing is pluralistic, but can cohesively fall under one main goal: **to encourage you to find ways to create innovative and flexible land use codes and laws that are more inclusive of differing models of farming.** Also, I would like agricultural lands to be preserved, wild spaces conserved, while also not cutting out farmers from streams of income that are low-impact and passive.

I will try to be somewhat brief, and to the point.

First, I would like to provide a narrative of our family farm on Sauvie Island (for background context – please skip this section if in a hurry). Second, I would like to share some of the concerns and struggles we face as small, organic farmers. These struggles are germane to farming, and particularly relevant to most small, young farmers in Oregon. Finally, I would like to plea that the State of Oregon consider ways to support new models of farming (even those that may have been rejected in prior discussions), using a model we created as one example. Supporting House Bill 2937 (and Senate Bill 340) would be an excellent option to stabilize many farms across the state of Oregon.

(1) A narrative. Greg and I have always wanted to farm. Greg, a gardener and extreme do-it-yourselfer by way of culture and birthright (from SW England), and me, an idealist who loves being part of a healthy food economy. We both love nature and community, and we long to build a sustainable farm that would be Greg's primary profession as he was leaving his salaried position as a tea buyer for Tazo Tea to delve into farming fulltime. In June 2013, we purchased our five-acre MUA-20 farm plot using every single penny we had, even withdrawing heavily from our 401Ks. **According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, at 32 and 38, we were way below the national average age of 58.3 (see chart in citations; age has been trending upward for decades) for farmers in America today. And according to Oregon State University's Center for Small Farms, in Oregon, the average age of farmers is 60.** With no budget for equipment, we started hand farming our barren plot, which had formerly been a sheep grazing pasture for decades. Without even a single shade tree or water source, we were in way over our heads.

Greg got busy farming: he rented a hand tiller, had the soil tested, vigorously amended the soil, created a dozen huge vegetable beds, and started to plant our first crops. He worked tirelessly from sun up to sun down. I got busy getting permits approved for us to build a small, eco-friendly home. We wanted something easy to maintain and affordable, since we knew all our resources and time would be taken by the farm. After working with Umpqua for nearly 9 months, our loan was declined because our 1100 square foot modern home was too small to be desirable should we die or go bankrupt. After appealing to the President of the bank and adding an additional 100 square feet (essentially a mudroom that now gets great use), we signed our mortgage loan and moved in five months later. I get

a combination of utterly exhausted and a mild form of PTSD just recalling how much work and stress starting and operating our farm has been for us, from day one. Despite Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality releasing a damning report about the wastefulness of large homes, banks still operate under a model of bigger is better (a larger American theme of material comfort and consumption).

Our home, built by Green Hammer in SE Portland, cost less to build than the price of our land. **Another fact of farming today is that many families inherit the land they farm. Actually buying quality farmland, especially near a large market like a city, is cost prohibitive. The rising costs of farmable land is another huge hurdle for beginning, young farmers, and another central part of the death of farming in Oregon and the U.S.**

Again, *OSU's Center for Small Farms report*, in September 2016, shared:

Fewer young people are entering the farming profession in Oregon.

- *24 percent of all Oregon farmers in 2012 were beginning farmers, down from 32 percent in 2002.*
- *15 percent of beginning farmers are under the age of 35. Nearly half of beginning farmers are 45 or older.*

Mark Bittman from the *New York Times* adds (June 10, 2015):

Just about everyone agrees that we need more farmers. Currently, nearly 30 percent are 65 or older, and fewer than 10 percent are under 35. The number of farmers is likely to fall further with continuing consolidation and technological innovation.

But displacement of farmers is neither desirable nor inevitable. We need to put more young people on smaller farms, the kinds that will grow nourishing food for people instead of food that sickens us or yields products intended for animals or cars.

The problem is land, which is often prohibitively expensive. Farmland near cities is prized by developers and the wealthy looking for vacation homes, hobby farms or secure investments. Many farmers have no choice but to rent land for a year or two before being asked to move and start all over, because the purchase of even the smallest plot is out of their reach.

Greg spent our first winter propagating crops in a small 7' x 12' attic room in our house, and in addition to my work as a professor at the University of Portland, I created our website to help market our farm's inaugural Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) season to friends and strangers alike. We capped enrollment at 15 shares. That first year on the farm we made approximately \$6500 from farm income. In the following three years we doubled our CSA enrollment to 30 city families, planted 45 native fruits trees and 75 native deciduous and conifer trees, grafted and planted 300 cider apple trees, collaborated with a local bee keeper to install 24 honey bee hives for honey and crop pollination, hayed our fields each season, built and hung over 30 bird and bat boxes for native nesting birds and

bats, created a large three tier composting system to compost whatever we could, rescued unwanted city ducks, chickens, and rabbits, and hand built a hoophouse, among other projects. With help from a small home equity loan this summer, we completed our barn, which will house our small produce stand, helping us more effectively sell directly to consumers, and provide a much needed dry space for Greg to work in the winter.

We love the farm we are building and the habitat for native species we have created in our work. We take care of our soil and we delight in the ever-growing number of birds, bees, snakes, and frogs that now call our formerly barren plot home, and we continue to be dedicated to organic, small scale farming as our primary goal. And an allowed ADU could do wonders for our farm and farming.

(2) Concerns/Struggles. Making a small farm profitable is hard work, and **financially draining**. There is so much work to be done and infrastructure to create: watering, irrigating, weeding, humane pest control, pruning, staking, fencing, repairing, mowing, treating sick animals, feeding/watering animals, etc. The list goes on and on. **Greg works seven days a week most weeks and we still cannot afford health insurance for him (This is a true story)**. He is in excellent health, and we have chosen that as a calculated risk. Not surprisingly, many farmers in the United States are uninsured both for health and for crop failure.

According to Dylan Walsh, in his NYtimes article, *Big Risks for Uninsured Farmers* (2012):

The insurance burden that's put on these types of farmers is completely out of balance," said Jeffrey O'Hara, an agricultural economist for the scientists' group and the report's author. As a result, few small farms take out insurance plans, leaving them vulnerable to risks like extreme weather and hard-pressed to secure credit and loans.

It is also **isolating, demanding work. Social isolation is a huge theme for farmers**, and suicide is not uncommon:

Newsweek 2014 adds:

In the U.S. the rate of farmer suicides is just under two times that of the general population. In the U.K. one farmer a week commits suicide. In China, farmers are killing themselves daily to protest the government taking over their prime agricultural lands for urbanization. In France, a farmer dies by suicide every two days. Australia reports one farmer suicides every four days. India yearly reports more than 17,627 farmer suicides.

A 2012 study from Quebec, Canada, titled, "Social isolation among young farmers" found:

Our results show that nearly 60% of young farmers are at risk of social isolation...a critical mass of new knowledge on subjects that have received little attention from researchers so far, such as social isolation and the quality of social support in agriculture. Because social isolation undermines the future of farming, especially family farms, this diagnosis on the social reality of young people can improve the

farmers' awareness of the situation, and can hopefully influence decision makers and enable them to develop better targeted actions.

Greg and I understand that now more than ever, viscerally. Before I starting living and running a farm, I strolled through farmer's markets blissfully unaware of the intense amount of time and energy that went into the peaches I picked up and inspected for blemishes. It brings tears to my eyes now just reflecting on that disconnect.

Farming is also an incredibly unstable and vulnerable profession. The weather also matters hugely: too wet or too dry and our highest yielding crops can fail, leaving our family strapped for cash for a season. Or wasps have a banner year, and kill almost all of our honeybees, and we lose thousands of dollars from a failed honey harvest. Or we over water and weeds thrive, causing many crops to never fully thrive. Greg spends days in the rain and mud digging up root vegetables to find that mice and moles have chewed 50 percent of the crop. Or one of our fruit trees has a parasite, and we do not have the time to figure out how to treat it, so it dies. We spent hours and hours of our lives on that tree, and it just dies.

There is so much problem solving in farming. **There is so much grief in farming. There is joy for us, but no one can prepare you for the frustration or sleeplessness or anxiety. You crave stability. You crave to again make contributions to your retirement savings.** And you crave to get better at it all next season. Yet farming is elusive in that way; you always have hope that you can correct your mistakes next year. Next year it will get easier. Next year we will get ahead. Except at the close of our fourth year we are slowly starting to accept that it never gets easier, because the problems just change each year.

Our second year farming we made approximately 12 thousand dollars, gross. Our third year, we made approximately 18 thousand dollars, gross. Every year we have been here, we have grown in terms of farm income in significant ways, but not quite enough to support the farm's continued need for more infrastructure: better equipment, a bigger well pump, a tractor, more filtration so our crops are not covered in iron, fans, tables and seed trays for our hoophouse, etc. We have been in a constant state of trying to make ends meet, creatively and proactively. Greg reuses and repurposes everything, almost always finding a use for off cuts of wood, or tubing, or what not. Our first year on the farm a random conversation at a party resulted in a stranger donating a small, old pickup truck that has come to be our godsend. Greg scours craigslist for free: firewood, scrap pieces of metal to make tomato frames, potting soil, wiring to place around fledgling trees to protect from deer damage. We have been so resourceful.

Still, about one year after we started farming we decided we desperately needed a reliable secondary farm income to help us stabilize and grow, and we decided **to rent one room on our property via Airbnb** (similar to VRBO: Vacation Rental by Owner), a prospering sharing economy startup that has been praised for helping to support local, micro economies like ours. We only allowed two guests per night to stay.

Our lives as farmers changed overnight. Our room booked up quickly with city dwelling guests eager to be in nature, or international travelers looking to see rural Oregon. **The**

extra income was a lifeline. We could breathe. We could start imagining how we might soon be able to get out of debt from buying our land or paying off existing student loans (or get couples' counseling or daycare for our two babies). In the two years we rented our room on the farm via Airbnb, we were able to accomplish a myriad of incredibly important goals, especially: supplement our primary farm income, pay off farm related debt and invest in higher quality farm equipment, and **provide Greg with much needed social engagement** (loneliness is rampant in farming, and has enormous consequences for rural farmers, and rural people in general) in the form of eager and excited visitors. OSU's September 2016 report again affirmed that we are not alone in our struggles in Oregon: *Amassing down payments, acquiring credit, or securing adequate income during start-up may be more difficult for young people than older people entering the profession.*

Each set of Airbnb guests brought affirmation, awe, and support for our farming work – this is such an integral missing component of many farmers' interactions since they rarely meet with the end consumer face-to-face. In fact, the reason we are transitioning to a small-scale produce stand model is precisely because our delivery CSA lacked the contact Greg yearned for (and did not know was missing initially). Although Airbnb guest interactions were often relatively brief, often an hour maximum over the course of a two to three day average stay, they filled him with pride and a sense of accomplishment as guests remarked on his hard earned bounty and delighted in his produce or merely exchanged banter about soccer scores. **It was a mutually beneficial relationship: guests financially supporting our farm via their stay/buying produce from us and providing social presence; and us often educating them about organic, small farming.**

Plus, it had the much-added bonus of being low impact. Our guests averaged only one transportation trip per day, leaving in the morning and returning at night. They often brought us small gifts from the city and we sometimes gave them lifts with us when they were transportation-less. It felt nice to connect, and meet new people. **We always felt guests left with a greater appreciation for rural farmland. And we started noticing a real trend: guests were seeking us because they wanted to learn about farming (and we thrilled in helping demystify and share the process).** We felt on some level that this model acted, in a very tertiary sense, similarly to a zoo, in that people do not typically protect or respect what they do not know. So, us hosting visitors on our small farm is the equivalent to seeing a lion in a zoo: Ideally, one then wants to act to protect this thing through conservation efforts and the like.

Mark Bittman (NYTIMES):

Farming is — or should be — a social enterprise as much as a business, one that benefits all of us and uses the land conscientiously and ecologically. Thus in the long run we've got to expand our vision to include some kind of land redistribution that would give those who want to work the land for our mutual benefit the ability to do so.

(3) Plea. Six months ago, the County ordered us to stop our Airbnb since the space we used for guests was located in an Accessory Structure (which was adjoined by a deck to our primary dwelling by eight feet of separation). Although our 320 square foot accessory

structure had been professionally engineered, and permitted and inspected using residential standards by the City of Portland, **it was an Accessory Structure, and thus, under the current code, was not a dwelling and never could be, even temporarily, for visiting family members (of which we have many from the United Kingdom where grandparents live), seasonal farm help, or Airbnb guests.** Based on the current land use code in Multnomah County, they were right. Still, we are devastated by the destabilization this restriction has caused us (e.g., countless sleepless nights, anxiety, depression). Whilst we understand and appreciate so much of the necessary restrictions placed on Oregon Class I, II, and III soils, **we also feel that farming, by nature, is a vocation that requires innovation. Lots of sacrifice, of course, but farming definitely demands creative problem solving. Not a one size fits all solution. Not a tightening of the code carte blanche. Please, no more burdens placed on farmers.**

Rather, and ideally, we think the **land use code should consider new ways that farming can be supported, particularly for younger farmers who did not inherit land or equipment.** The adage of “you can’t farm unless you inherit one” seems to be fairly true in our experience. **Also, when I have discussed ADUs and Airbnb as a secondary income source with rural neighbors, I am struck by the general support for it. And those that do not support it, generally cite fear of a ramping up of this model and its watering down of rural farmland and creating traffic – or they have a certain amount of fear of the unknown (perhaps stranger danger?).** While I appreciate these valid concerns, I do not think they are based on the data: First, the overwhelming trend in the U.S. over the past hundred years, and now more than ever, has been migration to urban spaces, and away from rural spaces. **I do not think allowing Accessory Structures to be used as dwellings, on a carte blanche or case-by-case basis, will greatly impact any population trends. Similarly, poverty in rural spaces is commonplace since folks are often cut out of certain sectors of the economy, such as building Accessory Dwelling Units for second incomes (common inside City limits). Second, our experience with our guests could not have been more pleasant and safe. In our two years of hosting guests, we never had a bad experience. Nothing was ever broken or damaged or stolen (from us or our neighbors). Even having two small children at home, we always felt comfortable with our guests, and in fact often felt our horizons expanded after a visit. People always treated our space as their own, taking great care to leave the space exactly as they found it. I truly think most of the local resistance can be debunked, or at least mitigated with more information. Most of what I have heard at Public Hearings, as it related to farmers renting an accessory structure, did not reflect our experience at all.**

Farming the land to provide healthy and fresh vegetables, fruit, and honey are our absolute primary goals, but we need support from lawmakers and state representatives. **We found that using Airbnb as a secondary farm income worked extremely well for us. It was easy, joyful, and low impact on our neighbors and us – and maybe most salient - the rural area. We need state-level advocates and/or visionaries that can help young farmers like us survive, and prosper in new and dynamic ways.** In the meantime, we are also working hard to survive: we collaborate with our neighbor on a blueberry u-pick and we help source vegetables from other small farms in our area to be sold to corporate

kitchens, for example. We have been resourceful and innovative, because we have had to be. And we want land use code to help us carry the burden, not make it heavier (one small example of outdated code: at the time of our violation notice for our rental, we were also cited for selling eggs. The current land use code for our property states we need a \$3400+ permit to sell our two dozen eggs each week. This is not innovative code that is supportive of farming).

In this specific case, **we would love Multnomah County and Oregon state to consider how legally built and safe accessory dwelling structures might be effectively used for short-term dwellings as a secondary (and stable, non-weather dependent) income for small professional farmers. Not to create more traffic or to distract us from the land's primary goals of being farmed or to create crowds in our rural spaces, or to make the population more dense, but to, on a case by case basis, support one of the hardest and oldest and most volatile, yet crucial, professions on the planet: *farming*.** Between raising two small children, my career at the university, and maintaining our farm, we do not have the time to do much else. **This is our livelihood, and in many ways, the future of farming in Oregon: We want and need you to take it seriously.**

Finally, I feel it pertinent that you may not be getting a balanced perspective of farming in the County/State since younger farmers just have less autonomous time to engage in public hearings and meetings.

Thank you for listening.

This is paramount to us, and we hope to provide you with a slightly more nuanced, balanced perspective on what small Oregon farmers need to survive.

Okay, this was not brief. I lost my Sunday to it, and you are likely bored to tears.

Sincerely,

Vail Fletcher, Ph.D. (14765 NW Gillihan Rd, Portland, OR, 97231)

p.s. Citations are below. I did not properly format them; I ran out of baby nap time.

<http://centerforsmallfarms.oregonstate.edu/publications>

http://centerforsmallfarms.oregonstate.edu/sites/default/files/futurefarmland_brief_final.pdf

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/10/opinion/lets-help-create-more-farmers.html?_r=0

<http://modernfarmer.com/2013/12/farmer-suicide/>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/terezia-farkas/why-farmer-suicide-rates-1_b_5610279.html

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/13/health/social-isolation-guns-and-a-culture-of-suicide.html>

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/268002593_Social_isolation_among_young_farmers_in_Quebec_Canada

<http://www.deq.state.or.us/lq/sw/wasteprevention/greenbuilding.htm>

Average Age of Farm Operators, 2007 and 2012

Operator	2007	2012	%
	(years)		change
Principal	57.1	58.3	2.1*
Second	51.4	53.4	3.9*
Third	44.6	46.0	3.1*
All	54.9	56.3	2.6*

Source: USDA NASS, 2012 Census of Agriculture.

**Statistically significant change.*