

The Honorable Brian Clem, Chair
House Committee on Agriculture and Natural Resources
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

Dear Chair Clem and Members of the Committee:

As a public service district dedicated to the conservation of soil and water resources for people, wildlife and the environment in Multnomah County west of the Willamette River and all of Sauvie Island, the West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District expresses support for House Bill 3249 relating to land conservation. Specifically, the District supports the tools called for in the legislation: conservation management plans, estate planning, temporary working land covenants, and permanent conservation easements. We support the voluntary use of these tools for Oregon's farmers and ranchers to address matters that lead to the permanent loss of agricultural lands, including fragmentation through new non-farm uses, development pressures, and barriers to successful ownership transfer from one generation to the next.

In addition to bringing us food, timber, beer, wine, and livestock, Oregon's working landscape of private farms, ranches, and forests provides a wide array of public benefit to Oregonians. Examples include habitat for Oregon's fish and wildlife, local jobs, and an agricultural business sector that contributes to the economic vitality of Oregon's rural communities. For almost 75 years, Soil and Water Conservation Districts have provided technical and financial assistance to these working lands so they can fully meet their capability to provide public benefits consistent with private landowner's goals and objectives in owning and working the land. We use a carrot approach to conservation: engaging property owners to voluntarily participate in conservation management planning while meeting their business goals. Our experience in working with private farmers and forestland owners is that often, once they understand the need for public conservation benefits from their lands, they are willing to adjust their goals to achieve these needs. We also provide financial incentives to help cover their cost or lost economic opportunity in doing so. In many cases, identified conservation actions reduce operational costs, improve productivity, and create public conservation benefits through clean water, diverse habitats, and healthy soil.

Oregon needs House Bill 3249 because relying on the voluntary action of today's farmer or rancher is not sufficient to sustain working lands and their conservation benefits into the future. We have experienced firsthand the loss of conservation values on working farmland simply because prior investments and value were not recognized during a change in land ownership. House Bill 3249 provides a multi-tool approach to address this need: (1) funding and standards for written conservation management plans, (2) investigation into barriers preventing the successful transfer of lands from one generation to the next, (3) temporary

covenants designed to recognize the value of sustaining the land for agricultural or ranch use, and (4) permanent conservation easements that call out specifically the conservation values of the working land to ensure their permanent protection from development and other loss due to converting the land out of farm or ranch use.

Our District believes the bill could be strengthened to ensure that public investment in this legislation leads to measurable public conservation gain with respect to clean water, diverse habitats, and sustainable agricultural and ranch systems. One example of how the bill could be strengthened is to more explicitly tie the prioritization of lands eligible for entry in the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program to Oregon's fish and wildlife conservation, and water quality goals. These goals are stated in Oregon's Conservation Strategy (including the Oregon Plan for Salmon and Watersheds) and regional Agricultural Water Quality Management Plans. Our District also encourages that the administrative structure of the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program be kept simple and efficient, relying on existing agency coordination and authorities wherever possible.

In closing, our District thanks you, Chair Clem and your Co-Sponsors – especially your Chief Co-Sponsors Representatives Knute Buehler and Brad Witt – for introducing this important legislation. Passage of this legislation in some form is important to ensure that working farms and ranches - and their attendant social, economic and ecological values - remain on the landscape for many generations to come.

Sincerely,

//via email//

Terri Preeg Riggsby
Board Chair and Zone 5 Director
West Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District