

Members of the Committee:

We are the third generation to be the Stewards of our small family ranch in Eastern Oregon. Established in 1917 by my grandparents, immigrants from Scotland, our small ranch encompasses 2,696.82 acre and, as with each farm and ranch in our state, is very unique. We range from some 2,800 +/- feet in elevation on the valley floor meadow and alfalfa crop ground to near 5,000 +/- feet elevation on our mountain timber/grazing lands. The area between these north and south boundaries is upland hills grazing lands. The habitats within the boundary of the ranch are varied and diverse. On the North we boarder the John Day River, with its pure wild runs of Mid-Columbia River Steelhead and Chinook Salmon, for a long three-quarters – short mile. On the South, we boarder the Malheur National Forest proposed McClellan Mountain Wilderness Area, for some three – four miles. When looking across the total ranch what some may see as a “small area of no value...so why not sell it for a home site...” we see as an area of integral and inseparable value to the operational integrity of the whole.

The agricultural land base in Oregon is on a slow, but steady, decline in number of total acres while the average age of our family farm and ranch owners continues to increase, near sixty years of age now. For the rural counties, especially those in Eastern Oregon, this is a very serious issue as agriculture is the primary economic driver of those counties. As existing farm and ranch owners work towards successful transition of their operations to the next generation there are a number of issues which pose as obstacles to recruiting the next generation to take over the family operation. It is imperative that those impediments be addressed in order to slow the decline in total farm and ranch acres as agriculture lands are lost to other uses.

Although there are a number of causes for the decline in productive agriculture acres, some of the most significant reasons are the tax costs of passing farms and ranches to the next generation, the accelerating price of farm and ranch lands due to development and related change of use pressures and the uncertainty of the ability to continue to farm or ranch due to increasing regulations and mounting pressure from regulatory agencies. All of these issues work to create reluctance on the part of young people to “follow the family foot-steps” and take over the family farm or ranch. The Estate Tax laws of Oregon are among the most Draconian and repressive in our nation. They create an environment in which children that desire to continue to operate a family farm or ranch are often faced with having to sell a portion of it to save the remainder. The resulting in reduction in size compromises the economic viability and integrity of the whole, often resulting in the eventual sale of the remainder for other developmental uses. There has been a steady increase in regulations over farming and ranching which has resulted in, what many see as increased intrusion into the daily operations of farms and ranches. When we increase the presence of “non-farm or ranch” people scattered among working farms and ranches the result is conflict and issues which increase the pressure on agriculture working operations.

As we look to the future this decline in working agriculture acres and the increase in the average age of farm and ranch owners is set to create a most serious crisis for not only the economy of many of our rural counties but also for the aesthetics and habitats as open spaces

are fragmented and development replaces working agriculture. To this end it is imperative that measures be developed and put in place to promote and facilitate the positive transition of Ag lands to the next generation. The Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program and House Bill 3249 is such a start. This program promotes Conservation Easements which are one of the more positive “tools” to assist in the preservation of working Ag lands, wildlife habitat and open space. But this concept requires a funding source to provide incentive for farmers and ranchers to relinquish “their right to partition, fracture or develop” their working lands in any way outside of a mutually agreed upon set of parameters. That is the very thrust of the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program and HB 3249. Conservation Easements provide an avenue to transition working Ag lands to the next generation at an affordable value while allowing for the continuation of a productive lifestyle vital to our rural economy and that of our state. Conservation Easements provide for the preservation of working Ag lands, of unfragmented areas of wildlife habitat and provide for much needed open space.

For the future of Agriculture working landscapes, our next generation(s) of farmers and rancher and the protection of unfractured wildlife habitat and open space view-sheds we urge you to support the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program and HB 3249. HB 3249 is a positive and very much needed endeavor. If we do not work to protect the working agriculture lands we have at this time we will continue the decline until we have none. With the continued loss of working lands is the continued loss of wildlife habitat and the continued loss of open space view sheds.

Respectfully,

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