



**Rogue Valley Farm to School Written Testimony
HAGLU Hearing December 16, 2020**

Dear Chair Clem and Members of the Committee:

My name is **Sheila Foster** and I am the **Executive director of Rogue Valley Farm to School** in Jackson County.

I would, first of all, like to express my immense gratitude to Representative Clem and the Members of the Committee for your support of Farm to School funding. It has made a tremendous difference to the farmers and schools, and school children, in the Rogue Valley. Rogue Valley Farm to School has been serving the schools and farmers of the Rogue Valley for more than a decade. We currently provide education programs in ten schools, in four different school districts, and work with seven school districts in supporting their procurement efforts.

The announcement of \$15 million, primarily allocated for Oregon schools to purchase Oregon grown and produced food, was met with great enthusiasm on both the producer and the school purchasing side in the Rogue Valley. We had more than 40 farmers, nutrition directors, and agency representatives attend our farm to school procurement gathering in July 2019. The funding was at a scale to make a significant difference for farmers and they began looking at ways to scale up. This was further supported when nine producers from our region applied for the infrastructure and equipment grants to help them scale up production in order to better be able to sell to schools. Pickled Planet, for example, applied to increasing their processing capacity for schools. Fry Family Farm would have increased their production so as to not only benefit schools but also help other institutions in our region purchase more locally, potentially keeping millions of dollars in our state. Because of the cuts to the program in 2020, neither of these important producers received the funding they needed to help scale up production.

This is important to understand, because our region, like many small, rural communities, has had a chicken-and-the-egg dilemma -- schools cannot purchase from producers in any meaningful way unless there is adequate production, and producers cannot risk scaling up production unless there is a market they can trust. The Farm to School funding was beginning to break through that cycle in our region. It was starting to create a meaningful impact on our children's meals and farmers' income. Farmers and schools alike were beginning to believe in the program and the



broad, positive impact it can have on a community. We were on a roll, a sea change was coming. Then COVID-19 hit and budgets were cut. The removal of these farm to school grant funds had a jarring impact, just when our community needed it most.

As you know, the Rogue Valley has been horribly hit this year. We are predominately a tourist/service-oriented economy, with farmers relying on restaurants and tourism dollars as a significant source of sales. The Almeda and Oberchain fires destroyed thousands of homes. Schools and school food has been a critical source of support for families since March of this year. Feeding children fresh, nutritious food has never been more important, and our farmers very much need the sales.

Farm to School funding helps farmers, it helps children, it helps families, it helps the local economy, it helps the environment. It is so absolutely critical to our community this year, I cannot express it strongly enough. There are multiple layers of bang for each buck. It is an incredibly sound investment, and removing those funds has a significant negative impact on so many, at a time when it is the last thing that our region needs. We can do so much good with these funds, please help us make it possible. Our children and farmers need it.

Thank you for your service.

With Kind Regards,
Sheila Foster
Executive Director