



Oregon Association of
Conservation Districts

To: Oregon State Legislature, House Committee on Agriculture and Land Use
haglu.exhibits@oregonlegislature.gov

From: The Oregon Association of Conservation Districts

Re: Strong support for HB 2729 and the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program

Date: March 25, 2019

Dear Chair Clem, Vice-Chairs McLain and Post, and members of the Committee,

On behalf of the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts, **I am writing to express our strong support for HB 2729.** OACD serves and represents 45 Soil and Water Conservation Districts across the state, which are special districts with locally elected boards of directors. Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs) protect and enhance soil quality, water quality and quantity, and habitat by working closely with private landowners, many of whom are farmers, as well as nonprofit and government partners. Funding the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program (OAHP) at \$10M for the 2019-2021 biennium will provide a **critical set of tools to support farmers, ranchers, and the organizations who assist in their stewardship of the land in communities throughout Oregon.**

OAHP could become a keystone in the future of Oregon's unique collaboration between working lands and conservation of soil, water, and habitat. In the 2015-2017 biennium, **Oregon's Soil and Water Conservation Districts approved new conservation plans on over 18,000 acres, demonstrating abundant landowner interest in voluntary conservation** and future opportunities for further conservation through programs like OAHP. Without OAHP funding, however, the full demand for agricultural conservation cannot be met due to limited funding sources and limited state-level matching funds to leverage federal funding sources. The federal government demonstrated an increased interest in heritage programs through increased funding for the Natural Resource Conservation Service Agricultural Conservation Easement Program (ACEP) in the Farm Bill. **Oregon only receives 0.19% of ACEP, leaving millions of federal dollars on the table, because we do not have a state match.**

OAHP was developed by a diverse coalition of stakeholders to protect Oregon's unique agricultural lands and the conservation benefits those lands provide, and the program could provide a match for the ACEP program and other sources of funding to address a crisis in agricultural succession. Many of these legacy lands are currently at risk to subdivision and conversion as 75% of Oregon's agricultural lands will change hands in the next 20 years. OAHP was codified by the legislature in 2017 with strong bipartisan support and became law, yet it lacks funding to implement the programs it was designed to deliver.

The creation of OAHP brought to center stage a conversation in Oregon about the ways conservation and agriculture are not only compatible but also complementary – how our private working lands provide both the economic and ecological foundations for the state. Over the past year, the OAHP Commission, a group of leaders appointed by ODA, OWEB, ODFW, DLCDC and OSU Extension, oversaw the program and finalized administrative rules. The 11 Commissioners make up a statewide leadership body that represents Oregon’s farming, ranching, conservation and tribal communities. They collectively have volunteered hundreds of hours during the past year to attend monthly meetings and develop OAHP’s administrative rules, which are ready to implement as soon as funding is secured.

As Oregon continues to face pressure on its productive agricultural land from low-density development, fragmentation, population growth, succession challenges and more, there is an urgent need for the voluntary tools that the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program is designed to provide. **We urge you to support the \$10 million funding request to *implement* the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program** and fund projects with the growing host of willing and interested landowners who want to protect their working lands for future generations.

Sincerely,



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