



OREGON
ASSOCIATION OF
NURSERIES

Comments relating Redistricting

Senate Committee on Redistricting, House Special Committee on Redistricting

By Jeff Stone, Executive Director, Oregon Association of Nurseries

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Chairs Taylor and Salinas, Vice Chairs Knopp and Boshart Davis, and members of the committee. My name is Jeff Stone and I serve as the Executive Director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries. A decade ago, I testified before a joint committee on redistricting urging the legislature to call upon its better judgement and conduct your duties to ensure that all Oregonians be encouraged to build community and have a plethora of views engaged at the political level. While I fundamentally believe that every single member of this body represents their district to the best of their ability, we must all do our part to ensure that every reach of Oregon is accounted for. That seems so Pollyannaish now, but the roots of the sentiment remain today.

The Economic and Community Footprint of the Nursery and Greenhouse Industry

The nursery and greenhouse industry are the state's largest agricultural sector, and the industry ranks third in the nation, with over \$1.02 billion in sales annually to customers in Oregon, the rest of the United States, and abroad. In fact, nearly 75% of the nursery stock grown in our state leaves our borders – with over half reaching markets east of the Mississippi River. Oregon's elite growers send ecologically friendly green products out of the state and bring traded sector dollars back to Oregon. Nursery association members represent wholesale plant growers, Christmas tree growers, retailers, greenhouse operators and the entire supply chain to get product to market. Our members are located throughout the state, with our largest nursery growing operations found in Clackamas, Marion, Washington, Yamhill and Multnomah Counties.

Combined with being a trade sector – this industry is one that has a strong sense of community and purpose. Our members are business owners and treasurers of their children's sports leagues; they build sets for high school plays and provide jobs for those who wish to master the craft of growing and producing quality nursery stock. They are republicans and democrats, liberal and conservative, but all derive a sense of place from their geographic location. The nursery and greenhouse industry are both urban and rural and can provide insight into a better way to shape our legislative districts by worrying less about party registration – the rise of the Non-Affiliated Voter (NAV) now represents the majority of voting Oregonians demonstrates a shift from this philosophy and more

about validation of regional voices. This is a timely opportunity to examine the process from a wholistic viewpoint.

Overall perspective about redistricting

Fairness of establishing legislative district lines, of course, is in the eye of the beholder. However, there are metrics that enable a plan to withstand a decade of impact and scrutiny and establish a sense of identity for neighboring and communities of interest. Statutes such as ORS 188.010 should be a minimal threshold for districts that are contiguous, utilize geographic boundaries and are of equal population. Economic ties should be a factor in the definition of communities of interest and assist with an enduring sense of place and connection between the citizens and the jobs that surround them. Agriculture has grown steadily over the past two decades and is a major contributor to Oregon's economy. One observation I would make is that there is a growing perception and apprehension by those who identify as "rural" in our state of being underrepresented. I believe this is real and simply slicing a little ag into many rural only perpetuates the notion that you need to live in Portland to be viable in state decision making.

Compounding the issue is that the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that elected officials may legally redraw districts that are at best gerrymandering and at worst a cold calculation of political power. The result can be very partisan. The good news is that it only occurs every ten years. The bad news is that, as a result, we are stuck with the result for ten years.

The OAN would suggest a couple of guideposts to help you with this decision, which is extremely consequential.

- Communities of interest must have greater weight than housing addresses of current legislators.
- Drifting away from a non-partisan approach will only entrench the divide between rural and urban communities.
- Transparency is critical. Without it, good people will infer nefarious intentions.
- Daylight principle of continual public engagement will create public trust in the outcome.

There is no shame in determining the process simply does not work

Maybe it is because I work for some of the most innovative growers in the nation, but the nursery industry is not shy to examine practices to see if they work. Repeating a process that is faulty only creates consistency of poor decisions. No matter the party in charge there will be complaints and I do not envy the decision that is before you. It is natural to embrace that elections matter and those in control get to make the call on this issue. Fair. However, in a state and country that has growing political toxicity, there is another way.

ORS 188.010 outlines the criteria for drawing district boundaries and the statute is in place to give guidance and criteria to be followed. Voter registration information is not, of course, listed as one of the criteria to be considered. Yet, we submit that it is the criteria most considered by every committee of this kind before you. This should be corrected and can be by supporting establishment of a citizen's redistricting commission

that is not dominated by either political party. It is my understanding that twelve states that now have established such commissions. The models vary from state to state and such a commission would assure a redistricting more reflective of reality, less influenced by partisan politics and better accepted by Oregon voters.

Conclusion

Thank you for your time and attention this evening and your largest sector of agriculture is willing to roll up our sleeves and work alongside the Legislature to produce a balanced and fair redistricting plan.