



Testimony before House Committee
Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water
House Bill 2998 - Relating to soil health
By Jeff Stone, Executive Director – Oregon Association of Nurseries
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Chair Helm, Vice-Chairs Hartman and Owens, members of the committee, my name is Jeff Stone and I serve as the Executive Director of the Oregon Association of Nurseries. It is my hope that my comments on House Bill 2998 are taken in consideration as the state delves into how to best recognize, promote, and encourage agricultural production in the state as a carbon benefit.

Background on the Nursery and Greenhouse Industry

The nursery and greenhouse industry is the state's largest agricultural sector, and Oregon ranks third in the nation in nursery production, with over \$1.2 billion in sales across the nation and the globe. In fact, nearly 80% of the nursery stock grown in our state leaves our borders – with over 50% reaching markets east of the Mississippi River. The nursery industry employs more than 22,000 full time workers with an annual payroll over \$327 million. We send ecologically friendly, carbon sequestering, green products out of the state, and we bring traded sector dollars back to Oregon. Nursery association members represent wholesale plant growers, Christmas tree growers, retailers, and greenhouse operators. Our members are located throughout the state, with our largest nursery growing operations found in Clackamas, Marion, Washington, Yamhill, and Multnomah Counties.

Three tenets and building the road to get there

The OAN has taken a very close look at House Bill 2998, and we have worked over the interim to provide comments on the shape and scope of a soil health initiative. We commend Rep. Ken Helm in his effort to find middle ground and build a modest effort to provide incentives, education, and on-the-ground assistance to farmers so they can maintain healthy soils in Oregon.

The OAN urges the proponents of HB 2998 include three basic tenets:

1. The initiative be completely voluntary and encourage best management practices for soil health.
2. The program should start small to build awareness and success and allow funds to be received by federal resources.
3. The program should have strict sideboards to ensure that the effort is not to be used for regulatory purposes.

It is important that through proper amendments to this bill and through the rulemaking process, the legislature and stakeholders keep in mind: what is the problem we are trying to solve? Since we already have a bevy of experts – our local growers – increasing the level of knowledge on practical agricultural practices is critical. For example, while no-till practices help with carbon storage, it is by no means the only remedy for soil health.

Dictating what farm practices should be deployed is well beyond the knowledge and reach of the legislature. For this reason, we appreciate the inclusion of Oregon State University Extension Services and the Soil and Water Conservation Districts as technical experts. This will do more on the ground to improve soil health than many understand. While we are not sure how many nurseries will be able to benefit from this program, since they tend not to be on an annual field crop schedule, I do appreciate the general direction of this bill. I also believe it's the best proposal out there in the Natural and Working Lands realm.

Some specific concerns and request for further conversion

- The declarations section should be removed. The prose is not directly related to the outcomes of the bill and could confuse the implementation process.
- The Institute of Natural Resources is not the right place to lead this effort, and we suggest housing it in a state agency with expertise, such as the Department of Agriculture.
- Section 2(2)(a)(E) goals include reducing agricultural inputs and protecting worker health. This conflates two completely different issues, and we fail to see how either is at the center of a healthy soils initiative.
- Section 2(5) excludes agricultural associations from being a “collaborating entity” except by unanimous approval by defined collaborating entities, which are ODA, OWEB, OSU college of Ag sciences, INR, Extension Services, SWDCs, and intertribal organizations. Member associations should be able to participate and not cede contributions to soil health to public entities. Landowners and subject matter experts should be driving this in concert with governmental interests.
- We would like to workshop some of the definitions in the bill to ensure we are as precise as possible for this program. For example, the definition of “soil health” in Section 1(3) is overly ambitious and broad and could be impossible to measure or achieve.
- We are always concerned with how data is collected and how information is derived from it. Since many operations already implement carbon mitigation practices, we would like to see their efforts recognized as part of this effort. It is certainly possible that remote sensing technologies already exist that could offer alternatives to manual data collection at the individual farm level.

Why it matters: Oregon is abundant in natural resources – timber, food, and nursery production – and it is no accident that we have the potential to act as a key to open the door to resolving carbon issues.

The OAN will continue to be a constructive voice in the development of a comprehensive climate policy. We must look at all factors when shaping legislation that rewards, incentivizes and promotes our working lands as a true mitigating force. Thank you for your time and consideration.