

Dear committee members:

As a small, independent grower of tree fruits in the Hood River Valley, I urge you to oppose HB 2548. This measure is a solution looking for a problem that does not exist in the mid-Columbia growing region. The agricultural workforce in the mid-Columbia fruit growing region consists of three elements; a local, permanent workforce, a migrant workforce that comes into the area during the short-term harvest period, and a foreign guest workforce that is brought in for short periods to supplement domestic workers. Most of these workers are provided with free housing and utilities during their period of employment. These housing benefits are already highly regulated by OR-OSHA. Agricultural workers in the mid-Columbia region are in the enviable position of a worker shortage which gives them much leverage in terms of pay and working conditions.

Agricultural workers already enjoy the same workplace protections as all other workers in Oregon. It is unclear why agricultural employers should be singled out with a new, intrusive bureaucracy. As proposed, the board governing this bureaucracy would be wholly chosen by the governor at her sole discretion. Such a board would have broad powers over the lives and livelihoods of already-struggling agricultural employers. Ag employers would have little recourse to the decisions of these unelected arbiters.

Since hearing of this proposed legislation, I have had several discussions with my farmer friends here in Hood River. Ironically, despite the hope of good returns from the 2024 crop due to a weather-reduced crop in Washington, my fellow growers are talking of exiting the fruit-growing business. While we all enjoy growing food to help feed the world, the burdens and risks associated with the fruit business are mind-boggling. The onslaught of regulation from the State of Oregon, while well-meaning, is contributing greatly to a sense of futility in going forward. These mounting pressures and costs will ultimately result in the decline and dissolution of the Oregon fruit-growing business. It strikes me that such an end-game will not be in our workers' best interests.