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House Committee on Labor & Workforce Standards
To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Elizabeth Polehn and I grow/raise cherries and pears within two family-owned operations in The Dalles Oregon. I am the packing house manager for my husband's family's third generation family farm. I also have had experience working in other local packing houses, and as a USDA/ODA Shipping Point Inspector. I have worked in the fruit industry for 40 years.

I am writing to ask you to please oppose HB 2548. This is a very negative bill for agricultural employers. Oregon has a very valuable agricultural economy as many of its crops are specialty crops requiring high intensity hand labor, meaning it is not suitable for automation. Oregon already has some of the highest labor cost in the country. For example, the H2A AEWR of \$19.82 in Oregon is the third highest rate in the nation already.

In tree fruit agriculture farmers do not get to set their prices. The prices are entirely set by the markets, and are dictated by supply and demand, things we have no control over. In light of this we would have no way to recoup the increased cost passed on by this proposed governing board.

Farm workers are currently protected by very strong workplace regulations such as paid sick time and minimum wage. Oregon OSHA has one of the highest worksite inspection rates and has adopted some of the most expansive workplace protections in the country. What real issue is this bill trying to solve?

HB 2548 gives unelected bureaucrats the power to set wages and safety rules that go far beyond current protections, adding more regulatory and cost burden to farms. There is no accountability for the decisions they make, even if their decisions ultimately close farms or result in layoffs.

I am strongly opposed to the proposal in HB 2548 that eliminates at-will employment for farms and ranches. I fail to understand how it could even be legal to carve out one sector of the Oregon Employment scene and disallow at will employment, putting agriculturalist at a disadvantage in the state, and opening up potential messy litigation for the state should this pass. HB 2548 carves out farms and puts us at risk for costly claims for making necessary staffing decisions. All other private sectors in Oregon enjoy at-will status, but farms—whose employment needs are impacted by weather, yields, trade and market

conditions, pests and diseases—would not. This is unfair. This bill doesn't help workers or consumers; it just makes farming harder and more expensive than it already is.

This brings me to a very uncomfortable subject, the suicide rate amongst agriculturalists, this would include both owners and workers. The most recent data on suicide rates amongst farmers, in Oregon is already 104 per 100,000 this compares to the average population in Oregon's suicide rate of 21 per 100,000, so the rate of farmer suicide in Oregon is already at over 5 times the rate of the average population. Nationwide, farmers commit suicide at a rate that varies depending upon what study you look at but is well over twice that of veterans, some studies suggest up to 4 times.

The Oregon State Legislature passed SB 955 that went into effect July 1, 2023 to provide \$300,000 in targeted Suicide Prevention measures by forwarding calls to suicide prevention lines to an industry specific hot line called Agristress. It seems to me HB 2548 is completely antithetical to this very appreciated and needed resource that has been provided by the Oregon State Legislature to Agriculturalists. Again what problem is this bill addressing?

What drives this high rate of suicide amongst agriculturalists? Studies show largely contributing factors being financial insecurity, fluctuating markets, labor shortages and trade disputes according to the American Farm Bureau Federation. The proposed HB 2548 exacerbates all these existing problems for Oregon Farmers.

Many farms have already had to reduce worker hours, change crops, or automate where they can to control labor costs associated with overtime; and cope with newly instituted labor camp upgrades, HB 2548 would have even more severe consequences piled on an already very stressed system.

Much of what is proposed to be the purview of the proposed "Workforce Standards Board" is already well covered by state and federal law, MSPA, BOLI/ OSHA standards, Federal FSMA/FDA standards that we already adhere to most have been in place for decades. In addition, we nearly all participate in industry food safety programs, as our food processors require like Global GAP, USDA GAP, Primus or SQF.

I urge you to vote no on HB 2548 to protect Oregon farms and ranches our very valued employees who's treasured jobs we currently provide.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Polehn

