



Testimony in Support of HB 2548

March 12, 2025

Chair Grayber, Vice Chair Elmer, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Lesly Muñoz, and I am honored to serve as the State Representative for House District 22, which includes Woodburn, Gervais, Brooks, and North Salem.

Over 72,000 farmworkers live in Oregon, and I am proud to represent the Mid-Willamette Valley, which has one of the largest concentrations of farm workers in the country.

Our state's history with farmworkers dates back to the 1940s when thousands of Latino farmworkers migrated to the Willamette Valley to cities like Woodburn and Gervais through the Bracero Program. This program is also part of my family's story. My grandfathers and many uncles came to the US to work as braceros.

I have dedicated my career to fighting for workers, specifically educators and hospital workers, to ensure they have respectful workplaces where they are treated with dignity. I remember learning in a government and economics course that farmworkers were intentionally excluded from federal labor laws, the National Labor Relations Act, and the Fair Labor Standards Act regarding wages, hours, and overtime. Since then, farmworkers have been excluded from having a voice in improving their working conditions.

These exclusions have resulted in poor wages and substandard working conditions in the agriculture industry. On average, a farmworker in Oregon makes \$34,000 per year. Some farmworkers are paid by piece, which is extremely low wages, and they have to sacrifice their health and safety to pick faster if they want to earn enough to make ends meet. Some don't take breaks—the combination of all of these difficult working conditions increases the likelihood of injury.

Farmworkers in Oregon work in some of the most dangerous conditions. They are often exposed to pesticides and extreme weather conditions, such as extreme heat and wildfire smoke.

My connections to farmworkers run deep. Not only did my grandfathers and uncles participate in the Bracero Program, but my ex-husband worked on Oregon Farms when he immigrated to the US at the age of 13. When we first married, he suggested I come to the farm with him on one of my days off. He told me we could park our car in a quiet place at the farm, and I could read a book while he worked. It sounded quiet and nice to read, surrounded by nature.

When we arrived at the farm, a worker was missing. My husband asked if I would be willing to help out. I happily agreed. They gave me a hole puncher and told me that as workers brought

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their buckets of strawberries to me, I would punch one hole on their ticket for each bucket presented.

This was a fourth-generation farm run by a married couple. When lunchtime came, the female owner arrived with lunch. She parked her truck, came out, and whistled loudly. Farmworkers put their buckets with picked strawberries down and proceeded toward the woman. As people got closer, she started throwing cheeseburgers at different workers. They would catch the burger and begin to eat the burgers.

In my culture, as a Mexican-American woman, we whistle at dogs, and throwing food at people is offensive. That woman's actions were humiliating and disrespectful. I approached her and let her know that she was being offensive. She was arrogant and told me she would fire me if I continued. By that time, both our husbands had reached us. Her husband let her know that I was volunteering to help and that I was there with my husband.

After that interaction, I asked my husband to leave that farm or leave me. I don't believe in participating in systems where folks are disrespected or oppressed.

Our livelihood was tied to farming strawberries, blue berries, and Christmas trees. Due to the low wages, my husband and I ran a family restaurant. It was hard work but good work. We kept the restaurant and went back to school so that we could be in a better position to supplement the wages lost from the farmwork he left.

Because of the advocacy of farmworker-serving organizations, many states have passed their own labor standards for farmworkers. In Oregon, we are grateful to have included farmworkers in our minimum wage standards, and the legislature recently moved to guarantee overtime pay to farmworkers.

Our federal labor laws exist to eliminate substandard labor conditions and to level the playing field for workers in their workplaces. However, since farmworkers were excluded from these fundamental laws, we have brought before you HB 2548, which creates a board charged with the duty to adopt rules establishing minimum standards for farmworkers to ensure their health and welfare.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the average life expectancy for migrant farmworkers is 49 years, compared to 73 for the general U.S. population. We are asking for farmworkers to have a voice in their workplace conditions to improve their quality of life.

This board provides a space for workers, employers, and stakeholders to collaborate and address industry standards. In addition, it has enforcement power and accountability measures. The agriculture industry is vital to our state's economy, and I believe this bill will help the industry thrive. It is a necessary and overdue recognition that farmworkers — who contribute so much to

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our communities and our economy – deserve fairness, stability and a voice in the conditions that shape their lives. I urge you to support HB 2548.

Thank you for your time and consideration.