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THE Melon Shack, NE Corvallis, Benton County

House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources and Water

Thank you to: Rep. Breese-Iverson, Senator Sollman, Smith DB, Anderson  
Rep. Elmer, Levy E., Owens, Reschke, Senator Broadman, Girod, McLane, Nash

Supporting HB4153

Thank you for the opportunity to present testimony in support of HB 4153.

I would ask the committee members to imagine an opportunity for an aspiring farmer who does not have deep pockets or a large source of outside financial support, yet desires an opportunity to build their own farming business. A business not only capable of creating a financially feasible and sustainable farm entity, but also providing a reasonable income to support a family. Imagine if such a person could buy or lease a, 30-acre field, near a modestly growing, urban population. Imagine that it might be near a college town. They may farm a small selection of the highest value produce items that grow well in their area and soil type. That produce might include cantaloupe and water melon, sweet corn, peppers, tomatoes, squash, etc. To realize the best financial return for their work, they do the required legal and logistical work to establish a farm produce stand. They give it a cute name. They capitalize on the opportunity to provide family fun and healthy experiences to the non-farming population by growing a diverse patch of pumpkins that can be harvested in the long tradition of U-pick retail marketing. Also, they plant an 8-acre field of field corn, planning to attract customers eager to celebrate the fall and Halloween season. They market their field corn, not by harvesting silage or grain for animal feed at a price too low to justify the land cost, but they cultivate the field into a form of maze art that attracts customers to participate in a 1-2 hour exploratory journey into the farm environment, including the weather, land and corn plants, all enhanced by a network of sign posts displaying navigational clues and information to promote and educate customers about the products the farm sells and the techniques and skills used to provide them. The two crops work in support of each other to enhance sales and the six-acre pumpkin patch is picked clean by the end of October. Now imagine, in early November, the farm family sitting together and going over the season's results, realizing that they have established a thriving business that just sold over 300,000 pounds of pumpkins, about 50,000 pounds of melons and other produce, as well as served approximately 30,000 customers and guests who enjoyed the various parts of the summer and fall activity. The profitability of this business is competitive with any of the best other crop options in the area. In addition, it was done successfully without conflicting with the neighboring farms, or the traffic flow in the area.

If this image seems like a pipe dream, it's not! This was The Melon Shack a few years ago and it has grown even more since. We have continued to add to the traditional atmosphere by creating a hay ride, a barrel train, hosting food vendors and always looking for better ways to create a wholesome experience and serve our community.

HB4153 will be a huge step in supporting farm businesses that use agritourism and direct farm marketing to support the sale of their farm products. HB4153 will prevent and solve many conflicts between our farm and local County Agencies. Some Oregon Counties have not adopted clear policy in this area and continue to struggle with conflicts that inconsistency creates. By codifying the farmstand/farm store and agritourism related policies, affected farmers will have the confidence to pursue growth in their farming operations. The supportive and positive approach of this Bill will provide the certainty that any business and industry need to be able to move into the future knowing that over regulation will not be the biggest challenge towards success.

Our family farm is unique in that we can truthfully say that we relate to the issues addressed in HB4153, from much more than just the farmstand (farm store) / agritourism end of the agricultural community. We are a fifth-generation farm family on the land originally acquired by my great grandfather. We own about 380 acres total, spread between my father, my son and myself. We farm a total of nearly 1500 acres, spread across the north half of Benton County, and yet our ability to afford to purchase more land of our own is exhausted. We farm 100 acres of hazelnuts, approximately 300 acres of specialty vegetable seed crops and just under 1100 acres of various grass seed varieties. The Melon Shack operation and DBA rely on the production of the 25 acres nearest our Farm Store for the crops and about 5 acres dedicated to parking. We understand the cost of farmland in our region and know that from as far back as the late 1980s, EFU zoning has failed to meet its goal of ensuring an affordable supply of land for farmers. The best way to ensure that land stays in farming is for it to be owned by farmers and the best way to ensure that is to empower farmers to compete financially by realizing a higher profitability for their work. Farm stands, farm stores and Agritourism are just tools that enable farms with those opportunities to compete. There is no danger that this will lead to land prices that aspiring farmers can't afford, that problem already overtook the industry. We are now just trying to stay in the game and this is one path that a smaller farmer can be successful on.

From the perspective of an average commercial farmer, the last couple of years has turned out to be a huge and serious low in the prices of agricultural commodities and produce. The more stable profitability of direct marketing and use of agritourism strategies has kept our farm able to meet financial obligations. If not for the profitability that HB4153 will help to ensure over the approaching future, I am not optimistic that our farm will survive the financial challenges that my son will face, as he takes over ownership of the farm operations.

There are several points that opposing parties to this bill have made that simply don't acknowledge historical facts or what this Bill will provide for the current direct farming operators. I welcome the open and honest discussion, knowing that what is best for our farm and others like ours is HB4153.