

To: Chair and Members of the House Committee on Agriculture

From: Claire Zielinski

Date: 2/4/26

RE: Support for HB 4153 – Protecting Oregon’s Farm Experiences

Hi, my name is Claire Zielinski I am a 5th generation farmer and I work full time at my families farm market E.Z. Orchards in NE Salem. Our operation is unique in that we stay open year round, while many agritourism operations and farm markets are seasonal. One of the reason we do this is so that we can keep a strong core team of people employed all year round. In the Willamette Valley alone “the employment impact, including full- and part-time jobs, is near 11,000 jobs — calculated from the combined total of agritourism employment.” (Sorte et al., 2024). In fact we always lose money in that first quarter of the year, but it is worth it to have a team who has expertise and passion for what we do at E.Z. Orchards.

My job at E.Z. Orchards is merchandise manager, anything that is not a fruit or a vegetable I order and keep restocked. One of my frustrations in the past has been having to justify if an packaged food, kitchen gadget, or gift item is a complimentary item. While we have been lucky to be in Marion county who is often quite kind and not too harsh on the quote on quote gray areas. I have been caught up in debates with other farmers and with people with opposite views on farm markets having to defend my job and what we sell.

Since I am also doing the ordering, I have met and know some of our local Oregon vendors of packaged foods quite personally. Which is why I know that all of these small businesses have a passion and a dream for what they do. Stimulating the local economy and most of these small food brands are family owned and operated just like our Oregon farms. We carry many local Oregon made products from BBQ sauce, hot sauce, jams, jellies, syrups, hazelnuts, nut butters, dried fruit, hazelnut flour, oils, dip mixes, salt, baking mixes, cheese, frozen meats, and so much more.

Currently we can sell products that are from other local farms whether they be the raw good or a processed version of the raw good. However, most farms do not do the processing themselves. Food processing has it’s own set of rules and regulations and managing a good production is it’s own full time job. So, many of these packaged food lines might be started by a farmers cousin or family member. Utilizing the product from the farm but is a separate business entity. Like utilizing apples you’re your uncles farm to make your own line of hard cider. More commonly a food brand might contract a farmer to grow what they specifically need. Like contracting specific peppers for making hot sauce. However, because they are not doing the farming themselves, However, because they are not doing the farming themselves, we would not be able to sell the

product if it was not a paired item with other produce that we sell. Not being able to sell these will impact on these small businesses and also our customers.

We do not want to be a chain grocery store, nor do we want to see them in our area. Which is why we support protecting farmland and keeping it farmed. All that being said, the most direct comparison that consumers have to what we are is a grocery store. There are many things that a grocery store has that I don't want to carry or compete with them on like sugar, flour, or paper towels. However, that is what people think of when they think of a business that sells food year round. We have regular customers who shop with us even during our slow time of year. Like a gentleman who comes in without fail every Monday with his little girl who we have been watching grow from a baby to a toddler. For those guests who visit us, I want to make it appealing and worth their time to visit.

For example: We carry spices because well you need spices to cook--there are very few things that only need salt and pepper. We sell fresh and local vegetables and a lot of people don't like to just eat broccoli, especially picky kids. So, we also have dip mixes that are locally made in the Eugene area. We also sell salad dressings, and other condiments. In our freezer we support two local meat companies and to go with their frozen meats like sausages and ground beef. So, in turn, we also sell Oregon made mustard and ketchup.

While my regular customers will of course have to go to other stores to do their shopping. I want to try and be a one stop shop if I can when it comes to their food shopping. Like for the Superbowl this weekend. They are busy and stressed trying to get ready to host. They can get all their food shopping done at E.Z. Orchards! Local ground beef and cheese for sliders, vegetables and locally made dip mix for their veggie tray, perhaps some apples from our orchard to make an American ala mode pie for dessert. Then when they go to the grocery store all they have to do is get paper plates and napkins, and life is so much simpler for the consumer and for me if HB4153 is passed.

In relation to food, we also have prepared food here at the Farm Market. While we have never had issues with the county on the issue of the prepared food that we sell, I know other agritourism operations in different counties have. It is also worrying that if there was a huge turn over of staff at the county level that perhaps opinion might change and our prepared food might not be allowed under current rule making.

For prepared food we have donuts year round in the Market, and a Shortcake Stand in the summer. We make cider donuts using our fresh cider, and peach shortcake and milkshakes using peaches from our orchard. All of which are grab and go items. However, especially for the Shortcake Stand peach season is such a short period of the summertime. We would have to wait until July to be open with prepared food only made with products from our orchard.

Instead, we open in mid-May when local Strawberry season starts. We then sell strawberry shortcakes all summer long from May to early September. While we do not grow strawberries

ourselves, we buy our strawberries from local growers. Some of these growers heavily rely on our consistent need of strawberries to keep their operations going. In fact, one farmer due to having us as a new customer, was able to expand and plant more strawberries. We also have some berry growers who if we did not order for both retail sales in the market and supply for the shortcake stand would not consider our orders large enough to warrant fulfilling.

All our food is grab and go, they can take it home and eat it, eat it in their car, or if the weather is nice eat at a picnic table. We do not service the tables, nor do we want to do anything like a full-service restaurant. What we hope for is the chance to be able to continue to offer what we currently sell, and that the public loves so much. Maybe one day we'll think of a revolutionary new prepared food item to sell, but we will always keep it in the format of it being a grab and go item.

Our busiest time of year at E.Z. Orchards is in October during our fall HarvestFest. We focus on being a family friendly and educational fall festival. Which is why all our activities tie into Oregon agriculture and Oregon history. During the month of October we offer field trips and have anywhere from 8,000-10,000 kids out to our HarvestFest on a field trip. It takes about a month to set up all the activities that the kids will participate in. We spend roughly 3 hours of time communicating and preparation for each classroom that comes out to the HarvestFest.

We do charge for our field trips. With the amount of time and resources we put into these field trips we cannot afford to not charge for them. Not to mention the cost of invisible things behind the scenes like insurance. Our goal is to educate the public and our number of field trips have been growing. More farms are choosing not to offer field trips anymore. Those schools are then choosing to come to us. Each year we have an increase in schools coming from further away. Some as far as the coast and even southern Washington. As the number of field trips increase, I want to continue to be in compliance, but I worry that because our current system does not allow ticketing as a part of our farm income. That in the future as we try our best to educate all those who want to be educated about Oregon farms, that we might fall out of compliance. Which is why I love that the HB4153 explicitly allows educational agritourism activities and the ability to charge for these activities without an income limit.

The main reason why I support HB4153 is because of what it means for me as a young farmer in Oregon. My family is currently going through succession planning. These rules and regulations will have a direct impact on me being able to continue the business in the future. Our operation needs agritourism and direct to consumer business to survive. There are very few fruit orchards left here in Salem, I don't know of a single fruit orchard here in Salem that does not do some form of agritourism. We like so many other fruit farms would have closed down if we had not diversified.

When I went to the North American Farm Direct Marketing Association meeting in Lexington two years ago I would say that easily half of the people there were under the age of 40. Young people who were able to return to the family farm or carve out their own space because of

agritourism. Oregon needs these rule changes in HB4153 because it will directly impact the future of agriculture continuing in this State. So, many young farmers are hesitant because of financial and stress issues they see from their parents having farmed. Agritourism is an appealing option to keep them on the farm and living in our rural communities. If HB4153 is not passed I worry that we will lose many more Oregon family farms.

I know that for myself I debate frequently why I stay here in Oregon. My family has deep roots here, and I deeply love this State and our community impact that the Zielinski family has had, I want to continue that legacy. However, I have gone to other states and seen how much easier it is for them. How much their state loves agritourism and happily welcomes them. Just like Dutch Bros recently moved their headquarters to a different state. What is it that is truly keeping me in this State and not moving to New York where the public loves agritourism and the State, county, and all forms of government warmly welcome agritourism. I am young but I do have a dream for what kind of operation I want to lead and build in the future, and that includes working with and educating the public. If I am unable to attain that dream in this the state of Oregon, then perhaps against my wishes, I would have no choice but to leave this great State and my community here.

In conclusion if the rules and regulations around agritourism do not change or if they get worse. My love for what I currently have here will not be enough to keep me in Oregon, and I fear that many farms in Oregon carry that same sentiment. So, please for the future of agriculture here in Oregon support HB4153.

Thank you for your time.

Claire Zielinski

E.Z. Orchards

References:

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