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On Behalf Of:

Committee: House Committee On Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water

Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB4153

We live in a very attractive place. It is exceedingly hard to keep developmental pressures away from Hood River County. We are not only a spectacular spot; we are also blessed with astonishingly productive farmland. We have been able to retain these attributes mostly because of our forward-thinking land use laws. I personally know farmers who chafe against some of those restrictions because they are struggling to survive against rising costs and relatively flat prices, and several other serious challenges, and I wish passionately to support them, but not in this way. We continue to lose farmland in spite of the land use laws that protect them, and I cannot support a bill that would weaken them.

HB 4153 is such a bill. Poorly written, it nevertheless manages to gut the strongest constraints on the development of Exclusive Farm Use lands. If allowed to pass this bill will make it much easier to pave this paradise and put up a parking lot. What does Exclusive Farm Use mean when it requires counties to permit “farm stores” on EFU land that are allowed to sell pretty much anything in any quantity as long as people can buy something produced by the farm there? and to host any number of events without clear limits on their duration or the number of people involved? And if one farm cashes in, even in a moderate way, on these lifted limitations, other farmers who hope to attract people to their fruit stands and u-picks and farm markets will feel pressure to compete. Farmers are pressured enough just by farming. There are huge issues to be addressed—threats to pollinators, figuring out how to attract and afford labor, how to move away from pesticides, improve techniques, deal with climate change. Most of them are chasing themselves already. Will they now be feeling pressure to have events and a build a restaurant? and a ... parking lot? and look comfortably rustic while they’re at it? The only thing that might slow down the impact of this law is its own lack of clarity. But the rewards to developers and entertainment conglomerates waiting in the wings--at least in the short term--are sufficient to guarantee that moneyed interests will have an unfair advantage in the clarification of what’s allowed.

The bill is needlessly threatening—and thoughtless--because it forces counties to permit non-farm uses that might not be consistent with their particular priorities or types of agriculture. State law currently allows counties more choice. For example, Oregon counties may, but are not required to, allow agri-tourism and other commercial events on Exclusive Farm Use land. Hood River County has chosen to allow up to 18 days of agri-tourism events, but not the larger number available in statute, and no commercial events. This is the county’s right and choice under

current law. It is a balance between tourism and farm land protection that suits Hood River. That local prerogative will be taken away by this bill. HB 4153 would force all counties to allow unlimited commercial activities and entertainment venues under the guise of a “farm store”. The bill takes away our freedom of choice and gives us a one-size-fits all option that doesn’t fit.

The bill is also unfair to rural residential landowners, who have a reasonable expectation that adjoining Exclusive Farm Use zoned land will be used for farming, not for retail stores, commercial kitchens, restaurants, concerts, amusement parks, zoos, or other entertainment venues. Rural residents expect and accept the necessary noise and inconvenience that comes with being part of a farming community. But rural residential landowners – and our farming neighbors – should not be forced to deal with non-farm uses that belong in commercial and manufacturing zones.

Please oppose this bill.