

Submitter: Eloise Koehler
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water
Measure, Appointment or HB4153
Topic:

Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Eloise Koehler. I am a sixth-generation Oregonian, a longtime land-use advocate, and a former board member of 1,000 Friends of Oregon. I am submitting testimony in firm opposition to HB 4153.

Oregon's Exclusive Farm Use (EFU) zones exist because this state made a deliberate, values-based decision decades ago: agricultural land is a public good that deserves protection from incremental commercial conversion. EFU zoning is not anti-business or anti-innovation—it is pro-agriculture, pro-land stewardship, and pro-long-term viability for farmers.

HB 4153 undermines that social contract.

This bill would require counties to allow large, permanent commercial facilities—5,000 to 10,000 square feet—on EFU land for nonfarm retail, dining, alcohol service, and unlimited events such as concerts and weddings. It does so without requiring agriculture to remain the primary use of the land and without meaningful safeguards to ensure surrounding farms are not negatively impacted.

The result is not support for working farmers. The result is a pay-to-play system that favors capital-intensive commercial development over agricultural production.

Facilities of this scale require significant upfront investment. That reality alone excludes most small and beginning farmers and instead incentivizes land speculation by entities whose primary business is events, hospitality, or retail—not farming. Under current law, purchasing acreage and performing minimal agricultural activity can qualify as “farm use.” HB 4153 would allow that thin threshold to justify permanent commercial destinations on protected farmland.

A property that generates most of its revenue from weddings or concerts is no longer a farm. It is an event venue using agriculture as cover.

Oregon law already allows farm stands, wineries, agritourism, and on-farm events—but critically, existing law requires agriculture to remain the predominant use and includes a “good neighbor” analysis to ensure nonfarm activities do not harm surrounding agricultural operations. HB 4153 removes those guardrails. That is not

modernization; it is deregulation of land-use protections that have served Oregon well for decades.

This bill also fails to address two of the most pressing issues facing agriculture today: land affordability and farm viability. By increasing the commercial value of EFU land without preserving agricultural primacy, HB 4153 risks driving up land prices and pushing working farmers—especially new and historically marginalized farmers—out of the market entirely.

Over time, the cumulative effect is clear: EFU zones become commercial corridors, agricultural activity becomes ornamental, and Oregon loses not just farmland, but the integrity of its land-use system.

I urge you to oppose HB 4153 or significantly amend it to retain the foundational protections that define EFU zoning, including the requirement that agriculture remain the primary use and that nonfarm activities undergo a good-neighbor analysis. Oregon's land-use system is admired nationally because it draws clear lines and holds them thoughtfully. This bill blurs those lines in ways that will be difficult, if not impossible, to reverse.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and for your consideration of the long-term impacts of this legislation.

Sincerely,
Eloise Koehler