

Testimony to the Natural Resources Subcommittee
of the Ways and Means Committee
April 20, 2014
Helle Ruddenklau

Co-Chairs, Devlin and Rayfield, members of the committee, thank you for letting me testify today.

My name is Helle Ruddenklau. My husband, Bruce, and I farm around 1,000 acres in Yamhill and Polk counties. Our farm is a mixed cropping farm with a diverse range of ten different crops ranging from wheat and grass seed, to specialty seed crops, green beans and sweet corn. We have previously been selected as conservation cooperators by both the Yamhill and Polk County Soil and Water Conservation Districts and in 2009 we were selected as one of four national outstanding young farmers based in part on our conservation efforts. As most farmers we know that being good stewards of our land is important. However, to stay on the land we also need to make sure we are financially sustainable.

We started farming when we were very young and it was touch and go for many years as to whether we would be able to make it or not. It is extremely important to us, as it is to all people, that we spend our dollars wisely. We rely on a variety of support industries for help when it comes to advise on chemicals, fertilizers, crop choices etc. While we enjoy good relationships with companies supplying that information, the basis of that relationship is still to sell us product - the more the better. But we have another source of information - the Extension Service. The Extension Service gives us unbiased, science based results that we can use to balance the information we get from the companies. Every year we bring up the fertilizer guides that the Extension Service publishes and use those to help us determine how much fertilizer to put on our fields. I can tell you that without that information (and even with it) we are pushed to put on more. However, we soil test all our fields every year, and that combined with the research from OSU allows us to be confident that we are putting on the right amount of crop nutrients. This benefits the state as a whole since we only put on what the crop needs thereby reducing the chance of leaching fertilizer through to the waterways of Oregon. But this is research that needs to happen on an ongoing basis to stay relevant. Agriculture is continually evolving. Our varieties and production methods are leading to higher yields and the fertilizer guides need to take that into account to maintain credibility.

Then there are areas where the only information comes from OSU. For example, OSU ran some experiments some years ago to determine the optimum time to cut grass seed. We moisture test the seedheads in our fields as they are maturing and we now know the exact range of moisture to aim at for each grass species we grow. This is information that makes us money. By cutting at the optimum time we loose less seed to shatter loss while maintaining the quality that Oregon grass seed is known for worldwide.

The fertilizer guides and the grass seed cutting time are examples of very practical research that has direct impact on Oregon's farmers.

If a problem comes up during the year, one of our first calls is to our local extension agent. When we first started farming there were three crops agents in the Valley. That number is now down to two. There is also a reduction in on campus staff. We have a developing issue right now in terms of slugs. On our farm we have shifted to mostly practicing no-till. In this system, you don't work the soil between planting different crops. This increases organic matter and improves soil structure leading to a healthier, more "alive" soil. No-till also reduces soil erosion. This helps keep soil sediments and potential fertilizer and chemical residues out of Oregon's waterways. So, environmentally, no-till is a good thing. However, in the process we have created a great environment for slugs. It turns out that slugs are an issue not just for us, but across all of agriculture including in Christmas trees bound for export. This is a problem we really need OSU to address, but there is no specialist any more at OSU with that expertise. Restoring funding to get the Statewides back to their previous strength would help us immensely.

I believe that the State of Oregon gets an amazing deal out of its support of OSU and the Statewides. The College of Ag is ranked as one of the top agricultural institutions in the world. As I mentioned, agriculture is in a state of rapid transition. World population is estimated to reach 9 billion people by 2050 and we need to almost double our food production to keep up with demand. We only have the farmland that we have today, and as you are aware some of the best land slowly gets swallowed up by cities. It is therefore imperative that we get as much production out of our current farmland as we can, but in a sustainable way. A strong agricultural research program coupled with an efficient way to get that information out to farmers is vital in meeting that challenge.

I therefore urge your support for the \$16 million request for the Statewides.