



March 15, 2021

State of Oregon  
Senate Committee on Education  
900 Court Street NE Room 453  
Salem, OR 97301

**Re: Senate Bill 404**

Dear Chairman Michael Dembrow, Vice-Chair Chuck Thomsen, and Members of the Senate Committee on Education

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on Senate Bill 404. I am Megan DeBates, Vice President of Government Affairs for the Organic Trade Association. The Organic Trade Association is the largest membership-based business association for organic agriculture and products in North America. It is the leading voice for organic trade in the United States representing over 9,500 farms and businesses across all 50 states, including over 45 in Oregon.

We count among our members many iconic companies with a deep-rooted connection to the state such as Pacific Foods, Oregon Tilth, OMRI, and Rogue Creamery. Additionally Organic Valley, Organically Grown Company, and Amy's Kitchen all serve on our Board of Directors. We are pleased to be joining many of them in support of Senate Bill 404, which would increase support for Oregon's organic sector through investments in technical assistance, research, market development and access to healthy foods.

Organic agriculture is a bright spot in the U.S farm economy, growing to over \$55 billion in sales a year in 2020, more than double the growth rate of the overall U.S. food market. Between 2017 and 2019, Oregon's organic market has grown 63% to \$454 million in annual farm gate sales and over 750 certified operations. Ninety-one percent of Oregonians purchase organic, and 30 percent of organic farms in Oregon plan to increase production over the next five years. Despite all this, Oregon is falling behind other states and is no longer in the top 10 states nationally for organic production, ranking 12<sup>th</sup>, which is why this legislation is critical to reestablishing Oregon's leadership within organic.

Organic presents a promising economic opportunity for farmers, but the arduous three-year transition process is an important prerequisite to becoming eligible for organic certification, and there is little support to help farmers through this transition. The lack of technical assistance and research tailored to organic systems are among the most significant barriers that prevent farmers from making the leap to organic. Hiring more organic specialists and extension agents is critical to ensuring farmers can take advantage of the many benefits of organic farming.

This bill provides support for organic and conventional farmers alike by establishing a soil health specialist at the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA). Organic production requires practices that advance sustainability in agriculture like crop rotation, cover cropping, building soil health, increasing biodiversity, and reducing nutrient pollution.

Organic soils have been shown to make farms more resilient to extreme weather and serve as a carbon sinks, sequestering 26% more long-term soil carbon than non-organic farms. Investing in soil health-building practices will help all farmers adapt to a changing climate while also reducing costs from synthetic inputs.

Lastly, you cannot support growth in the organic sector without increasing markets for organic products to be sold. This legislation will help address that by making investments in promoting organically grown in Oregon both locally and internationally. Ensuring that organic products are eligible for purchase in the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) feeding program will not only expand markets but increase access to healthy foods for at-risk communities. Additionally, Oregon is well positioned to take advantage of the growing international demand for organic food. Last year, the U.S exported more than \$650 million in organic and the top destinations were Canada, Mexico and Pacific Rim countries. Hiring an organic specialist within ODA will help coordinate market opportunities and increase the competitiveness of Oregon organic.

In summary, support for organic agriculture in Oregon will increase overall economic growth, improve soil health and environmental outcomes, strengthen local food systems, and promote trade within the United States and internationally.

Thank you for the opportunity to share our support for this important legislation.

Sincerely,

Megan DeBates  
Vice President of Government Affairs  
Organic Trade Association