

Ways & Means Committee
900 Court St. NE
Salem, OR 97301

April 18, 2021

Please Support the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program with \$10 million ARPA investment

Dear Senators Johnson and Steiner-Hayward, and Representative Rayfield:

I am the District Manager of Ft. Rock-Silver Lake Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD) and Lakeview SWCD, serving all of Lake County. I also sit on the board of the Oregon Association of Conservation Districts. I understand that requests have been made to the Ways and Means Committee to allocate \$10 million to the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program. The SWCDs I serve strongly support this request and ask for your support as well.

In my roles as a service provider to agricultural producers and as a rancher myself, I have come to understand the many challenges landowners face in acquiring, stewarding, and passing on their lands to future generations. It is difficult to afford new land on a ranching income alone. In addition, lands currently under good stewardship may be fragmented in the future and their agriculture and natural resource values lost forever. And ranching families are finding it difficult to make the business survive each generation under the burden of attorney fees, estate taxes, and paying non-farming heirs.

The Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program was designed to help address these issues. Its four grant programs include annual payments for implementing a conservation plan, which would incentivize landowners' investments in their natural resources. It also includes funding for working land easements, which are voluntary agreements that a growing number of Lake County landowners are interested in pursuing because of their business AND conservation benefits. Easements allow landowners to sell development and subdivision rights they would not use anyway, and which artificially inflate the land's value above agricultural value. Ranchers and farmers can then use the capital from selling these property rights to help pay for succession or even expand their business and improve its viability. Best of all, working land easements are completely *voluntary and keep the land in production*.

OWEB, which administers the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program, cannot fund it out of their existing lottery dollars, which are only to be used for habitat and water quality and quantity. Therefore, ARPA funds are needed and soon to help this generation of Lake County ranchers retire with ease or expand their businesses while protecting the land for agriculture for future generations.

The program is ready to implement, with rules and a commission that includes producers. Funding that goes to this program could be deployed right away to support agricultural landowners, including our SWCDs' constituents in Lake County.

Thank you for your service, and please support funding for the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program.

Sincerely,

Justin Ferrell
Ft. Rock-Silver Lake Soil SWCD and Lakeview SWCD