



April 17, 2021

Bill Harvey
Commission Chair
bharvey@bakercounty.org

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

Mark Bennett
Commissioner
mbennett@bakercounty.org

Re: Support for \$10 Million for the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program

Dear Co-Chairs Johnson, Steiner-Hayward, and Rayfield, and members of the Committee:

Bruce A. Nichols
Commissioner
bnichols@bakercounty.org

I write to you as a rancher, County Commissioner, and rural community member asking for your support for the funding request of \$10 million to the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program (OAHP). As Oregon faces increasing pressure on its productive agricultural land from low-density development, fragmentation, succession challenges and more, there is an urgent need for voluntary tools to protect the economic and conservation values these lands provide.

OAHP was developed by a diverse coalition of stakeholders to respond to these challenges and support farmers and ranchers in communities throughout Oregon. It includes four grant programs administered by the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB) to fund working lands easements, conservation plans, succession planning assistance, and technical assistance for support organizations. Working lands easements in particular allow landowners to access liquidity from their real estate without having to sell off parcels - which can be very helpful when ranchers need cash for farm succession or expansion. The land then stays in production, supporting agriculture and the surrounding rural economy.

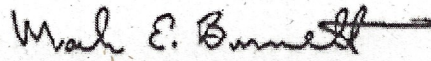
OAHP was passed by the legislature in 2017 with strong bipartisan support and is now "shovel-ready" with finalized rules, grant applications, and a commission. Yet the program currently lacks funding to implement the services and tools it was designed to deliver; OWEB's constitutional funding can only be used for projects that benefit habitat and water quality and quantity *exclusively*, and not for a program like OAHP that *also* supports agricultural values.

A dozen projects that would cost at least \$10 million have already been identified and the demand for the program is increasing. These programs are time-sensitive and opportunities might pass if funding is not available until future years.

These projects would also leverage federal match that Oregon has been leaving on the table. The 26 other states with funded easement match programs have been able to leverage almost 4 times more in federal funds for working land easements than states like Oregon, which has only brought in 0.42% of those funds.

In short, the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program is ready to implement immediately and supports agriculture, rural communities, *and* conservation while leveraging federal funds. I urge you to include \$10 million in funding for this program in your budget.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mark E. Bennett" with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Mark Bennett
Baker County Commissioner