



Malheur County

ONION GROWERS ASSOCIATION

"The Home of Mild Sweet Spanish Onions"
710 S. W. 5th Avenue . . . Ontario, Oregon 97914
Phone (541) 881-1417

February 9, 2021

Senator Lee Beyer
VIA EMAIL

Senator Lynn Findley
VIA EMAIL

Senator Michael Dembrow
VIA EMAIL

Senator Art Robinson
VIA EMAIL

Senator Kathleen Taylor
VIA EMAIL

SUBJECT: Please Support Senate Bill 16

Dear Senator Beyer, Senator Findley, Senator Dembrow, Senator Robinson, & Senator Taylor:

The membership of the Malheur County Onion Growers Association has expressed their interest and support of Senate Bill 16 to allow the Border Region to rezone up to 200 acres of non-viable farmland to residential. The thoughtful and deliberate crafting of the bill will protect and assist farmers by utilizing an irrevocable deed restriction acknowledging the protected rights of farm and rangeland practices in the area. Additionally, the use of a three-year non-production clause and inability to rezone Class I, II, or III lands will further protect the right to farm and our greatest asset – high value farm ground. I would like to reiterate that I – and the members of the Malheur County Onion Growers Association are acutely aware that farm ground is our most valued resource, and we support SB 16.

Sagebrush covered bluffs are commonplace on the edges of local farms. Because of the proximity to farm ground, they are zoned EFU – even though they are likely Class VI or VII lands with no water right. These are ideal for the type of housing development targeted by SB 16. A majority of the higher wage earners working in the Border Region live in neighboring communities across the river in Idaho – citing the limited availability of rural residential housing as their choice of living location. The Border Region, Malheur County, and the State of Oregon is missing out on potential tax payers who would enjoy the opportunity to live here – but are not able to find suitable land for new construction. Opponents would say to build in the Urban Growth Boundary – but not every person wants to live “in town” as we call it.

Multi-generational family farms will benefit when looking to house those coming “back” to the farm by utilizing non-viable lands for residential use. It is of utmost importance to have those working on the farm to be close to the land and our multi-generational farms have enough troubles to deal with including Oregon Estate Taxes, potential for Cap & Trade, and more possible taxes and regulations with each year.

In 2020 alone, five times more homes were built in Payette County, Idaho. Of the new homes built in Payette County, Idaho – more than 30%, or 50 homes were “rural residential”. I invite you to come to

Eastern Oregon; I will gladly tour you around the area and show you the booming economy in Idaho against the unprosperous Oregon side of the Border Region.

Personally, I am a lifelong agriculturalist and resident of the “Border Region” on the edge of Eastern Oregon. I attended school in Nyssa and then at Treasure Valley Community College in Ontario, Oregon. Farming on the border of Oregon and Idaho for nearly 50 years has brought to my attention many disparities – most working against the Oregon farmer. Skeen Farms operates 1,325 acres and each year we are faced with new challenges – many politically charged.

One point I would like to make is the loss of rural living with the expansion of farms. When the original land use regulations were put into place, it was common for a farmer to work and live on 80 acres. As stated above, Skeen Farms is operating 1,325 acres and as we have grown, our farm has absorbed many neighbors as they have sold. Through this process, there have been four homes torn down and turned into farm ground on the land I operate. Some older farm homes are too dilapidated to save, others are in an inconvenient location for normal farming practices, and some were placed in the middle of high-value farm ground and would be more profitable if put into production. The current land use laws do not allow for a “placeholder” or a “transfer” of this home site that is ultimately lost. My research has shown there is not even a record kept of the number of homes torn down to the expansion of farms. My point here is – SB 16 would be an avenue to replace homes – in better locations that will support our rural communities and economy in the Eastern Oregon Border Region.

I'm hoping you will show your support for SB 16.

Thank you for your time and attention to this important matter in our region. Let us attract families and individuals to come to live and work in the Border Region. Two-hundred acres of developable land with a maximum of 100 new homes proposed is not erosive to current land use regulations – it is a creative and carefully crafted solution that takes into account our rural way of life.

Sincerely,

/s/ Paul Skeen

Paul Skeen
President, Malheur County Onion Growers Association
Owner/Operator, Skeen Farms

cc: Senator Lynn Findley
Eastern Oregon Border Economic Development Region Board
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