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February 2, 2022

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildlife Recovery
Attn: Senator Jeff Golden (Chair), Senator Bill Kennemer (Vice-Chair) and Members of the Committee
Oregon State Capitol
Salem, OR

RE: Testimony in Support of SB 1532

Dear Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Kennemer and Members of the Committee:

For over a decade, I've served as Executive Director for Oregon Tilth, a leading nonprofit certifier, educator & advocate for organic agriculture since 1974. The organization's administrative office is located in Corvallis and we work with farmers, processors and distributors across Oregon, the U.S. and Mexico. The organization is accredited by the USDA to offer organic certification services in accordance with the USDA National Organic Program. We certify over 1100 farm operations, with diverse crops, geography and scales of production. We are the largest organic certifier in Oregon.

I believe SB 1532 represents a strategic investment towards building increased resilience and economic opportunity for Oregon's food and agricultural sector. The bill would expand Oregon State University's Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems by hiring five agricultural extension positions focused on organic practices that will assist Oregon farmers and ranchers, and will also fund an economic assessment of Oregon's organic sector.

<u>Urgent action needed in response to climate change</u>
Oregon agriculture is already experiencing the adverse impacts of climate change. Water supplies are increasingly limited, threatening a fundamental resource for the agriculture industry. Wildfires impact farmworkers in the field and can compromise crop quality. The extreme "heat dome" event in June 2021 brought record high temperatures, reducing yields of some specialty crops by as much as 90%. Also predicted is greater pressure from weeds and pests, increased animal diseases, reduced winter chill hours, and an increased number of extreme weather events.

Organic farming and ranching practices have an important role to play in mitigating the effects of and helping adapt to a changing climate. Organic agriculture is proven to sequester more carbon in the soil and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Research shows organic soils already sequester 25% more carbon than soils from

non-organic farms.[1] Organic farms use 50% less new reactive nitrogen, a potent greenhouse gas.[2] Supporting organic is a meaningful way to help mitigate climate change.

Improving soil health by using organic practices such as cover cropping, crop rotation, organic fertilizers, pasture-based livestock management and conservation tillage have many benefits that increase a farm's resilience, including:

- Increased soil fertility
- Reduced soil erosion
- Improved water infiltration (which improves water conservation and limits the impacts of flooding)
- Decreased reliance on fossil fuel-based inputs such as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides (which can also decreases farm input costs)
- Increased habitat for beneficial insects (reducing the need for costly pesticides)

In summary, organic agriculture is part of a toolkit of climate solutions. It can help reduce GHG emissions, enhance soil health to increase carbon sequestration, and provide many additional environmental and human health benefits.

It's also important to note some of the practices used by organic farmers can and have been incorporated on non-organic farms. While they may not implement all the practices necessary to achieve organic certification, non-organic farms can also directly benefit by selective adoption of some organic practices.

To support the benefits of organic practices, Oregon needs increased research and technical assistance:

- More Oregon-specific research is needed on agriculture and climate change issues, specifically focused on the relationship of organic and biologically integrated agricultural practices to soil health, carbon sequestration, GHG emissions reductions, and risk reduction.
- Farmers need additional outreach and technical expertise to put the scientific findings into practice.

<u>Investments in extension positions supports farmers</u>

Oregon Tilth has maintained a formal partnership with Oregon State University (OSU) since 2009. We have invested over $275K in OSU. This unique public-private partnership has helped protect faculty positions in difficult fiscal years by allowing OSU to leverage matched dollars and it has also launched new initiatives, like helping establish a nascent Organic Extension Program at OSU. Working closely with the OSU's Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems, we help inform the research and education agenda to meet the unique needs of organic management systems.

OSU has begun to address priority areas identified for outreach and applied research. For example, organic extension faculty have updated tools for nutrient management using organic inputs, and degree day models for organic pest management. A research program is active with grant-supported projects investigating cover crops, winter vegetable production, and pest management in brassicas. An OSU Organic Agriculture Working Group is catalyzing organic practices across Oregon in multiple disciplines from plant breeding to soil health.

[1] Ghabbour E.A. et al. 2017. Chapter One - National Comparison of the Total and Sequestered Organic Matter Contents of Conventional and Organic Farm Soils. Advances in Agronomy, 146, 1–35

[2] Shade, J., Cattell Noll, L., Seufert, V. et al. Decreasing reactive nitrogen losses in organic agricultural systems. 2020

All farmers can improve soil health, contribute to conservation of natural resources, increase public health and climate solutions by selective adoption of some organic practices. ***Agricultural Extension positions specializing in organic practices can support these goals.***

Organic is good for the economy

U.S. organic sales have grown substantially from $1 billion in 1990, when the federal organic law was signed, to over $55 billion in 2020. U.S. organic food sales continue to grow at a rate more than double the rate of the overall U.S. food market and now account for nearly 6% of all food sales. Organic produce captures 15% of the nation's overall fruit and vegetable market.[3]

Oregon currently ranks 5th nationally in certified organic acreage and 8th in the number of certified farms. Oregon organic commodity sales increased 64% from 2017 to 2019, to $454 million annually. And 30% of Oregon organic farms plan on increasing production over the next five years.[4] With Oregon's ability to produce a wide variety of crops, there is now considerable momentum for Oregon to be a leader in a number of organic crops.[3]

Organic hotspots help drive rural economic development. Hotspots, defined as counties with high levels of organic agricultural activity whose neighboring counties also have a high level of organic activity, boost median household incomes by an average of $2,000, and reduce poverty levels by an average of 1.3 percentage points. Nearly half (47%) of the counties in Oregon are Organic hotspots.[5] SB 1532 includes funding for the Oregon Business Development Department to conduct a comprehensive economic analysis of Oregon's organic sector to inform opportunities for continued growth and development.

I strongly encourage you to support SB 1532 as a strategic opportunity to put Oregon on the map as a state investing in organic management expertise and market analysis to support all farmers with climate adaptation, community resilience and economic opportunities.

Thanks in advance for your consideration.

Kind regards,

Chris Schreiner

Chris Schreiner
Executive Director
Oregon Tilth

[3] The Organic Trade Association. 2020 Organic Industry Survey
[4] USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. 2019 Organic Survey.
[5] Jaenicke, Edward C. 2016. U.S. Organic Hotspots and Their Benefit to Local Economies