



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 1532

Laura Jean

Co-Director, Cultivate Oregon

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

My name is Laura Jean; I am submitting written testimony on behalf of Cultivate Oregon.

I am asking for your support for SB 1532, which would expand the 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 also will fund an economic assessment of Oregon's organic sector.

The extension agents will focus on organic practices that will help *all farmers*, regardless of if they are certified organic or not. Through these positions, OSU will be able to expand the reach of organic practices that are already providing benefits to both organic and conventional farmers, and also increase much-needed applied research. Many of these common practices like cover crops, compost management, crop rotations and efforts to enhance soil health can, when used fittingly, benefit all producers.

Farms of all sizes and types were significantly impacted not only by Covid-19, but also by recent floods, ice storms, fires, smoke and record-setting extreme heat. The heat dome heat wave created "existential threats" to farm viability in many agricultural sectors, like the berry industry.

Technical Assistance in organic practices is sorely needed to help farmers employ methods that allow them to diversify their operations or try new ways to build resilience. For example, organic methods have led to soil with increased water holding capacity—a benefit that is critical during drought.

The organic community has long known the importance of technical assistance as offered by extension agents. The Oregon Global Warming Commission's recent *Natural and Working Lands Proposal* also noted that additional technical assistance for Oregon farmers and ranchers is needed, something this bill directly addresses.

According to OSU's 2021 report *Oregon Agriculture, Food and Fiber: An Economic Analysis*, Oregon's organic industry grew substantially between 2008 and 2019 and while the number of farms decreased, the size of farms increased, with overall organic acreage almost doubling. And even though certified organic farms, as measured by NASS, currently only represent 1.2% of agriculture in Oregon, organic captures 6% of all Oregon

farmgate sales. Between 2016 and 2019, the total value of Oregon's organic agricultural products sold increased nearly 30% to \$454 million. However, Oregon is falling behind other states and is no longer in the top 10 for organic production, ranking 12th, which is why this legislation is critical to reestablishing Oregon's leadership within organic.

In general, 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. Organic farming also creates jobs with greater stability—organic farms hire more people per acre, and those people work for more days of the year. The number of US organic farms grew by 39% in recent years, while the total number of farms in the U.S. shrank by 3%. During that same period, organic farm income nearly doubled while the income of all U.S. farms remained stagnant. Furthermore, the average value of products sold from organic farms is double the average value sold from all U.S. farms. And younger farmers gravitate to organic—the average age of organic farmers is six years younger than that of the national average of all farmers.

And in terms of youth and market trends, market data from the Hartman Group's *Organic and Beyond 2020* report shows that 82% of consumers use organic food and beverages at least monthly—challenging the notion that organic is only for the wealthy—with much higher adoption rates among Gen X, millennials and Gen Z, the market of the future.

A comprehensive economic assessment of Oregon's organic sector will help identify opportunities that highlight the state's competitive advantages and needs for the future, and to help secure additional private investment. Organic agriculture can be used as an effective economic development tool, especially in rural areas—regardless of if farmers choose to certify all of part of their farms.

Thank you,

Laura Jean
Cultivate Oregon