

Date: January 24, 2023

To: House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Water
Representative Ken Helm, Chair
Representative Annessa Hartman, Vice-Chair
Representative Mark Owens, Vice-Chair
Committee Members

From: Susan Watkins & Arnie Hollander
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RE: HB 2527: **Support**

My husband Arnie Hollander and I own 55 acres in Yamhill County. As small landowners who are deeply invested in protecting our natural heritage and native species, we support HB 2527, the Department of Fish and Wildlife's Wildlife Habitat Conservation and Management Program (WHCMP).

(Note: I am a Master Woodland Manager trained by forestry experts from Oregon State University; I served two terms on the board of Forestry's Committee for Family Forestlands, including a year as Acting Chair, and I am a member of the Board of the Yamhill County Small Woodlands Association.)

Photo #1 was taken just in 1992 after we purchased our property.

We acquired our 55-acre property, located just outside McMinnville in Yamhill County, in 1992 after the previous owner had cut and chipped 90% of the white oak woodland that had covered it for well over a century.

Photo #2 shows young Christmas trees in the meadow across from our house in 2005.

Like many landowners, we were looking for an income stream when we purchased the property. We planted 16,000 Christmas trees on 14 acres and 10,000 Douglas-fir forest trees on the 45 hillside acres that had been stripped of their native oak. To help make our Christmas tree and timber operations viable, we obtained an agricultural deferral on the Christmas tree acres and a forest deferral on the forested acres. These deferrals reduced our annual tax bill while assuring Yamhill County that we would properly maintain our forest and Christmas trees.

By the time the Great Recession ended our Christmas tree business, we had visited oak preservation projects in our area, and we decided to convert five of the 14 acres into fir forest and nine acres into oak savannah and woodlands. This meant loss of the deferral on those nine acres -- almost 20% of our land.

Photo #3 is illustrative of the work we did to protect the oak in the woodland areas, removing competing fir, cherry, and maple, as well as a carpet of non-native grasses and weeds..

We began this conversion five years ago with technical help from our Yamhill County Soil and Water Conservation District and federal cost-share funds. To recreate native oak habitat, we had to remove these non-natives and buy and sow large quantities of seed for native grasses, forbs, and wildflowers. This "preparatory" work typically takes two years, to ensure that most weeds are removed. Follow-up maintenance goes on forever.

Photo #4 shows the meadow across from our house as it looked last spring.

Restoring oak woodland to conditions that existed in the Willamette Valley for centuries has been both environmentally and culturally rewarding. Development and conversion to row crops, orchards, vineyards, and, yes, to fir forests have reduced iconic Oregon white oak woodlands and savannahs to less than 10% of their extensive historical range. Without more efforts like ours, the Valley stands to lose its connections to its ecological and tribal cultural past.

But developing habitat like this is not a "one and done" project. We continue to incur costs each year -- hiring contractors to mow or remove competing vegetation, purchasing seed and equipment, sowing and weeding.

Our work benefits us, of course. We enjoy the presence of a diverse array of wildlife. But there is also a public benefit to restoring these lands for which we receive no economic recognition. The Wildlife Habitat Program recognizes that benefit in the same way that agricultural and forest deferrals recognize the benefits to the community that trees and crops provide.

Yamhill County rejoined the Wildlife Habitat Program in 2020, and we have already submitted our paper work. A viable Program will help offset the cost of maintaining the habitat we have worked so hard to recreate and, equally important, would provide an incentive for other landowners to join us in supporting this unique Oregon habitat.

We urge you to approve HB 2527. Thank you.