

Submitter: Garth Mulkey

On Behalf Of:

Committee: Senate Committee On Natural Resources

Measure: SB789

As a third-generation family farmer in the Willamette Valley, my family and I work hard — for our business and for the community. We are fortunate to farm in the Willamette Valley because the unique climate here is so well suited to vegetable seed production.

Over the years many companies from around the world have sourced their vegetable seeds from this valley. This has helped grow our vegetable seed business and led to large investments by local farms and businesses, including ours, to properly serve this valuable market.

On our farm we grow grass seed for turf and forage, and radish and legume crops for seed that we sell into the cover crop market. The highest value crops that we grow have been the vegetable seed crops. Cabbage, mustard, spinach, and chard are consistently our most profitable crops. The seeds from these crops go to farmers around the world.

We build our business based on future projections, like all businesspeople. A big reason we farm the way we do is because we count on our high-value specialty seeds being protected from contamination from a low-value oilseed crop, rapeseed/canola. Rapeseed/canola can contaminate neighboring brassica seed fields, bringing in new pests and the possibility of genetic contamination to our valuable cabbage and mustard seed crops.

The Willamette Valley Protected District has helped farmers cooperate to protect seed crops and ensure that rapeseed/canola is grown in places where it will not contaminate neighboring fields.

Unfortunately, a small group of farmers, some of them friends, have been pushing to end this long-standing collaborative system.

But here's the rub: we and many other farmers have made major investments based on this collaborative system. We have invested in things like a 120-acre-foot reservoir that we built in 2010 to store and supply irrigation water for our crops.

As we built the reservoir, we also made big investments in irrigation equipment to use the newly stored water on our fields. The increase in water availability has allowed us to increase our vegetable seed acres by 400% over what we previously could grow.

This increase in acres has also required the need to fund a larger investment into production equipment to insure the timely planting, cultivation, and harvest of these crops.

So, we are deeply committed to keeping this collaborative system working, despite the efforts of a few canola farmers. The unfortunate reality is that rapeseed/canola is a threat to our investments, our crops, and to our valley's vibrant seed production industry. The Protected District ensures a fair balance of crops, and farmers' needs, that can be grown in our area.

Today, we have a chance to ensure that fair balance is enshrined in state law. A new bill, SB789, would make existing protections permanent. We can and should move past this divisive conflict and back into a collaborative system where canola is grown where it makes sense, and specialty seed farmers and producers can keep building this unique, and tremendously valuable, part of the farm economy.