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Testimony to the Ways & Means Committee Joint Subcommittee on Natural Resources In Support of Funding for the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program POP 215 and 115

Thursday, April 13, 2023

Co-Chairs Sen. Dembrow and Rep. Pham and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of funding for the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program (OAHP). For the record, my name is Nellie McAdams, Executive Director of the Oregon Agricultural Trust¹ (OAT) - a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that partners with farmers and ranchers to protect and pass on their lands to future generations.

My specific ask is that the committee reinsert POP 215 (\$10M in grant funding) and POP 115 (\$800,000 in administrative costs) for OAHP into OWEB's budget. The funding had been requested as part of OWEB's ARB, but was not included in the Governor's budget. The need for this funding is urgent, and it has been proven to leverage critical federal funding.

This program was developed 7 years ago by agricultural and conservation organizations that shared a common purpose of providing mutual benefits for rural economies and entrepreneurs, food systems, habitat, and water quality and quantity. To achieve their goal, these diverse stakeholders designed a suite of four voluntary grant programs under one umbrella - OAHP:

1. **Working land conservation easements & covenants:** voluntary agreements between landowners and land trusts or bodies of government to remove development rights that interfere with agriculture (easements are permanent, covenants last 20-50 years).
2. **Conservation management plans:** OAHP can pay not only to develop a plan itself, but also to implement a plan over 20-50 years.
3. **Succession planning:** Training to help landowners take the next step in transferring their property to future generations, whether or not they are related to the landowner. This is especially urgent, since the average age of farmer and rancher is 60 and 81% do not have succession plans. Unplanned estates are more likely to be fragmented, sold for development, destroyed for farming and associated habitat, and/or become more difficult for the next generation of increasingly diverse farmers and ranchers to access.
4. **Technical assistance:** landowners cannot apply directly to the above programs, so organizations must conduct outreach and build capacity to apply for and administer the grant projects. Technical assistance helps them cover those expenses.

¹ While our names are similar, Oregon Agricultural **Trust** is a nonprofit and is distinct from Oregon Agricultural **Heritage Program**, which is the state grant program that would be funded by HB 3366.



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OAHP was created by the legislature in 2017 with bipartisan support, but only received administrative funding to build a diverse and skilled Commission and to develop rules. OAHP's grant programs were funded for the first time in last year's short legislative session at \$5 million for use in the remaining 1 year of the biennium. This \$5 million investment almost immediately helped the state leverage an additional \$6 million in federal match for easement projects.

The agency that administers OAHP, the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board (OWEB), got right to work hiring expert staff and launching applications for the first two grant programs. The program received 7 applications for the easement program and 2 applications for the conservation management plan program; application totals exceeded available funds. The commission will make their recommendations on the grant applications this Thursday, and OWEB's Board will make their final decision in late April.

The projects that were submitted cover the state, from Curry Co. to Columbia Co. to Lake Co. and in between. Many farmer and rancher applicants have already made significant personal investments in restoring habitat on their properties - both because of the landowner's dedication to conservation and because conserving water and soil benefits both agriculture and habitat. Some easements would help continue a multigenerational tradition, and some easements would help first generation or young farmers and ranchers pay off a mortgage or purchase land.

Our nonprofit, Oregon Agricultural Trust, and our peer land trusts have been waiting for years for such a program to be up and running. Landowner demand has built over the years, as landowners have looked over the fence to Washington and California, which have state easement programs that reward landowners for protecting their land and keeping it in production. With OAHP, Oregon has now joined the ranks of 28 other states with working land protection programs, and land trusts like OAT are ready to partner with these producers and land stewards to meet their conservation and business goals.

We respectfully ask that the Committee support funding for OAHP by reinserting POPs 215 and 115 into OWEB's Budget for the sake of Oregon's #2nd largest economic sector, our rural communities, and our natural resources.

Thank you,

Nellie McAdams
Executive Director
Oregon Agricultural Trust