

Dear Co-Chair Helm, Co-Chair Owens and members of the House Committee on Agriculture, Land Use, Natural Resources, and Wildfire:

My name is Valerie Nguyen and I am a cofounder of Westfir Oakridge Local Food and the Oakridge Community Farmers Market. **I am writing to strongly support HB 2979, and urge continued investment in Oregon's farmers markets, which serve as critical infrastructure for local economies, small farms, and food access programs.**

The support of the Oregon Farmer's Market Association (OFMA) and Farmer's Market Fund (FMF) has been, and continues to be, foundational to the positive potential of our farmers markets. We mutually recognize that the success of this work is rooted in advocating for food system equity: advocating for the just livelihoods of small diversified farmers and empowering communities with tools to bridge the access gap to fresh locally-produced food.

Three years ago, our organization launched a farmers market in a small rural community of about 4,000 residents. Despite being surrounded by wild rivers and expansive forests, the area has long been described as a food desert. Residents, many of whom are low income families and seniors, are challenged to drive eighty miles round-trip to Eugene for affordable, fresher produce. Despite the clear need for better fresh produce access, there was a lot of skepticism that our area could viably sustain a farmers market.

The nucleus of our market was this challenge: How could we both keep food prices affordable for our community, while also honoring the skilled labor of local farmers to empower them to continue cultivating their diversified relationships with regionally adapted seeds and soil (both art and science)?

From day one, OFMA has been there to help support our priority of opening up healthy food access for everyone. FMF's "Growth Grant" gave our staff the tools and training to successfully run nutrition assistance programs for our community such as SNAP, Double Up Food Bucks, WIC-Senior Farmers Market Direct Program, the Kid's Little Lettuce program. 37% of Oakridge residents are under the poverty line (more than double the rate in Oregon) and the childhood poverty rate at a severe 67%. Here, asthma, heart disease, and cancer all at or above the 95th percentile (ORH 2023, EPA 2024). At our farmers market, these health assistance programs benefit make up nearly a third of a farmer's total income.

Farmers markets have the power to grow local economies. In the last two years, our market has recirculated over \$120,000 back into nurturing small farms, soil health, community health. The market has shown an incredible ability to provide sustaining income essential to emerging farmers in their startup years, effectively recirculating around \$2,000 per week in fresh vegetables and baked goods sales back towards the local economy within the short span of a couple hours.

This year, our community was selected to receive a \$42,000 Disaster Resilience Grant from OFMA. This incredible grant gives us precious strength and stability to sustain operations

through winter storm conditions and wildfire smoke season that affects all those who live, work, and farm in rural forested areas. For the last three summers, Oakridge has been severely impacted by extended periods of hazardous smoke from megafires in our region. Our area has historically been ranked among the top 20 communities in the US with the worst air quality, as the steep hilly topography makes the area prone to atmospheric inversions and traps wildfire smoke.

Winter storms directly impacts food access in our rural area. The 80 mile drive to the city of Eugene, with its more affordable and diverse food options, becomes even more challenging in dangerous road conditions prone to landslide and unexpected closures. Travelling the distance, especially in wintery conditions, is unsafe for community members, many of whom are low-income, without reliable transportation and/or elderly. The one grocery store in the area is expensive and often goes for extended time without restocking fresh staples. In the winter, many locals rely on the farmers market for fresh produce.

This grant helps us reassure farmers that any fruits and veggies remaining after market will be purchased at a fair cost (70% market value) for our local food bank 2 miles away, which chronically struggles with sourcing fresh produce and seasonally operates as an emergency relief site for wildfire evacuees. This initiative has been a tremendous positive contribution to local food security, both for farmers and for residents experiencing food insecurity. For farmers, the program removes a huge element of climate-connected farmers market market volatility, reassures them that their produce will not go to waste but nourish health, and profoundly soothes their trepidations towards selling in a low-income area especially during challenging climate conditions when turnout is a lot more uncertain. For food insecure residents, they deeply appreciate the diversity and quality of the veggies, herbs and fruits: as the community is rural, the produce that arrives from the central Food Bank distribution center down in the Eugene valley can too often be 'bottom of the barrel'.

In times of extended heavy smoke, the continuity of holding regular market helps tremendously with uplifting community morale. When air quality is hazardous, the market can take refuge indoors with air purifiers so that we can breathe easy.

The grant also catalyzes a collaboration with Lane County Bounty (LCB), a farmer-directed locally-grown produce delivery service and food hub functioning as an online farmers market platform for the greater Lane County area, bolster reliable food access across challenging weather. The Oakridge Farmers Market received funding to integrate LCB's preorder system into our climate resilience response plan by subsidizing their transportation cost to Oakridge to support continued food access during the weeks where the area is most susceptible to wildfire smoke and winter storm hazards. This will reduce pressure on farms in the immediate area affected by smoke and storm, allowing a continued diversity of produce from a greater variety of farms located in less impacted areas. To further relieve pressure on our primary in-person farmers during emergency events, LCB is able to pick up and purchase any seasonally abundant produce to make available to the larger Eugene market if it is helpful to support their

continued income stream. For elderly and folks of sensitive health who are more vulnerable to smoke, the market can coordinate neighborly doorstep dropoff.

The grant increases the market's staffing capacity, supporting continuity and health of our dedicated organizational team.

We hope that the stabilizing effect of the funded work attracts more vendors to our market in the fair-weather season We hope that, after the first year of deploying the help of Lane County Bounty during more challenging periods, many more folks will become familiar with their services and their transportation will no longer need to be subsidized. We hope that local small farms along LCB's new rural route will take advantage of the opportunity to access the larger Eugene market, strengthening our local food system to the benefit of all.

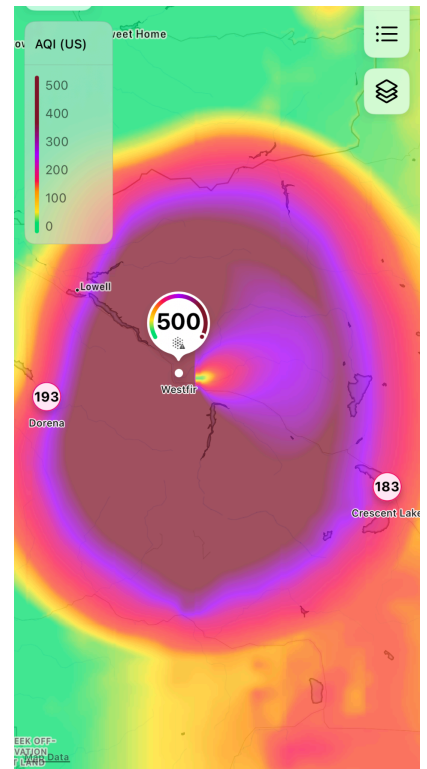
The capable leadership at OFMA and FMF can leverage state funds to match federal funding, strengthening our farmers markets and local food systems that insulate our communities from the fluctuations of the centralized food supply chain. We cannot afford to fall behind. Please support HB 2979 to keep our markets strong, our farmers supported, and our communities fed.

Thank you,

Valerie Nguyen

Westfir Oakridge Local Food / Westfir Oakridge Community Farmers Market

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**Through rain, sun and smoke**

