



## **Testimony in Support of SB 747**

### **Senate committee on Natural Resource and Wildfire February 4, 2025**

Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Nash, and members of the Senate committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire,

My name is Kaleb Lay. I'm director of policy & research with Oregon Rural Action and I live in Union County. I'm here today to express adamant support for SB 747 and for finally getting the facts about how fertilizer is used in Oregon.

Oregon Rural Action is a small grassroots, community-led nonprofit community organizing group working to promote the wellbeing of our communities and environment in rural eastern Oregon. For years, ORA has worked extensively in the Lower Umatilla Basin with community members impacted by nitrate contamination in groundwater and pollution of their drinking water. Together, we've worked to protect people from the immediate health harms of nitrate, address sources of pollution, and secure permanent, sustainable sources of safe drinking water for all of our affected neighbors.

Pollution from overuse of fertilizer is not a hypothetical problem in our state. It has long been known as the leading cause of groundwater contamination in the Lower Umatilla Basin, accounting for an estimated 69.4% of nitrate polluting the region's drinking water according to the most recent DEQ analysis. The drinking water in hundreds of homes has been contaminated with unsafe levels of nitrate, affecting thousands of predominantly working-class, low-income, and non-english speaking people. Most learned only recently of the contamination after unknowingly drinking water for years or even decades, and many continue to self-disclose serious health problems that are associated with nitrate – gastrointestinal cancers, thyroid issues, miscarriages, and more. And though the pace of testing remains grindingly slow, more families learn with each passing month that their drinking water was polluted by the very feedlots, factories, and farms where they work.

Agricultural runoff to surface waters also fuels harmful algae blooms (HABs) in our rivers and streams, which have been both a nuisance and health hazard to people, wildlife, and livestock across the state in recent years. Runoff of fertilizer can also lead to dead zones in estuaries and coastal waters, which can devastate ecosystems and the industries that rely on them like fishing and tourism. Runoff and contamination of surface waters can also threaten sensitive and

culturally important aquatic species like salmon and steelhead smolt, which serve as keystone species critical to the health of ecosystems across the state.

Fertilizer use also contributes significantly to climate change and the climate crisis, which threatens our entire way of life. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that some 75% of nitrous oxide emissions in the United States are caused by agricultural soil management activities, driven by the application of fertilizer to farmland. Nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) is an extremely potent greenhouse gas – some 298 times more potent than CO<sub>2</sub> – and is widely considered to be one of the “big three” greenhouse gasses fueling climate change, along with carbon dioxide and methane. Fertilizer production is also extremely greenhouse gas intensive, with many fertilizer feedstocks derived from fossil fuels.

These are all real problems that affect Oregonians across our state every single day.

Inaction on this problem is costing people their health, their futures, and in some cases their lives. Decisions about how we, as a state, address pollution from fertilizer are unavoidable. The purpose of this bill is – very simply – to allow those decisions to be informed and made well.

Unlike what some have claimed, this is not a bill that tells farmers how to farm. This bill would not regulate or limit fertilizer use, nor would it require anyone in Oregon to change how they farm.

This is a bill that gathers data. The data gathered are fundamental to the Department of Agriculture’s mission of supporting farmers, supporting food production in Oregon, and ensuring that the laws of our state are being followed. It is a bill that establishes a basic, foundational understanding of how fertilizer is being used by the farms we all rely on. It is a bill that manages to exempt 90% of Oregon’s farms, while still managing to get data on almost 80% of irrigated land in the state.

This is a good bill, and I urge your full support for SB 747. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kaleb Lay  
*Director of Policy and Research, Oregon Rural Action*