

February 20, 2025

Senate Committee on Early Childhood and Behavioral Health

Support SB 779: Maintain the AgriStress Helpline for Oregon into Perpetuity

In 2023 it was shared with members of the Legislature, that in the United States, suicide rates among farmers, ranchers and other agricultural managers are almost 58% greater than any other occupation. Particularly rural men over the age of 49, loggers, commercial fishers, farmers and ranchers. Key factors contributing to preventable deaths include financial losses, chronic illness, work-life imbalance, societal stigmas and the physical and social barriers to access mental health services. Additionally, suicide rates in Oregon are higher than the national average.

In 2023, the Legislature passed a bill to allocate \$300,000 from the general fund to support implementing the AgriStress Helpline, a free and confidential crisis/support line available 24/7, with interpretation services provided in 180 languages. The AgriStress Hotline specialists have supplemental training to understand the culture, values, stressors, and lived experiences of agriculture workers.

Now, the Legislature has the opportunity to pass SB 779 to Maintain the AgriStress Helpline for Oregon into perpetuity. SB 779 offers one-time funds of \$2M to the Rural Mental Health Fund Endowment at the Oregon State University Foundation, to support continued operations. The Endowment generates 4% interest annually. Together with Endowment interest, Oregon State University Extension Service, College of Health, and College of Agricultural Sciences, Eastern Oregon Coordinated Care Organization, Roundhouse Foundation, AgWest, AWS and many individuals and families have contributed financially to support the Helpline since its' launch on September 1, 2023.

The passage of SB 779 would make the Helpline available in perpetuity for the ag/natural resource community until such point in time when it is no longer necessary. The requested \$2M investment in the Endowment will generate interest to pay the \$68,000 annual phone bill and to spread awareness of the service.

Impact of Helpline to Date

The Helpline has been open for 15 months. Since its inception, 51 calls or texts from people in 25 unique Oregon counties (70%) have been received. It is understood that for each person who dies by suicide, up to 130 others are negatively affected: Any number of calls is a good number of calls.

The agricultural/natural resource organizations listed below support and urge passage of SB 779. It is unfortunate that food/fiber producers experience high degrees of stress, however this Helpline provides a place for them to engage when they need a neutral professional to listen.

Contacts at Oregon State University Extension: **For more information, contact the AgriStress team: Kaycee.Headley@oregonstate.edu or Allison.Myers@oregonstate.edu**

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