

My name is Julie Stuben, a 3rd generation orchardist in the Hood River Valley where my husband and I farm approximately 50 acres of pears. When my grandfather started the family orchard back in the 1950's, he dug the holes to plant the pear trees by hand, he wanted to farm so badly. He and my grandmother scraped by for years, planting strawberries and asparagus between the tree rows to try to earn enough income to avoid bankruptcy from farming. My parents took over orchard operations in the late 1970's, despite having advanced academic degrees and careers that could have taken them down more lucrative financial paths. They had a desire to carry the family legacy of farming my grandparents built and continue nurturing the land while they raised their family. I remember our family struggling through a lot of economic hardship growing up-- crop disasters, cannery failures, mounting debt and poor returns. But still my parents cared for the trees and cared for their employees. And while I never intended to return to my hometown to become an orchardist because I knew first-hand how physically, emotionally and financially challenging it would be, it felt like the right thing to do to protect my family's farming legacy and preserve the beautiful land.

Why is the history important? Because it demonstrates that despite the poor economics of family farming, there is an inherent desire to honor the sacrifices made by the generations before us to care for the land and continue persevering through challenging times. I'm not just a faceless corporate officer managing from an office, but I'm working in the orchard daily along with my husband in adverse weather conditions to make sure every job gets done. We are at the mercy of seasonal employees to come back to our orchard year after year to help us during manual-intensive times of pruning, thinning and harvesting pears. We do not have housing to offer as an incentive for employees, instead presenting above-average wages and bonuses to compensate those that work for us. Being financially competitive and treating all our employees with fairness and respect has meant we have employees that continually come back to help us, including multiple generations from the same families. We are beyond grateful for the hard work and dedication from our employees, knowing that we could not continue to farm without their help.

We are very concerned about the impact of HB 2548 on both our farm and our employees because it threatens our ability to keep farming. Oregon already has some of the highest labor costs in the country, and after many tough years, we can't afford more unnecessary regulations and uncontrollable wage increases. An unelected governing body should not be able to have more authority over our business operations and decisions than we do. The proposal not only takes away an individual farmer's ability to set their wage rates, but also eliminates at-will employment for agriculture. This is an unfair bill that will make farming harder and more expensive, ultimately resulting in job losses and the elimination of small family farms.

I urge you to vote no on HB 2548 to protect our farms.