

HDFFA Support for HB 2979

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

My name is Sharon Maier-Kennelly and I am the Executive Director of High Desert Food & Farm Alliance (HDFFA), a 501 c-3 nonprofit serving small- to mid-sized farmers and ranchers in Central Oregon. I am writing today to strongly support HB 2979 and tell you how crucial it is to continue investing in the local food system by supporting the small farms and ranches that feed our community and the outlets that they depend on. The Oregon Community Food Systems Network especially is a crucial part of ensuring the Oregon food system is collaborative, connected, resilient, and responsive to the changing needs of farmers and food businesses across the state.

Central Oregon has one food hub and nine farmers markets, five of which are in rural and/or underserved areas. These centers, which are major outlets for community members to access fresh, local produce and proteins during our short growing season, also utilize nutrition assistance programs for people who might not otherwise have access to this food. In addition, HDFFA hosts a variety of food access programs that rely on these assistance programs to meet the needs of our community members. We must make sure that these vital small businesses have the ability to sell their products at fair market value and withstand natural disasters, the ongoing drought in our region, smoke, and unpredictable weather that has been increasing in recent years.

In 2024, the Farmer Rancher Disaster Resilience grant program funded 13 businesses in Central Oregon with necessary improvements to their operations, from irrigation to season extension infrastructure. Accessible funding for these kinds of projects is limited, especially for farmers in rural areas with already thin margins and limited ability to invest, and for capital programs of this size. We have a very short growing season, with irrigable water provided to growers between April–October, the potential for frost at any time, and increasing challenges with smoke and extreme heat for both work in the field and selling at markets. Grant funds through the ongoing operation of this program would go toward more resilient agricultural practices, season extension, and increased production to feed our community.

Recently, our main regional food hub downscaled its operations to individual consumer sales, leaving gaps for buyers wanting to access locally produced food. This is despite the increasing interest and demand from incoming chefs, visitors interested in the “local food scene,” and growth from farmers. It is vital to continue to support this business, or else we risk losing an extremely important hub, distributor, and resource for both buyers and producers.

HDFFA's mission is to support a healthy and thriving food and farm network throughout Central Oregon. We believe everyone deserves good food and at the heart of that belief is the availability of good food. This is only possible if we provide the best possible support to Central Oregon's farmers and ranchers, who can survive, maintain, and grow their businesses in our region.

It is time for Oregon to renew its commitment to our small farms and local food system. They keep our communities fed and insulated from the fluctuations of the centralized food supply chain. They are a vital part of our collective wellbeing, environmental stewardship, and the future of food. Please support HB 2979.

Thank you,

Sharon Maier-Kennelly

Executive Director, High Desert Food and Farm Alliance

Bend, Oregon