

Submitter: Erin Maher
On Behalf Of: Agricultural Connections
Committee: Joint Committee On Ways and Means
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB5006

Members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means:

My name is Erin Maher and I am a own and operate a food hub serving Central Oregon. I am writing today to support HB 2979. Continuing to invest in local food systems is absolutely critical, and has an outsized impact on small farms, ranches, local food purveyors like farmers markets and hubs, and Oregon residents. These community institutions not only bring economic opportunity into rural Oregon, they connect urban and rural areas through agricultural marketplaces, provide access to local food, and tap into nutrition assistance programs that spread these fresh Oregon grown fruits, vegetables, and meats to people who might not otherwise be able to get them. We need to make sure that these vital small businesses can withstand the natural disasters, worsening storms, and unpredictable weather that has been increasing in recent years.

As a small business owner, this impacts me and my business, as well as our partner farmers, ranchers, fishers, and fellow hubs directly. Local food systems work, including storage, aggregation, and delivery of local produce and meat, expands the reach and capacity of our local producers. By providing additional storage of crops during peak season, we allow farmers to produce to capacity while avoiding waste and feeding more people. By taking on delivery in a wider region, we allow farmers to spend more time farming, and crucially more time to protect their crops from extreme weather or try innovative new methods for handling changing weather and increased demand. By working with nearby regions and their own hubs and producers, we boost farmer and rancher sales while expanding their reach, and expand access to Oregon produce, meat, and fish year-round across the state.

Infrastructure is key to all of these services. With a goal to pay fair prices to farmers while keeping local food accessible for as many people as possible, the margins of food systems work are slim, and investment can have a huge impact.

We received funding for a refrigerated vehicle, which we would not have otherwise been able to purchase. Adding this vehicle to our small fleet allowed us to make deliveries to a wider geographical area, including rural areas without much existing local food access (no or very limited farmers markets) a regular part of our route. We have seen increased demand in these regions, while farmers have struggled to reach these customers as they are already stretched thin, and we're happy to be able to be a bridge to those customers. Delivery has been especially important as all customers - but especially those who live in more rural areas, are aging, and/or have health concerns - have looked for ways to access local food during extreme weather events that might make attending markets, visiting farms, or driving longer distances more challenging.

The vehicle also allowed us to offer services, including delivery and transportation, to additional farm and small food businesses to make it easier for small food businesses to use local meat and produce in their products, and to do more work across regional markets.

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,

Erin Bellomy Maher

Agricultural Connections

Bend, OR