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February 9, 2021

Senator Lee Beyer

VIA EMAIL:

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Senator Michael Dembrow

VIA EMAIL:

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Senator Kathleen Taylor

VIA EMAIL:

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Senator Lynn Findley

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Senator Art Robinson

VIA EMAIL:

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SUBJECT: Letter Supporting SB 16

Dear Senator Beyer, Senator Findley, Senator Dembrow, Senator Robinson, and Senator Taylor:

I am writing to share my SUPPORT FOR SB 16.

Thank you for taking the time to meet today as the Senate Committee on Energy & Environment. I am a fourth-generation Oregon agriculturalist and a member of Farm Bureau. Growing up on a farm and ranch in Willowcreek, Oregon – which is a part of the “Border Region”, I am acutely aware of the need to protect Oregon’s viable high-value farmland. I hope you leave here today with a better picture of what agriculture looks like in Malheur County and the Border Region – because it is vastly different from agriculture on the western side of the state. If not for COVID-19, I would invite you to come tour the region with me and learn of our region’s unique situation.

My career depends on high-value farmland, as I am the Assistant General Manager of Snake River Produce Co., LLC and sell onions for a living. My husband is an Agricultural Educator and FFA Advisor, we live on and farm over 130 acres located in the Border Region. My father still lives and works on the farm where he – and I grew up in Willowcreek and the situation is the same for my father-in-law.

To be viable – farm ground must meet certain criteria with regard to soil quality and land, accessibility, etc. Our area is unique from the rest of Oregon as we are extremely dependent upon irrigation, since on average only 10 inches of precipitation falls each year – and most of that falls

during the winter / non-growing months whereas the Willamette Valley, for example, receives between 35-45 inches annually. For that reason, water from snow melt and spring rains is saved in reservoirs and distributed to farmland via various local irrigation districts based upon water rights owned by individuals tied to specific ground during the spring and summer growing season.

Even if ground is zoned “exclusive farm use” – it may not be considered high-value farmland, or even viable for growing crops – for a variety of reasons, but one may be the lack of water right tied to said land. There are a finite number of water rights available and the only way to obtain new is if others are released. Other land may not be suitable for farming because of the type of soil – we have many sandy bluffs that have a difficult time growing sagebrush – let alone a good crop for harvest.

As you can see in Senate Bill 16, we have been very sensitive to the fact that Oregon has thoughtfully crafted rules and legislation to protect farmland. Only lands that have met the criteria in the Bill would be eligible for rezoning, and I would like to point out the lands must not have been employed for farm use in the three prior years – and – the land must not be considered high-value farmland as defined in ORS 195.300. High-value farmland is land in a tract composed predominantly of soils that, at the time are (a) irrigated and classified prime, unique, Class I, or Class II – OR – (b) not irrigated and classified prime, unique, Class I, or Class II. To clarify – Class I lands contain soils having few limitations for cultivation and Class II contains soils having some limitations for cultivation. In Malheur County and the Border Region specifically – there are many areas zoned for exclusive farm use that fall into land classes such as VI or VII which are unsuited to cultivation. My home, for example is built on EFU land zoned as a Class VII – we struggle to grow a decent lawn, even with proper management and soil corrections.

In Malheur County, and the Border Region, specifically, the for-sale home inventory and building site inventory is extremely limited when compared to our competition across the Snake River – Idaho. A quick Zillow search reveals 48 homes and 20 “lots” ranging from six acres with a partially built shop to 350 acres with a feedlot currently available in the Border Region. We are not asking to “be like Idaho” – we are asking for a thoughtfully fashioned fix that is specific to our Border Region. I understand it is easy to think this will be a “slippery slope”, but our Eastern Oregon Border Economic Development Board has been tasked with making the Border Region more competitive with Idaho – and this is a step in the right direction. Malheur County and the Border Region are unique, and we must adapt to survive.

The majority of high-wage earners working in the Border Region live across the border in Idaho – many cite the lack of housing. These individuals would be contributing members to our civic groups, volunteers at our school functions, taxpayers on their home and land. Rather, they take the wages they earn in Oregon to Idaho. One specific example is the vast number of employees of Oregon’s largest prison, Snake River Correctional Institute – which is located in the Border Region. Over 75% employed by SRCI live in Idaho – which equates to approximately 675 high wage-earners choosing to live in Idaho versus the Border Region. Referencing my earlier mentioned numbers from Zillow, 48 homes and 20 lots available in the Border Region, there is clearly a disconnect. Communities a few miles away are prosperous, while we lose out on taxpayers and community supporters because of limited inventory of homes and building sites.

This topic of land use has been the number one issue farmers and ranchers have brought up to me as a member, and Chair on the Eastern Oregon Border Economic Development Board – the agriculturalists in the Border Region absolutely do not want to give up their high-value viable farmland, they want to rezone – as an example - sagebrush riddled ridgelines so we can attract individuals and families to live and work in Malheur County – folks who want a two-acre parcel with a little privacy and room for a 4-H or FFA Project to thrive. Opponents may point out that these up to 100 homes are “not related to farming”, but who is to say whether they are related to farming or not? Landowners will not be required to apply to participate in the 200 acres allotted through SB 16, if they do not want to pursue this opportunity, there is no one forcing them to do so. Many landowners I have spoken with actually would like to participate in the program to create areas for their children and grandchildren to come “home to the farm” – which would certainly be related to farming.

To say that SB 16 aims to break down the land use system, is false. To argue this will take farmland out of production, is incorrect. This bill does not allow for the rezoning of viable, high-value farmland, as opponents of the bill will argue. I urge you to support Senate Bill 16 and trust that the agriculturalists in the Border Region are fully aware their most precious resource is high-value farmland.

Sincerely,



Tiffany Cruickshank

cc: Representative Mark Owens