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March 6, 2025

Senate Committee on Natural Resources & Wildfire
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE
Salem, Oregon 97301

Re: SB 788 – Oppose

Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Nash, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 788. Central Oregon LandWatch (“LandWatch”) is a land use and conservation advocacy organization that, for more than 35 years, has protected Central Oregon’s farm and forest lands, rivers and springs, fish and wildlife, and vibrant communities. We work to conserve the region’s ecosystems, wildlife habitat, and working rural lands balanced with a responsible, sustainable approach to planning and fostering thriving communities.

LandWatch opposes SB 788, which would add “wedding or event venue” to the list of outright allowed uses on land zoned for Exclusive Farm Use east of the Cascades and in counties with a population of fewer than 90,000.

Oregon continues to lose farmland every year and would-be new farmers face huge barriers to success.¹ Chief among the reasons for farmland loss is real estate speculation. When farmland is allowed to be used for nonfarm uses, such as weddings and other commercial events, the cost of the land is artificially increased. Suddenly, the value of farmland inflates when the market perceives that nonfarm, commercial uses may be readily established. Existing farms face conflicts, cannot afford to expand, and new farmers cannot access land. Meanwhile, Oregon law provides that the intent of Exclusive Farm Use zoning is to “substantially limit alternatives to the use of rural land” because “the preservation of the maximum amount of the limited supply of agricultural land is necessary to the conservation of the state’s economic resources.” ORS 215.243. Adding “wedding or event venues” to the list of outright allowed uses in EFU zones would not support farmers or preserve farmland. Instead, it would allow farm properties to be used exclusively for commercial events, without any requirement that the events support a farm operation.

Oregon law already allows commercial events and activities on rural lands, particularly as agritourism activities permitted under ORS 215.283(4)-(6). Agritourism permits allow up to 18 tourism events per year on farmland, with varying criteria depending on how many events are

¹ See 2022-2023 DLCD Farm & Forest Report,
https://www.oregon.gov/lcd/FF/Documents/Farm_Forest_Report_2022_2023.pdf



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sought. In all cases, agritourism activities must be incidental and subordinate to the farm use of the property. This is a commonsense policy that ensures that weddings or other commercial events do not subsume farm use of land zoned for Exclusive Farm Use.

Commercial events, and especially weddings, are incompatible with the realities of commercial farming. Farm operations produce noise, dust, heavy vehicle use, pesticide and herbicide application, and odors. Siting commercial uses like event venues inside urban growth boundaries, far away from farm life, buffers events from these realities of farm operations. It also buffers farmers, whose work often starts with the morning sun, from disruptive events.

The already-excessive list of nonfarm uses permitted on farmland in Oregon does not need another. When EFU zones were created, they allowed six land uses. After 50 years, that list has expanded to more than 60. Please protect farmland for farming and do not allow weddings and event venues in Exclusive Farm Use zones in Central and Eastern Oregon. LandWatch respectfully requests this Committee not pass SB 788 out of committee.

Regards,

Rory Isbell
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Central Oregon LandWatch



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