



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – April 15, 2019

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New data show Oregon has lost farmland every year since 1997

Oregon legislators need to step up and help save our farms

New data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture show that Oregon lost 340,000 acres of farmland from 2012-2017, more than three times the number of acres lost from 2007-2012 (98,000 acres). Since 1997, Oregon has lost nearly 10 percent of its farmland (9.6 percent).

“The amount of farmland lost in Oregon keeps growing. It’s a disturbing trend. We need the legislature to step up and help farmers save their farms,” said Kelley Beamer, executive director of the Coalition of Oregon Land Trusts.

The USDA’s Census of Agriculture, released Thursday, shows that from 2012 to 2017:

- Oregon’s total farmland is down 340,000 acres since 2012, an area significantly larger than the entire Portland Metro Area, and larger than all of Oregon’s 10 largest cities put together.
- The number of mid-size and large farms (between 50 to 1,999 acres) continued to decrease, a consistent 20-year trend.

In an effort to combat these trends, a diverse coalition of agricultural and conservation groups is championing House Bill 2729 to fund the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program (OAHP) at \$10 million.

"For over 20 years, I've worked within Oregon's land use system to promote wise development and protect farmland and open spaces. Despite the strength of that system, we continue to lose farmland across the state. Funding the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program will help reverse the trend and renew Oregon's legacy of protecting agricultural lands," said Representative Ken Helm (D-Washington County).

"Oregon's land use program has been great, but it is not enough. We need the legislature to invest in efforts to stem the tide before we lose even more land to non-agricultural uses," said Ken Bailey, one of 11 citizen commissioners for the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program, and shareholder of family-owned Orchard View Farms, Inc. in The Dalles, OR.

Farms in Oregon and throughout the nation are being lost to a range of types of development, often when one generation is ready to retire and there is no succession plan in place. Agricultural lands make up 25% (16.3 million acres) of Oregon's land. Yet two-thirds (10.45 million acres) of Oregon's agricultural lands will change hands in the next 20 years, according to research from Oregon State University.

Funding OAHP will allow Oregon to access federal matching dollars for projects that preserve farmland and support Oregon farmers and ranchers. If the proposed funding bill passes during this legislative session, farmers and ranchers can apply for state-level grants to protect working lands, enhance natural resource values, and assist with succession planning.

"Investing state funds in our agricultural heritage will mean Oregon can finally access the growing pot of federal Farm Bill funds available to protect U.S. agricultural land. Each year, Oregon leaves millions of federal dollars on the table because we do not have a state grant program to match this USDA funding," said Doug Kraemer, a blueberry farmer in Marion County and a member of the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Commission.

History of the Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program (OAHP)

Governor Brown signed a bipartisan bill authorizing creation of OAHP in September 2017. OAHP offers a suite of voluntary tools including grants for permanent working lands conservation easements and 20- to 50-year covenants, and succession and conservation management planning.



The Oregon Agricultural Heritage Program is designed to support farmers and ranchers like Woody Wolfe, a sixth-generation farmer in Wallowa County who is taking steps to conserve his family's ranch (above) at the confluence of the Lostine and Wallowa rivers.

Photo by Rick McEwan