

Farm, forest background paper.

Protect Our Best Farmland, Forest Land, and Natural Areas

Oregon is blessed with some of the world's best farmland. This farmland is the base of tens of thousands of jobs for Oregonians, as well as being a source of healthy food, a resource for our energy needs, and an alternative to fuel-intensive shipping of food from thousands of miles away.

Oregon is also defined by our productive forests and woodlands that are the basis of tens of thousands of jobs across the state. Oregon is the nation's leading producer of lumber, and our forests help us build our homes and businesses and meet everyday needs such as paper.

Natural landscapes and access to fish and wildlife habitats contribute significantly to our state's economy as well through tourism, quality of life benefits, and ecosystem services like protecting water quality and clean air.

We need to do more to protect our best farmland, forest land, and natural areas, starting with these actions:

Create a Land Stewardship Program to Buy Easements

Oregon has done a better job than most states in protecting valuable farm and forest land from development. But as development's pressure increases, we need more tools in our toolbox.

Easement programs have long been used for protection of habitat and natural areas, open space, scenic values, and working landscapes (farm, forest and rangeland). Easement programs pay willing farm or forest land owners to make zoning protections permanent or limit development that would otherwise be allowed.

Even with our land use laws, development pressures and urbanization still threaten some of our best farm and forest lands. An agricultural easement program would complement our land use system and help farmers stay in farming and foresters in forestry, while resolving tensions between profit and protection and supporting our shared future vision.

Federal resources are available for farm and forest land easement acquisition but require state or local matching money. We need to fund that match.

Funding could come from collecting one-fifth of the windfall caused by expanding urban growth boundaries. For example, rural lots in Washington County can gain hundreds of thousands of dollars per acre of market value simply by being brought into the urban growth boundary.

Action: Enact a Land Stewardship Program to fund the purchase of easements on farm, forest, and range lands. Money could come from a windfall tax. Read draft language at www.friends.org/blueprint.

Reauthorize Measure 66 to Purchase Natural Areas

Development pressures also threaten our natural areas. An additional program should purchase park land, natural areas and fish and wildlife habitat outright. Funding should come from the extension of the parks and salmon funding program created by voters when they passed Measure 66 in 1998. The measure requires it be reauthorized by the voters before 2014, and is the main source of funding to protect natural areas through purchase of land and easements.

Action: Reauthorize Measure 66 and continue to use the funding to provide incentive-based programs such as purchase of natural areas from willing sellers.

Protect Our Best Farmland and Natural Resources from City Expansions and Conflicts with Non-Farming Neighbors

Our cities are often very close to Oregon's best farmland, and often damage fish and wildlife habitat. Our agricultural forefathers located on the best farmland near cities and rivers, to have access to markets, water, and power. Unfortunately, unsustainable development patterns are threatening our agricultural heritage and our natural resources. As cities expand, they often grow to cover some of our best farmland, fish and wildlife habitat and significant natural landscapes instead of on other less productive or less environmentally sensitive lands.

Urban pressures aren't the only problem. Under current law, there are over fifty uses allowed in the increasingly misnamed "Exclusive Farm Use" zones. Many of these uses have nothing to do with farming and cause conflicts with neighbors who farm. Nor have land use laws effectively protected significant fish and wildlife habitats and natural landscapes in rural areas, despite the economic benefits of doing so.

It's time Oregon gave true long-term protection to our significant natural resource lands and our critical areas of farmland. Because of their ability to grow certain crops, proximity to markets, and development pressures, agricultural lands deserve special protection and enhancement.

The Oregon Department of Agriculture has been working in Multnomah, Washington and Clackamas counties to identify our best farmland and protect it from urban expansion under a "rural reserves" program created by the 2007 Oregon Legislature.

Action: Protect Oregon's best farmland from the long list of non-farm uses currently allowed in farm zones by strengthening state farmland laws.

Action: Create a rural reserves program requiring cities to work with the Oregon Departments of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fish and Wildlife to ensure our cities don't expand onto our best farmland, forest land, and natural areas. Land owners in these critical areas should receive preference for the easement and purchase programs described above.

Support Family Farms and Forests with Economic Development Investments

Oregon's efforts to support economic development and job growth often focus on high-visibility large companies. Yet agriculture is thriving in Oregon. Its growth continued in 2006, with sales increasing 8.9% to \$4.4 billion. It remains one of our leading employers, and family farms have been increasing in number. Forestry remains a large employer as well, employing over X Oregonians.

Unfortunately, we're not taking advantage of all the potential economic benefits of these markets when local producers are forced to ship their products out of state for value-added processing. Local producers also could use help meeting the new challenges of changing markets, from wind energy farms and biofuel production to value-added forest products.

Action: The Oregon Economic and Community Development Department and other state agencies should target investments in the critical infrastructure and programs necessary to support the agricultural and woodlands industries from farm and forest to market.