

**Testimony of Kendra Kimbirauskas, Friends of Family Farmers
before the Oregon Board of Agriculture
July 31, 2008 - The Dalles, Oregon**

Chair Krahrmer and members of the Board:

Good morning and behalf of myself, and our Board, I want to thank you for this opportunity to present to you.

My name is Kendra Kimbirauskas and I am co-president of Friends of Family Farmers (FOFF). We are a statewide non-profit working to educate, organize, and advocate for socially responsible agriculture and healthy rural communities in Oregon. We promote programs and policies that foster the profitable growing, processing and local sale of safe, nutritious food and agricultural products, based on the belief that this can best be accomplished by Oregon's family farmers. We also support citizens having a voice in the siting and construction of industrial-scale farms that have the potential to impact their communities, public health, and the environment.

In the 12 months since the close of the 2007 legislative session, FOFF grassroots organizers have traveled the state speaking with family farmers, ranchers and members of rural communities about the issues that they are facing as they work to operate or support socially responsible and economically viable agricultural businesses in Oregon. My intention today is to share some of what we have learned and talk to you generally about what we hope to see happen in the 2009 Legislative Session.

As you know, we are so fortunate in Oregon to have a diverse agricultural economy and a consumer base that demands regionally produced agricultural products. Our region gives growers access to metropolitan markets such as Portland, Seattle, Spokane, Boise, San Francisco and also to many smaller, local markets like Salem, Corvallis, Eugene, Medford, Ashland, Hood River, Pendleton, the Tri-Cities and La Grande.

In the multiple "listening sessions" we have hosted and in the discussions with farmers during farm visits, we have found that with few exceptions, the issues that family farmers are facing across Oregon are much the same. In other words, similar challenges continued to surface regardless of which part of the state our organizers traveled to.

Some of the common challenges we've heard include:

Despite strong land-use planning and EFU designation, valuable farmland is being lost in this state as prices of land skyrocket due to pressure from development and trophy homes. As a result farmers lack access to capital for land purchases, start-up costs, inputs and innovation strategies.

The average age of farmers in Oregon is 55 years old. We risk losing 25-50% of our farmland becoming if we have no systems in place to transfer this land to the next generation of farmers. There currently lacks adequate educational opportunities and access to the resources and knowledge that young and new farmers need in order to succeed.

Food safety regulations put a stranglehold on small agricultural business enterprises. Regulations meant for large industrial operations are not always a good fit for smaller operators. As a result, small meat and dairy operations are forced to comply with one-size-fits-all regulations that are costly, time-intensive, difficult to navigate, and may not be relevant to their specific situation. The same is true for processed, value-added products. This either shuts producers out of market opportunities or requires largely unrealistic capital investments and extensive knowledge of the bureaucratic and regulatory systems to comply. Rural communities currently have no mechanism to weigh in on the types of agricultural operations that move onto their local EFU lands. The result is that federally defined CAFOs are attempting to site operations in areas that 1) don't fit the culture of the agricultural community, and/or 2) are inappropriate in such a location. This is critical, because with the exception of the ODA's CAFO program, there are essentially no protections from the pollutants that these operations generate for the rural residents that were living in these areas first.

As we move into the 2009 Legislative Session, FOFF is working with partners to investigate legislative opportunities as well as opportunities outside of the legislative process where we can begin to address some of the challenges that are being faced by family farmers and rural communities. We are looking at a variety of possibilities including, but certainly not limited to:

Multi-species processing license package for small, diverse farms to establish on-farm processing with a tiered regulation system based on farm size. This would increase consumer access to locally produced and processed meat at the retail level by the pound or cut, and would enable these farmers to more easily get their products into restaurants, schools, hospitals and other institutions.

Networking opportunities for small-scale meat, dairy and vegetable producers and processors to access locally-produced organic animal feed, organic seed supplies, local processing supplies, certified kitchens, and small-scale distributors.

Establishing a next-generation farmer program with the intention of providing the infrastructure to train the next generation by pairing new and young farmers with farmer-mentors and land transition opportunities. As farmers retire and we begin face a dramatic turn-over of farmland in the next 10 years, it is imperative that we come up with adequate educational opportunities and that we develop a system that connects the old and young to ensure that the next generation of farmers are skilled and prepared to keep farmland in agricultural production.

Establishing a mechanism that assures agricultural communities some local control over the siting of federally-defined CAFOs on EFU land.

As fuel prices increase and trucking companies are becoming reluctant to supply rural populations, our food security is becoming an issue of great concern. Recent food recalls, adverse publicity on how livestock are treated in industrial farms, and the presence of meat from sick or "downer" cows in our food supply are fueling a national wave of interest and enthusiasm among consumers around the establishment of viable alternatives to the corporate dominated food system.

In Oregon, we are seeing that despite strong consumer demand for local products and the need for more farmers and infrastructure to meet this demand, most of our agricultural products still leave the state. The ODA has been devoting a tremendous amount of energy to ensuring that Oregon agricultural products reach markets outside our state, region and country. However, more resources need to be allocated to ensure that Oregon's independent agricultural producers have the infrastructure they need to reach consumers and meet local demand.

As we enter this new and interesting era, we are presented with a myriad of challenges, but also countless opportunities. My intention here today is to relay to you what we are hearing from the farmers. If we want to build a sound and sustainable infrastructure for regional and local food economies that allow for food producers to earn a living wage, the environment to be protected, and for consumers to have access to fresh, healthy, Oregon-produced foods, it will take a lot of thought, creativity and collaboration from all sides. We hope to serve as a catalyst for new dialog, but we do not claim to have all the answers, nor the ability to tackle all of these issues on our own.

Again, on behalf of our Board, thank you for this opportunity to present and we look forward to working with you in the future.