FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 22, 2017
Contact: Anne Marie Moss, annemarie@oregonfb.org, 503.399.1701

Union County Farm Bureau president talks respect for water, opposition to bills

[On March 22, the House Energy & Environment Committee will hold hearings on the two costly water-related bills: HB 2705, which would require farmers outside irrigation districts to install expensive measuring devices on all water diversions, and HB 2706, which would impose a $100 tax on water rights.]

In the heart of the scenic Grand Ronde River Valley in far eastern Oregon, along Catherine Creek, Jed Hassinger, president of Union County Farm Bureau, raises an interesting mix of crops: peppermint, sunflowers, wheat, and grass seed.

He and his brother Seth are the fifth generation to run the family farm and keep a proud agricultural heritage thriving.

“Over the years we’ve learned to manage this land well. We take pride in it and really value that,” said Hassinger. “It’s important that we’re good environmental stewards so future generations can enjoy the same farming productivity and wildlife and all the aesthetic values we enjoy now.”

But when he hears about bills that would substantially increase his farm’s costs — and specifically a $100-per-water-right fee with HB 2706 — it frustrates him.

“They call it a ‘management fee,’ but you pay money when you apply for a water right. It seems like another tax, which is not insignificant if it’s for the maximum $1,000 a year,” he said. “It’s especially tough now when commodity prices are so low and margins are so slim, to have that kind of a tax added on to our farm’s expenses when we could be putting that toward more efficient irrigation infrastructure or upgrading equipment.”

Oregon’s farmers already pay a significant amount to maintain the infrastructure needed to deliver water to their crops, including increasing electricity costs. The value of a water right is already part of the property values they pay taxes on every year.
This new fee would not go to providing any direct benefit to family farms. Instead, it would go to the Department of Water Resources (OWRD) for administrative costs and studies.

Meanwhile, **HB 2705** would require measurement and reporting for all water rights outside of irrigation districts and cities. The proposal would require installation of costly measurement devices and authorizes OWRD to impose a punitive penalty of up to $500 per day with no exceptions for equipment failure.

HB 2705 also is impractical for many farm and ranch families. Technologically advanced measurement devices are expensive, and would be particularly so for farms with multiple diversion points. **HB 2705** is an unnecessary cost burden on rural households.

Most of Oregon’s farmers are already exemplary environmental stewards, committed to doing more with less without state-mandated measurement systems. These families care about maintaining a healthy environment — they depend on it for their livelihood — and are constantly striving to conserve water, improve soil health, increase energy efficiency, and, of course, raise the highest-quality crops possible.

For example, a few years ago, Hassinger received an Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) grant to experiment with soil moisture sensors.

“It’s been a monumental change in the way we manage irrigation,” he said. “We have about 75 sensors so we can keep tabs on the exact soil moisture in different fields. We’re able to know when to water and how much is needed.”

The precise, targeted technology prevents inadvertent overwatering of crops, thereby limiting water runoff, reducing overall water use, and keeping the soil’s nutrients intact for the plants.

While it’s difficult to know for sure, Hassinger estimates the sensors are to thank for a 15% improvement in water conservation.

The farm is also transitioning to a more-efficient pivot irrigation systems from wheel lines, and uses variable-frequency motors on pumps to save both water and energy.

###

* Note to Editors: “Farm Bureau” is a registered trademark; please capitalize in all cases.

The state’s largest general farm organization, Oregon Farm Bureau (OFB) is a grassroots, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization representing the interests of the state’s farmers and ranchers in the public and policymaking arenas. First established in Oregon in 1919, Farm Bureau is organized in all 36 counties and has 7,000 member families that are professionally engaged in agriculture.