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Tillamook County farmers first in nation to have say in wetland siting

TILLAMOOK COUNTY, OREGON, August 4, 2017 – Farmers in Tillamook County are the first in the nation to have a say in wetland siting after a unanimous vote by the Tillamook County Board of Commissioners on Aug. 2.

“Thanks to legislation Oregon Farm Bureau and the Oregon Dairy Farmers Association worked on in 2016, Tillamook County has adopted an ordinance that allows local farmers to have a voice in designing conservation projects that may have spillover impacts on their land,” said Mary Anne Nash, OFB public policy counsel.

The ordinance requires that new wetland projects must not have negative impacts on neighboring agricultural operations. It’s part an innovative 10-year pilot project championed by Oregon Farm Bureau (OFB) and the Oregon Dairy Farmers Association (ODFA), and authorized by the Oregon Legislature in 2016 with the passage of SB 1517.

The project is the first of its kind in the nation where state agencies, conservation groups, farmers, and other stakeholders will work collaboratively on new wetland sites to achieve the goals of fish and wildlife improvements, while also balancing the needs of the local agriculture community.

Tillamook County dairy farmer Chad Allen, ODFA president and member of Tillamook County Farm Bureau, was instrumental from the project’s conception to its passage by the county commissioners.

“Farmers in Tillamook County have always valued habitat restoration and healthy fish populations, but we also think these habitat restoration projects shouldn’t harm adjacent landowners. It’s part of being a good neighbor,” said Allen. “I’m happy the county will now have a role in making sure that farmers and conservation groups are working together to achieve common goals.”
In recent years, conservation groups and governmental entities have purchased many acres of prime farmland in Tillamook County’s Exclusive Farm Use zone and taken it out of production for conservation purposes. However, this can alter rain drainage patterns in the area and create serious flooding problems for neighboring farms. Given that farmers in wetland areas already struggle to combat flooding in rainy years, new projects can drastically decrease their productivity.

“The dairy industry forms the backbone of Tillamook County’s economy. We worked on this project so family farms can coexist with conservation efforts and maintain the functioning land base they need to be successful,” said Nash.

“We hope this process will create a blueprint for other communities in efforts to protect both wildlife habitat and local agriculture,” said Nash.

Specifically, the legislation passed in 2016 contains three primary provisions:

1) Gives Tillamook County the option for local approval of wetlands projects sited in Exclusive Farm Use zones to ensure that the project will not impact nearby agricultural operations;

2) Allows Tillamook County to create a collaborative process that a project applicant can choose to use to achieve agreement regarding conditions necessary to protect neighboring agricultural operations; and

3) Directs Tillamook County to enter into a planning process involving a diverse group of stakeholders that will allow the county to more effectively plan priority areas for restoration and priority areas where the maintenance of agricultural operations will be protected.

The pilot project will sunset in 10 years.

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* 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 nearly 7,000 member families that are professionally engaged in agriculture.

OFB’s 15th President, Barry Bushue, is a third-generation farmer raising a variety of vegetables, flowers, and berries at a nearly century-old farm near Boring.