Jefferson County Farm Bureau Wins Oregon Farm Bureau County Action Award

December 22 2017, PENDLETON, OREGON: Jefferson County Farm Bureau was honored with the 2017 County Farm Bureau Action Award on December 7 during the 85th Oregon Farm Bureau (OFB) Annual Meeting in Pendleton.

The award is given to a County Farm Bureau that has developed a successful, innovative project or program in the political or public education arena within the last two years.

"This award was tailor-made for the proactive, grassroots initiative by Jefferson County Farm Bureau we recognize this year," said Logan Kerns, chair of the OFB Membership & Recognition Committee. "Without the leadership, hard work, and determination of Jefferson County Farm Bureau, the livelihood of countless farm families in Central Oregon would have been seriously threatened."

In 2015, two lawsuits filed by environmental groups sought to change the operations of water distribution out of Crescent Lake and Wickiup and Crane Prairie Reservoirs to protect habitat for the spotted frog. These lawsuits posed a huge threat for farms and ranches in the North Unit Irrigation District.

Jefferson County Farm Bureau immediately got organized and took action. A core group of 10 volunteers recruited and mobilized a grassroots team of 150 farmers, ranchers, business owners, public officials, local citizens, and other allies to fight back.

"Our ultimate goal was to unify local residents and help educate others about the fact that if farmers don't have water for agriculture in the North Unit Irrigation District, our community as a whole will suffer greatly. The impacts will be catastrophic to the livelihoods of those that work and live in Jefferson County," said Mickey Killingsworth of Jefferson County Farm Bureau.

Also critical was bringing community and legislator awareness about how these lawsuits threatened the region's major agricultural commodities, which include carrot seed, garlic seed, grass seed, peppermint, alfalfa, wheat, potatoes, and livestock. Jefferson County farmers raise 50 percent of the world’s hybrid carrot seed supply, and 75 percent of U.S. hybrid carrot seed supply. This important international market, and others, would be impacted without sufficient access to water, along with the health of the local farming community.

During the peak of the campaign, Jefferson County Farm Bureau leaders met for biweekly planning
meetings, and Farm Bureau members wrote frequent letters to the editor, describing how their family farms and ranches — along with the rural economy as a whole — would be impacted by limited access to water.

"This grassroots team was well informed and very engaged. In fact, an emailed OFB Action Alert about the spotted frog broke a record for the most responses, with hundreds of farmers submitting comments in opposition," said Kerns.

Jefferson County Farm Bureau also proactively reached out to groups and individuals outside of agriculture and successfully built a wide network of diverse allies.

"Among the outcomes we're most proud of are gaining the support for irrigators by Governor Kate Brown, and filling a court house in Eugene with farmers during a hearing about the lawsuits," said Killingsworth.

The county also organized tours of irrigated farms and ranches, inviting lawmakers, community leaders, environmental groups, the media, and others. Farmers were able to demonstrative their commitment to water conservation and their investment in water efficiency technology.

Jefferson County Farm Bureau leaders also organized meetings with Oregon Senators Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden to discuss the issue and make clear agriculture's concerns.

The outreach effort has continued in 2017, with more farm tours and a call to action to write letters to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Dept. about the newly developed Habitat Conservation Plan — describing what it would mean for local agriculture and business.

"This grassroots effort saw Jefferson County Farm Bureau members take the lead with passionate engagement and overt pride in being grassroots," said Kerns. "We are proud to present the 2017 County Farm Bureau Action Award to Jefferson County Farm Bureau."

PHOTO: The 2017 OFB County Farm Bureau Action Award went to Jefferson County Farm Bureau for its excellent work advocating on behalf of Central Oregon irrigators in the spotted frog issue. From left are OFB Membership Committee Chair Logan Kerns, and Jefferson CFB members Ray Austin, President Sue Vanek, Mickey Killingsworth, Ed Chotard, Paul Clowers, and Gary Harris.

See press releases of all awards given at the 2017 OFB Annual Meeting: http://bit.ly/2CXEoMx

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

Oregon Farm Bureau (OFB) is a grassroots, nonpartisan, nonprofit, general farm organization representing the interests of farming and ranching families in the public and policymaking arenas. First established in Oregon in 1919, Farm Bureau is organized in all 36 counties and has 7,000 farm and ranch family members.

Oregon Farm Bureau President Barry Bushue is a third-generation farmer raising pumpkins, u-pick produce, and flowering baskets at a nearly century-old farm near Boring. He is OFB’s 15th president.