FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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Farm Bureau asks Yamhill County for April 30 trail “hearing” delay
Untimely “hearing” seems designed to thwart public input and take advantage of Pandemic chaos
Contact: Dave Dillon, Oregon Farm Bureau, dave@oregonfb.org

Oregon Farm Bureau and Yamhill County Farm Bureau have asked the Yamhill County Commission to delay its scheduled April 30 “hearing” on its latest response to the state Land Use Board of Appeals (LUBA) ruling on the proposed Yamhelas Westsider Trail. The “hearing” will not allow oral or live testimony and will take place at the height of COVID-19. Other public bodies regularly take live testimony via available online video tools. “The busiest time of the year for many area farmers, and at the height of a global pandemic is not the time to be rushing a process like this,” said Yamhill County Farm Bureau President Jerry Mann, “Cobbling together a last-minute YouTube show with no chance for live testimony is not the way to run a credible public comment process. Unless Yamhill County is trying to undermine and avoid public input, there is no reason to hold this hearing on April 30.”

Just as troubling, to date the county has not posted necessary findings, including required trail and fence design plans, a parking demand study, evidence showing necessary fire and emergency access, and other key documents proving that the trail will comply with county code and state law. This means interested citizens will have only a few days to review, analyze, and respond to anything the county posts. If the county takes longer than expected to post these critical materials, it should give its residents more time to review them.

As the Yamhill County appears to try to ramrod the trail project through over vigorous and vocal opposition by families who operate adjacent to the proposed trail route, Oregon Farm Bureau and Yamhill County Farm Bureau have worked for three years to get the county government to merely follow state law. Yamhill County has so far refused. LUBA has remanded the county on two of its major land use decisions on the trail so far. LUBA agrees with Farm Bureau that the county must show that the trail will not cause significant impacts to farm practices and to demonstrate that it has studied these impacts and addressed them. Yet Yamhill County presses ahead ignoring the repeated concerns of its farming community.

In a time of immense uncertainty for Oregon’s farmers and ranchers, who are tasked with providing the healthy food and fiber we depend on, Yamhill County continues to disregard the concerns of area farmers who would be most impacted by the trail. State law says the county needs to study and address impacts on local farms, but the county has refused. Local farmer Ben Vandyke said, “This trail will really impact my family farm and I just want the county to work with farmers like me on a better approach to a
trail. Why won’t they do that?” All Yamhill County residents deserve an answer to that and other questions that the April 30 “hearing” does not allow them to even ask.

The text of the letter to Yamhill County follows.

April 20, 2020

TO:       Yamhill County Commission

FROM:  Oregon Farm Bureau, Yamhill County Farm Bureau

RE:       Request to postpone April 30 “hearing” until a safe and credible hearing can be held

Commissioners- We formally ask that the planned April 30 YouTube event be canceled and that a full hearing on the county’s response to LUBA’s remand of its decisions regarding the proposed Yamhelas Westsider Trail be scheduled after Governor Brown’s Executive Order 20-12 is rescinded and full public participation is safe. The participation restrictions built into the virtual April 30 YouTube event make full public input on this important matter nearly impossible.

Moving forward with the April 30 event during a pandemic and without a mechanism for live online or telephonic public comment has a severe chilling effect on public input, which is unfair to the residents of Yamhill County who have advocated both for and against this project for years. The lack of easy access to the record heading into the event, the public’s focus on navigating the public health and economic impacts of COVID-19, and the lack of live comment and rebuttal all argue for delay.

Decisions this important, with their range of strong feelings and technical legal elements should not be made in a rush and in a manner that discourages public input. We see no credible reason to hold the April 30 event as planned. We may be only weeks away from lifting the pandemic restrictions, and we ask that this process resume when it is safe for all to participate and have their voices heard.

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