

Jackson County Farmland Conservation Program

Over a decade ago a group of farmers and concerned citizens came together to determine how to conserve farmland in Jackson County. They understood that if the county was to remain a thriving agricultural region, the best farmland in the area had to be protected from ever-increasing urban sprawl. They developed an outline for a conservation strategy, which would designate and protect the region's best farmland through a farmland conservation "overlay," then allow future population growth in all other areas. This strategy was documented in a publication called "Our Region."

The Our Region idea caught on countywide and before long it morphed into another process called the "Bear Creek Regional Problem Solving Plan," or "RPS." Through the RPS process, the cities in the Bear Creek watershed and Jackson County have been working together to outline a plan for future growth in the county. The county is projected to double its population in the next 50 years, and one of the main goals of RPS is to conserve the county's resource lands in the face of this rapid growth.

Unfortunately the RPS draft plan, which was made public last year for review, fails to accomplish its stated goal of preserving farmland. The plan designates 8,500 acres of rural lands as "Urban Reserve Areas" (URAs), which are areas that will be urbanized in the next 50 years. Of those, 7,000 acres are zoned for "Exclusive Farm Use" (EFU) and 1,200 acres of those EFU lands have been determined by RPS's own "Resource Lands Review Committee" to be part of the region's commercial agricultural base. Called "RLRC" lands, these lands are the cream of the crop of farmland, typically being irrigated Class I and Class II soils. Oregon law makes clear that development on these high value farmlands should only occur as a last resort.

Rogue Advocates, 1000 Friends of Oregon, other groups, individuals and farmers have been working together over the past year to voice our concerns about the high amount of farmlands that are to be converted for urbanization through this plan. While we have advocated for *conserving* rather than *converting* a vast portion of these farmlands, these lands still remain designated for future urban growth. . . So what now?

Another mechanism for preserving farmland exists, which is already being done in California and other states across the country, and is a proven powerful tool for conserving farmland. We are now seeking to incorporate this mechanism into the RPS plan. Referred to as "farmland mitigation," this mechanism requires that when farmland is developed for urban uses, the developer must mitigate for the loss of that farmland by establishing a conservation easement on other farmland. Conservation easements have the beauty of permanently protecting farmland while providing substantial financial benefits to farmers who volunteer to have their land in easement status.

Our specific proposal for Jackson County requests the following: That whenever farmland in the URAs is annexed for urban development, that the developer mitigate for that loss by protecting farmland close to but outside of the URAs. The developer would have two choices: 1) work directly with and pay a willing landowner to establish a farmland conservation easement; or 2) pay a "mitigation fee" to the county, which would establish a farmland conservation easement itself. Either way, this plan would ensure that anytime farmland in the URAs is lost, that other farmland threatened by development pressure is permanently preserved.

Rogue Advocates is presenting this proposal to the Jackson County Planning Commission at the next RPS hearing on February 24th and is looking for support of this plan! Letters of support addressed to the commission are strongly encouraged. Please send them to the email address below.

For more information about this proposed program or to get a full copy of the proposal, please contact Sarah Vaile, Program Director for Rogue Advocates, at sarah@rogueadvocates.org or (541) 261-7836.