

## Organic farming depends on new pesticide law

I believe that organic food production is the heart of Oregon's economic future.

There is tremendous growth and economic opportunity in the organics industry. In fact, organic farming in Oregon is rapidly leading a major paradigm shift in agriculture today. In Oregon, about 700 organic farms generate hundreds of millions of dollars in sales. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Oregon ranks fourth in the nation in total dollars of organic sales. Recently, Oregon's organic farm acres increased more than 230 percent in one year, making Oregon second in the nation in numbers of acres devoted to harvesting organic crops.

Researchers at Oregon State University stated that Oregon's organic agriculture is uniquely positioned to grow dramatically in market share.

My business, Mountain Rose Herbs, is a case in point. Currently we have 13 organic farms in the Northwest and we employ 180 full-time workers, and plan to expand our employment base. Opportunities to connect with organic growers through farmers' markets, buy-local projects, farm-to-table and farm-to-school movements are spurring a burgeoning population of consumers across the nation who seek to buy Oregon's unique organic products.

Yet, this new economic model is imperiled. Reckless practices embraced by logging interests and enabled by state law endanger an agricultural model that is thriving. I'm referring to the practice of spraying thousands of acres of land with chemical tank mixes of herbicides by helicopters. Herbicides sprayed aerially are known to drift long distances.

Oregon's timber industry stubbornly defends outdated forestry chemical laws that are the weakest in the West. Oregon's law prohibits buffers to protect homes, schools and organic farms. Other states protect agricultural land with no-spray buffer zones stretching from 200 feet to one-half mile. In Oregon, there is not a shred of protection against pesticide drift for our endangered organic farming operations.

Organic farming is a strictly regulated industry. Like all organic businesses, I am required to periodically test for pesticide residues, and the results of these tests are startling. We are continuously presented with organic crops which have significant residues of pesticides that necessitate the total destruction or rejection of material, and the financial loss for us has been in the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

That is why I am strongly supportive of a legislative effort to update Oregon's regulations around the risk of pesticide drift from conventional forestry and farming operations. Senate Bill 613, the Public Health and Water Resources Protection Act, introduced by Sen. Michael Dembrow, D-Portland, and Rep. Ann Lininger, D-Lake Oswego, is the first legislation in decades to correct major gaps in our state's Forest Practices Act. The bill requires creation of appropriate pesticide spray buffers to protect residences, schools, drinking water and fish. It also would require advance notification of pesticide sprays and accurate disclosure of spray records within 48 hours.

Oregon's Forest Practices Act is a backwards law, which, if not altered, will ultimately undermine the significant forward-looking successes achieved by the organic farmers so far. This obsolete law places Oregon's organic industry at a disadvantage compared with our competitors in other Western states. Oregon does not regulate pesticide drift by statute or regulation. This is in stark contrast with many states that have identified aerial pesticide spray as a hazardous activity requiring regulation for the protection of health and property.

The Supreme Court of Washington held that aerial application of pesticides is "an abnormally dangerous activity to which a standard of strict liability is applied." Even Idaho requires a buffer zone between aerial pesticide sprays and farming operations — but not Oregon.

By their own admission, it is industrial forestry businesses who want to keep pesticide use secret by claiming it is privileged “proprietary business information.” The shroud of chemical secrecy in Oregon can be lifted by SB 613.

Organic business owners think it is important to care for the health of our customers and the environment. Oregon’s future is tied to industries that sustain the land, not burden it with toxic chemicals. I hope that our legislators will celebrate that organic farming is poised to become the backbone of Oregon’s economic health. To stay competitive in the global market, we must support SB 613 for its concrete and reasonable standards of pesticide use accountability.

Shawn Donnille is co-owner and vice president of Mountain Rose Herbs in Eugene.