May 19, 2025
Liz Fancher, Multnomah County Hearings Officer
*Sent via email to LUP-Hearings@multco.us*

**Re: Case # T3-2022-16220 – Remand – Response to S36 (Soils and Ag Land as a Natural Resource)**

The East Multnomah Soil and Water Conservation District (EMSWCD) is a non-regulatory government agency representing the residents of Multnomah County east of the Willamette River to the far end of the county. The mission of EMSWCD is to help people care for land and water. While EMSWCD supports the provision of clean, safe drinking water for all Portland Water Bureau (PWB) customers, we are concerned that the current proposed location for the water filtration plant will incur negative and irreversible impacts on the agricultural natural resources of East Multnomah County. We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments to the Hearings Officer in response to S36 (Soils and Ag Land as a Natural Resource).

The Community Service Approval criteria MCC 39.7515(B) referenced in the Remand from LUBA requires that the projects NOT adversely affect natural resources. The proposal by the City of Portland to site an urban water treatment facility within a Rural Reserve in East Multnomah County adversely impacts agricultural natural resources on the subject property and in the surrounding area. As noted previously, EMSWCD operates a working farmland protection program to "strategically and permanently protect high value agricultural lands in order to maintain a viable agricultural economy and improve watershed health and function." Our investments in working farmland protection are driven by the soil quality of farm properties in the following ways:

- Our working farmland easements restrict the removal of soil and limit the amount of impervious surfaces that can be constructed because we recognize that **farm soils are the foundational basis for productive agricultural use of a site**.

- As our resources are limited, we prioritize farm properties for protection, with ½ of that prioritization being based on the quality of the farm soils. That soil quality is quantified by the National Resource Conservation Service soil classifications[i] and the United State Department of Agriculture classifications of prime and other important farmlands[ii]. Per the USDA, prime farmland *is land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber, and oilseed*

*crops and is available for these uses.* **EMSWCD's farmland prioritization methodology identifies the subject property as the 3rd best farm property in our entire service area, due principally to the quality of the subject's farm soils.**

The national system of classifying agricultural land by its potential for productivity is a recognition that soil possesses certain innate natural qualities that make it suitable for productive agricultural use. **This is a functional natural characteristic that exists independent of human intervention.**

Exhibit S. 36 seeks to make the case that agriculture is not a functioning natural system because it entails significant human intervention. Every natural resource on the planet is touched by some measure of human intervention, including the surface water natural resource that will be subject to treatment by the proposed filtration plant**.**

**Building soil health over time**

EMSWCD was founded 75 years ago by a group of dedicated farmers in east Multnomah County who wanted to decrease erosion and promote soil health. Over this time, our District has worked with dozens of private landowners to implement on-farm practices like cover-cropping and drip irrigation to maximize the biological properties of soil. We have learned that high-quality soil can be managed and restored to maximize public natural resource benefits like carbon sequestration and the ability to retain moisture for longer periods of time. We are watching this play out at Headwaters Farm, a 60-acre farm owned by EMSWCD that serves as a farm business incubator and demonstration site for soil restoration. The Headwaters site was heavily impacted for decades but was recently enrolled in a soil health program that focuses on cover cropping, biological inputs, and optimized tillage. In just a couple years of this management strategy, staff has documented a transformation of soil health resulting in less compaction, an increase of beneficial organisms, soil fungi and increased crop yield. The rapid progress at our Headwaters site demonstrates that the public benefit of protecting agricultural soil from conversion is not just for present benefits but for those that we can maximize into the future through a conservation farming approach.

**Conclusion**

The Community Service Approval criteria MCC 39.7515(B) referenced in the Remand from LUBA requires that the projects NOT adversely affect natural resources. The proposal by the City of Portland to site an urban water treatment facility within a Rural Reserve in East Multnomah County adversely impacts agricultural natural resources. We respectfully ask that you re-launch an alternatives analysis that provides a robust review of all potential sites for this facility. EMSWCD urges Multnomah County to preserve our unique and threatened agricultural natural resources by ensuring that this site remains dedicated to agricultural use.

Respectfully submitted,

Kelley Beamer, Executive Director
East Multnomah Soil & Water Conservation District

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[i] https://www.ars.usda.gov/ARSUserFiles/np215/Food%20security%20talk%20inputs%20Lunch%203-15-11.pdf

[ii] https://efotg.sc.egov.usda.gov/references/public/LA/Prime_and_other_Important_Farmland.html

Multnomah County

**LUP Hearings <lup-hearings@multco.us>**

# S36 response

**Kelley Beamer** <Kelley@emswcd.org> Mon, May 19, 2025 at 11:59 AM
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*We help people care for land and water*

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