

Subject: T3-2022-16220 – Remand, Response to S36; Soils and Ag Land as a Natural Resource

Dear Ms. Fancher,

Even though agricultural soils often require inputs such as compost, cover crops, lime, and amendments to maintain fertility and structure, they remain a vital natural resource. Soil is a living system—an intricate web of minerals, organic matter, microorganisms, and fungi—that forms the foundation of terrestrial life. It supports food production, filters water, stores carbon and enables nutrient cycling. Inputs are used not because soil is expendable, but because it is so valuable that it must be stewarded and maintained with care. Just as we maintain forests with thinning or rivers with restoration work, inputs are a form of investment in the long-term productivity and health of soils.

Furthermore, the presence of high-quality, workable soil in East Multnomah County is a naturally occurring asset that cannot be replaced once lost to development. Generating even one inch of topsoil can take hundreds of years under natural conditions. These soils, shaped over millennia by glacial floods, volcanic activity, and river deposition, are irreplaceable in human time scales. The need for inputs doesn't diminish their natural value—it reinforces it. Because these soils are so productive and responsive to sustainable management, they have the potential to feed communities, store carbon, and support livelihoods for generations, making their conservation an urgent and practical priority.

Responding to S.36

*****Natural State vs. Farm Use**:***

- Farming is not the natural state of land; it is a use that modifies the land from its original condition (forests, meadows) to an agricultural one.

Response:

It's true that farming is not the original, untouched state of most land—agriculture transforms natural ecosystems like forests, meadows, or wetlands into managed systems for production. However, this does not diminish the value of agricultural land as a natural resource. In fact, the transformation of land into productive farmland represents a long-term interaction between humans and soil, water, and climate. When managed sustainably, agricultural land becomes a working landscape that continues to provide essential ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration, pollinator habitat, and groundwater recharge, alongside food production.

Recognizing that farmland is a modified landscape doesn't negate its natural importance, it highlights the need to treat it as a resource that bridges human needs and ecological function. Just as managed forests are still considered vital natural resources, farmland should be viewed not simply as developed land, but as a productive and adaptive use of natural systems.

*****Definition of Natural Resources**:***

- The term "natural resources" should include "functioning natural systems" like wetlands and streams, but farmland and farmed soil do not qualify as such.

Response:

While it's true that "natural resources" often refers to untouched or minimally altered systems like wetlands, streams, or old-growth forests, this definition can—and should—be broadened to include working landscapes like farmland and farmed soil. Functioning natural systems are vital, but so are the systems that have been carefully managed to support essential human needs like food, fiber, and fuel. Farmland, especially when stewarded responsibly, operates as a hybrid system—part human-directed, part ecological. Healthy farm soil retains many natural functions: it stores carbon, supports biodiversity (especially microbial life), filters water, and cycles nutrients. These functions are foundational to ecological health, even if the land is no longer in its pre-settlement state.

Moreover, excluding farmland from the definition of natural resources creates a false dichotomy between "natural" and "useful." Many landscapes exist on a spectrum, where human use and natural function coexist. If we define natural resources solely as untouched systems, we risk undervaluing the ecological services that working lands provide and missing opportunities for conservation through stewardship. In regions like East Multnomah County, farmland is not just a utilitarian space, it's part of a living, soil-based system that underpins regional resilience. Recognizing its role as a natural resource reflects a more inclusive and realistic approach to sustainability.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments for your consideration.

Respectfully,



Jesse Nelson

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T3-2022-16220-Remand, Response to S36 Soils and ag land as a Natural Resource

1 message

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To: LUP Hearings <lup-hearings@multco.us>

Mon, May 19, 2025 at 8:41 AM



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Please include my testimony in the record in response to S.36 regarding soils and ag land as a natural resource.

Thank you,
Jesse



Response to S.36.pdf
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