



2024 NW Beech Street  
Madras, Oregon 97741

(541) 475-3625  
(541) 475-3652  
Fax (541) 475-3905  
nuid@northunitid.com

March 27, 2024

Honorable Governor Tina Kotek  
Office of the Governor  
900 Court Street NE, Suite 254  
Salem, OR 97301-4047

Re: Request for Assistance for Jefferson County Farmers and Ranchers

Dear Governor Kotek,

As you know, many parts of Oregon have suffered through recent years of historic drought. Central Oregon and Jefferson County are no exception, as you witnessed firsthand during your visit to Jefferson County farms in August 2023. Today, portions of Central Oregon, including Jefferson County, remain in moderate drought or abnormally dry status, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor. Although hydrologic conditions have improved slightly, Jefferson County farmers, ranchers, and businesses are still suffering through the remnants of the historic drought and current drought conditions.

Even though the Deschutes drainage basin is slightly above average for both snowpack and precipitation to date, the impacts of the multi-year drought are reflected in our water supplies and economic uncertainties. The Oregon Water Resources Department recently stated in the *Central Oregon Source Weekly Newspaper*, "We are also coming off the heels of many years of prolonged drought, so I still anticipate there will be curtailment on irrigation withdrawals in the upcoming season." Given current and anticipated water supply conditions, North Unit farmers will once again be operating under a curtailed water allotment, likely around 50% of their normal supply.

While this irrigation season is looking somewhat better regarding water supply, there remains little hope for many in Jefferson County after the years of drought and water supply shortages. Some sobering examples include the local Holt tractor dealership closing its Madras dealership, Wilbur-Ellis—a global agribusiness company—has shut down its seed division, and Central Oregon Seeds has closed its agronomy field fertilizer division. In addition to the impact of these local businesses, we are also seeing multi-generation farms shutting down and selling out.

We have been very grateful for your support in the past as you have supported and issued emergency drought declarations for Jefferson County considering the dire circumstances. As you are aware, the primary benefits of a state-declared drought declaration are to create greater awareness of drought conditions, facilitate coordination between state agencies, and allow the Water Resources Department to provide existing water right holders with access to emergency water management tools. Furthermore, a drought declaration directs the State, through the Oregon Department of Agriculture, to coordinate and provide assistance in seeking resources to mitigate drought conditions and assist in agricultural recovery.

It is difficult to quantify the economic impact the drought has created in Jefferson County in recent years, but the visual impact is hard to ignore. Generational farms with “for sale” signs, empty lots where farm equipment used to be sold, farm auctions selling off farm equipment, and thousands of fallow acres.

We usually don't think of droughts in the same way as other natural disasters, such as floods or wildfire. But droughts can be more costly and impactful than other natural disasters, particularly in regions that rely on water to sustain their economic vitality. We understand Senate Bill 5506 (Section 152. (1)) from the 2023 Legislative Session appropriated \$35,000,000 to be allocated to the Legislative Emergency Board for the state's natural disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. Clearly, we believe Central Oregon's present and past drought conditions fall within the definition of natural disaster and therefore should be considered when funding is made available through Senate Bill 5506, or any other natural disaster relief program. We would ask that the Oregon Department of Agriculture or Oregon Water Enhancement Board provide the necessary funding through existing programs or existing agency authorities to assist in drought recovery for Jefferson County. Plainly said, farmers and ranchers in Jefferson County need help to recover from these years of drought and for ongoing survival.

We understand that many others have similar needs. However, without help, the regional economy in Central Oregon will continue to decline absent the support the agricultural economy brings to the region.

Please feel free to reach out to me or Mike Britton (North Unit ID Executive Manager) with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,



Mike Kirsch  
Board Chair

cc: Legislative Emergency Board