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Contact: Reana Kovalcik, 202-547-5754

Organic Farmer Fights for a Sustainable Future

National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition partners with Oregon farmer Anne Berblinger to generate support for conservation and sustainable ag research programs on Capitol Hill

Washington, D.C., July 14, 2016 – Organic farmer Anne Berblinger has seen firsthand the effect conservation and sustainable agriculture research programs can have on small family farms. Berblinger lives and farms in Oregon, where she also serves on the Advisory Committee for the Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems at Oregon State University (OSU). OSU is a hotbed for innovation in sustainable agriculture, and Berblinger has a front row seat.

“I’ve seen so many great projects get off the ground here at OSU thanks to support from the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program,” said Berblinger. “Take Nick Andrews’ organic fertilizer calculator, for example. He developed that at OSU with help from SARE and now it’s an amazing tool that any farmer can use to make sure they’re not wasting money by applying excess fertilizer that could run off into the water supply.”

SARE is the only U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) competitive grants research program with a clear and consistent focus on sustainability and farmer-driven research. This budget cycle is the first in years in which the Obama Administration has requested an increase in funding for the program, from \$24.7 million to \$30 million. The Senate recently approved a \$2.3 million increase for SARE in their appropriations package, while the House bill disappointingly left funding flat. Both bills are now headed for full floor consideration in their respective chambers.

“Congressional appropriators have very few working days left to act on USDA funding priorities,” said NSAC Policy Director Ferd Hoefner. “Combine that with the chaos of an election year, and you’ve got a situation where it’s a real challenge to bring attention to these important sustainable agriculture programs. Thankfully, we’ve got some great farmer and rancher representatives who are willing to leave their busy lives and come to D.C. to speak to Congress about what these programs mean to them and for their businesses.”

On her own 15-acre farm in Gales Creek, OR – Gales Meadow Farm – Berblinger and husband René utilize USDA’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) to help them implement conservation activities. So far, they have used the program to switch from overhead sprinklers to drip irrigation, reducing the farm’s water usage, as well as for nutrient management, cover cropping, and installing hedgerows and native plants for local pollinators and wildlife.

For the first time during this administration, the President’s budget request included no cuts to farm bill mandatory funding for private lands conservation programs, including

EQIP. EQIP is a voluntary conservation program that provides farmers and ranchers with financial cost-share assistance and technical assistance to implement conservation practices on working agricultural land. Assistance is available through a general pool and also through special initiatives, which highlight specific practices or natural resources, such as the Organic Initiative, which provides separate funding pools for transitioning and certified organic producers.

Unfortunately, both the House and the Senate appropriations bills include cuts to EQIP. The House bill proposes a cut of \$323 million (nearly 20 percent of the program's funds), while the Senate bill does nearly as much damage, asking for a \$303 million cut in funds.

Along with staff from NSAC, Berblinger met with Representative Earl Blumenauer (OR-03) and the offices of Senators Jeff Merkley (D-OR) and Ron Wyden (D-OR). Berblinger asked Oregon representatives to stand with farmers as champions of SARE, EQIP, and other important sustainable agriculture programs.

"I'm very happy to have been able to speak with Oregon's representatives about these important issues," said Berblinger. "I was especially heartened to hear from Representative Blumenauer that he will be gathering input and ideas for the 2018 Farm Bill directly from Oregonians, getting their insights on programs like the ones we discussed today."

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About the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC)

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition is a grassroots alliance that advocates for federal policy reform supporting the long-term social, economic, and environmental sustainability of agriculture, natural resources, and rural communities. Learn more:

<http://sustainableagriculture.net>

About the Center for Small Farms and Community Food Systems

The Center's mission is to advance sustainable agriculture, community food systems, and economic progress for Oregon's small farmers and ranchers and provide a leading-edge experience for students. Learn more: <http://centerforsmallfarms.oregonstate.edu/>

About Gales Meadow Farm

René and Anne Berblinger began farming in the Gales Creek Valley in western Washington County in 1999. They have been a learning farm for aspiring farmers since 2006, and are proud that some former employees have started their own farms after working with them for a few seasons. Gales Meadow Farm, on the northeast side of Gales Creek Road, includes 9 flat acres of wonderful soil, a steep wooded hillside - the west side of Clapshaw Hill - and a riparian area with cottonwoods. They produce more than 300 varieties of great tasting and beautiful vegetables and herbs. Many of their varieties are heirlooms.

Learn more: <http://www.galesmeadow.com/home/about>