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PRESS RELEASE

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For immediate release

A win to protect farmland from sprawl; LUBA decides in favor of LandWatch's challenge to an urban growth boundary expansion

On October 6, 2021, the Oregon Land Use Board of Appeals (LUBA) issued a decision in favor of Central Oregon LandWatch in an appeal of a Jefferson County decision that approved an expansion of the City of Metolius' urban growth boundary (UGB).

The City of Metolius is located four miles southwest of Madras near Lake Billy Chinook. With a population of 830, the town is surrounded by productive agricultural land in the heart of Jefferson County.

In May 2021, Central Oregon LandWatch was joined by the Jefferson County Farm Bureau, which supports the working farmers in North Unit Irrigation District, in filing an appeal to LUBA. The appeal challenged Jefferson County's decision to allow the City of Metolius to convert 67 acres of farmland into urban land by expanding the town's urban growth boundary.

As Jefferson County is home to the most productive agricultural land in Central Oregon, LandWatch was concerned that the UGB expansion would permanently convert prime farmland away from agricultural use without any need to expand the UGB.

If allowed to stand, the County's decision would have set a bad precedent for expanding UGBs across the state, likely resulting in unnecessary losses of wildlife habitat, agricultural land, and open space.

According to Rory Isbell, Staff Attorney at LandWatch, "The City of Metolius is growing slower than forecasted and has no need to expand onto productive farmland. We're happy LUBA agreed that Oregon land use law only allows urban growth boundary expansions when needed to accommodate population growth. This decision saves 67 acres of farmland and prevents unneeded urban sprawl."

LUBA's decision found that Jefferson County's decision failed to comply with statewide land use planning Goal 14. Goal 14 requires efficient use of land and the accommodation of urban populations inside UGBs. It allows for the expansion of UGBs only when a demonstrated need exists to accommodate forecasted population growth. LUBA found that Jefferson County failed to demonstrate that the City of Metolius needs more land inside its UGB.



LUBA also found that Jefferson County's decision failed to comply with the Jefferson County Comprehensive Plan and its criteria for rezoning land zoned for exclusive farm use.

Central Oregon LandWatch and the Jefferson County Farm Bureau prevailed at LUBA, and Jefferson County's decision was remanded back to the County, resulting in continued protections for farmland from development in Jefferson County.

According to LandWatch's Executive Director Ben Gordon, "Oregon's land use system is only as strong as the watchdog efforts to enforce it. We applaud LUBA's decision that protects vital agricultural land and reminds Oregon's cities and counties that efforts to undermine land use laws will not be tolerated."

As a watchdog organization, LandWatch's mission is to uphold Oregon's land use system to protect rural landscapes, wildlife habitat, and farmland for generations to come.

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