

# Summary of the Fall 2024 Conversations on Canola in the Willamette Valley Protected District

December 2024

In the fall of 2024, the Governor's Office, and the Oregon Department of Agriculture (ODA) convened a small group of key stakeholders to explore potential pathways for canola coexistence in the Willamette Valley. The group included six individuals representing specialty seed growers, organic specialty seed growers, and potential canola growers. ODA hired Kearns & West, a third-party neutral facilitation consultant, to manage the process and provide meeting facilitation. The group met five times between October and December 2024. Kearns & West developed this document to provide a summary of the process, discussions, and outcomes from these conversations.

## Background

Oregon is a leader in producing various essential crops, especially in the diverse Willamette Valley region. However, challenges arise regarding canola production coexisting with Brassicaceae specialty seed production. Advocates for canola see its potential as a rotational crop for grass seed and wheat growers. At the same time, specialty seed growers have concerns about potential cross-pollination that could risk genetic purity.

Since 2013, legislative bills have permitted 500 acres of canola to be grown annually in the Willamette Valley Protected District under ODA permits. This has been intended as a temporary process until a joint solution for coexistence is found. The current 500-acre cap was most recently extended through legislation in 2023, which is set to sunset in 2028.

ODA and other state partners have worked to find a solution for canola coexistence. Research has been conducted, legislative hearings have been held, and advisory committees have been formed. Most recently, in 2023, SB 789 tasked ODA with creating recommendations for legislation to identify fields in the Willamette Valley Protected District producing Brassica seed crops, aiming to alleviate conflicts associated with that production. This process produced a set of recommendations, but ultimately no new legislation related to canola was passed in the 2024 session.

The 2024 canola conversations were convened to try and address the outstanding issues from the 2023 recommendations.

## Process and Meeting Summary

The 2024 canola conversations were intended to bring together a small group of key interests to try and find common ground as a starting place for future legislation. Meeting participants were selected to participate based on previous process involvement and their connections to the communities they represent. The group included representatives from potential canola and brassica growers, specialty seed growers, and organic seed growers.

The group met five times between October and December 2024. Meetings lasted 2 to 3 hours with most meetings taking place in-person at the Oregon State Library. During several points in the process members of the public and interested stakeholders were invited to listen to the conversations and provide comments to help inform the discussions.

At the beginning of the process, the group identified several common goals for their work. These goals were used as high-level criteria for evaluating various approaches to addressing canola coexistence. These goals included:

- **Prosperity:** Maintain and support the global reputation and economic success of the Willamette Valley as a unique and diverse agricultural area.
- **Flexibility:** Provide farmers in the Willamette Valley with more opportunities to adapt and respond to changing economic conditions and provide more diverse options for rotational crops.
- **Consistency:** Provide long-term clarity for the rules and regulations related to canola in the Willamette Valley.
- **Feasibility:** Find an approach that addresses the interests of all stakeholders and is a viable basis for legislation.

In subsequent meetings, group members proposed a variety of potential pathways and assessed them together as a group. Some of the key topics that the group discussed and focused on in these different pathways included elements such as:

- Genetically engineered canola
- WVPD boundaries
- The pinning process
- Isolation distances
- Acreage caps for canola
- Feral Brassica and roadside management
- Research and monitoring
- Grower education and communication

## Conversation Outcomes

Through the five-meeting series, the group aligned around several key elements of a potential framework, which could provide a balanced approach for canola coexistence that addresses the key interests, needs, and priorities of the various stakeholders. Below is a summary of the framework.

### **Potential Framework for Canola in the Willamette Valley**

- **Coexistence with a Focus on Certified Seed:** The group agreed that the most viable path forward for a balance approach would be introducing a structured pathway to expand production of canola seed stock that is certified free, through testing, of noxious weeds, *Leptosphaeria maculans* (blackleg), and genetically engineered material regulated under 7 CFR Part 340. This would ensure that expanded production meets established standards and addresses key concerns from stakeholders, supporting coexistence. The group agreed that this certified seed could use a standard three-mile isolation distance between certified canola fields and specialty seed crops of the *Brassica* genus to minimize potential conflicts. An expanded isolation distance of up to six miles was discussed for non-certified seed. This distance reflects recommendations from grower engagements and is designed to allow both industries to operate effectively. Flexibility is provided by enabling written agreements between farmers for growing within the isolation distance to foster collaboration.

- **Maintain WVPD Boundaries.** The group generally agreed that the current boundaries of the WVPD are sufficient and that modifying the boundaries would not be a productive, long-term solution for balanced coexistence.
- **Improved Grower Education.** The group agreed with ODA, that educational materials about the rules, regulations, and best practices of canola and Brassica production to reduce the risks of the negative impacts of mismanagement should be prioritized. They suggested that these materials could be shared with and distributed through relevant industry stakeholders. This proactive engagement would help ensure a better understanding of the best practices for canola production. The group highlighted that this action could be implemented without any legislation.
- **Rulemaking and Oversight:** The group agreed in the value of providing ODA with the authority to adopt rules for compliance timelines, required documentation, fees, and administrative processes to ensure clarity and flexibility. This rulemaking capability allows for the development of practical, adaptive measures that support the coexistence of specialty seed and canola industries in the WVPD.

#### **Areas for Further Discussion**

In addition to the framework above, the group discussed several other topics during the conversations. The group did not reach full alignment on how to best address these topics but agreed that they are valuable areas to explore more in-depth through future discussions.

These topics include:

- **Feral Population Management:** The group discussed the value of proactive management of feral populations in the right-of-way as a tool for reducing the risk of cross-pollination. There was general acknowledgement that there needs to be more discussion to identify the cost and resources for managing this type of system.
- **Monitoring:** The group discussed the value of additional monitoring of Brassica production in the Willamette Valley as an opportunity to provide valuable insights for future conversations about coexistence. They acknowledged that there needs to be more discussion on how to implement an effective monitoring program.
- **Public Pinning System:** The group discussed that a public pinning system could be a valuable tool for long-term management of canola alongside other Brassica crops. They acknowledged that there would need to be further discussion about the details and logistics of how that system would operate.
- **Isolation Distance:** The group discussed various isolation distances for non-certified canola seed and other Brassica. The discussions focused on distances between 3 and 6 miles, however there was no overall agreement on an isolation distance for these crops. There was acknowledgement that a set isolation distance would depend on the amount of non-certified canola is allowed.

- **Allowable Acreage:** The group discussed a variety of acreage caps for both certified and non-certified canola seed. There was some discussion around removing any cap on certified seed if there was no non-certified seed allowed, however, the group acknowledged that this would be a large departure from the current system. Some group members noted that any acreage cap should consider the threshold to support local processing, which they estimated at around 5,000 acres.

## Conclusion/Next Steps

Kearns & West developed this document as a summary of the canola conversations in Fall 2024. It identifies areas of agreement around canola coexistence as well as outstanding issues on the topic. If this summary is used to inform future proposed legislation, it is assumed and encouraged that that process would incorporate additional public and stakeholder engagement according to the rules of the Oregon State Legislature.

## Canola Conversation Participants

### Community Members:

- Kathy Hadley
- Helle Ruddenklau
- Kenny Smith
- Charles Ortiz
- Hank Keogh
- Sarah Kleeger

### Oregon Governor's Office

- Geoff Huntington
- Courtney Warner Crowell

### Oregon Department of Agriculture

- Lisa Charpilloz Hanson
- Jonathan Sandau
- Lindsay Eng
- Sunny Summers

### Kearns & West Facilitation Team

- Josh Mahar
- Ruby Gonzales