



The Washington State Department of Agriculture
Office of the Director

Washington State Department of Agriculture Partner Report for the Washington Association of Conservation Districts

The information below provides a few agency highlights and a summary of conservation activities that the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) and Conservation Districts (CDs) have worked together on in 2020:

Pandemic response. Over the last year, WSDA has been deeply involved in pandemic response, working with partner agencies in state and federal government, in addition to many agriculture industry groups. The priority for us this past year has been to maintain a secure food supply for all Washingtonians. In doing so, our team successfully mitigated a hunger crisis as more than 2.2 million Washingtonians faced food insecurity in the wake of the pandemic. WSDA took a lead role on procurement of emergency food and supplies for distribution through the NGO hunger relief sector, building on the strengths and relationships of our existing Food Assistance programs while also offering new services like direct procurement and new contracts with the food banks to address supply chain disruptions. Since April, WSDA has secured \$90 million in coronavirus relief funds, as well as supporting the launch of the WA Food Fund through Philanthropy Northwest, which has raised an additional \$12 million to invest in the NGO emergency food response. With these funds, WSDA has made significant investments in the purchase of fresh and shelf stable foods, PPE to allow for the safe distribution of emergency food across the state, additional support for hunger relief staffing, and capacity investments to ensure adequate cold storage and chilled transportation within the emergency food system to distribute twice as much food as pre-COVID. Since April of 2020, WSDA's newly mobilized emergency food procurement team has purchased over 7 tons of food. Our initiatives have helped support the distribution of more than 58 million pounds (~29 tons) of food directly to food insecure families. We expect to sustain this response well into 2021 and continue to monitor changes to demand.

International Marketing. COVID-19 began affecting Washington food and agriculture exports in late January, first in China and followed by other markets in Asia as the virus affected them. Exporters were affected differently based on their product and whether destined for retail, food service or other channels. Washington shellfish and French fries were impacted especially hard by the closure of restaurants. However, even products in-demand overseas faced challenges getting to market. First due to port back-ups as international markets experienced COVID lockdowns in January/February. Then, and much more significantly, large numbers of vessels with imports from Asia to the U.S. were canceled once COVID hit the U.S. and our import demand fell. These vessels are necessary for carrying our exports back to Asia. While the situation improved greatly over the summer, we are still experiencing issues related to fewer sailings.

While the decline of some exports was dramatic and the impact on certain businesses devastating, exports of other products (dairy and wheat for example) have increased substantially in the past 4 to 5 months and

overall, total Washington food and agriculture exports are now trending very close to last year's total. In particular, our exports to Southeast Asian countries such as Vietnam and Thailand are seeing significant increases.

Director Sandison continued his role as Chair of the Marketing and International Trade Committee for the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA). COVID-19 resulted in the cancellation of several planned trade missions in 2020. However, the WSDA International Marketing Program reformatted several of these and held 12 virtual trade missions and events focused on market education and business meetings between Washington exporters and international buyers. These "virtual trade missions" will continue during the first half of 2021, along with export education webinars and virtual business consultations between Washington exporters and WSDA's international representatives.

The **WSDA Dairy Nutrient Management Program (DNMP)** partners with Conservation Districts (CD), inspecting 302 dairies (322 licensed facilities) in 29 counties. Local CDs help dairy producers develop nutrient management plans as required by chapter 90.64 RCW, the Dairy Nutrient Management Act, and they help identify financial assistance for dairies through local, state, and federal cost share and grant programs.

Nutrient management plans (NMP) are a critical tool in protecting water quality for both surface and ground waters. As of September 30, 2020, 98% of Washington dairies are in compliance and have, or are currently working with a planner to obtain an approved and certified plan. Seven dairies are being penalized \$100/month until they have a Certified NMP, and one dairy has paid the maximum penalty of \$5,000 and will not receive further penalties for failure to obtain a Certified NMP.

Since the 2019 National Estuary Program (NEP) grant award, DNMP has received two additional rounds of funding. With the current contract amendment underway, DNMP is working with Snohomish, Skagit, and Whatcom CDs to provide grant sub-awards to help them establish and maintain in-house Coliscan® sampling and analysis labs. Whatcom CD has begun using Coliscan as a non-regulatory, technical assistance tool in support of Pollution Identifications and Correction (PIC) partners. With reliable, non-regulatory sample results, CDs can provide targeted technical assistance to producers, focused on correcting pollution sources.

In March 2020, DNMP suspended routine inspections for all dairies due to COVID-19. DNMP communicated with CDs to let them know that inspectors would only be responding to emergencies where a credible threat to human health or the environment was identified. Based on DNMP's Continuity of Operations Plan, routine inspections resumed in June 2020 (with appropriate safety measures) in counties that achieved Phase 2 in the Governor's Safe Start Plan. Yakima was one of the last counties to reach Phase 2 in October 2020. At this time, routine inspections have resumed in all counties and inspectors are getting caught up on the backlog.

DNMP's Technical Assistance Referral (TAR) tool has been in place for approximately one year, which improved our ability to report the number of TARs to CDs, completion rates, and barriers and successes with completing referred projects with CD assistance. From November 2019 to present, WSDA has made 102 referrals to CDs requesting technical assistance to dairies for issues such as facility improvements, field management, manure storage, and support of administrative records including updated field maps and farm plans. This system allows CD's to have 24/7 access to producer inspection outcomes and referrals, allowing CD staff to review and update status of referrals. To date 6 TARs have been marked as "resolved" by CD staff.

Our CD partners have been very helpful in participating in field walks, source ID sampling, and most recently assisting with smoke testing at a dairy to identify underground tile lines and drainage infrastructure at a dairy. DNMP is always grateful when CD planners join routine dairy inspections as a non-regulatory presence. This helps ensure that DNMP, producers, and technical assistance providers have a common understanding of water quality concerns and potential fixes; it helps all three parties problem-solve jointly.

WSDA Natural Resource Assessment Section (NRAS) received a Columbia River Basin Restoration grant from EPA to enhance our partnerships in Eastern Washington for pesticide program work, water quality and salmon protection. Project activities will take place in the Palouse and Yakima River watersheds and will include monitoring surface water for agricultural pesticides, waste pesticide collection, and targeted outreach in partnership with Conservation Districts. We will also begin new stream monitoring in the Palouse region in Eastern Washington, in partnership with the Palouse Conservation District.

Soil Health. WSDA has continued to partner with the WSCC and WSU on a statewide soil health initiative. Partners for this effort include conservation districts all over Washington, researchers with WSU, commodity groups and state agencies.

WSDA's Specialty Crop Block Grant program awarded \$500,000 in 2019 to WSDA Natural Resource Assessment Section (NRAS) to fund soil health projects in 2020-21 for the following specialty crops: hops, onions, potatoes, pulses, sweet corn, tree fruit, and wine grapes. This project was designed to assess the soil health of specialty crops in Eastern Washington in collaboration with Washington State University (WSU).

WSDA also works in collaboration with WSCC and CD's on VSP related soil health work. This includes presence on the technical panel, providing technical support, assistance in county VSP plans, and partnering with CD's for future soil health projects.

Asian Giant Hornets. The successful removal of the first Asian Giant Hornet nest in the United States occurred October 24th in Blaine. The hornet can destroy honeybee hives and if established could have negative impacts on the environment, economy, and public health of Washington State.

At the Department of Agriculture, we greatly value the hard work and expertise the dedicated staff the Conservation Districts provides to those working in agriculture as they seek ways to improve the environment.

Sincerely,

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