



WESTERN WASHINGTON AG REPORT

JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2021



President's Perspective

Marty Coble

As we welcome another year, it's easy to get wrapped up in all the

drama that seems to be prevalent in our society's culture. As an organization, we are firmly committed to protecting agriculture using science and reason. That is how we've always gotten things done, and we will continue that steadfast and prudent commitment to you as a partner and advocate.

No doubt, we've got big challenges ahead that will require some bold actions. We just celebrated the 10-year anniversary of the Skagit Delta Tidegates and Fish Initiative (TFI). Today, drainage and irrigation districts, through their commitment to TFI, are able to work on tidegates with less regulatory scrutiny, streamlined permitting, and consolidated mitigation. As this agreement moves forward, we must continue to address challenges

from outside sources while still maintaining landowner rights and improving our infrastructure. We continue to work with partners such as the Skagit County Drainage and Irrigation Districts Consortium to improve how we serve landowners and implement our historic agreement duties. We also have ag water supply, VSP, and a host of other issues that we need to help guide on the behalf of farmers.

We just held our annual meeting, and I want to thank all of our members for your continued support and involvement. We lead with good intentions, but we're only as knowledgeable as those sitting around the table. I encourage you to get involved on one of our committees (legislative, natural resources, research, or communications). We need more of your input as we make decisions, and we hope to not drain your limited time resource. Committees are a good way to be involved but not overwhelmed. Please, reach out to me, our staff, or another board member for more information.

IN THIS ISSUE:

- 10-year review of the TFI
- Our involvement in the Voluntary Stewardship Program
- Rural water quality update
- Friend of Agriculture
- Brassica seed update

I also want to take the opportunity to thank long-time board member, Brad Smith, for his years of service to WWAA and the community. Brad recently stepped off our board, and we welcome his wife, Jenn, as his replacement. Brad has served WWAA for more than 15 years, and he's been a part of building a lot of the progress we've made.

WWAA MISSION

To represent agriculture by providing services to the entire agricultural community

WWAA COMMITMENTS

Engage in internal and external (economic, environmental, regulatory) pressures on agriculture

Interact with county, state, and federal legislators and regulators

Pest and nutrient management control

Network with and support of the agricultural research community

Seek out and develop opportunities and technologies for agriculture

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President

Marty Coble

Vice-President

Garrett Williams

Secretary/Treasurer

Tyler Breum

Directors

Jenn Smith

Steve Strand

Bob Hughes

Jon Vanderkooy

Andrew Schuh

Dan Gundersen

Owen Peth

STAFF MEMBERS

Executive Director

Brandon Roozen

broozen@westag.org

Office Manager

Debbie Danielson

ddanielson@westag.org

Assistant to Executive Director

Gary T. Jones

gjones@westag.org

2017 Continental Place #6
Mount Vernon, WA 98273
(360) 424-7327
westag.org

Annual Meeting

Updates on current issues affecting members

The new year brought a lot of new protocols and procedures, including how we performed our annual meeting. Like many other organizations, we utilized the virtual option to conduct business, and roughly 20 members came together to review the work of the past year.

10-Year Review of the TFI

The spring of 2020 marked the 10th anniversary of the Skagit Delta Tidegates and Fish Initiative (TFI). Within and among programmatic responsibilities, WWAA crafted a TFI Implementation Agreement 10-year review report. To best meet this task, WWAA utilized our local environmental consultant, Paul Pittman (Saturna), to help compile the report. The TFI 25-year agreement was signed in 2010 and serves as the backbone to protect and enhance both salmon habitat and tidegate infrastructure (read more about this agreement in our November 2020 newsletter). The 10-year program review includes two elements:

- 1) Habitat-credit status, and
- 2) Input from parties and committees regarding program function.

The review process is intended to be inclusive of TFI parties and provided opportunities for all to submit formal feedback. While drafted to inform TFI parties on how to best meet TFI goals and commitments, both the TFI 10-year mark and the report has been met with some criticism from the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community (SITC), particularly regarding the conversion of agricultural land to estuary restoration. The TFI supports the attainment of smolt production goals (1.35 million smolts) identified within the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan or the conversion and restoration of a maximum of 2,700 acres of agricultural land (whichever is achieved first) within the Skagit Delta. The SITC claims that while the TFI program is 40% through its intended

duration (25 years), it's far from achieving 40% of the habitat restoration goal. The SITC would like a detailed plan of how the parties involved in the agreement will achieve the 2,700-acre estuarine habitat goal within the next 15 years.

Along with TFI partners NOAA and WDFW, WWAA supports strategic and linked efforts to meet Chinook recovery goals, and appreciates SITC's participation and interest in TFI implementation. At the same time, as a signatory party to the TFI agreement and following our commitment to members and neighbors, WWAA staff works with all involved parties to ensure that the TFI is upheld as agreed. We work to ensure that tidegate infrastructure continues to improve for farmers and landowners, while also finding appropriately timed and placed Chinook habitat restoration projects.

Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) Involvement

This program continues to set WWAA's standards for environmental stewardship, and WWAA continues to influence how it benefits farmers throughout the state. Instead of regulation, VSP enables an enrolled county to protect and restore riparian streams and other critical areas on agricultural land through voluntary programs and coordination of existing incentive programs. It provides focus and direction for agricultural stewardship, measurable goals and benchmarks, and relies on local watershed groups to develop work plans for implementation. Skagit County landowners with property on agricultural-natural resource lands and rural resource-natural resource lands must comply with the existing Critical Areas Ordinance for ongoing agriculture. According to our local county

code, qualified agricultural activity is exempt from the standard buffer requirements, but they must “not harm or degrade” critical areas and must comply with specified water course protection measures. The VSP has two mandates:

1) Protect and enhance critical areas, and

2) Maintain agriculture’s viability.

Both our executive director, Brandon Roozen, and the Washington Farm Bureau’s John Stuhlmiller represent agricultural interests on the State-wide Advisory Committee. Without this representation, the agencies and others could change how critical area protection standards and definitions would apply to agriculture. According to the Skagit County’s 2-year status report (2019), this program’s local goals are to protect critical wetlands, aquifer recharge areas, frequently flooded areas, geologically hazardous areas, and fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas. Multiple groups, including Skagit Conservation District, Skagit Land Trust, County Agricultural Advisory Board, Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, Port of Skagit, and the Skagit Watershed Council, play a role in this program. Skagit County’s Natural Resources Stewardship Program (NRSP) was chosen to be the centerpiece of the county’s voluntary measures for implementing VSP.

WWAA continues to be actively involved in how VSP is applied to a landscape. We also anticipate the thorough and extensive 5-year report on the VSP, which is due August 30, 2021.

Ag Water Supply Update

While local partners are formally appointed to the Joint Legislative Task Force for Water Supply (Task Force), WWAA continues support for local agricultural water supply. Access to water for irrigation is critical to crop diversity and farm viability in the Skagit Valley. In 2001, the Skagit River Instream Flow Rule was adopted by the Washington State Department of Ecology (DOE). It established flow levels to protect the Skagit River and its tributaries. The rule was influenced and informed by the 1999 Duke Engineering “Final Technical Report: Lower Skagit River Instream Flow Studies.”

KEN DAHLSTEDT

Friend of Agriculture

Well known for his passion for the Puget Sound region, Ken Dahlstedt worked to improve the greater Skagit Valley throughout the course of 20 years serving as District 2 County Commissioner. His district included Mount Vernon south to the Snohomish county line, but his commitment to agriculture was felt throughout the County. Dahlstedt lost his re-election bid in 2020. By leveraging his relationships with federal and state officials, he was able to secure funding for multiple projects in the area during his service. Known for his willingness to listen to constituents great and small, Dahlstedt understood the critical needs of the community and agricultural landscape. Serving his last term through 2020, he remained committed to promoting and meeting balanced natural resource goals.

“Ken worked for all his constituents,” said Brandon Roozen, executive director of WWAA. “He understands the challenges our agricultural community faces, and he will be missed.” Dahlstedt plans to continue serving the area by working with farmers regarding Chinook recovery and agricultural viability. He is interested in utilizing his expertise to garner support for community-wide and landscape-level actions that keep us all ahead of future challenges. WWAA applauds and appreciates him for continuing these pursuits.



Until late last year, WWAA’s Gary Jones served on the Task Force representing agriculture. Last spring, he and partners within the Task Force requested that the Washington State Academy of Sciences (WSAS) conduct an independent peer review of the estuary portion of the 1999 Duke Engineering Report that was commissioned to inform the 2001 Skagit River Instream Flow Rule by the Skagit River Instream Flow Committee. The estuary study’s objectives, methods, and results have not been previously peer reviewed.

Recently, the WSAS finalized its independent peer review of the estuary study portion of the 1999 Duke Engineering report. According to WSAS’s report, the Academy found that, “while the Duke Estuary Study took several thoughtful approaches and represents a body of work that was relatively comprehensive given the tools available when it was conducted, and the likely potential budget and management constraints placed upon the study, there are several issues with the study’s methods. A current-day estuary study could use several new tools and technologies, and would be positioned to apply an updated understanding of

climatic processes, habitat, and other relevant fields.”

While this report does not change any water rights or permits, the role of the DOE, or the Instream Flow Rule, it does offer the prospect of better information and better scientific data to influence future decisions.

Rural Water Quality News

How should water be regulated and monitored? That’s the question we are tracking regarding water quality in the region and within agricultural areas. Currently WWAA is participating in DOE processes (Total Maximum Daily Load Assessments and Implementation Reports) and discussions relating to rural water quality, in part to discern which waterways are held to a “swimmable or fishable” standard and to articulate how and why this is not appropriate. For example, drainage and irrigation ditches created for agricultural purposes that don’t drain directly into fish-bearing streams should not be held to this standard. These ditches are not intended to hold fish,

(continued on next page)



2017 Continental Place #6
Mount Vernon, WA 98273
(360) 424-7327
westag.org

nor are they areas for human use. In addition, we believe that water quality parameters and problems created by other upstream uses should not be applied to or mitigated by agricultural areas. WWAA staff continues to monitor and educate community partners, elected officials, and regulatory agencies about rural and agricultural water quality.

Brassica Seed Update

Also, the group learned more about the Skagit County Brassica seed ordinance change. The proposed ordinance (SCC 9.56) aims to promote cooperation between commercial and noncommercial growers by establishing a method to resolve potential cross-pollination conflicts. Brassica plants like kale, cabbage, broccoli, and Brussels sprouts are very susceptible to cross-pollination, and this problem can damage the pure seed industry our farmers have worked so hard to develop. Skagit County currently grows roughly 25% of the world's cabbage seed. These pure seed crops can be easily damaged by neighboring homeowners who also grow brassica plants and allow their plants to flower. Most homeowners remove their plants before flowering, but some do not. State code discourages homeowners from allowing their plants to flower. The new ordinance would set in place a clear and mandatory dispute resolution process between farmers and homeowners. A public hearing is scheduled for March 2, at 9:00 AM, with information on the Skagit County Commissioner webpage.

Thank You, Brad Smith

After 15 years of service, local farmer Brad Smith recently decided to step off the WWAA board of directors. He started in 2006, and his input and participation was vital to the creation and implementation of the Skagit Comprehensive Irrigation District Management Plan (2006), the Skagit Delta Tidegates and Fish Initiative (2010), the Skagit Farms, Fish and Food Initiative (2012), the Skagit County Drainage and Irrigation Districts Consortium (2017), and numerous other WWAA endeavors.

"It's fair to say that we (WWAA) wouldn't have the drainage and irrigation infrastructure programs and plans we have today, if it wasn't for the input and work of Brad," said WWAA Executive Director Brandon Roozen. "Brad's involvement during those tenuous years crafting important agreements, and the years of dedication to their implementation ever since, was vital to the success of agriculture in the valley."

Smith is a 4th generation Mt. Vernon-area farmer. Smith raises wheat and spinach seed, as well as multiple other crops, in rotation with their primary crop of potatoes. In 1998, the Smiths established a partnership with Morrison Farms to construct a packing facility and sell potatoes throughout the United States and Canada under the labels, "Skagit Valley's Best" and "Skagit Harvest Value."

Smith's wife, Jennifer, was unanimously elected at the annual meeting to replace her husband on the board of directors. We are sad to see Brad go, but are excited to have Jenn serving on the board. Jenn works on the farm with Brad, and also serves on the board of directors for both the Skagit Farmers Supply and Skagitians to Preserve Farmland.