



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 2021:

International Marketing. COVID-19 has continued to negatively impact Washington food and agriculture exporters in 2021 due to ongoing marketplace disruptions as well as shipping challenges resulting from container shortages, significant port congestion and unprecedented shipping rates. The WSDA International Marketing Program has continued to conduct all programming “virtually” in 2021, implementing over 20 virtual trade missions and numerous educational webinars and virtual business consultations as of October. The program is tentatively planning in-person trade events in the coming months starting with Canada and Mexico. As the result of a large competitive procurement process, the program increased the number of contracts for in-market representation from 4 to 9, expanding countries of WSDA coverage significantly (and with a reduced program budget). Director Sandison continued his role as Chair of the Marketing and International Trade Committee for the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture (NASDA). He was also appointed Vice-Chair of the NASDA-affiliated Agriculture Trade Education Council, a new organization focused on educating people on the importance of international trade for U.S. farmers and ranchers.

The **WSDA Dairy Nutrient Management Program (DNMP)** partners with Conservation Districts (CD), inspecting 292 dairies (312 licensed milking parlors) in 29 counties. Between July 1, 2020 and June 30 2021, DNMP conducted 258 routine, follow up, investigation, closeout, and other inspections. Local CDs often collaborate with DNMP during routine and other inspections; this partnership helps CDs provide excellent, non-regulatory technical assistance to producers, also helping to identify financial assistance for dairies through local, state, and federal cost share and grant programs. CD’s also work with dairy producers develop nutrient management plans as required by chapter 90.64 RCW, the Dairy Nutrient Management Act.

Nutrient management plans (NMP) are a critical tool in protecting both surface and ground waters. As of September 30, 2021, 99% of Washington dairies are in compliance with NMP requirements and have, or are currently working with a planner to obtain an approved and certified plan.

- Two dairies have paid the maximum penalty of \$5,000 and will not receive further penalties for failure to obtain a certified NMP.
- One dairy has been assessed the maximum penalty of \$5,000, but has not paid.
- One dairy is being penalized \$100/month until they have a Certified NMP or have paid the maximum of \$5,000.

Through DNMP's National Estuary Program grant, in March and April 2021 we provided \$10,000 sub-awards to Snohomish, Skagit, and Whatcom CDs to help them establish and maintain in-house Coliscan® [*E. coli*] sampling and analysis stations. Our three CD partners currently have their stations set up, have begun sampling and promotional activities to offer Coliscan® as a non-regulatory, technical assistance tool in support of Pollution Identifications and Correction partners. With reliable, non-regulatory sample results, CDs can provide targeted technical assistance to producers, focused on correcting pollution sources.

The database that DNMP maintains to house producer information, also allows CD access to inspection reports and Technical Assistance Referrals (TAR). CD planners request access and are provided with a temporary password, which gives them the ability to view and comment on TAR progress, and barriers and successes with completing referred projects. Between July 1, 2020 and June 30 2021, DNMP issued 111 TARs to 65 facilities with multiple facilities receiving referrals for more than one issue. Similar to the previous year, nutrient collection and storage issues remain high. This is in part due to aging and failing infrastructure at facilities.

While inspectors issued twice as many TARs to facilities in the NW Region than other regions, proportionally, SW Region facilities received the most TARs:

- 34% of SW Region facilities received a TAR
- 20% of NW Region facilities received a TAR
- 17% of EA Region facilities receiving a TAR

Our CD partners have been very helpful in participating in field walks, source ID sampling. 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; when all three parties problem-solve jointly the chances for effective and permanent fixes greatly increase.

WSDA Natural Resource Assessment Section (NRAS) implemented 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 took place in the Palouse and Yakima River watersheds and included monitoring surface water for agricultural pesticides, waste pesticide collection, and targeted outreach in partnership with the Palouse Conservation District.

Soil Health. As part of the broader Washington Soil Health Initiative (WA SHI), WSDA contracted with 11 conservation districts in 2021 to take soil samples from nearly 100 fields. Samples were primarily taken from dryland wheat systems and rangelands to complement the nearly 300 specialty crop samples taken by WSU. All samples were analyzed for physical, chemical, and biological indicators of soil health. Data is being used in a “State of the Soils” Assessment. The assessment will provide Washington- and crop- specific soil health scoring curves, as well as a statewide database that maps soil health and carbon storage across Washington’s diverse crops and regions. Participating growers will be given a soil health report by the end of 2021.

In 2021, WSDA hired a full time Soil Health Scientist to lead WSDA’s participation in WA SHI. Under this leadership, soil health surveys and interviews were conducted with participating conservation districts across the state. Districts identified the following soil management challenges: 1) low soil organic matter; 2) problems maintaining fertility; 3) low water holding capacity; 4) poor resistance to water- or wind-driven erosion; 5) poor air quality resulting from erosional forces; 6) acidification; 7) compaction; 8) soil-borne pathogens; and 9) decreased soil microbial diversity and activity. To address these challenges, districts ask that WA SHI provide: 1) increased soils education and outreach; 2) site- and crop-specific soil health prescriptions; 3) funding for demonstration projects; 4) technical support for project implementation and monitoring; 5) support in translating WSU research to growers, and in communicating grower needs to WSU; 6) soil health field days; 7) soil health trainings through the Center for Technical Development; and 8) more information and technical support for cover crop implementation. These challenges and requests will be incorporated into the strategic planning of WA SHI in years to come. Finally, conservation districts reported a widespread enjoyment of sampling with WSDA, due to: 1) the increased technical capacity each CD now contains; 2) the networking opportunity with WSDA, WSU, and other CDs; 3) the ability to work with new growers in their districts; and 4) the WSDA training materials.

Additional soil health updates include: the implementation of a network of long-term soil health research sites across the state, currently located in Mount Vernon (seed and vegetable crops), Othello (potatoes), and Wenatchee (tree fruit); the planning phase of a voluntary grant program called Sustainable Farms and Fields, which will fund growers to increase carbon sequestration and reduce greenhouse gas emissions; and the continuation of training and monitoring support for soil health under the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP).

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,

Perry Beale
WSDA / NRAS / Office of the Director
SCC Commissioner
21 N 1st Ave, Suite 224
Yakima WA 98902

Cc Lisa Leffert