Ag industry mourns death of WSU president

Floyd committed to land-grant mission, leaders say

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Matthew Weaver/Capital Press
Washington State University President Elson Floyd speaks during a symposium in 2013 on the university campus in Pullman, Wash. Floyd died June 20 of complications from colon cancer.

Representatives of Washington's agriculture industry remember Washington State University's president for his leadership and commitment to research.

Elson Floyd died June 20 of complications from colon cancer, according to WSU. He was 59. Floyd became WSU president in 2007.

"He was a real straight shooter when it came to us in the wheat industry," said Randy Suess, a Colfax, Wash., wheat farmer and Whitman County representative on the Washington Grain Commission. "If we would have an issue, we could go to him and he'd say, 'Give me five minutes.' Then he'd come back and he'd go, 'Problem solved.'"

Former grain commission CEO Tom Mick, now retired, praised Floyd's ability to make a decision quickly. When university bureaucracy threatened a key research position that had been vacated, the commission met with Floyd to stress the importance of the position. Floyd returned within 10 minutes and told them he had approved that someone be hired.

"Usually when you make a proposal to a university, it takes 18 months to two years to even get an indication whether they're going to approve it or not," Mick said. "He did it in 10 minutes because he thought it was the right thing to do. That really impressed me. I can't say enough good things — I worked with a lot of research institutes and universities around the country, and he by far stood out as the best."

Rich Koenig, associate dean of WSU's College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Sciences and director of WSU Extension, said Floyd would often walk across the campus, checking in with students and university staff about how things were going, an uncommon practice, Koenig said.

Floyd often spoke of his commitment to agriculture and the land-grant mission of the university to stakeholders, students, faculty and staff, Koenig said. He was also the only president to visit every county extension office in the state, Koenig said.

During those visits, Floyd emphasized the accessibility and relevance of higher education for citizens. He stressed the importance of the partnership between the university and local governments, and that the university's land-grant mission was "alive and well in the 21st Century," Koenig said.

Floyd was slated to speak at the centennial celebration of WSU's dryland research station in Lind, Wash., June 11, but was unable to attend due to his illness.

Station director Bill Schilliger recalled Floyd scheduling a 2010 meeting with 50 key dryland farmers at the Lind station to talk about the university's commitment to agricultural research.

"This was right when the recession hit and everybody (was thinking), 'What's going to happen?'" Schillinger said. "(Floyd) said, 'Nope, that's our mission. We are the land-grant university for this state. We will not abandon you.' He wowed those farmers — they basically said, 'This is the best president ever.' They're still talking about it today, how he came out to speak to them directly about research."

Courtesy of Washington Growers League
The Washington Growers League owns and operates the 200-bed Bender Creek housing for seasonal farmworkers in Cashmere. The league's executive director says the buildings won't have a problem meeting new state standards.

Wash. sets new standards for farmworker housing

Agency gives growers several years to meet space requirements

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Two state agencies have finalized new standards for farmworker housing, regulating everything from minimum living space to the number of toilets in group quarters.

The Department of Health and the Department of Labor and Industries on Wednesday issued the rules, which will take effect in one month, though most requirements won't have to be met until Jan. 1 at the earliest.

Farm groups have expressed concern that changing the rules will force growers to close housing or pay for expensive remodeling.

The health department's health facilities director, Lisa Hodgson, said the agency was sensitive to farm economics.

"I believe we really tried to balance the costs to growers with the health and safety of workers," she said.

Washington Farm Labor Association Director Dan Fazio said the organization is reviewing the standards and planned to ask the health department for a briefing.

The association had urged that the state rules not exceed federal farmworker housing standards and that they not apply to existing housing.

The final rule doesn't include a grandfather clause for current housing. But in some cases, growers will have two or more years to meet the standards.

The state standards will have requirements related to fire extinguishers, smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, partitions between toilets and shower stalls, and storage lockers not found in federal rules.

Fazio said the new rules could further complicate efforts to bring in H-2A foreign workers, who must be supplied housing licensed by the health department. Growers already are struggling with multiple agencies to meet H-2A requirements, he said.

"The government has to decide whether it wants a guest-worker program," Fazio said. "I don't see the commitment."

The state law on minimum space requirements will mirror federal standards set by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Each worker must have at least 50 square feet in sleeping quarters and at least 100 square feet in units with a kitchen. Currently, housing must have at least 70 square feet of floor space for the first worker and 50 square feet for every worker after that.

Growers will have until Jan. 1, 2019, to meet the space requirements. Growers can apply for a three-year extension if they have a plan to provide the space. The health department received comments that the space requirement would be a hardship and that farms needed time to comply.

Older farmworker housing may fall short of the standards, but for most units, the changes probably will be minor, said Mike Gempler, executive director of the Washington Growers League, which owns seasonal housing in Cashmere and Malaga in Eastern Washington.

"I don't think it's going to be a widespread impact," he said.

Gempler said the new rules include "commonsense" requirements, such as locks on bathroom stalls and places for workers to secure their belongings.

Washington ag nonprofit seeks 'founding members'

TV show needs industry support, director says

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Photo courtesy Karla Salp/Washington Farmers and Ranchers
"Washington Grown" host Kristi Gorenson speaks with Skagit Valley farmer Jim Neff during the second season of the TV series, designed to teach the state's consumers about agriculture. The nonprofit Washington Farmers and Ranchers is offering industry members a chance to become "founding member" donors by June 30.

Online
http://www.wafarmers.org/join-wfr

A nonprofit organization that aims to educate consumers about Washington agriculture is looking for founding members.

Washington Farmers and Ranchers (WFR), doing business as Washington Grown, was incorporated as a nonprofit in July 2014.

June 30 is the last day for agricultural producers, shippers or organizations to become "founding members," in the nonprofit's first year. The designation comes with a permanent spot on the company's website, said executive director Karla Salp.

Memberships are paid. The funds help put on the Washington Grown television program, currently filming its third season, slated to air this fall.

The funding also helps put on an educational seed packet giveaway program, designed to teach consumers about what it takes to grow food and the difference between gardening and farming. The organization distributed 15,000 free gardening seed packets statewide in May, according to a press release.

Other activities include an educational day for legislators in Olympia in March.

"The end-goal is to educate consumers so they are better aware of what agriculture is really like in Washington State," Salp said. "How important it is, not only for getting food on their plates, but also for our economy."

Washington Farmers and Ranchers has 17 members. Salp hopes to get all farmers, ranchers and organizations to support efforts.

Salp will work on membership recruitment this summer, and begin planning the next Olympia event. A fourth season of "Washington Grown" depends on industry support, Salp said.

"If the industry likes it and wants to keep it going, we all need to come together to support it to make that happen," she said. "When we all work together, we can have a dramatic positive impact on farming and ranching in Washington State."

Senate committee gives swift blessing to new ag director

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Washington's new agriculture director, Derek Sandison, breezed through his confirmation hearing June 19, signaling that legislators are confident the veteran administrator will competently lead the department.

From start to finish, the hearing took 13 minutes, ending with the Senate Agriculture, Water and Rural Economic Development Committee voting to recommend Sandison to the full Senate.

The committee's chairwoman, Moses Lake Republican Judy Warnick, said she hoped the Senate will vote on Sandison during the current special session.

Sandison, 62, started his new job June 15, coming directly from the state Department of Ecology, where he had worked since 2001. He was the agency's central region director and then head of the Wenatchee-based Office of Columbia River.

"I've worked with Derek a long time. I know his qualifications, and I wanted to give the stamp of approval, at least through this committee," Warnick said.

Sandison said after the hearing that his first week at WSDA has gone well.

"It's a fantastic group of people to work with, and I'm impressed with their grasp of issues and approach to problem-solving," he said.

The speedy hearing contrasted with the Senate's handling of Sandison's predecessor, Bud Hover, an Okanogan County farmer and former county commissioner.

Hover was WSDA director for two years before the Senate scheduled a confirmation hearing. Hover resigned last spring the day before the hearing.

Agency directors appointed by the governor can serve without Senate confirmation, but they can be ousted by the confirmation process. It's unclear whether Hover would have been rejected, but at the time, one senator described the department as a "mess."

Gov. Jay Inslee's appointment of Sandison was widely praised by lawmakers. The Washington Farm Bureau said Sandison was its top pick.

As Office of Columbia River director, Sandison oversaw long-range plans to increase water available for fish, cities and farmers in Central and Eastern Washington.

Sandison told senators that he looked forward to continuing to work with irrigators in developing water supplies. "Their dedication and persistence have greatly impressed me," he said.

Sandison fielded a few questions. He said WSDA is working with other agencies to respond if bird flu reappears in Washington. "I think that at this point, most people understand how serious this threat is and are willing to pull together," he said.

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