

Ag director a problem solver

Derek Sandison learned by listening as he navigated Columbia River issues

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

OLYMPIA — Prior to becoming Washington's agriculture director 10 months ago, Derek Sandison was immersed in the West's water war and somehow emerged a popular man.

He led the Office of Columbia River within the Washington Department of Ecology for more than six years. The state set up the office to unite factions fighting over water in Eastern Washington.

Sandison set out to do what science says can't be done — create water.

Plans to wring more water from Washington's dry side are complex and expensive. They will take years to execute and aren't universally supported. There are wild cards, too. Political support for major undertakings rise and fall. Until the U.S. and Canada negotiate a new treaty to manage the mighty Columbia River, the outlook past 2024 won't be clear.

Nevertheless, Washington state now has blueprints to increase water supplies for farms, fish and cities.

Sandison's handling of this whirlpool of policy and politics was such that he was a popular choice to lead a Department of Agriculture in disarray.

Rancher and former Okanogan County Commissioner Bud Hover was director for two years before the Senate summoned him for a confirmation hearing, a bad omen. Even without confirmation, gubernatorial appointees serve unless the Senate votes to reject them. Hover resigned, and a senator described the department as a "mess."

Sandison, 63, didn't fit the normal agriculture director profile. He is not a farmer or a past or aspiring office holder. He hadn't worked at WSDA. He had been at Ecology for 14 years.

But he had earned a reputation as a listener and problem solver. He also was not a regulator. He spent his DOE career in Eastern Washington trying to do water projects. "I had to get permits from the Department of Ecology," he said.



Don Jenkins/Capital Press

Washington State Department of Agriculture Director Derek Sandison sits in his office in Olympia. On the job for 10 months, Sandison has brought his problem-solving skills to the department.

Western Innovator Derek Sandison

Age: 63
Position: Washington State Department of Agriculture director since June 2015

Previously: Director of the Office of Columbia River within the state Department of Ecology in Wenatchee and before that director of the department's Central Region office in Yakima

Hometown: Port Angeles

Education: Bachelor's degree in biology and master's degree in natural resources management from Central Washington University



Sandison was welcomed by Republicans and Democrats. The Washington Farm Bureau said Sandison was its top choice for WSDA director.

"Derek has done just what we expected him to do," the Farm Bureau's government relations director, Tom Davis, said. "He has done a great job restoring stability and leadership to WSDA."

Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Judy Warnick, R-Moses Lake, said Sandison has taken the time to learn from farmers

and ranchers. "He's willing to listen to issues other people have, and he's put people in place in his department who follow through on these issues," she said. "I feel like he's doing a great job. He understands the water issue, which in the state of Washington is critical for our farmers."

Sandison says that "mess" might be overstating what he walked into. But he did reshuffle administrators, to get people in the right place, he said. "There was certainly tur-

moil. You could see it on people's faces," Sandison said.

Sandison also moved to connect with producer groups. "It is notable that he is open and accessible," Davis said.

The Legislature keeps Sandison in Olympia when it's in session. At other times, Sandison estimates he spends at least half of his time traveling around the state.

In the short time he's been director, Sandison has dealt with, among other issues, drought, bird flu, apple maggots and gypsy moths.

"When a crisis arises, it's too late to do relationship building," he said.

Sandison said he's learned that producers have the sensation of being under siege.

"I hear that all over the state," Sandison said. "They feel like they're under attack."

Sandison's office is not far from where a What's Upstream billboard was put up to promote stricter laws on agriculture.

The now-removed billboard, part of a campaign funded by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, asserted that agriculture is unregulated, a proposition that Sandison said must seem "laughable" to farmers.

But Sandison said he was also struck by how, in his view, counterproductive the billboard was to the interests of the groups that put it up.

"If the motive was to solve problems, that's one helluva way to go about it," he said. "You want to foster collaboration and communication. You don't want to inflame a situation."

"I'm disappointed it was done with taxpayer funding."

When Gov. Jay Inslee picked Sandison last year, the Senate quickly held a hearing and confirmed Sandison's appointment. Sandison said he plans to stay as long as the governor allows it and as long as he's solving problems.

"My inclination is, if I see a problem, I want to deal with it," he said. "For the foreseeable future, I'm good."

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Calendar

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20 Northwest Locations

To submit an event go to the Community Events calendar on the home page of our website at www.capitalpress.com and click on "Submit an Event." Calendar items can also be mailed to Capital Press, 1400 Broadway St. NE, Salem, OR 97301.

Saturday, April 23
Oregon Ag Fest, 8:30 a.m.-5 p.m. We strive to bridge the gap between urban and rural life, and to share the wonder and abundance of Oregon's bountiful and diverse harvest. Most importantly, we do this in a family-friendly way, where kids 12 and under receive free admission, and virtually all activities are free of charge. Oregon State Fairgrounds, Salem. http://oragfest.com/
California FFA State Convention, Selland Arena, Fresno. www.calaged.org/stateconvention

Monday, April 25
California FFA State Convention, Selland Arena, Fresno. www.calaged.org/stateconvention

Tuesday, April 26
California FFA State Convention, Selland Arena, Fresno. www.calaged.org/stateconvention

Soil Test Interpretation for Commercial Growers. 4-6 p.m. OSU Southern Oregon Research & Extension Center-Library. Soil scientist Elizabeth Murphy will present strategies and practical approaches to integrate knowledge about the chemical, physical, and ecological properties of the soil to refine nutrient management, improve soil health, and maximize production. \$20 fee. Pre-class questions and soil test report submittal are encouraged. 541-776-7371, ext. 208, http://extension.oregonstate.edu/sorec/small-farms-2016-classes

Sunday, April 24
Oregon Ag Fest, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. We strive to bridge the gap between urban and rural life, and to share the wonder and abundance of Oregon's bountiful and diverse harvest. Most importantly, we do this in a family-friendly way, where kids 12 and under receive free admission, and virtually all activities are free of charge. Oregon State Fairgrounds, Salem. http://oragfest.com/
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Wednesday, April 27
Oregon Orchardgrass Seed Producers Commission meeting, 7:30 a.m., Elmer's restaurant, 2802 Santiam Highway SE, Albany, Ore., 503-924-1181, www.orchardgrass.org

Saturday, April 30
Incredible Edibles Plant Sale, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Westminster Presbyterian Church, Portland. Multnomah County master gardeners. From seedlings to supper, grow your own. Cost: Free.

Thursday, May 5
2016 Animal Agriculture Alliance Stakeholders Summit, 7 a.m.-6 p.m. Westin Arlington Gateway, Arlington, Va. www.animalagalliance.org/summit

Friday, May 6
18th Annual Cinco de Mayo Golf Classic. 7:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Silverado Resort & Spa, 1600 Atlas Peak Road, Napa, Calif. This is the only fundraising event in Napa Valley exclusively dedicated to the needs of migrant farmworkers. 707-227-2641

Friday, May 13
Washington FFA Convention, Washington State University, Pullman

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Saturday, May 14
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Saturday, May 21
2016 Goat Academy, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. A full day of classes followed by an auction on May 22. Camping available. Half Creek Farm, Goldendale, Wash. www.columbiabasin-goatguild.org

Sunday, May 22
Oregon Cattlemen's Association's Midyear 2016, 1-9 p.m., Sunriver Resort, 17600 Center Drive, Sunriver, Ore. The event will host Ethan Lane, executive director of the Public Lands Council. www.orcattle.com

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Saturday, May 28
Alpaca Shearing Day & Sale, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Alpacas of Oregon, 21345 SW Aebischer Road, Sherwood, Ore. Visitors can chat with four long-time livestock breeders who've raised llamas, horses, sheep, and goats. 503-348-6954

Monday, June 6
AOSA SCST Joint Annual Meeting, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Embassy Suites, Airport Way, Portland. http://www.seedtechnology.net/

Tuesday, June 7
AOSA SCST Joint Annual Meeting, 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Embassy Suites, Airport Way, Portland. http://www.seedtechnology.net/

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