

Lobbying firm now downplays role in What's Upstream

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

A \$655,000 campaign funded by the Environmental Protection Agency to impose mandatory buffers between farms and waterways generated 51 form letters to Washington state lawmakers, according to a lobbying firm executive.

Strategies 360 Vice President of Communications Jeff Reading told the state Public Disclosure Commission that even if more letters had been sent, they would not amount to lobbying because they didn't advocate for a specific bill.

The letters sent through the What's Upstream website were merely meant to make legislators "more aware of the issue."

"Therefore there was nothing to report to the PDC," he wrote.

The email sent Dec. 29 to the PDC responded to a complaint by Save Family Farming that What's Upstream failed to register as a political organization.

The Swinomish Indian tribe used an EPA grant for Puget Sound restoration to hire Strategies 360. Over five years, the firm, tribe and environmental groups developed a media campaign accusing farmers of being unregulated water polluters. The EPA's Office of Inspector General is looking into whether the campaign violated federal laws against using public funds to lobby.

In earlier responses to the PDC, the tribe and EPA asserted the state agency has no jurisdiction over them.

Reading called the complaint "frivolous and retaliatory."

The What's Upstream website included a "take action" link urging lawmakers to consider mandatory 100-foot buffers. Environmental groups told supporters the letter was timed to influence the 2016 Legislature.

"They were very specific about the legislation they wanted to pass requiring mandatory buffers," Save Family Farming director Gerald Baron said Wednesday. "Is that not a specific change in state law?"

The PDC can issue fines of up to \$10,000. It also can refer cases to the state Attorney General's Office to seek stiffer penalties. The PDC has not announced whether it will take enforcement action. Save Family Farming was formed to push back against What's Upstream.

Strategies 360 describes itself on its website as a "leader in grass-roots advocacy in the West and beyond."

The firm once held up What's Upstream as a "case study" to attract other clients. According to Strategies 360, it created advertising that drove more than 13,000 visitors to the What's Upstream website in three months.

In his response to the PDC, Reading downplayed Strategies 360's role, comparing it to a newspaper that runs a guest editorial urging readers to contact legislators.

"S360 merely provided a platform — in this case, a website — for the public to learn about an environmental issue, ..." he wrote.

Reading told the PDC that the firm polled voters in 2012 and 2014 to gauge public support for a statewide initiative to mandate buffers. He said the polls did not lead to an imitative.

Previously released EPA records show that the polls found that voters held farmers in high regard. To increase support for more restrictions on agriculture, the public would have to be persuaded water quality is actually a "growing and dangerous problem," according to a post-survey report by Strategies 360.

The tribe subsequently reported to the EPA that Strategies 360 was developing a "more refined outreach program."

Grain reps, state officials meet with USDA on falling number

Industry gatherings planned to discuss controversial test

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

Representatives from the Pacific Northwest wheat industry and Washington State Department of Agriculture recently met with USDA officials to discuss ways to deal with falling number quality problems.

"We felt the discussions went very well and that it was extremely helpful to have the wheat industry join our agency in those meetings," said Hector Castro, communications director for WSDA.

WSDA Director Derek Sandison and representatives of the Washington Grain Commission, Oregon Wheat Commission, Idaho Grain Producers Association and Washington Association of Wheat Growers met in Washington, D.C., with several "high-level" representatives from USDA Agricultural Research Service and Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration.

"We explained the challenges of falling number this



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press File

Washington Grain Commission CEO Glen Squires talks about falling number test problems with U.S. Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash., Sept. 2 in Colfax. Squires and other Pacific Northwest wheat industry representatives recently met with federal officials in Washington, D.C., to discuss ways to address the problems.

year, and the need to move forward on several fronts," Washington Grain Commission CEO Glen Squires said.

"It was a good meeting and well-received."

Those fronts include:

- A quicker test at the

grain elevator level to assist with segregating wheat with low falling number from the rest of the crop.

- Possible adjustments in protocol to the current test and equipment.

- Genomic research in wheat cultivar development.

- Potential other test equipment from other companies.

Discussions included the need for increased funding at the federal level, Squires said.

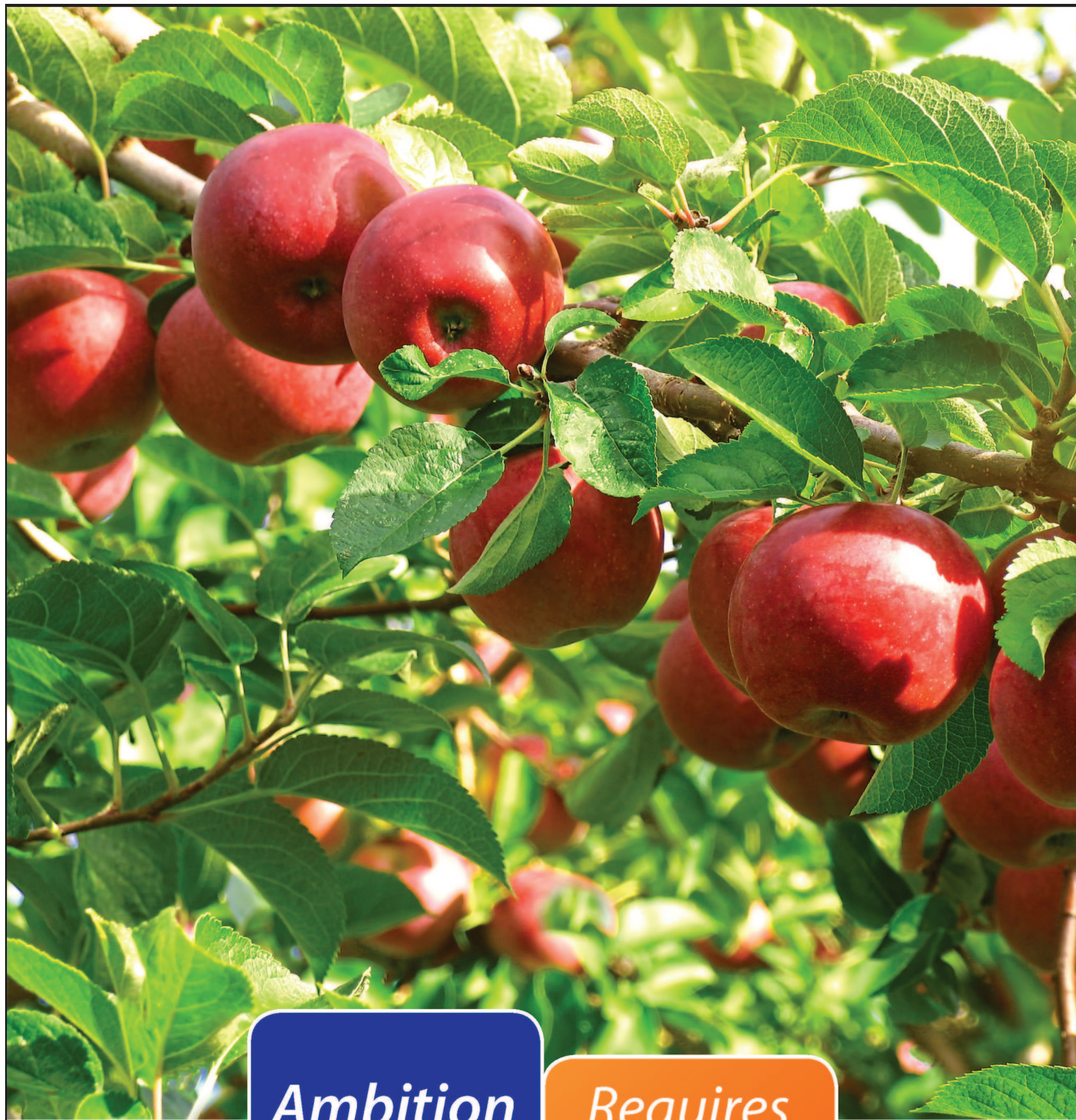
WSDA expects further meetings with some of the same federal agencies in February, Castro said.

The USDA ARS unit in Pullman, Wash., is organizing a regional meeting in February to discuss current and potential research and existing expertise in each state. The falling number committee from the three commissions will meet in early January, Squires said.

The PNW states, WSDA and ARS will stay in touch, Squires said.

Grain elevators use the Hagberg-Perten falling number test to measure starch damage due to sprouting. A low falling number indicates a high level of alpha amylase, an enzyme that degrades starch and diminishes the quality of wheat products.

Discounts for low falling numbers vary depending on the elevator, according to the Washington Grain Commission.



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