Washington Strawberry Commission exits on sour audit

Records on spending absent

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

The Washington Strawberry Commission, inactive and soon to officially dissolve, didn't produce records to document that it spent grower assessments appropriately over a five-year period, according to the state auditor's office.

The commission's former part-time manager, Walter Swenson, did not provide documents on expenditures that auditors requested. Auditors were able to look at bank statements and strawberry production records.

"The limited documentation provided did not reveal any misspent funds," according to the auditor's report released Oct. 4.

The routine audit covered the years 2013 through 2017. Inadequate internal controls put the public funds at greater risk of loss, waste and abuse, according to the audit. Since the commission will disband at the end of this year, the auditor's office recommended no further action.

Strawberry growers petitioned the state Department of Agriculture to close the commission because of declining funds and interest among farmers. The half-cent per pound assessment raised $36,144 in 2016, the last year assessments were collected.

Commission board member Richard Sakuma, of Sakuma Brothers Farms in Skagit County, said Monday that the commission met once a year to allocate the money, mostly for research. The commission also had some administrative costs, including Swenson's salary. The commission did not have an office.

"It was pretty low key," Sakuma said. "I felt everything was OK."

Swenson resigned in August 2017, according to the auditor's office. Efforts to reach Swenson were unsuccessful.

Washington has 21 agricultural commissions. The state Department of Agriculture is represented on each commission. As required, the strawberry commission submitted budgets to the department in 2015, 2016 and 2017, a department spokesman said.

Sakuma took over as the strawberry commission's chairman after growers petitioned the department to disband it.

Farmers who supply strawberries to processors saw little benefit to the commission. Sakuma said that he hoped some growers would be interested in continuing a commission to promote fresh strawberries and to have an organization in place in case a problem arose that affected the strawberry industry.

"It just couldn't get the traction," he said. "There just isn't much of an industry left."

The assessments collected in 2016 were about one-third the amount collected 15 years ago. Farmers cite labor costs and competition from California for the decline in production.

Remote-sensing study of alfalfa aims to predict bloom

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

The best alfalfa seed production occurs when pollinating bees can work on the crop as it approaches, and then reaches, full bloom.

Predicting peak bloom and getting the alfalfa leafcutter bees ready to pollinate at the right time pose problems that producers traditionally solved — successfully, for the most part — with hand-me-down or otherwise shared knowledge.

A field study underway in southwest Idaho aims to take out some of this guesswork by remotely sensing weather and field conditions, and in turn alfalfa plant and seed progress, so peak bloom can be predicted more effectively. Boise State University, the Nampa operations of S&W Seed Co. and research firm Kairosys are participating. Funding includes a $194,000 Idaho Global Entrepreneurial Mission grant through the state Department of Commerce and a $51,000 match from Kairosys.

Best yields occur when bees can pollinate alfalfa flowers when the crop is at peak bloom, Boise State University Geosciences Professor Nancy Glenn said.

"It is challenging to predict when bloom is going to be because of environmental conditions," she said. Soil and weather variables, and growers' irrigation decisions can make prediction difficult.


Nancy Glenn

"And growers actually have to cultivate leafcutter bees with the timing of the bloom in mind," Glenn said. "They want alfalfa to be at peak bloom when the leafcutter bees are mature enough to pollinate."

Traditionally, growers aimed to release bees when fields were at around 50 percent active bloom, said Brad Chambers, North American production manager with S&W.

"At that point, if you release bees, bloom is progressing every day," he said. "In the next week or two, they will just continue to bloom. That initial release of bees is important. You want the bees to have food and forage."

Releasing bees based on the percentage of the field that is in active bloom is a balancing act, he said.

"Any less than the ideal (bloom percentage) and the bees may travel — leave the field," he said. But if the grower waits until too far into the bloom, "the bees may not catch up, which hurts seed yield on the other end. Plants start dropping flowers, and bees can't get to them in time."

Managing bee incubation in step with bloom has been done largely based on growers' longtime knowledge, and familiarity with the weather calendar, Chambers said.

"The alfalfa industry is successful. Growers do hit that mark," he said. But growers and seed companies would like to see more consistency in yields, he said.

Tapping technology can help growers replace guesswork with data on temperatures and other environmental conditions, and even the plants' progress, he said.

In the study, satellites and field-installed sensors collect and track data comprising a fingerprint-like "spectral signature" — which changes over time, and ideally tells observers how plants are progressing and when bloom will gear up, Glenn said.

In a spectral signature, "the alfalfa bloom looks different than the alfalfa green leaves," she said. "So we can use that difference to find the alfalfa bloom."

Real-time data can be converted to images showing differences in bloom stage.

Court denies USDA motion to dismiss organic lawsuit

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

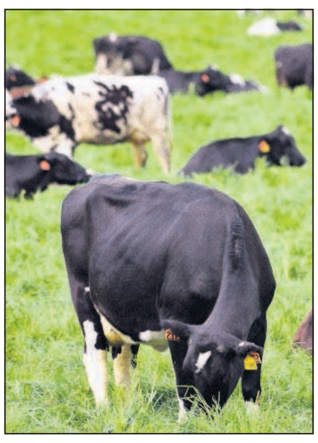
A ruling by the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia will allow a lawsuit by the Organic Trade Association against USDA over its withdrawal of the Organic Livestock and Poultry Practices rule to proceed.

U.S. District Judge Rosemary M. Collyer on Oct. 11 denied USDA's petition to dismiss the lawsuit and granted OTA's request for oral arguments at a date and time to be determined.

The rule, finalized in the waning days of the Obama administration, included new standards for raising, transporting and slaughtering organic animals.

USDA withdrew the rule in March, stating the rule exceeds the agency's statutory authority under the National Organic Program and could have a negative effect on voluntary participation in the program.

"We are delighted the court has agreed to hold a hearing despite the USDA's objections. Our case is moving forward," Laura Batcha, OTA's CEO and executive director, said in a press release.


E.J. Harris/EO Media Group File
Holstein cows graze at an organic dairy east of Hermiston, Ore. A judge has allowed a lawsuit to continue against USDA over the agency's withdrawal of new regulations for organic livestock and poultry.

"We are also encouraged that the court will hear our challenge to the entire, year-long pattern of unlawful conduct by USDA," she said.

The rule, which was set to go into effect March 20, 2017, was first delayed by a regulatory freeze by incoming President Donald Trump. USDA delayed implementation twice more before announcing in December — after taking public comment — it intended to withdraw the rule, which it did in February.

OTA's lawsuit argues that USDA's repeated delays were issued without the required public process and that USDA arbitrarily ignored the overwhelming public record established in support of the organic standards.

"We are confident our case is strong, and we look forward to winning this legal battle to uphold organic standards," Batcha said.

Conventional livestock and poultry groups have fiercely opposed the rule, citing health threats to animals and the public. They have argued its animal-welfare standards aren't based on science and are outside the scope of the Organic Foods Production Act, which limits organic standards to feeding and medication practices.

They have also argued that it would vilify conventional livestock practices, open the door to activists' lawsuits and create barriers for existing and new organic producers.

The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Animal Welfare Institute joined OTA in the lawsuit in April.

Women in Agriculture event to spotlight finances

Capital Press

The theme of the seventh annual Women in Agriculture Conference sponsored by Washington State University Extension will be "Pump Up Your Financial Fitness."

The one-day event will be held simultaneously 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Pacific time Saturday, Oct. 27, in 35 places in Oregon, Idaho, Washington, Montana and Alaska.


Carol Ryan Dumas/Capital Press File
Sarah Beth Aubrey, left, will be one of the featured speakers during the Oct. 27 Women in Agriculture Conference sponsored by the Washington State University Extension. The conference will be held simultaneously at 35 locations in five states.

The conference will offer discussions at each site and conference speakers. The featured morning speakers will be farm economist Robin Reid and farm analyst LaVell Winsor, both of Kansas State University Extension. Indiana farmer and agricultural business consultant Sarah Beth Aubrey will speak in the afternoon.

More than 600 people attended last year's conference, according to organizers.

In Oregon, the conference will be held in La Grande, Prineville, Salem and The Dalles.

In Idaho, the conference will be held in Bonners Ferry, Caldwell, Coeur d'Alene, McCall, Moscow, Sandpoint and Twin Falls.

In Washington, the conference will be held in Bremerton, Chehalis, Colville, Coupeville, Mount Vernon, Nespelem, Olympia, Pasco, Port Hadlock, Renton, Republic, Ritzville, Spokane, Vancouver, Walla Walla, Wenatchee, White Salmon and Yakima.

The registration fee is $35.

For more information online, WomenInAg.wsu.edu.