

# Tilth Alliance director looks to build bridge between urban, rural

**Spear: Washington farmers will assume leadership in food production**

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

The new executive director of the Tilth Alliance says she is "incredibly impressed" with the Washington farmers she's met.

"Given the climatic changes that we're seeing occur, I think Washington farmers are going to find themselves really being a leader in food production ... over the next couple of generations," said Melissa Spear. "I see them working very hard to do the work that's necessary to assume that position. I just really am looking forward to engaging more with that community."

Spear joined the Seattle-based organization Nov. 26.

"What really interests me about (the alliance) is it straddles the urban and the rural," she said. "Having a productive relationship between those two is critically important, they depend



Courtesy Melissa Spear

**Melissa Spear joined the Tilth Alliance as executive director in November.**

upon each other."

The organization co-manages the 10-acre Rainier Beach Urban Farm and Wetlands, which recently completed a two-year construction project. The alliance is developing support for the agricultural community on the site, and educational programs about food production, cooking and wetland restoration, Spear said.

The farm is certified organic by the Washington State Department of Agriculture.

Spear got her bachelor's

degree in zoology at the University of California-Santa Barbara. She got a master's degree in forest science from the Yale School of Forestry and a master's in business administration from the IESE Business School in Barcelona, Spain.

Originally from California, Spear was doing similar work while living in Connecticut for 30 years. She worked for the Trust for Public Land, which included preserving several important farms, she said.

There, she became inter-

ested in the challenge of maintaining a viable agricultural enterprise and farm, she said.

She also served as executive director for Common Ground in New Haven, Conn., a high school, urban farm and environmental education center that introduces agriculture to an urban population, including how to grow food, healthy eating and sustainable agriculture.

"The interests aligned really well with what Tilth was up to," she said.

Spear also moved to the West Coast to be closer to her daughter, who is "permanently located out here."

Washington agricultural communities face many of the same challenges that Connecticut communities do, Spear said.

"How to really strengthen the relationship between the urban centers and the rural communities who generally are our food producers," she said.

The alliance can help, she said, and promote sustainable and organic agriculture.

That includes making sure consumers, or "eaters," understand the impacts of their food choices, she said.

"Any time you eat some-

thing, producing that food item has a set of social, environmental and economic impacts," Spear said. "I think having some understanding of what those impacts are will influence your food choices."

Spear sees ways to modify food production and distribution to address climate change. That includes increasing organic matter in soils; prioritizing soil health; no-till farming and cover cropping; and reducing food waste.

Spear hopes the organization can continue to represent both farmers and consumers, as a source of education and information.

The alliance works with schools to use gardens as a teaching tool and introduce the concept of food production.

"All children should have some understanding of the important role agriculture plays in bringing food to the table," she said. "That's a missing link right now for a lot of kids. They think their food comes from a box wrapped in plastic or a plastic bag and don't understand it requires a farmer, a farm and some knowledge to produce it."

**Bake test helps Shepherd's Grain select varieties to grow**

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

A farmer-owned Eastern Washington flour company is testing the baking characteristics of up-and-coming wheat varieties to select the best for its growers to raise.

Shepherd's Grain held its annual bake test Feb. 19-20 at the Spokane Hutterian Brethren near Reedman, Wash.

"I think our bake tests are the number one reason why Shepherd's Grain flour stands out from a quality perspective," said Jeremy Bunch, logistics manager. "There's a lot of varieties of wheat out there that growers can choose from, and some of them may yield really great or are really good at preventing certain crop diseases. But maybe they don't have very good end-use quality."

The company tests new or pending wheat varieties from public and private wheat breeders. This year, they tested hard red winter wheat varieties Westbred XB4542, Westbred WB4311, LCS Evina, WSU WA8268, Syngenta Wolf and South Dakota State University's Oahe, using Westbred Keldin and a low-gluten Syngenta variety as checks.

The company is still analyzing the results, Bunch said.

"We only approve the ones we like," Bunch said. "On average we approve two or three a year, out of the eight or 10 we look at."

Testers prepare a pre-fermented pan loaf of bread for each variety, rating such factors as absorption, mixing time, dough strength, dough development, crumb color, crumb structure, smell, loaf size, crust color and taste.

"This is our way of vetting out which varieties we're going to accept from our growers," Bunch said. "Whatever they're contracting with Shepherd's Grain, yes we have to have one of those varieties."

The company has 35 farmers raising wheat on roughly 100,000 acres, Bunch said. He estimates the growers devote an average of 15 percent of their total production to Shepherd's Grain.

The test is held each year at the Hutterian facility because it has a commercial-grade kitchen. The company invites wheat breeders to attend the final day in the dining hall, Bunch said.

The company speaks with breeders to identify possible future varieties and promising experimental lines to get samples for next year's bake test.

## Idaho mulls changes to equine brand-inspection fees

By **BRAD CARLSON**  
Capital Press

Idaho may update its brand-inspection fee system for horses and mules to increase its financial sustainability.

The Idaho Senate Agricultural Affairs Committee on Feb. 22 endorsed Senate Bill 1082, which would raise the limit on existing fees and add a charge to cover the cost of inspectors' on-farm visits.

A brand inspection is needed when an animal leaves the state, changes ownership or goes to slaughter. The State Brand Board, through negotiated rule-making with stakeholders, sets the fees, which cannot exceed a statutory cap. The Idaho State Police run the brand-inspection program, which has its own budget from dedicated, fee-derived funds.

The current brand-inspection fee can be no more than \$1.50 per head. SB 1082 would raise the limit to \$10.

Idaho also offers an ownership and transportation certificate, known as a lifetime inspection, valid for as long as someone owns a horse or mule. SB 1082 would raise the limit or cap on this fee to \$75, from the current \$35.

SB 1082 proposes a new equine farm-service fee, of not more than \$55, to cover inspector travel to farms. Qualifying livestock auctions and feed lots are excluded.



Capital Press File

**Idaho legislators are considering an increase in brand inspection fees for horses and mules.**

Idaho State Brand Inspector Cody Burlile said the Brand Board inspection program has had a deficit. It raised the cattle inspection fee by 25 cents to \$1.19 by rule, but was unable to raise horse and mule inspection fees because of the caps. Proposed changes under SB 1082 would better enable horse and mule inspections to pay for themselves while allowing for some growth in demand, he said.

"We are totally in support of that," Idaho Horse Board Executive Director DeEtt

Lindbergh said of the proposed legislation. A portion of inspection revenue goes to the Horse Board, which issues grants to agricultural groups such as 4-H, therapeutic and backcountry trail riding organizations, and Miss Rodeo Idaho.

Proposed changes would align more closely with current costs, she said. Statutory caps haven't been raised in 30-plus years, the fees themselves in about 20.

The new equine farm-service fee of up to \$55 is important in that

horse inspections are commonly conducted on one or two animals, and rarely more than five at a time, said Wyatt Prescott, lobbyist for the Idaho Cattle Association, which supports the legislation. In contrast, cattle often are inspected by the truckload, 50 to 100 at once, depending on animal size.

The Idaho Farm Bureau Federation's 2019 Policy Book says IFB supports eliminating mandatory equine brand inspections. But IFB also supports an

option for having a brand inspection that stays valid as long as the equine stays under one ownership, and raising the fee for it. For livestock, the Farm Bureau supports the concept that animals can be left unbranded at the owner's discretion except for animals grazing on federally and state-managed land.

Lindbergh said horse brand inspections are valuable in tracking stolen animals, in disease control and traceability, and in resolving ownership disputes.

## Albertsons exec: Demand for natural, organic foods grows

By **BRAD CARLSON**  
Capital Press

Digging into data and working to stay innovative helped the nation's second-largest conventional grocery chain realize that demand for natural and organic foods was growing well beyond niche status.

Although Albertsons Cos. continues to see good demand for traditional fresh foods, deli goods and consumer packaged goods, the natural and organic segment has been contributing more to total revenues lately, Intermountain Division President John Colgrove told a Larry Branan Idaho Ag Summit audience Feb. 19 in Boise.

Branan is a retired dean of the University of Idaho



John Colgrove

College of Agricultural and Life Sciences.

Colgrove said the annual revenue that Boise-based Albertsons generates from natural and organic foods has been growing by more than 10 percent per year for the past seven years. At the same time, revenue from consumer packaged goods remains a big contributor, but has been flat or in slight decline collectively.

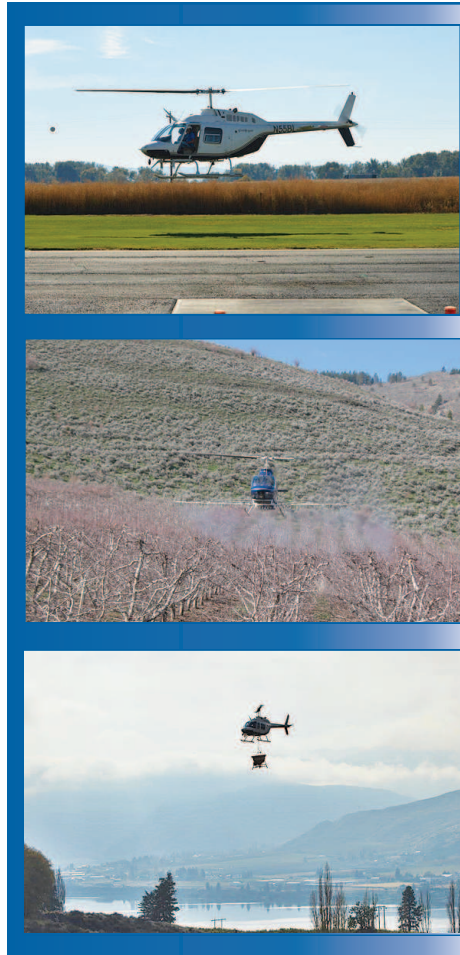
Nationwide spending on natural and organic foods combined is expected to amount to 11 percent of total food spending by next year, he said, up from low single-digit percentages earlier this decade.

"We see that those trends in our stores are consistently running slightly higher than the national average," Colgrove said.

Albertsons, in new and existing stores, is devoting more shelf space to natural and organic foods. In surveys, 61 percent of customers say they want more locally produced foods — especially produce, meat and dairy, he said.

But staying innovative while following and even anticipating trends benefits production agriculture as well as the retail side of the food industry, Colgrove said.

"We are in a business that is changing fast and is driven primarily by the new millennial (generation) shopper," he said.



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