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Our View

Skirting meetings law erode's public trust

A lot of people in government these days make a real show about the need to be transparent, then turn around and do everything they can to conduct their most controversial business behind closed doors.

We've been reporting on the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission's skirting of the state's open meetings law.

The commission is the supervising authority for the Department of Fish and Wildlife. The commission is made up of nine Washingtonians — three members from west of the Cascade Mountains, three members from east of the Cascade Mountains and three "at-large" members who may reside anywhere in the state.

The commission meets as a body each month. The time and place of those meetings are posted, minutes are kept and in many cases the meetings are live streamed and recorded for viewing on the internet.



Washington State Capitol

These regular meetings are governed by the Washington Open Public Meetings Act.

In addition to meeting as a body, the commission has several committees, each made up of four commissioners.

The Washington Open Public Meeting Act defines a "meeting" as any gathering of a majority of commissioners assembled to deal in any way with official business. The committees discuss official business, but because there are only four commissioners they aren't governed by

the act. Unlike regular meetings, committee meetings are not recorded and posted online for people unable to attend in person. The department does not keep written minutes.

Here the state's open meetings law is weak. Most states extend open meeting requirements to committees.

Most of the commission's committee meetings are open to the public. Except, of course, when they are closed.

Where the law provides that public meetings can be closed only for a specific set of reasons, committee meetings can be closed on a whim. Commissioners discussing a particularly controversial proposal can keep the public out. This allows a more robust, albeit private, conversation out of earshot of anyone.

Where things really go off the rails is when other commissioners who are not part of the committee decide to attend the meeting. Such as a recent meeting of the

wolf committee.

Chairwoman Kim Thorburn told the full commission on Oct. 18 that every committee member was there, plus other commissioners.

"We had a robust discussion among the committee members and other commissioners about our concerns that it has not been recognized in this current sort of upheaval that recovery of wolves in Washington has been highly successful."

No minutes or recordings were kept.

We give commissioners the benefit of the doubt that they are working in the best interest of Washingtonians. But this approach is wrong-headed.

The law says that if there are five or more commissioners discussing public business the meeting is public. By not following the rules the commission is helping to erode the public's trust in government — the exact opposite of what the law was intended to do.

Our View



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

The FFRobotics robotic apple picker mounted on an Automated Ag Bandit Xpress picking platform.

Robotic era approaches

Some day in the not-too-distant future, an orchardist will push a button and a fleet of robots will deploy and harvest the apples. Working day and night and in any weather, they will choose only the apples that are perfectly colored and send them into bins. They will also note apples that are not quite ready and return when they are.

From there, robotic transports will take the bins to the packing plants, where automated sorters and packers will choose which apples to pack and which to send to controlled atmosphere storage.

When a sales manager makes a sale, the order will be fulfilled automatically and loaded onto a driverless truck, which will deliver them to the customer. Every step will be tracked by blockchain, allowing the company to track every step, from the exact tree that an apple came off to its placement in the store to the consumer's home.

Science fiction? For now, yes. But in the near future, the tree fruit industry will see a revolution unlike any other. Robots will replace people at nearly every step of apple production and distribution.

Automated and computerized sorters and packing lines are already in use, allowing greater volumes of fruit to be handled at greater speed. Eventually, other steps will also be automated and computerized, if they haven't already.

A key step toward this new era is robotic apple pickers. Once seen as a combination of Buck Rogers and pie in the sky, robotic pickers are getting closer to commercialization.

The advantages are obvious. Apple growers

have for years been struggling to find adequate numbers of pickers. Many are forced to pay exorbitant costs to bring in pickers from Mexico and other countries and put them up in free housing. They receive government-set wages — and so do any domestic pickers that work alongside them.

To simplify the system using robots would represent a leap forward for the industry. Added computerization and automation will further reduce labor costs.

Currently, two companies are racing to perfect their robotic pickers. Abundant Robotics of Hayward, Calif., and FFRobotics, an Israeli company, both have working prototypes. They have been field testing their machines this year in New Zealand, Europe and Washington state.

While they develop and commercialize their robots, other companies such as DBR Conveyor Concepts in Conklin, Mich., and Automated Ag Systems of Moses Lake, Wash., are developing hybrid systems that help human pickers do their jobs quicker and without having to clamber up and down ladders.

Apple growers will not be alone in the robotic era to come. Other fruits — oranges, grapefruit and pears — plus crops such as lettuce, asparagus and even strawberries will be picked, packed and transported to market.

Not long ago, the idea of picking berries by machine was a game changer. Then came grape harvesters. Then came other ideas — including modifying berry harvesters to handle apples for cider.

These innovations will not stop. As long as the economics dictate, the robotic era will continue.

It's time for NW to embrace the 'Blue Revolution'

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) notes that 90% of the world's fisheries are at capacity or have been overfished. By the year 2030 — a mere decade away — the world population will reach 8.3 billion. That's 8.3 billion mouths to feed with a decreasing amount of arable land for agriculture.

Meet the solution: The Blue Revolution.

Around the world, countries like Norway, Scotland, New Zealand, Ecuador, Brazil, India, Thailand and China — to name a few — have embraced aquaculture for decades. In the case of Asia, aquaculture has been around for thousands of years producing locally farmed protein and, more recently, robust economic development.

Unfortunately, the U.S. has fallen behind many countries, currently ranking No. 16 in aquaculture production.

The Northwest Aquaculture Alliance (NWAA) believes it is time for the U.S., specifically our West Coast region, to embrace aquaculture as a public health, economic development, and food security strategy.

Research demonstrates the correlation between regular seafood consumption and human health. Diets low in seafood result in chronic health issues such as cardiovascular disease, contributing to 84,000 preventable deaths in the U.S. annually. Consumers need to eat more seafood; aquaculture makes seafood accessible and affordable.

Farming fish, shellfish, and seaweed also supports community economic development. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), fish harvested from aquaculture around the globe had an estimated first-sale value of \$160.2 billion, divided among finfish, shellfish, and crustaceans — using less than 4% of the ocean.

In the debate over global warming and ocean acidification, most reasonable people say we should listen to NOAA scientists and give credence to NOAA data. Yet, regarding aquaculture, many of these same people don't listen to NOAA scientists or give credence to their data. This double standard sets back aquaculture, hurts our rural communities, and harms the overall health of consumers.

Now we are, once again, at a crossroads in Washington as Cooke Aquaculture Pacific seeks to gain the state's approval to raise all-female sterile rainbow trout and, in a joint venture with the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, rear native black cod and sterile rainbow trout.

We support these efforts.

In the U.S., most people do not consume the amount of seafood needed for good health. A significant benefit of aquaculture is that it delivers a nutritious product that consumers

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John Dentler
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want at a price they can afford. We cannot harvest more wild seafood. We must import our seafood or, conversely, produce more of it here in the U.S.

We believe Cooke's proposal and the Jamestown Tribe's proposal is in the best overall interests not just of the state but also the rural communities where family-wage jobs are desperately needed.

That is not to say that aquaculture, like any human activity, doesn't have an environmental footprint, but we work hard and must continue to work hard to control, mitigate and reduce that footprint. In fact, fish farming has the lowest environmental footprint of any animal production.

Aquaculture is also highly regulated at the local, state and federal level. Here are just a few federal laws governing "water farming:"

- Animal Health Protection Act.
- Animal Medicinal Use Drug Clarification Act.
- Clean Water Act.
- Coastal Zone Management Act.
- Endangered Species Act.
- Federal Food Drug and Cosmetic Act.
- Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act.
- Federal Water Pollution Control Act (Clean Water Act).
- Lacey Act.
- Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act.
- Marine Mammal Protection Act.
- Migratory Bird Protection Act.
- National Environmental Policy Act.
- Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act.
- Rivers and Harbors Act.

We invite those who are interested in aquaculture, pro or con, to contact us to identify areas of mutual interest and to discuss solutions that will benefit the region, help its people, including Tribal members, and benefit from our shared marine and aquatic environment.

It's time for Washington and the Northwest region to join the Blue Revolution. Let's work together to make it happen.

John Dentler earned his JD from Seattle University and is president of the Northwest Aquaculture Alliance www.nwaquaculturealliance.org. He is also a senior adviser to Troutlodge, the world's largest producer of eyed trout eggs. Jeanne McKnight, Ph.D., has been involved in strategic communications and public affairs for 25 years, specializing in fisheries and aquaculture, both regionally and globally. She currently serves as the executive director of NWAA.