

# WSU narrowing field of candidates for ag dean

By **MATTHEW WEAVER**  
Capital Press

A Washington State University search committee is narrowing the list of applicants to be the next dean of the agricultural college.

The committee was to meet Jan. 27 to review applications from candidates who have been recruited for the position, said Rich Koenig, interim dean of WSU's College of Agricultural, Human and Natural Resource Sciences.

Former Dean Andre-Denis Wright left in June to become provost of the Norman campus of the University of Oklahoma. Wright had been CAHNRS dean since 2018.



**Rich Koenig**

The goal is to have a new dean on the job by July.

"It may be possible to even have somebody here before that," Koenig said. "The search is moving along very quickly."

Koenig said he did not apply for the permanent position "for a variety of reasons — mainly, I want to see my son grow up and get to college," Koenig told the Capital Press. "It will be time for me

some day, but not right now for the full-time, permanent position."

Koenig is on the search committee.

The process is handled by a search firm, which conducted initial screenings and provided a group of qualified candidates.

"I've glanced at the list," he said. "I'm impressed. There's some good applicants in there."

The committee includes representatives from the Washington Grain Commission, Washington Tree Fruit Research Commission and Washington State Dairy Federation.

Koenig expects agricultural stakeholders to have an

opportunity to meet candidates across the state.

The dean has a \$5 million endowment. The Cashup Davis Family Endowed Dean honors the spirit of "Cashup" Davis, "an enterprising English immigrant who homesteaded on the Palouse, building a now-vanished three-story hotel atop 3,612-foot Steptoe Butte in 1888," according to WSU.

"Nicknamed for his willingness to offer 'cash up' on the table in trade — a rarity in pioneer days— Davis was a fervent promoter of the region, and praised the potential, fertility and beauty of the Palouse — the future breadbasket of the Pacific Northwest," the university stated in

a press release.

His great-grandson, Gordon Davis, first announced the endowment in 2019 and completed the funding in December.

It's unusual for a dean to be an endowed position, Koenig said. This is the first endowed dean at WSU.

"The endowment provides significant resources directly to the dean's position to do a number of things in the college," Koenig said. "They're guided discretionary dollars. It's a large pool of funds, it will generate about \$200,000 a year for the dean to be able to invest in a number of priorities guided by Mr. Davis, the donor."

Those are "fairly broad"

priorities, Koenig said.

"They're perfect, they're just what we strive to do within this college — things like recognizing students," he said.

"He wants to instill that spirit of philanthropy — time, talent and treasure — and recognize students who live that, but also to talk more about the importance of philanthropy in general with our students here at the college," he said.

The funds will also be used to recognize farmer-cooperators and sponsor a symposium, during which CAHNRS would invite in a distinguished speaker well-known in the field, noted for excellence in research, teaching or entrepreneurship.

## Biden appoints new leader for FSA in Idaho

By **BRAD CARLSON**  
Capital Press

President Joe Biden has appointed fourth-generation farmer Matt Gellings to direct USDA's Farm Service Agency in Idaho.

Gellings, of the Osgood area just west of Idaho Falls, was sworn in as state executive director Jan. 18. He succeeds Tom Dayley, whom former President Donald Trump appointed in April 2019. For the past year, Charles Newhouse, longtime farm programs chief, served as acting director.

"I am just so super-excited," said Gellings, 64.

Serving a dozen years on FSA's state committee likely helped him get the appointment, he said.

"Over the last 12 years, I've said agriculture is so critical to the nation," Gellings said. "Everybody wants to know where their food comes from. We're here to unite these rural communities, and let them know



**Matt Gellings**

we're here for them and for the farmer and rancher."

One of his near-term priorities is to set up a permanent FSA state committee. An acting committee has been operating since July.

A permanent state committee's value is "to get that voice out there, that perspective," Gellings said.

The three- to five-member FSA state committees, which have producer representation, constitute a grassroots voice rare for a federal agency.

"When an appeal comes up from dairy, I want someone from dairy" on the committee, Gellings said. He aims to have members from various ag sectors and locations selected, vetted, and approved by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack this spring.

FSA also has county committees.

Gellings, who will be based in the state office in Boise, plans to visit all of the agency's 29 service centers. Hiring in Idaho is a major focus.

"The first thing is to try to get our offices fully staffed," he said. "And in talking to national in the last couple of days, we are definitely in a hiring mode ... the (Biden) administration is saying: Get it fully staffed."

FSA in Idaho in recent years lost personnel for reasons including COVID-19 impacts, and people retiring or moving to other employers.

For example, six county executive directors retired at the end of 2021, Gellings said. The agency is hiring for those positions as well as a farm loan chief. Three program technicians at local service centers were to start Jan. 24. The agency employed 109 people full-time in the state as of Jan. 1.

## Idaho irrigators eye impact of urbanization on water supply, delivery

By **BRAD CARLSON**  
Capital Press

Irrigators in the Boise area remain concerned about urbanization and how it will impact agriculture.

About 29% of the irrigated agricultural land in the Boise River watershed was converted to urban uses from 2001 to 2016, according to a study's findings presented at the Idaho Water Users Association's convention.

And from 2016 to 2020, 12-16% of the irrigated ag lands along three major creeks in the area between Boise and Caldwell were converted to non-agricultural uses.

Attorney Dan Steenson spoke to the association about the impact urbanization is having on agricultural irrigators.

He said one study of the three-creek system estimated 60-70% of the water flowing from the creeks into the Boise River could be lost if all flood irrigation



Capital Press File

**Recent studies have tallied some of the impacts of urbanization on the Boise River and the irrigators who depend on it.**

is converted to pressurized delivery.

Steenson represents the Treasure Valley Water Users Association and is a member of the Lower Boise Watershed Council board.

The Treasure Valley Water Users say the area has about 1,500 miles of canals and laterals. Flood irrigation — still substantial for reasons including an abundance of small fields and a large seed industry — helps to replenish the aquifer, he said.

Steenson said converting from flood irrigation to pressurized delivery can reduce total water usage, as well as nutrient loading in streams. "But the reduction of (water) volume can negatively impact all uses of the river and creeks," he said.

For example, irrigation drain flows — an important source of Boise River water below Middleton, near the middle of the system — decline as more irrigation is piped and pressurized.

## Farm bankruptcies down

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**  
Capital Press

This year is off to a good start for agriculture, with growth in many sectors and improved farm financials that have allowed many farmers to recapitalize their operations, an economist says, but they and lenders will be keeping an eye on interest rates.

There have also been far fewer bankruptcies in the last 12 months than in 2018 and 2019, said Jackson Takach, Farmer Mac chief economist and senior director of strategy, research and analytics. Farmer Mac is a secondary market for agricultural credit.

In 2016, 2017 and 2018, there was a lot more profit compression and a lot more stress in working capital and balance sheets, he said during the latest "Dairy Download" podcast.

"That was starting to build in farm financial stress. You can't have five bad years of income," he said.

Most agriculture sectors went through kind of a grind during that period, and it started to work its way through the court system in bankruptcies.

"And then 2020 hit. And I think a lot of lenders at first were fearing the worst," he said.

A lot of lenders thought the down cycle in agriculture combined with the pan-

demie's demand disruptions were going to be devastating. But government support payments started and a "pretty incredible" run in commodity prices in 2021 turned things around, he said.

The number of farm bankruptcies in the last 12 months is about half what it was in 2019, he said.

It was a "very positive story about recapitalizing U.S. agriculture, getting cash, getting working capital and getting profits in a much better spot for many producers," he said.

Delinquencies tend to be a leading indicator of financial stress on farms, and those are at about a six-year low, he said.

Interest rates are the unknown, but any increase in rates won't have an immediate impact on farm operating loans, he said.

"A lot of times, farmers are fixing those at the front of the year, kind of like getting their finances lined up. They're getting their lines set up, and maybe that's good for a year," he said.

If the government raises interest rates this year, they'll flow in at the renewal point. Producers should get through 2022 with very low interest rates because the Federal Reserve hasn't raised them yet. Farm operating loans are still at 3% to 3.5%, which is a historic low, he said.



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