



Office of the
Washington
State Auditor
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PERFORMANCE AUDIT

Report Highlights

Washington's Agricultural Commodity Commissions:

An assessment of effectiveness

Agricultural production in Washington is nearly a \$10 billion industry, and together with food processing, supports more than 160,000 jobs and generates income in all 39 counties. In Washington, as in many other states, agricultural commodity commissions help promote specific products and provide a voice for producers. The state's 21 commodity commissions are funded through producer assessments, primarily based on the volume of production, totaling more than \$40 million annually in recent years. Commissions primarily conduct research, education and marketing activities to support their industries.

As is required by law, the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) provides oversight and administrative services to the commissions, and offers other assistance as its resources allow. This audit assessed the benefits agricultural commodity commissions provide to Washington's producers and their industry by reviewing commission processes and surveying the state's producers.

Producers recognized that commodity commissions benefit the state's agriculture industry, and more communication from commission boards could improve awareness of the benefits

Most surveyed producers believe they benefit from their commission's activities, and found value in their efforts. However, more transparent operations could help commissions communicate their value to producers and the public. For example, producers want more information about commission priorities and programs. WSDA is well positioned to communicate information about commission operations to producers and the general public by making it available online. Producers also said commissions could improve efforts to actively solicit feedback. To do that, commissions could use surveys to engage with their producers and better understand their needs.

A coordinated and comprehensive approach to marketing the state's agriculture industry could help ensure its future growth and success

Commission boards and producers both believe creating more demand for Washington's commodities is key to the industry's future. Developing a statewide brand for agricultural commodities could enhance demand for Washington products, and the experiences of other states suggest opportunities worth exploring here. In addition, coordination between commissions could help enhance their promotional efforts, both nationally and internationally.

Additional WSDA support and assistance could help ensure commissions and their producers succeed

Nearly all commissions say they need help in understanding and navigating state agency requirements and services, and WSDA is again well positioned to help commissions with these issues. WSDA could help commissions ensure they have accurate and current member lists. In these and other areas, if WSDA had additional resources itself, it would be in a position to offer commissions even better support.

State Auditor's Conclusions

Agriculture is a vital part of Washington's economy, helping to fill our grocery store shelves and restaurant kitchens, as well as employing approximately 160,000 people in every corner of the state. To support specific commodities, the state has created 21 separate commissions to conduct research, education and marketing of the products, from blueberries to beef.

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) is well positioned to better coordinate and assist these commissions, but is likely to need additional resources if it is to do so. For example, today a single, half-time position within the department is charged by statute with many key tasks, such as reviewing and approving commission budgets and conducting board elections. More assistance from the department in areas such as communicating with producers and navigating state requirements would increase both their transparency and effectiveness.

Additionally, those within the industry believe they would benefit from statewide branding of Washington's products, something WSDA is also well positioned to take on. This report includes a number of recommendations to both the agency and the commissions.

Recommendations

We made a series of recommendations to WSDA to enhance the benefits the commissions provide to producers and the agriculture industry overall. Among the issues addressed are: increased transparency for the commissions through online information about their operations; engagement with producers through periodic surveys; and assistance that will help commissions – particularly small ones – navigate state requirements. Additional recommendations address the need for more coordination and a statewide agriculture brand to help market the state's industry both domestically and internationally. To achieve them, we recommended the agency determine the resources it would need to provide further support for the commissions. A final recommendation is to the commissions themselves to measure and report the results of their activities, with the goal of improving transparency and informing producers about the value of their assessment dollars.