
**Agriculture & Natural Resources
Committee**

SSB 5766

Brief Description: Improving relationships between agricultural producers and state regulatory staff.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Agriculture, Water & Rural Economic Development (originally sponsored by Senators Hobbs, Hatfield, Honeyford, Schoesler and Brown).

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires the State Conservation Commission to initiate a state forum that has goals generally aimed at decreasing tensions and improving working relationships between agricultural landowners and the staff at selected regulatory agencies.

Hearing Date: 3/26/13

Staff: Jason Callahan (786-7117).

Background:

Membership of the State Conservation Commission.

The State Conservation Commission (Conservation Commission) has 10 members: two appointed, three elected, and five ex officio. Two members are appointed by the Governor, one of which must be a landowner or operator of a farm. The two appointed members serve four-year terms. The three elected members serve three-year terms. One of these members is elected each year by the District Supervisors at their annual statewide meeting. One of the members must reside in eastern Washington, one in central Washington, and one in western Washington. At least two of the three elected members must be landowners or operators of a farm.

The Director of the Department of Ecology, the Director of the Washington State Department of Agriculture, the Commissioner of Public Lands, the President of the Washington Association of

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Conservation Districts, and the Dean of the College of Agriculture at Washington State University are the ex officio members of the Conservation Commission.

Duties of the Conservation Commission.

The Conservation Commission has several duties: (1) assist the supervisors of districts; (2) keep the supervisors of the districts organized and informed of the activities and experiences of the other districts, and facilitate an interchange of advice and experience between districts; (3) review and advise on agreements by districts; (4) secure cooperation and assistance of federal, state, and local agencies in the work of the districts; (5) administer and distribute allocated funds; (6) facilitate with local governments in the administration of activities dealing with the conservation of renewable natural resources; (7) disseminate information throughout Washington about the activities and programs of the districts; (8) review and comment on state and local plans, programs, and activities; (9) compile information and make studies, summaries, and analyses of district programs; (10) assist districts in obtaining legal services from state and local legal officers; (11) require annual reports from districts; and (12) establish uniform accounting and auditing procedures.

Summary of Bill:

The Conservation Commission is required to initiate a state forum that has goals generally aimed at decreasing tensions and improving working relationships between agricultural landowners and the staff at selected regulatory agencies. The forum must include representatives of the Department of Agriculture, Department of Ecology, and Department of Fish and Wildlife and agricultural producers that are named by the Conservation Commission. The Conservation Commission is required to submit its findings to the Legislature in 2013 and again in 2017.

The Conservation Commission, in implementing the state forum, must design a locally-instituted pilot process that provides opportunities for local agricultural producers to meet the appropriate staff members of the selected regulatory agencies. These local meetings are to be designed to begin a dialogue that improves cooperation and mutual understanding among participants.

The state forum must also:

- begin a process that allows input and complaints to be received by the selected regulatory agencies so that constituent feedback can be received, evaluated, and potentially form the basis for possible agency procedural changes;
- examine and propose revisions to any existing training and procedures given to field enforcement staff of the selected regulatory agencies;
- examine policy issues that create tensions between agricultural organizations and the selected regulatory agencies and devise potential solutions for relieving the tensions; and
- examine the roles and responsibilities of the selected regulatory agencies and, where appropriate, recommend policy changes.

The Conservation Commission may request that a local conservation district host and conduct local forums as a pilot to a larger state forum. The Conservation Commission must attempt to find at least one local host in both eastern and western Washington and may utilize its existing governance and accountability programs to induce local conservation district participation.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.