

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6306

As Reported by Senate Committee On:
Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks, January 23, 2020

Title: An act relating to creating the Washington soil health initiative.

Brief Description: Creating the Washington soil health initiative.

Sponsors: Senators Liias, Van De Wege, Warnick, Rolfes, Short, Nguyen, Das, Lovelett, Randall, Saldaña and Wilson, C.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks: 1/16/20, 1/23/20 [DP-WM].

Brief Summary of Bill

- Creates the Washington Soil Health Initiative (SHI) as a partnership jointly administered by Washington State University (WSU), the Department of Agriculture (WSDA), and the State Conservation Commission (Commission).
- Establishes that the goals and objectives of the initiative are to improve agricultural viability, nutrition, and environmental function.
- Requires WSU, WSDA, and the Commission to submit biennial Washington SHI progress reports every other year to the Governor and the Legislature starting October 1, 2020.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, WATER, NATURAL RESOURCES & PARKS

Majority Report: Do pass and be referred to Committee on Ways & Means.

Signed by Senators Van De Wege, Chair; Salomon, Vice Chair; Warnick, Ranking Member; Honeyford, McCoy, Rolfes and Short.

Staff: Karen Epps (786-7424)

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not a part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

Background: WSDA was created in 1913 and is organized into five divisions, including commodity inspection, food safety, pesticide management, plant protection, and the state veterinarian. WSDA has a duty to promote and protect agriculture and its dependent rural community in Washington State. WSDA must carry out its assigned regulatory responsibilities to protect the public health and welfare.

The Commission was created by the Legislature in 1939 to support conservation districts through financial and technical assistance, administrative and operational oversight, program coordination, and promotion of district activities and services. The Commission has several duties, including to assist the supervisors of districts, keep the supervisors of each district informed of the activities and experiences of other districts, and facilitate an exchange of advice and experience between districts.

Founded in 1890, WSU is one of the oldest land-grant universities in the American west and features programs in a broad range of academic disciplines. WSU has four research and extension centers around the state and extension offices in each of Washington's 39 counties, providing training and assistance in agricultural practices, natural resource management, human and life skills, diversity understanding and outreach, the state 4-H program, and many other programs.

Maintaining and improving soil health is key to preventing soil depletion, ensuring long-term agricultural productivity, and protecting the environment, as well as the ongoing health of the rural economy and regional food security. According to the United States Department of Agriculture—Natural Resources Conservation Service, "soil health" is defined as the continued capacity of soil to function as a vital living ecosystem that sustains plants, animals, and humans. During the 2019 Legislative Session, funds were appropriated for WSU's Soil Health Initiative and its network of long-term agroecological research and extension sites. The network must include a Mount Vernon Research and Extension Center site.

Summary of Bill: The Washington SHI is created as a partnership jointly administered by WSU, WSDA, and the Commission. The goals and objectives of the SHI are to improve:

- agricultural viability, by improving farm profitability;
- nutrition, by increasing health-promoting nutrients, micronutrients, and microbial processes of agricultural soils; and
- environmental function, by reducing soil erosion, runoff, and leaching of nutrients and pollutants, while also improving water quality.

WSU, WSDA, and the Commission must support and supplement current Washington Soil Health Advisory Committee membership to promote effective implementation of the SHI. Committee members must be qualified and knowledgeable regarding soil health stewardship. Membership may include agricultural producers, soil scientists or specialists, and representatives of governmental, nongovernmental, and tribal organizations interested in soil health as it pertains to agricultural viability, nutrition, or environmental function. WSU, WSDA, and the Commission must convene, staff, and develop agendas for each Washington Soil Health Advisory Committee meeting and appoint committee members and subcommittee members by consensus.

WSU, WSDA, and the Commission must jointly:

- assess programmatic needs and build the capacities of WSU, WSDA, and the Commission to fill gaps in scientific research, economic assessment, staffing, technical assistance, grants administration, project implementation, data management, and monitoring tools to improve the reach and effectiveness of the SHI;
- prioritize in-state sourcing of needed SHI resources including, but not limited to, testing resources, seeds, compost materials, supplies, and equipment; and
- employ adaptive management to support the improvement and long-term viability of the SHI, including modification of soil health metrics, priorities, and activities to maximize complementary net benefits for agricultural viability, nutrition, and environmental function, and to the extent practicable, metrics chosen to assess changes from baseline environmental function must be measured per unit of production.

WSU, WSDA, and the Commission must submit biennial Washington SHI progress reports every other year to the Governor and the Legislature starting October 1, 2020. The report's recommendations must include an assessment of success in meeting the SHI's goals and objectives, a biennial work plan detailing any proposed legislation, budget requests or administrative rules, and a prioritized list of proposed actions needed to fulfill the responsibilities of WSU, WSDA, and the Commission for programmatic components and advance SHI goals and objectives in the upcoming biennium.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Requested on January 14, 2020.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: The 2019 budget provided funding for two new soil scientists, allowing them to do this important and dynamic work. Washington has the second most diverse agricultural economy in the country, with agriculture in all 39 counties of the state. This bill will bring these important partners together, establish a baseline state of the soils, and outline ways in which the state can make investments to improve soil health. Healthy soils will absorb stormwater more efficiently and will clean stormwater efficiently. The SHI will help to understand what practices are effective for improving soil health, including building soil carbon, by evaluating soil health practices for a variety of crops. Improving soil health improves farms' productivity, while also improving soil carbon. Washington farmers take care of their soils, but the soil system in the state is very complicated. This bill will provide a coordinated effort and establish a long term plan. This bill establishes a collaborative and science-based approach that will improve Washington's food production system. Washington farmers need economical management strategies that are relevant to the diverse agricultural systems and locations across the state. The SHI focuses on the biology of soil, which is the next frontier of Washington agricultural research. Soil health is environmental health, economic health, public health health, and climate health.

OTHER: Growers are very interested in soil health practices, including cover crops, mulching, and reduced tillage. The SHI provides a strategy by which WSU, WSDA, and the Commission can coordinate to efficiently and effectively develop a soil health roadmap, a baseline assessment, and use the data to identify the best practices to achieve the goal of better soil health statewide. The bill provides a strong mission statement that would be put in statute, showing how the collaboration will occur and establishing three concurrent goals and objectives for WSU, WSDA, and the Commission.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Marko Liias, Prime Sponsor; Jim Jesernig, Washington Potato Commission, Washington Grain Commission; Joanna Grist, PCC Community Markets; Noa Kay, Carbon Washington; Chad Kruger, Washington State University; Mo McBroom, The Nature Conservancy.

OTHER: Alison Halpern, State Conservation Commission; Evan Sheffels, Senior Policy Advisor to the Director, Washington State Department of Agriculture.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.