
Agriculture & Natural Resources Committee

SSB 6278

Brief Description: Promoting organic agriculture.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks (originally sponsored by Senators Lias, Muzzall, Billig, Nobles, Saldaña and Valdez).

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Requires the Department of Agriculture (WSDA) to create and chair an Organic and Regenerative Agriculture Task Force (task force).
- Requires the WSDA, in consultation with the task force, to develop an Organic Agriculture Action Plan and to submit the plan to the Legislature by November 1, 2025.
- Authorizes the WSDA to modify the fee schedule for the state organics program if funding is provided.

Hearing Date: 2/16/24

Staff: Robert Hatfield (786-7117).

Background:

The National Organics Program (NOP) is operated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and regulates the standards required to label a product as certified organic. Products that may be certified as organic include crops, livestock, livestock products, and other agricultural products. The NOP standards are designed to assess whether a producer's product meets the organic criteria. To sell, label, or represent products as organic, operations must follow all of the specifications set out by the USDA organic regulations, including being

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certified by a USDA-accredited certification agency.

The State Organics Program, administered by the Washington Department of Agriculture (WSDA), is accredited as a certification agency by the USDA and provides certification to Washington businesses that grow organic and transitional crops, raise certain organic livestock, and handle and process organic crops and products.

The WSDA must adopt rules for implementation of the state program and may adopt rules for certifying producers, processors, and handlers as meeting state, national, or international standards for organic or transitional products. The rules must include a fee schedule and the fees must cover the full cost of the program.

The Washington Soil Health Initiative (SHI) is 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.

Summary of Bill:

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) must create and chair an Organic and Regenerative Agriculture Task Force (task force). The WSDA must, in consultation with the task force, develop an Organic Agriculture Action Plan (plan) to serve as a guide to leverage organic and regenerative agriculture to address economic, social, and environmental challenges, create opportunities for farmers wishing to transition to organic farming, increase resiliency in agricultural methods, and build a robust regional food system.

The WSDA must appoint members to the task force, including representatives of the following interests, organizations, and state agencies:

- the State Conservation Commission;
- Washington State University;
- the Washington Soil Health Initiative;
- one or more persons currently certified in organic farming;
- one or more persons currently engaged in regenerative farming;
- one or more persons currently engaged in conventional farming;
- one or more historically underserved farmers or ranchers;
- organizations representing farmers markets;
- conservation organizations;
- environmental justice organizations;
- irrigation districts;
- pesticide distributors and applicators; and
- two members of the public, one from east and one from west of the crest of the Cascade

Mountains.

Representatives of Washington tribes must also be invited to participate on the task force. One youth representative from an organization that encourages students to engage in agricultural education must also be invited to participate on the task force.

When appointing members of the task force, the WSDA must include representatives from large farming operations with greater than \$250,000 gross receipts annually and small farming operations with less than \$250,000 gross receipts annually and farming operations from both east and west of the crest of the Cascade Mountains.

When developing the plan, the WSDA, in consultation with the task force, must consider and provide recommendations on the following:

- identifying barriers to achieving organic certification and expanding organic markets;
- defining regenerative agriculture and considering how and where regenerative agriculture and organic agriculture overlap and interconnect;
- providing education to support job creation and retention in the organic sector;
- ways to increase Washington's certified organic acreage to 25 percent of agricultural land by 2035;
- ways to support entry to organic farming, particularly among youth, overburdened communities, and black, indigenous, and other people of color;
- increasing the number of farmers, processors, wholesalers, and retailers transitioning to organic farming production and sale of organic products;
- ways to improve coordination of organic farming and food processing and distribution infrastructures;
- options to increase financial revenue for, and sustainability of, organic farms, processors, wholesalers, and retailers;
- ways to enhance soil health, water and air quality, biodiversity, and carbon sequestration to mitigate climate change and improve on-farm resilience through organic or regenerative farming; and
- research on topics specific or relevant to organic and regenerative farming, including increased crop productivity and quality, genetic biodiversity, and alternatives to synthetic pesticides.

The WSDA, in consultation with the task force, must consider the work and recommendations of the Washington Soil Health Initiative when developing the plan. The WSDA must also include recommendations for legislative, administrative, or budgetary actions necessary to implement the plan, including whether to extend the task force, in the plan.

The WSDA must provide a progress report on the development of the plan to the Legislature by November 1, 2024, and must provide the plan itself to the Legislature by November 1, 2025.

The WSDA is authorized to modify the fee schedule for the state organic program to the extent that funds are appropriated for the specific purpose of reducing fees to decrease the financial

burden to achieve or maintain organic certification and increase participation in organic agriculture.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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