Washington Asparagus Commission

August 6, 2019

Location: Snipes Mountain Restaurant, Sunnyside, WA

Chair Gary Larsen, presiding.

Chair Gary Larsen called the meeting to order at 11:08 am.

**Introduction**

Commissioners: Gary Larsen, Steve Thomas, Gary Johnson, Zack Miller, Bill Middleton, Rebecca Weber and Jon Nishi

Administrative staff: Alan Schreiber and Liesl Zappler

Guests: Scott Middleton, Phil Clouse, Ron Hull

**Approval of Minutes**

Rebecca had some slight changes to the minutes.

*Zack made a motion to approve the April 8, 2019 minutes. Bill seconded. The motion passed unanimously.*

**Financial Report**

Alan reviewed the financial report. Most of the local marketing funds have been spent. Operating expenses have been low. Part of the contingency fund was spent on the accounting bill. The specialty crop block grant pays half of the Evado promotional expenses. Alan’s IR-4 trip was split with two other commissions. Outreach expenses included costs associated with Beef Day in Olympia, a radio show in Seattle and restaurant exposure. There’s a $3,000 grant from the PNVA which was used to expand an asparagus variety trial.

*Zack made a motion to approve the financial report. Steve seconded. The motion passed unanimously.*

**Assessment Collection Efforts**

Alan projected 24 million pounds of production for this year but that was before the late start to the season. Last year Washington had 22.8 million pounds. Production may be similar this year. The price appears to be close to last year. It is too soon to predict what will happen with total assessments for the year. Alan has started to call those who haven’t paid yet. Despite the late start it appears that the assessment numbers will be similar to last year.

**Committee Reports**

**Education/Promotions**

**PMA** – this year it will be held October 17-19 in Anaheim, CA. The board will discuss whether to send someone.

**2019 Promotions Review**- Evado started in 2017 and has done outreach along the wester corridor including San Francisco, as well as on the East Coast around New York. They’ve partnered with grocers and chefs. Marketing efforts have included radio, press and social media including bloggers. Retail partnership has now included 233 stores. There were outreach efforts at Ray’s Boathouse, Safeway, Met Market, Rosauers in Spokane, Pacific Coast Harvest which does home delivery, New Seasons and Albertsons. Met Market focused on jumbo asparagus. In SF and north CA Evado worked with a wholesaler and are working on developing more partnerships with grocery stores. Kroeger couldn’t move forward this year, but they are hoping to include Fred Meyer in 2020. Fifty-three Seattle and Portland restaurants featured asparagus. This is the second year of the 3-year SCB grant. The commission matches the SCBG with $40,000. Alan thinks they’re gaining momentum each year. At the next meeting the budget needs to be put together. In 2020 they will do a similar effort, which has been the $30,000, plus an additional $10,000 and asparagus purchases. The commission needs to assess what to do after the grant runs out. Gary felt that they get more positive reviews with the social media assistance. He felt the relationship with CA grocers is big and they may buy more WA asparagus than from Mexico. Bill questioned the Seattle restaurant promos and would like to see more effort at Safeway and other groceries, such as Rosauers. Maybe the message would be to redirect efforts on restaurant outreach and focus more with grocery stores and large chains such as Fred Meyer and QFC, especially if they would buy WA asparagus instead of Mexico.

**Asparagus Festival**

Scott talked about the Asparagus Festival which had approximately 1500 attendee this year, the most ever. They worked hard on set up and felt it was very successful and getting bigger every year. All the tour wagons were at full capacity with hundreds of people. The Commission also had a booth. Alan felt this was a very big effort to promote asparagus. The Commission paid for T-shirts, the asparagus booth, the asparagus griller, as well as Country Mercantile ice cream. Johnson Foods and Columbia Valley brought their pickled asparagus. The Commission put $1,200 toward it. Some attendees came from out of state such as Idaho and Colorado. Gourmet Trading gave out bags of asparagus. Alan felt they need to work on keeping the festival going.

**Research**

Research and pesticide update

Most of the research activities are completed and there’s a new variety trial on a bed that previously had asparagus to see how new varieties do in a replant situation. There’s a specialty crop block grant for research on organic asparagus. Alan would like to resubmit the crop block grant for promotions, but it isn’t easy to renew the grant. Alan hopes to put it in the next cycle which would come when the current grant runs out. There’s also an organic herbicide trial which has implications for conventional asparagus as well. He also hoped to showcase a robotic weeder from CA but now they aren’t available. Currently it’s being used in lettuce and other crops. Another weeder does selective herbicide applications. Some vendors aren’t interested in asparagus due to the smaller size of the crop. They got the Warrior Section 18 for aphid control. The event used to draw 40 people and was catered, last time it was down to only 20-25 people and the cost was significant, although getting information to growers is critical. Ron Hull of Tri River Seed Co. said that on 9/6 Felix Gebhardt with Sudwest Saat is coming from Germany with Dr. Ludger Aldenhoff, an authority on asparagus, and he’d like to introduce him to other growers. Alan would like to work with Ron on a “field”/ information day and each would provide information to the growers with Ron covering the costs.

**Mechanized Harvesting**

This year it didn’t work out to go to see the harvester in Arizona, but Alan felt it’s imperative that someone go see it next year.

**Trade/Legislative**

**Federal Issues/National Asparagus Council**

The CA Asparagus Commission is disbanding, and the industry is disappearing.

The Peruvians wanted to have a federal marketing order. Alan had proposed a marketing order if they stayed out of the US market for 12 weeks. They want to have a meeting on August 26th in Ft. Worth.

John Baker called in to discuss the meeting on the proposed marketing order. He has spoken with Pricilla for a year. The same effort happened 15 years ago when they told them it would happen with or without them. He hasn’t been able to judge interest outside of Peru and doesn’t know what Mexico’s stake is in this. That’s part of why he wants to attend the meeting. Pricilla is persistent. MI growers would be happy to invest a half cent a pound to keep the price up. At first Pricilla didn’t want to discuss this, but he asked someone on the Senate Ag committee about this and they thought if it was voluntary it could happen, if everyone agreed, and it could be a promotion order. Even though it’s a long shot, he feels it’s the best shot for his growers. MI is sending 4 people. Eastern Fresh, the largest grower in NJ, is not attending but thinks someone from NJ should. Canadians are also attending. The meeting is from 12-4 pm in Dallas. They want a federal marketing order, but the concern is Peru would control the money, as the importers represent most of the production. Alan would like to have someone from WA attend the meeting. They felt there needs to be a formula for reducing their effect on the US market season. John would like to have a conference call with everyone attending prior to the meeting. Gary Johnson volunteered to go. Other commodities that have federal marketing orders include wine grapes, avocados, pistachios, potatoes and blueberries have an additional assessment, such as a half cent, and this goes toward domestic production and imports for national marketing, for generic year-round promotion. These campaigns have been very successful. The concern is that Mexico and Peru would control the money and votes.

**State Issues**

**Legislative/Executive Issues**

Alan said for state issues he’s concerned that there may not be an overtime exemption for Ag. The board may need to approve more funding for Charlie to work on this issue during the session, or they could continue to just have him monitor. They could also work with WA Growers League or others they don’t have to pay. The WA Agriculture Legal Foundation is seeking funds to pay legal costs for working on this issue. Overtime wages would be $18 this year and $20.50 next year.

**Labor report**

Gary said his labor supply was fine. Steve felt some fields weren’t cut for lack of labor. It was a whole field that wasn’t cut and other areas. Jon said that hop fields have 50-60 works which pay $15-$16 an hour for full time work. Bill felt that most of the time they had enough labor but not every day. He’d like to grow another hundred acres but there is no one to harvest it. Ron felt his labor was fine, and that it’s important to have a good crew leader. Gary felt overall labor was pretty good. Alan had cutters that weren’t good and then ended up being short of labor. Since the crop was late, they avoided competing with Mexico and Peru at the first of the season. Peru ended in May, and Mexico in June. The Baja quality is good, but they aren’t as big of a threat as it could have been.

**End of Harvest Season Report – prices, pack outs, plow outs and plantings**

L and F farms removed a significant amount of asparagus. Gary thinks some asparagus may come out in his area. Scott Hayles took out 45 acres. Jon took out 30 acres. Bill took out 2-3 acres and planted 35 acres. Kensey took some out and planted some, but Steve didn’t know how much. The Muse nursery has commitments for his stock which is all going out of the state. Gary planted 95 acres. Alan wondered if they should do a survey for growers of the age, acreage and variety of asparagus. Phil said that a total of 819 acres came out this year. If the yield was like last year the assessments would be similar, but unless the price gets higher, assessments will be down. The commission may have to tighten things financially in case assessments are lower. Some ideas include not sending someone to PMA, joining with others such as a seed rep to host the field day, and being more fiscally conservative.

**Other Business**

Rebecca said the Director of Ag will be going forward in the next legislative session with a marketing proposal to use WA Grown and she’s looking for input on branding promotion to support the industry. This would be helpful for commodities that don’t have a logo like the apple industry does.

**Public Comment**

Ron asked about the best time for the September 17th meeting. The topics can include factors that influence yield, how each nutrient effects asparagus, fusarium in asparagus and how replant effects asparagus. A meal will be provided. Alan will coordinate with him on the time.

The meeting adjourned at 2:05 pm.