**WASHINGTON ASPARAGUS COMMMISSION**

**Asparagus Commission Office**

**Eltopia, WA 99330**

**March 28, 2018**

**Gary Larsen, Chair, Presiding**

Chair Gary Larsen called the meeting to order at 1pm.

**Introduction**

Commissioners present: Chair Gary Larsen, Jeff Muse, Bryan Lynch, Gary Johnson, Steve Thomas, Bill Middleton, Rebecca Weber, Gary Johnson, Norm Inaba, Jon Nishi

Administrative Staff: Alan Schreiber, Liesl Zappler, Jennifer Garcia

Guest: Scott Middleton, Phil Fria, Phil Clouse.

**Approval of minutes**

There was a correction to clarify which Gary made the second motion to approve the Board.

*Bryan Lynch made a motion to approve the minutes as corrected. Jon Nishi seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

**Financial Report**

Alan reviewed the budget history. At the last meeting the Board had given the authority to change CD rates. Many members were on the Mexican trip at the time, Jeff Muse and Alan Schreiber attended the bank meeting with Columbia Bank. Presently there is $135,000 in CDs, with almost $2,500 per year on interest. There was a small penalty for breaking them out early, but they will more than make up for that with the higher interest.

Alan explained the check details for the year. The trip to Mexico $2,329.07 needs to be moved from Travel to the Trade & Legislative budget. They had the lowest bill ever for the accountant this year.

Gary Larsen asked about the $10,000 for the rainy day fund. Alan believed they were going to start putting the financial on the report. The Board designated this as a reserve, not in a special account. It’s budgeted to be held for a rainy day, not in an account at a bank. There could be a line item for it in the budget. $100,000 went to the Hawes Harvester. The financial report will add a line showing what the designated reserve is- $110,000. This can’t be spent without Board approval, which would need a vote of 5 out of 9 members. The reserve is in the Columbia bank checking account.

Gary Larsen asked if this can go into the contingency fund. There is a current budget of $248,000. They will receive more in assessments soon, and the difference in having a reserve fund or not is minimal. This can be inserted into the Excel sheet. As a line item, it wouldn’t need the 5 member vote. Money has already been authorized for dedicated specifications. The designated reserve can be spent on anything. If the $110,000 is outside the budget it can’t be used without the Board’s approval. Alan will have the reserve fund put as a designated reserve.

They will have a projected $190,000 in next few months. Alan estimates the price will be down a penny or two but the yields will be up.

*Bryan Lynch made a motion to approve the financial report. Norm Inaba seconded* *the motion. The motion passed unanimously.*

**Marketing/ Education**

Alan submitted a specialty crop block grant which is multi-state project for a big marketing effort. There is a small likelihood on getting it, and it’s for .25 million. They’ll be receiving notification soon. If we don’t get it, WA, CA and MI will have to pay a small fee.

**Local Promotion**

Wine and Asparagus events: Norm, Bryan and Sandy have been working with local wineries that serve food to highlight WA asparagus during Spring Barrel Tasting. They have two wineries committed so far, with a maximum of six. Norm is waiting for word from Gilbert Cellars. Members are asked to let Norm know of any other wineries that might be interested. Last year, Norm provided asparagus in the Yakima area, and Bryan provided it in the Tri-Cities area. The wineries featured signs that stated, “Asparagus Provided by WA State Asparagus Growers”. This event was very well received.

Beef & Asparagus Day in Olympia- Unfortunately, it snowed the night before and Board members were as frozen as the asparagus. The event, however, was very successful with over 1,500 people served and the lines were bigger than last year. They cooked non-stop until 2 pm. The Cattlemen were also very happy. Gary thought the asparagus cooked and served well, with clean tips. The asparagus was donated by the Johnson Foods. They need better gloves for next year, but hopefully the event will be in April.

Asparagus Festival- - May 12th, 5 pm- 10 pm at Bill Middleton’s farm. There will be two musical acts, including the Knutzen Brothers. There will be more field tours with two trailers. There will be media coverage from Channel 19 and several radio stations. They’ll have lots of contests- such as a cutting contest, pickled and deep fried asparagus eating contests, banding, box stacking and trivia. There’s been lots of interest on social media and they’ve already sold 80 tickets. They need growers to attend for a Meet the Growers event.

**Asparagus Promotions by Evado.** Lauren from Evado called in and gave the marketing highlights. They got a jump start on promotions in January with Alaska Airlines magazine, “Beyond” and a Tom Douglas article highlighting WA asparagus which will appear in the April issue. This reaches 2.2 million passengers per month. The April issue of 425 Magazine, which is about PNW lifestyle, will have an article on asparagus cooking tips. Also, the April issue of Edible Seattle, which is focused on eating local, will highlight three different ways to prepare asparagus. There will also be digital press with the Seattle Times, bloggers, Portland San Francisco, Cour d’Alene, Boise and the East coast. They have chef partnerships in Seattle with 20 restaurants including such icons as the Dahlia Lounge and Café Juanita. They are committed to putting WA asparagus on their menus and providing recipes for social media. Boise has been stalled a little as they don’t have a distributor for asparagus. They have been asking chefs to promote WA asparagus on menu, and have some initial response. Seattle and Spokane chefs more eager. They are offering conventional except for specialty organic restaurants. They are giving the chefs a one-time complementary pack of asparagus and then they’ll be purchasing any more that they want. Norm asked about grilling for chef demos so they get larger spears. They will probably send jumbo and large spears, and would like help moving them into the market, but can accommodate smaller sizes. Gary Larsen asked if there’s a chain interested in deep fried for the bar. Potentially there is, they’re leaving it up to chefs on what they do, but they could reach out to Ruth Chris/ Rays. All the chefs involved are Charlie’s clients so that they’re a little limited by that. The Met Market partnership is big, with all 7 locations Seattle to Tacoma, and a focus on jumbo size. They have a contact who works with a variety of San Francisco wholesalers who would set up signage displays, but they don’t have confirmation yet. They’ll provide magazine copies.

Summary: Boise and Portland- they don’t have inroads yet. They focused on Seattle last year. This year there is My Fresh Basket in Spokane. They are focusing on restaurants and chefs. The Spokane distributor into Boise is not being responsive.

**Trip report from Mexico**

Norm was very impressed with the conventional operations, such as the care of getting the beds established, as well as the cheap labor. They don’t know what pesticides they spray, and growers weren’t forthcoming when asked. Gourmet was the host. For the sheds, GTC’s place was closed and there were automated and non-automated systems. In the majority of the operations the trim was done after the spears were bundled, similar to using a paper cutter. There were even bundles with lots of waste on bottom end. Once the harvesting technique is figured out, yields will increase quite a bit. Other than weeds, the 2 year old organic field looked good. Phil said it bothers him that they take advantage of cheap labor. The workers cut, lay the asparagus on ground, then wheelbarrow and box, for $15- $30/ day piece rate. Growers guarantee about $12/ day. If it rains, they get more money.

**Trade/ Legislative**

**Report on 2018 State Legislative/ Executive Issues**

Charlie Brown called in and gave the Legislative report: Alan had asked Charlie for suggestions on what the Board could do legislatively. Charlie said that if they wanted to work on cost of labor issues and they shouldn’t wait until the end of the year to prep for that, and it might cost some money.

They didn’t pass a Capital budget last year because of issues regarding water. The legislative solution to the Hearst decision was regarded by Charlie as a good compromise and it passed by 2/3 in both houses. There were two bills that Ag was supporting, the first was a pesticide application issue, which was closely watched by labor and environmental groups, regarding applications near schools and housing. The bill was modified to be a work group. Labor still has issues with it. It was signed by Governor on 15th.

The second bill was introduced by Rep JT Wilcox, the House Republican Leader, a 4th generation farmer in Pierce County, regarding a behavioral health study about higher incidents of depression in Agriculture communities. This was signed by the Governor. There were several other bills such as the food safety bill, and adopting rules by the federal government. Charlie felt the session was pretty good overall on the Ag side. There are 12-13 legislators that are retiring, with a number on the East side including the reps from Dayton and Yakima. The Democrats control the House and Senate which probably won’t change, though the numbers are close.

Gary brought up an issue with the paid sick leave law. He asked for clarity regarding asparagus workers not taking leave and asked if a farmer could pay it out. Charlie had asked an ag labor rep who said this would have to be a discussion with other labor groups. It would be best to start the conversation sooner than later. Fall would be too late to bring this up. It’s become harder to get things done in one legislative cycle, and most likely can take two or three. Trying to reduce wages is a non-starter. Charlie suggested that growers need to get higher rates for product and try for specialty crop block grants, which the Board has already done. Norm felt that others failed to grasp the issue that growers can’t raise the price of their product as they aren’t the ones to set it. Jeff suggested making wages variable to inflation. Gary Larsen suggested a cost break for starting new fields. Paid sick leave is based on the quit day, and start day the next year. Most likely workers would be eligible in May of next year.

Alan said he is working with the Tree Fruit Association on their annual Ag Tour with legislators in June. They don’t have the date yet.

**Research**

Alan gave a summary of the research program. This included products for pesticide registration as well as crop block grants for organic weed control and aphid management. The Asparagus Commission is putting on a meeting for organic asparagus production. There will be a lower price in the next few years as more organic is coming on, which will start as conventional and transitions to organic. This is good for conventional growers as it doesn’t compete. Charlies, OGC and Spokane Produce reps will attend. They’ll discuss research and marketing. The meeting is next Thursday the 5th, 10:30 am- 2 pm at Sterlings at Queensgate.

**Labor**

Weather has been good for fruit people, with more pruning and twining done. Most growers have people stopping by inquiring for jobs.

**Report on California/ Michigan/ Mexican**

California- Alan stated that growers pushed harvest back due to Mexico going into Easter.

Michigan- the volume is the same; normal start with limited volume. Seed sales off a bit due to the increase in availability.

Mexico- Gary Larsen and Jim said the volume is up, markets are holding, several growers are shutting down, and they’re optimistic for post-Easter. Some are trying to open fields in Peru. Peru is not a real threat with freight rates. Not much from Baja.

**Commissioners Presentations on Their Districts**

Bill Middleton- not early, April 5th or 6th

Phil- soil temp 45/46. Estimates the second week of April.

John- not many spears, a couple weeks off.

Gary- might cut mid-next week, though not much.

**Status of Lawsuit against WAC**

The case is dead, with no communication from the plaintiff. They’re waiting to see if it will be dismissed. There might be a bill later. Alan is trying to not do anything to generate costs such as calling the AGs office to make inquiries.

**Other Business**

Alan said one the most complaints at farmer’s markets deals with asparagus. The WA Farmers Market Association is hosting a training with him on the 7th of April about how to spot asparagus that’s not the grower’s.

Gary Larsen requested that Tiffini Deal, who is no longer with the Agriculture Development Group, continue to put content on the WAC social media sites. Current administrative staff also have this ability. Tiffani is volunteering to help with the Asparagus Festival.

**Public comment**

Scott Middleton- the numbers on CA production are 12.8 million pounds.

On March 29th there is a Farmer and Farm labor forum panel and Alan was asked to be a farmer rep. The goal is helping to connect farmworkers and farmers. It is hosted by the Center for Latino Leadership.

*Norm Inaba made a motion to adjourn. Bill Middleton seconded the motion*. *The motion passed unanimously.*

Meeting adjourned at 3:30 pm.