HOUSE BILL REPORT
SSB 6306

As Reported by House Committee On:
Rural Development, Agriculture, & Natural Resources

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

Brief Description: Creating the Washington soil health initiative.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators Liias, Van De Wege, Warnick, Rolfes, Short, Nguyen, Das, Lovelett, Randall, Saldaña and Wilson, C.).

Brief History:
Committee Activity:
Rural Development, Agriculture, & Natural Resources: 2/25/20, 2/28/20 [DP].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Establishes the Washington Soil Health Initiative as a partnership jointly administered by Washington State University, the Washington State Conservation Commission, and the Washington State Department of Agriculture.
- Requires the collaborating agencies to support and supplement the current Washington Soil Health Advisory Committee membership to promote effective implementation of the Soil Health Initiative.
- Requires the collaborating agencies to submit a biennial Soil Health Initiative progress report to the Governor and appropriate committees of the Legislature by October 1, 2020, and every two years thereafter.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT, AGRICULTURE, & NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 12 members: Representatives Blake, Chair; Shewmake, Vice Chair; Chapman, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Lekanoff, Orcutt, Pettigrew, Ramos, Schmick, Springer and Walsh.

Minority Report: Do not pass. Signed by 2 members: Representatives Chandler, Ranking Minority Member; Dent, Assistant Ranking Minority Member.

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.

Staff: Nico Wedekind (786-7290) and Robert Hatfield (786-7117).

Background:

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) was created in 1913 and is organized into five divisions, including commodity inspection, food safety, pesticide management, plant protection, and the state veterinarian. The WSDA has a duty to promote and protect agriculture and its dependent rural community in Washington.

The Washington State Conservation Commission (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, the Washington State University (WSU) is one of the oldest land-grant universities in the American west and features programs in a broad range of academic disciplines. The 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.

The Soil Health Advisory Committee (Committee) was created through a formal cooperative agreement between the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Commission in 2015 with the purpose of providing technical assistance and resources to accomplish NRCS conservation goals in Washington to improve soil health. The Committee has focused on providing education and outreach to the public about the benefits of soil health and funding soil health research pilot projects. The NRCS and the Commission provide funding for the Committee, and the Grant County Conservation District has provided administrative support to the Committee.

During the 2019 Legislative Session, the Legislature appropriated funds to WSU to initiate the Soil Health Initiative. The proviso directed WSU to establish the proposed long-term agroecological research and extension site at the WSU Mount Vernon Research & Extension Center.

Summary of Bill:

The Washington Soil Health Initiative is created as a partnership jointly administered by three collaborating agencies: Washington State University (WSU), the Washington State Conservation Commission (Commission), and the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA).

The goals and objectives of the Soil Health Initiative are to improve agricultural viability, nutrition, and environmental function.

The collaborating agencies must jointly:
- assess programmatic needs and build the capacities of the collaborating agencies to improve the reach and effectiveness of the Soil Health Initiative;
- prioritize in-state sourcing of needed Soil Health Initiative 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 Soil Health Initiative.

The collaborating agencies must support and supplement the current Washington Soil Health Advisory Committee membership to promote effective implementation of the Soil Health Initiative. The collaborating agencies must convene, staff, and develop agendas for each Washington Soil Health Advisory Committee meeting and appoint committee members and subcommittee members as appropriate. No appointment is effective unless all collaborating agencies concur in the appointment.

The collaborating agencies must submit a biennial Soil Health Initiative progress report to the Governor and appropriate committees of the Legislature by October 1, 2020, and every two years thereafter. The report's recommendations must include an assessment of success in meeting the Soil Health Initiative'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 advance Soil Health Initiative goals and objectives in the upcoming biennium.

The primary responsibilities of the individual collaborating agencies are described below.

The primary responsibilities of WSU are:
- establishing a network of long-term research and extension demonstration sites;
- compiling and developing information on nutrition effects related to agricultural soil management practices and regimes;
- developing a statewide soil health roadmap to refine metrics and objectives to guide future public and private investment in the Soil Health Initiative;
- developing a statewide agricultural soil health monitoring system and database; and
- consulting and collaborating with the WSDA and the Commission to support all Soil Health Initiative goals.

The primary responsibilities of the WSDA are:
- compiling existing information on agricultural viability and environmental function effects related to agricultural soil management practices and regimes across the state, and identifying data gaps associated with understanding and quantifying such effects;
- establishing a "state of the soils" baseline assessment of statewide agricultural soil health practices and characteristic soil health indicators;
- developing standardized methods and diagnostic tools to support accurate and cost-effective measurement of key soil health indicators;

- developing and supporting an agricultural product marketing and promotion program; and
- consulting and collaborating with the Commission and WSU to support all Soil Health Initiative goals, objectives, and components.

The primary responsibilities of the Commission are:

- developing, publishing, and distributing outreach and education materials to help conservation districts, cooperative extension, and local governments raise awareness of the importance of soil health;
- training and mobilizing technical service providers to encourage farmers, ranchers, and land managers to voluntarily implement desired soil health stewardship and enter into any maintenance or easement agreements needed to maintain soil health benefits obtained;
- training technical assistance providers, property owners, land managers, and others to voluntarily take ongoing soil health samples and measurements and submit results to the soil health monitoring database; and
- consulting and collaborating with the WSDA and WSU to support all Soil Health Initiative goals, objectives, and components.

The Commission may adopt rules in order to carry out the purposes of the Soil Health Initiative.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

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

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) There is agriculture being performed in all 39 counties of Washington, and Washington has the second most diverse agricultural sector in the country, with 300 different commodities valued at about $11 billion being produced across the state's diverse agro-ecological landscape. Soil health is critical to all of this.

Soil health is a topic that bridges the urban-rural divide, as healthy soil benefits all Washingtonians. Further, the proposed program builds on public-private partnerships and the technology already generated by research from the Mount Vernon station has spawned new companies that are helping to bring the innovations created to the rest of the world. The work that scientists are performing at the Mount Vernon research station is exemplary and helps all 39 counties in Washington, both urban and rural.

Though farmers across the state are working hard to protect their soil, years of traditional farming techniques and soil management strategies have depleted the natural fertility and health of Washington soils. Despite years of study, questions remain due to the diversity of

regions across Washington state. For instance, soil is filled with living organisms that are currently barely understood by scientists but are understood to be extremely important for crop nutrition, plant defense, and, ultimately, may even be the key to nutrition and human health. Washington could potentially become a national leader in soil health science.

Carbon sequestration is a win-win policy. Excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere causes climate change and other detrimental effects and so it should be moved into forests and soils, where it can create economic and environmental benefits. This is a research and development opportunity that can support future grant programs. It should not be passed up and this bill should be fully funded.

Soil health matters because it maintains and potentially increases yields; improves crop quality and nutrition; enables more frequent planting of high-value crops; suppresses soil-borne disease; and promotes drainage, water infiltration, and water quality. With the soil health initiative, Washingtonians can continue to eat healthy, wonderful Washington-produced food grown in healthy soils.

(Opposed) None.

(Other) There is a saying that "poor farming grows weeds, so-so farming grows crops, and good farming grows soil." There are a lot of producers that already know how to grow great soil, but the Soil Health Initiative is a long-term strategy that helps even more Washingtonians grow great soil statewide.

Producers are already interested in soil health practices and the initiative would provide education and outreach, as well as the development of site-specific farm plans to implement the best soil health practices based on the scientific findings of agencies involved in the initiative.

Persons Testifying: (In support) Senator Liias, prime sponsor; Chad Kruger, Washington State University; Kelly McLain, Department of Agriculture; Jim Jesernig, Washington Potato Commission and Washington Grain Commission; and Greg Rock, Carbon Washington.

(Other) Alison Halpern, State Conservation Commission.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.