

FINAL BILL REPORT

2SSB 5947

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Synopsis as Enacted

Brief Description: Establishing the sustainable farms and fields grant program.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Ways & Means (originally sponsored by Senators McCoy, Schoesler, Palumbo, King, Salomon and Warnick).

Senate Committee on Agriculture, Water, Natural Resources & Parks
Senate Committee on Ways & Means
House Committee on Rural Development, Agriculture, & Natural Resources
House Committee on Capital Budget

Background: The 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.

Conservation districts work with landowners on a voluntary basis, providing incentive-based conservation help on private lands. The board of supervisors of a conservation district is composed of five members, three of whom are elected and two appointed by the Commission.

The 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. WSDA has a duty to promote and protect agriculture and its dependent rural community in Washington State.

Carbon farming is a process designed to maximize agriculture's potential for moving excess greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and storing them in the soil and vegetation. It focuses on carbon as a key agricultural element and involves implementing common practices known to enhance transferring and storing atmospheric carbon dioxide as soil and biomass carbon. This is done through common practices that support plant photosynthesis, increase soil organic matter, and reduce erosion. Because water retention and nutrient availability increase with more carbon in the soil, carbon farming may help ranchers and farmers increase production, enhance resilience to drought, and reduce input costs over time.

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.

Summary: The Commission must develop a sustainable farms and fields grant program (Program) in consultation with WSDA, Washington State University (WSU), and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) within the United States Department of Agriculture.

The Commission must distribute funds, as appropriate, to conservation districts and other public entities to help implement projects approved by the Commission. No more than 15 percent of funds may be used to develop and publicize the Program and no more than 5 percent of funds may be used by the Commission to cover administrative costs of the Program. No more than 20 percent of the funds may be awarded to any one applicant.

Allowable uses of grant funds from the Program include:

- annual payments to enrolled participants for successfully delivered carbon storage or reduction;
- up-front payments for contracted carbon storage;
- down payments on equipment;
- purchases of equipment;
- purchases of seed, seedlings, spores, animal feed, and amendments;
- services to landowners, such as the development of site-specific conservation plans to increase soil organic levels or to increase usage of precision agricultural practices, or design and implementation of best management practices to reduce livestock emissions; and
- other equipment purchases or financial assistance deemed appropriate by the Commission.

Applicants for equipment purchase grants under the Program may be farm, ranch, or aquaculture operations coordinating as individual businesses or as formal cooperative ventures. Conservation districts may apply for grant funds to operate an equipment sharing program.

The Commission must attempt to achieve a geographically fair distribution of funds across a broad group of crop types, soil management practices, and farm sizes. The Commission must develop and approve a prioritization metric to guide the distribution of funds appropriated by the Legislature for this purpose, with the goal of producing cost-effective carbon dioxide equivalent impact benefits. The Commission must determine methods for measuring, estimating, and verifying outcomes under the Program in consultation with WSU, WSDA, and NRCS.

The Commission must maintain a public list of projects funded under the Program. All grant recipients must allow anonymized information about the full funding of their project to be made available for public reporting purposes. The Commission must report to the Legislature by October 15, 2021, and then every two years on the performance of the Program.

The Commission must consult with WSU and the University of Washington to adopt an appropriate carbon equivalency metric for the Program. Until that time, the Commission is directed to use an equivalency that recognizes the storage of 3.67 tons of biogenic carbon for 100 years being assigned a value equal to avoiding 1 ton of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions.

The Sustainable Farms and Fields Account is created in the State Treasury. No public funds may be awarded as grants under the Program until public funds are appropriated specifically for the Program.

Votes on Final Passage:

2019 Regular Session

Senate 32 15

2020 Regular Session

Senate 32 17

House 74 22 (House amended)

Senate 43 6 (Senate concurred)

Effective: June 11, 2020