
**Agriculture & Natural Resources
Committee**

HB 1588

Brief Description: Expanding opportunities for organic, regenerative, climate-smart, and sustainable producers.

Sponsors: Representatives Bernbaum, Gregerson, Berg, Parshley, Reeves, Doglio and Nance.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Directs the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) to develop an Organic Agriculture Action Plan.
- Creates a microgrant program for producers who implement or seek to implement regenerative, organic, sustainable, or climate-smart agricultural practices.
- Provides that the WSDA may modify the organic certification fee schedule for the purpose of reducing fees to achieve or maintain organic certification.

Hearing Date: 2/11/25

Staff: Rebecca Lewis (786-7339).

Background:

The National Organics Program regulates national standards to label products, including crops, livestock, and livestock products, as certified organic. To sell, label, or represent products as organic, farms and businesses must follow all specifications set out by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) organic regulations, including being certified by a USDA accredited certification agency.

This analysis was prepared by non-partisan legislative staff for the use of legislative members in their deliberations. This analysis is not part of the legislation nor does it constitute a statement of legislative intent.

The Washington State Department of Agriculture's (WSDA) State Organic Program (SOP) is accredited by the USDA as an organic certification agent. The WSDA must adopt rules to administer the SOP, 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 that will cover the full cost of the SOP.

The SOP provides certification to Washington farms and businesses that grow organic and transitional crops, raise certain organic livestock, and handle and process organic crops and products. There are five steps to obtain organic certification, including:

- the operation completes an application and develops an Organic System Plan (OSP);
- the operation implements the OSP, and the certifier reviews the OSP;
- the certifier's inspector completes an onsite inspection of the operation to evaluate the implementation of the OSP and the operation's compliance with the USDA organic regulations;
- the certifier reviews the inspection report; and
- the certifier decides whether to grant certification to the operation.

The Washington Soil Health Initiative (SHI) is a partnership jointly administered by WSU, the WSDA, and the Conservation 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:

Organic Action Plan.

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) must develop an organic action plan (Plan) containing recommendations for legislative, administrative, or budgetary actions necessary to implement the Plan.

In developing the plan, the WSDA must consider and provide recommendations on a series of topics, including:

- identifying barriers to achieving organic certification;
- opportunities to expand organic markets and acreage;
- opportunities to support job creation and retention in the organic sector, with particular emphasis on supporting entry to organic farming by youth, overburdened communities, and black, indigenous, and other people of color;
- inventorying and identifying gaps in existing extension, training, and technical resources;
- identifying ways to improve organic infrastructure and partnerships between producers, distributors, and financial institutions; and

- identifying data sources and data collection opportunities to quantify benefits and impacts of organic and regenerative farming on a variety of environmental and crop resiliency factors.

The WSDA must also consult with the State Conservation Commission to consider the work and recommendations of the Washington Soil Health Initiative. The WSDA must submit the plan to the appropriate committees of the Legislature by June 1, 2027.

Microgrant Program.

Subject to amounts appropriated, the WSDA must contract with a nonprofit organization to administer a low-barrier microgrant program to support the growth of organic, regenerative, and sustainable climate-smart agriculture. The organization must be a 501 (c)(3) organization able to demonstrate more than five years of experience awarding grants of less than \$25,000 to state farm businesses with the primary purpose of supporting the implementation of sustainable agricultural practices.

The administrator of the nonprofit may award grants of up to \$25,000 to any applicant who is an agricultural producer in operation for at least two years and employs, implements, or is seeking to implement regenerative, organic, sustainable, or climate-smart principles on at least some of the land that they farm or ranch.

When selecting recipients, the administrator must prioritize projects located in overburdened communities or led by members of vulnerable populations, and projects that:

- implement or enhance climate-smart and regenerative practices;
- measure and enhance carbon sequestration;
- reduce greenhouse gas emissions;
- restore soil health;
- use cover crops;
- preserve and create habitats;
- increase biodiversity; or
- employ environmentally safe waste management practices.

The administrator is encouraged to award more than one cycle of funding each year and supplement the program with private philanthropic funding if practicable.

The administrator must report by December 15 each year to the WSDA on a number of factors including the total amount of funds awarded, the number of farm businesses that received a grant, any amount of private philanthropic funding that was raised, and a summary of projects located in overburdened communities or led by members of vulnerable populations.

Organic Certification Fees.

The organic certification fee schedule may be modified to the extent that funds are appropriated

to the WSDA 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.