

Group looks at Washington organics commission

By PEGGY STEWARD
Capital Press Staff Writer

A Washington state organics food commission, separate from the state's 24 traditional commodity commissions, is being considered by a work group appointed by the state Department of Agriculture.

The work group was appointed in the wake of a legislative directive to WSDA to evaluate the benefits of a commodity commission to the state's organic producers.

The work group will hold its first meeting Thursday, Sept. 26, in El-

lensburg. The meeting, set for 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Hal Holmes Center, 201 North Ruby St., is open to the public. A public comment period is scheduled for 3:30 p.m.

Organic farming and processing are increasing in Washington state. In 2001, the state's organic producers generated \$47 million in sales from 40,000 acres. Thousands more acres are transitioning from conventional farming.

The state is the country's leading producer of organic apples. Washington has more than 6,500 acres of certified organic apple trees with another 3,400 acres in transition, said a new report from Washington State University. Organic apple acreage tripled from 1998 and 2001.

There are more than 800 certi-

fied organic farmers, handlers and processors in the state, producing organic fruits, vegetables, grains, herbs and many other commodities and food products, the WSDA said.

The WSDA surveyed existing commodity commissions as well as organic producers to identify issues that would need to be addressed in forming an organic food commission. The surveys were mailed in May to 535 operations on the WSDA organic producer list. The department received 420 responses, an 83 percent response rate.

The survey showed considerable support for an organic commission, although most producers who responded were opposed to forming a separate commission if they have to pay assessments to both an organics commission and

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Support for an organics commission is strongest among apple growers who produce 100 percent organic fruit for the wholesale market. Most organic producers with diverse operations but who focus on vegetables and who direct-market crops, oppose the formation of

a separate organics commission, the WSDA reported.

Sixteen of the state's 24 commodity commissions responded to the WSDA survey. Responses were mixed, with some favoring an organic program within current commission structures, some favoring a separate commission and some favoring continuing discussion.

Forming a separate organic commission could be divisive, some of the commissions said, and divert energy and resources away from promotions that benefit entire sectors. They also questioned what would happen if an organics commission might suggest, even remotely, that organics are higher quality. That could pit organics against traditionally grown crops, to the detriment of non-organic producers.

There are questions about whether an organics commission could represent all organically-grown crops, or if separate commissions would better serve different organic crops.

Those and other questions need to be worked out, said Miles McEvoy, organics program manager with WSDA in Olympia. The work group will help the department make recommendations to the Legislature regarding the need for an organic food commission, procedures to use to form one and methods to fund it. The department has a Dec. 15 deadline for providing that information.

The work group includes organic producers Aldofo Alvarez of Prosser, Dain Craver of Royal City, Bill Dean of Basin City, Ray Fuller of Chelan, Jeff Herman of Colville, Scott Leach of Zillah, Harold O'tenson of George and Eric Strandberg of Tonasket. Representing established commodity commissions on the group are Jim McPerson of the Washington State Tree Fruit Research Commission, Welcome Sauer, president of the Washington Apple Commission, and B.J. Thurlby, president of the Washington State Fruit Commission.

Jim Hazen, executive director of the Washington State Horticultural Association, a tree-fruit industry group, and Alec McErlich, representing Small Planet Foods, a processor of organic frozen foods and products, are also members.