

WSDA leaders reflect on history

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Past leaders gather to share history of department, industry

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OLYMPIA -- When the Washington Agriculture Commission opened up shop 100 years ago, the most valuable livestock in the state was work horses, and there were as many farmers as lawyers in the Legislature.

Now known as the [Washington State Department of Agriculture](#), the agency has seen substantial changes in agriculture.

When it was created in 1913, the agency had 34 employees and an annual budget of \$195,400.

Today, WSDA has a budget of \$151 million and 755 employees supporting the \$40 billion food and agriculture industry, which contributes 12 percent of the state's economy and 160,000 jobs in farming and food production.

During the June 5 kickoff of the WSDA's centennial celebration, visitors to the Natural Resources Building got a glimpse of history. In attendance were six of the living WSDA directors, the most ever gathered in one place, current Director Dan Newhouse said.

He called it "a target-rich environment. ... Somebody said 'Director' and six people turned around."

Present were former directors Keith Ellis (1981-1985), Alan Pettibone (1985-1993), Peter Goldmark (1993), Jim Jesernig (1993-2001) and Valoria Loveland (2002-2008).

The WSDA was organized in 1913 to bring under one authority a variety of activities tended by separate state commissions, said Mary Beth Lang, who serves as WSDA's historian. The grain commission was not included until 1921.

Former director Pettibone said that 27 years ago the WSDA had a huge responsibility and was underfunded and understaffed.

"Budget reductions are nothing new," he said.

He recalled an infestation of the Asian gypsy moth in 1992, which involved spraying 116,000 acres at a cost of \$13.6 million.

"That was a real exercise in public relations," he said.

Wheat and cattle prices were down, farmers and ranchers were concerned about the cost of production, they had lost the use of some pest-control products and the competition in foreign markets was intense. Still, Pettibone said, the state's agricultural production grew from \$3 billion to \$5 billion during his eight years as director.

Newhouse said WSDA has enjoyed a special relationship with farmers and ranchers.

"Every function we perform has been driven by the industry. Our regulating the industry is a big part of its success," he said.

Agriculture has always been important to the state, he said. A century ago, the whole country was more agrarian, but economic downturns drove people to the cities.

"We've lost that connection to the land," he said. "Most ag areas have more houses, which makes for more rural-urban interface. People move to the country for the rural experience, but it doesn't match ag practices."

Over the years, there has been both a degree of tolerance and a degree of intolerance, he said.

"Most people don't realize it, but King County (dominated by Seattle) is the No. 1 county in food processing."

"We're celebrating not just an agency but the industry," Lang said.

The country was in turmoil in 1913, she said, with the Progressive Movement changing the face of politics nationally and in the state. The Republican Party had dominated since before statehood, but that year several Progressives and one Socialist were elected to the Legislature, and a Democrat was elected governor.

Newhouse said the 16th amendment to the constitution had just been ratified, establishing a federal income tax. Henry Ford instituted the automobile assembly line, and there had been no world wars.