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RE: Future of Farming Draft Strategic Plan

I have provided in-text suggestions for revision of the December 26th draft of the FOF Strategic Plan. Overall, I find this document to be a balanced survey of the present state and future prospects of Washington agriculture, of the problems it faces, and of possible approaches toward alleviating the problems. In many ways, it is a blueprint of the agricultural resource policy situations around the country, and could well be taken as a model of a Strategic Plan in other states. Most importantly, the FoF document seems to me to avoid placing undue stress on, or preference toward, any individual sector or interest group in Washington agriculture, such as on major-commodity or minor-commodity groups.

The approach in the draft document of attaching to each broad theme or recommendation a list of more specific recommendations makes good sense and appears to be applied in a self-consistent manner.

I now comment in a summary way on each major section of the document.

Industry Participation

The breadth of the steering committee, the initial soundings among association and professional representatives to identify information sources, the number and variety of producer groups met with throughout the state, discussions with non-producer specialist groups, the use of a survey instrument to provide statistical indicators on certain topics, and the continued input from trade associations in the writing process are evidence that a wide net was cast in the development of the FoF document.

Discussion of Making Agriculture a Priority and Eliminating Regulatory Barriers (Categories 1 and 2)

Eliminating regulatory barriers to profitable farming is the overarching recommendation of the draft document. As a policy recommendation, it clearly gains the most widespread support among Washington farmers. And its discussion in these sections is quite persuasive.

Discussion of Resources (Category 3)

This discussion is the heart of the FoF document. The breakdown into land, water, labor, energy, and capital is exhaustive, and the discussion of each is thorough and effective. For each resource, a brief conceptual overview is provided about the role of that resource in food production. The discussion then moves to the problems presently encountered with that resource and steps that might be taken to alleviate the problems. Only the capital resource is largely outside the scope of Washington state policy. The draft document makes a strong case that state policy is extraordinarily important for land, water, labor, and energy resources (and especially land and water), and for the most part is clear about what the state can do to enhance long-run profitability in the use of each resource.

Discussion of Support Services (Category 4)

This section is divided into discussions about education, transportation, technology, processing, marketing, information/outreach, and producer associations. I do not think this list excludes any important support area, and I again find the discussion to be cogent, organized, and well-considered.

Discussion of Future Challenges (Harnessing Emerging Opportunities)

As in the earlier sections, the authors clearly are cognizant of the importance of recommending only policies that would benefit at least some agricultural interest groups and not harm others. In some cases, that meant maintaining a rather generic language in the recommendations, for example in the organic/local and climate change sections. Although I've made a number of specific recommendations in the text, I think the authors have done a good job with this difficult part of the document.