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Contact: Mike Louisell (360) 902-1813

WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
P.O. Box 42560, Olympia, Washington 98504-2560
Visit our Web site at: agr.wa.gov

Technology improves WSDA inspection process to serve grain and produce shippers *Industry benefits from Web-based information to track grain and produce inspection results*

OLYMPIA – The harvest season is well under way in the Evergreen State. Growers are knee-deep harvesting apples, pears and potatoes. During this busy season, Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) produce and grain inspectors play an important role in supporting the marketing of the state’s major agricultural commodities.

In addition to their experience in evaluating the quality of agricultural products, inspectors are increasingly using technology to add value to the inspection process. Through WSDA process improvements, such as electronic submittals of certificates of compliance and portable computers used in the field, shippers can now access real-time inspection results to meet their information and marketing needs.

Inspectors sample grains, fruits and vegetables to verify they meet size, grade and condition and that crops are free of disease and insects prohibited by domestic and international trading partners. As a result of the inspections that WSDA provides growers, Washington’s shippers can verify for their customers that they are reliable suppliers of quality commodities that meet buyers’ specifications.

WSDA helps facilitate the movement of \$7.5 billion of commodities each year for domestic and export markets. WSDA inspects produce and grains grown in Washington, as well as other crops, such as soybeans, wheat and corn grown in other states. Thirty percent of U.S. grain exports move through Washington ports. And, Washington growers produce a larger volume of fruits and vegetables than farmers in any other state except California and Florida.

With offices in agricultural communities and grain ports, WSDA inspectors meet industry requests for an independent third-party review of commodities to satisfy customer and export requirements. WSDA’s growing use of technology is creating greater efficiencies, opportunities and capacity over the pencil and paper era.

“Our technology enhancements help WSDA and industry improve the quality of inspection services and increase the accuracy and speed of reporting results,” says Jim Quigley, manager of the Fruit & Vegetable Inspection Program.

Tablet computers, for example, provide online inspection results to industry and allow WSDA inspectors to reference online state and federal grading standards. These small computers include extensive visual aids for inspectors to compare grades and condition as they inspect fruits and vegetables, assuring accuracy and consistency for WSDA customers.

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WSDA's Web-based services and accounts allow shippers, trade associations and commodity commissions to obtain real-time data for monitoring crop movement.

Compiling data electronically also assists WSDA and industry with the ability to trace back or forward produce if crop quality issues come up. Database documents can be accessed to connect produce from a specific shipper, grower or field to its final destination.

Audits for good agricultural and handling practices at farms and packing plants are another tool to elevate the level of producing safe crops. WSDA is conducting a growing number of audits using U.S. Department of Agriculture recommendations that support protections of the food supply chain. Last year, more than 128,000 acres of Washington produce were audited, primarily potatoes.

"The harvest season provides more opportunities for us to audit fields for good agricultural practices and it's also when we see increased interest and demand by growers," Quigley said. "We expect the number of acres under audit this year to increase."

Grain trade benefiting from technology investments

WSDA's grain inspection results also are available under a Web-based system, called the Grain Inspection Management System.

"All of our customers use this computer-based system in some manner," said Randy Deike, manager of the Grain Inspection Program. "About 75 percent use it to retrieve grade data or certificates and nearly all the customers use it for their account information regarding WSDA services. The ability to rapidly supply accurate certificates and inspection results via the Internet saves WSDA and our customers time and expense."

Deike's program provides inspection, analytical and weighing services to ensure grains, dry peas, lentils, and similar commodities can be marketed. The grain harvest began a bit later than usual due to a very cool spring, but wheat, barley, pea and lentil harvests are nearly done. The harvest for feed corn begins in October and wraps up in November.

WSDA's fee-for-service inspection programs gear up staffing for harvest times in Washington, roughly April to October. Inspections are also conducted off-season when industry calls upon WSDA to check commodities from cold storage or country grain elevators, co-operatives and river elevators.

Making investments in technology that speeds up the delivery of inspection results makes WSDA's produce and grain inspection programs more efficient and helps to keep inspection rates stable for a huge segment of the state's agricultural economy.

Information about WSDA grain and produce inspection services can be found at www.agr.wa.gov/Inspection.