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THE COLUMBIA BASIN IRRIGATION PROJECT; AS DROUGHT-PROOF AND SUSTAINABLE AS IT GETS

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Irrigation Systems and Food Production

Irrigated agriculture is critical, supplying 40% of the world’s food despite having only 28% of cropland. Irrigation also stabilizes food production by separating crop yields from the risk of variable rainfall (*Troy et al., 2015*). However, history reveals that most irrigation systems eventually fail. In *Pillar of Sand*, Sandra Postel discusses how irrigation-dependent civilizations collapsed due to these shared failure factors (*Postel, 1999; Elias et al., 2023*):

1. Changes in water supply
2. Sedimentation
3. Salinization of the soil
4. Failure to maintain the system

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Modern irrigation systems face these same challenges. Drought, water scarcity, and soil degradation are on the rise. And climate change is expected to quadruple seasonal heat and rainfall variability by 2040, threatening the stability of crop yields (Troy et al. 2015; Walker et al., 2019). The Columbia Basin Irrigation Project (CBP) in Washington State has been producing food for over 70 years, but can that be sustained? Or will it fail from the same challenges that took down other irrigation systems? This analysis examines CBP’s sustainability by assessing its resilience to the four primary threats that have affected irrigation systems globally.



Figure 1. Washington State, the watershed above Grand Coulee Dam, and the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project. The project irrigates nearly 700,000 acres in Grant, Adams, Franklin, and Walla Walla counties.

Threats to Irrigation Systems

Threat 1: Inadequate Water Supply

“In Washington State, overall vulnerability of agricultural production to a changing climate is expected to be low in the Columbia Basin Project where irrigation water supplies are available.” (Snover et al. 2013)

Inadequate water supply remains the most common cause of irrigation failure, often due to drought, water use beyond supply



Figure 2. By annual flow of water, the Columbia River is by far the largest river in the US West. Graphic: Heberger, Matthew. 2013. American Rivers: A Graphic. Oakland, Calif.: Pacific Institute.

limits, or climate impacts (Postel, 1999). The CBP benefits from a large, stable water source, the Columbia River, with a watershed that extends into the Canadian Rockies (see Fig. 1). Although still affected by climate change (Intsiful and Ambinakudige, 2021), its northerly location and high elevation make it less vulnerable to drought impacts seen elsewhere, such as in the Southwest United States (Qin et al. 2020). The water flow outlook for the upper Columbia River remains favorable, with an expected shift to earlier peak flows but also a slight increase in annual flow (Hall et al., 2022).

Given this large watershed, the water used by the CBP is small compared to the flow of the river. It currently draws an estimated at 2.4 million acre-feet at Grand Coulee Dam, which is only 3% of the Columbia River’s average annual flow (Figure 3). Furthermore, in drought years, Lake Roosevelt—backed up behind Grand Coulee Dam— buffers against shortages by storing three times the project’s annual water use. Finally, the project has priority water rights, dating back to 1938 (Weber and Lee, 2021) all but guaranteeing



QUOTE OF THE QUARTER

It does not matter how slowly you go so long as you do not stop.

- Confucius





Figure 3. Grand Coulee Dam. Although the dam was completed in 1942, water did not flow to the Columbia Basin irrigation project until 1952. The pumping plant that lifts water to a canal that begins the irrigation project is just to the right of the dam. Behind the dam, Lake Roosevelt backs up all the way to Canada, storing 9 million acre-ft of water. Photo Credit: United States Bureau of Reclamation.

sufficient water quantity. These advantages of the CBP water supply (Rajagopalan et al., 2018) are in stark contrast to the irrigated cropland in California, Arizona, and even in the Ogalla aquifer of the US High Plains (Schoups et al. 2005; Walker et al. 2019; Elias et al. 2023). The Columbia Basin Irrigation Project is a drought-proof as it gets.

Threat 2: Sedimentation

Sedimentation, or silt buildup, is a threat that slowly decreases water storage behind dams and impedes water flow in irrigation canals and ditches. While rivers like the Colorado carry a high load of sediment, the Columbia River, especially in the upper reaches, carries less (Figure 7). The US Bureau of Reclamation estimates that sedimentation since 1942 has reduced water storage behind Grand Coulee dam by about 10%. Sedimentation in the canals and ditches is removed each year by local Irrigation districts. As with inadequate water supply, the threat of sedimentation for the CBP is low.

Threat 3: Soil Salinization

Soil salinization, where the soil loses productivity due to accumulating salts, devastates many irrigation systems over time, including at least 14 million acres in the US (Short, 2019). Soil salinization occurs when salt in the irrigation water remains in the surface soil after the water evaporates or is used by crops. If the salt is not leached out, it builds up to levels that hinder soil function and decrease crop yields. Since the only way for salt to leave the soil is through water, the problem is worsened by poorly drained soils.



Figure 4. The pumping station at Grand Coulee Dam, which supplies water to the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project. The amount delivered to the project annually, 2.4 million acre-ft, is just 3% of the annual flow of the river at this location. Photo credit: United States Bureau of Reclamation.

In irrigation systems along the Colorado river, high salt levels in the river water are the main problem. Salinity levels in the Colorado range from 723 mg/L at Hoover dam to 879 mg/L further downstream. In contrast, the water in the Columbia River at Grand Coulee Dam is very low in salts, ranging from 70-85 mg/l (McKillops and Wells, 2007), far below the irrigation limit of >525 mg/l (Fipps, 2003).

In California, drainage is the primary driver of soil salinization in irrigated cropland (Schoups et al. 2005). In the CBP, soon after irrigation water was first delivered, project managers recognized the need to provide drainage for some fields. An extensive drainage system was eventually installed with more than 2,845 miles of drains (Storey, 2008). This effectively removed most drainage problems from project cropland.

With both high-quality water and good drainage of irrigated soils, the risk of salinization to the Columbia Basin irrigation project is low.



Figure 5. The Colorado River (top) has a much higher sediment load than the upper Columbia River (bottom). This limits the risk of sedimentation and associated decreases in water storage capacity and conveyance. USFWS Mountain-Prairie photo, NPS photo, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

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Figure 6. Soil salinization decreases crop productivity. Both water quality and soil drainage are factors in salt buildup in irrigated soils. Photo credit: Don Suarez, USDA-ARS.

Threat 4: Infrastructure Maintenance

The last threat to irrigation systems is insufficient maintenance of the infrastructure. To function efficiently, irrigation systems require well maintained water conveyance components: the dam, pumps, reservoirs, canals, siphons, and ditches. Failure of any one of these components poses significant risks to an irrigation project, and a lack of resources or organization can accelerate system decline. The CBP has seen serious incidents that test this maintenance challenge. In 2014, a crack in Wanapum Dam (provides hydropower for the pumps and sprinkler irrigation systems of the CBP) required immediate repair, which was completed by temporarily lowering the water level and funding a \$61 million fix, ultimately covered by local Public Utility District ratepayers. Earlier in 2024, a main canal sidewall failed during the irrigation season, but repairs were completed within a week, minimizing impact on crop production.

Although not a factor for ancient irrigation systems, maintenance of legal infrastructure is also important to maintain. As water scarcity becomes more acute in regions, conflicts between countries over shared water resources can occur. For the CBP, a new proposed Columbia River Treaty with Canada is now awaiting approval of the US and Canadian governments. This treaty ensures that the water flowing from Canada will continue to flow for the benefit of both countries.

Irrigation project maintenance requires a commitment from society, from the people that live here, and from those that eat the food produced here. As far as I can tell, project maintenance is not a current threat to the irrigation system.

The Future of the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project

Maintaining irrigated cropland is crucial for current and future food security (Walker et al., 2019). Current trends, however, show irrigation systems are susceptible to the same threats that have caused them to fail throughout history. The CBP is not one of them.

Within the limited scope of this analysis, and in view of other irrigation systems, I conclude that the Columbia Basin irrigation project is as sustainable as it gets. With dependable water sources, limited sedimentation, low risk of soil salinization, and responsive infrastructure maintenance, the CBP is a sustainable irrigation system in a world where many systems are faltering. The project’s continued productivity not only supports regional food security but contributes to national food

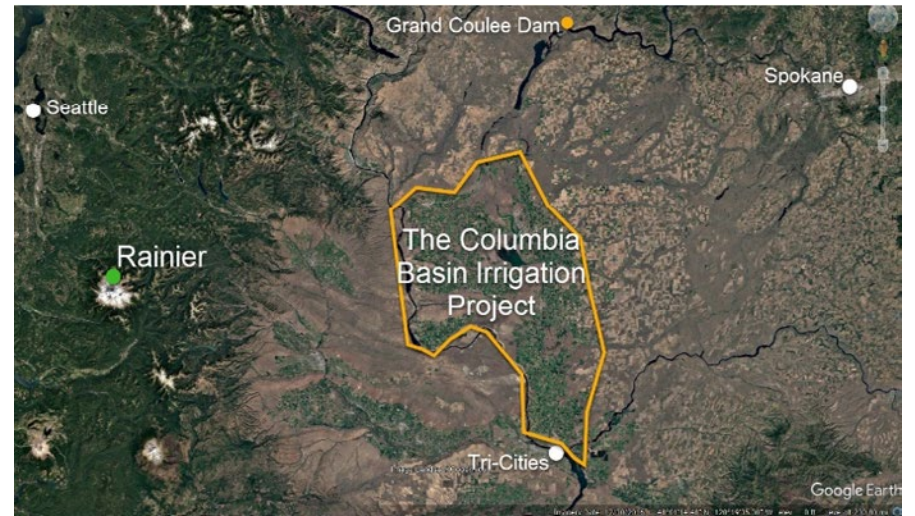


Figure 7. The Columbia Basin Irrigation Project, turning central Washington from brown to green. Image from Google Earth.

supply stability. If we continue to support it, the Columbia Basin Project should continue to provide a reliable supply of food in the foreseeable future.

Please contact me at andrew.mcquiere@wsu.edu if you would like me to make a presentation on this topic. 

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AG ADVOCATES STRATEGIZE FOR 2025

On the Monday prior to Thanksgiving, agricultural associations, commissions, and lobbyists gathered at the Summit of Snoqualmie Pass to identify and prioritize policy issues of importance to Washington State agriculture. League Executive Director, Sara Higgins, and Lobbyist, John Culton, were in attendance. The morning was dedicated to discussion of a variety of issues, including the budget for Ecology's Office of Columbia River and developments of the farm bill. The afternoon brought updates from the Washington State Department of Agriculture and Washington State University. The opportunity to convene and network was beneficial in informing the League of the policy landscape going into 2025. [S](#)



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FEDERAL SNAPSHOT

FY25 Appropriations

On December 20, the U.S. House and Senate passed a second Continuing Resolution through March 14. This extension prevented a government shutdown and allows members of the 119th Congress to vote on committee assignments, leadership positions, and come to an agreement on the appropriations bill. This process is critical for the Columbia Basin Development League for two key reasons. Firstly, appropriations language directs the Bureau of Reclamation to conduct a study on the continued development of the Columbia Basin Project, allocating \$400,000 for this purpose. Secondly, appropriations language aims to make the construction of the Adams County bridges over the East Low Canal more competitive in the Bridge Replacement Program.

If the appropriations bills do not pass, these language changes will not

be implemented, potentially hindering progress on both the Columbia Basin Project study and the Adams County bridge construction. The League is staying engaged to ensure necessary funding and support are secured for these important initiatives.

Farm Bill Extension

The Farm Bill has been extended for a year as part of a legislative package that extended government funding through March 14. Passage of a new farm bill is now two years behind schedule. In recent years, Farm Bill programs like the Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCP) have been a source of significant funding for the Odessa Ground Water Replacement Program (OGWRP). Passage of a new Farm Bill that authorizes and adequately funds such programs is beneficial to OGWRP with a scale and funding need requiring multiple sources of support for completion. [S](#)



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PREPARING FOR THE 2025 STATE LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Each year, in December, committee assembly days are an opportunity for state legislators to prepare for the coming session. They are also an opportunity for constituents to make their position known on anticipated session developments. As part of the League's new lobbying contract with Culton Consulting, the League had two lobbyists on the ground in Olympia for Committee days – Lily Wilson-Codega and Kyla Shkerich Blair. During that time, they met with key legislators on the budget committees for both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

Some highlights from their week in Olympia follow, along with a look forward as we prepare for the Governor's transition and the beginning of the legislative session.

Budget updates

During the week there were several committee hearings on the budget. Both the Governor and the Legislature must submit a balanced biennial budget for 2025–2027 as well as the next two-year projections. Based at that, the Office of Financial Management (OFM) stated that there was between a \$12–14 billion shortfall that they will have to make up for.

This short fall will largely impact the operating and transportation budgets more heavily than the capital, although it will still be a tough year for that budget as well. Much of the League's interest is in the capital budget where Office of the Columbia River funding is appropriated for projects such as OGWRP, Potholes Supplemental Feedroute, and Pasco Basin.

To combat the shortfall, OFM asked state agencies where they can cut costs. They also implemented a statewide freeze on hiring, travel, non-essential service contracts and discretionary purchases of goods and equipment.

Governor Transition:

The incoming Governor put together a 53-person transition team to coordinate and help with the transition from Inslee to Ferguson. Additionally, as of the writing of this article, at least ten agency directors have announced they will be departing the state, with more to come in the next several weeks. Those departments include: Department of Transportation; Department of Health; Department of Child, Youth and Families; Department of Social and Health Services; Department of Ecology; Department of Enterprise Services; Department of Corrections; Heath Care Authority; Department of Commerce; and Governor's Office of Indian Affairs. It is hoped that WSDA Director Sandison, a long-time supporter of the Columbia Basin Project, will remain. The League was among multiple ag organizations that signed a letter of support to the Governor advocating for his continuation. Tom Tebb, Director of the

Office of Columbia River within the Department of Ecology, and another strong CBP supporter, plans to retire in March.

Governor-Elect Ferguson is set to be sworn in on January 15.

Governor Budget:

The Governor's budget for Ecology's Office of Columbia River over the next Biennium is \$55 million, short \$2 million from OCR's request. \$25 million is included for the Odessa Ground Water Replacement Program.

Key Committee Member list:

The League believes it's important for stakeholders to build relationships with leadership on both the Senate and the House side of specific committees. Below are committee leadership assignments for agriculture and water committees in both the house and senate as well as the two capital budget committees. The League will actively be working to connect with these individuals in 2025, in addition to long-time supporters. House Republican Committee Assignments were not available at the writing of this article.

House:

Agriculture and Natural Resources:

- Incoming-Chair: Kristine Reeves (D) — *previously vice chair*
- Vice Chair: Melanie Morgan (D)

Capital Committee:

- Chair: Steve Tharinger (D)
- Vice Chair: Lisa Callan (D)
- Incoming-Vice Chair: Emily Alvarado (D) — *previously a committee member*

Senate:

Agriculture & Natural Resources:

- Incoming-Chair: Senator Sharon Shewmake (D) — *previously a committee member*
- Incoming Ranking member: Senator Shelly Short (R) — *previously a committee member*
- Vice Chair: Senator Mike Chapman (D) — *new to the committee*

Ways and Means:

- Chair: Senator June Robinson (D)
- Incoming-Vice Chair, Capital: Senator Yasmin Trudeau (D) — *new to the committee*
- Ranking member, Capital: Senator Mark Schoesler (R)
- Incoming-Vice Chair, Operating: Senator Derek Stanford (D) — *new to the committee*


- Incoming Ranking member, Operating: Senator Chis Gildon (R) — *previously assistant ranking (operating)*
- Incoming-Vice Chair, Finance: Senator Noel Frame (D) — *new to the committee*
- Incoming-Assistant Ranking, Capital: Senator Perry Dozier (R) — *new to the committee*
- Incoming-Assistant Ranking, Operations: Senator Nikki Torres (R) — *previously a committee member*

What we're hearing

Throughout the week of committee assembly days, Culton Consulting has over 20 meetings scheduled. In conversations with legislators and other colleagues we know that this is going to be a tough session budget wise. There is going to be a lot of work done to balance out the operations and transportation side.

There are heavy talks about a revenue bill that could come forward this session — potentially a wealth tax or tax on business that will generate increased revenue for the state. There are not specifics out about those yet but we are expecting something to be in play this session. We anticipate to know more in the next couple of weeks.

Legislative Session Dates:

Session will start on January 13, 2025, and will last 105 days with the last day scheduled to be April 27, 2025. 



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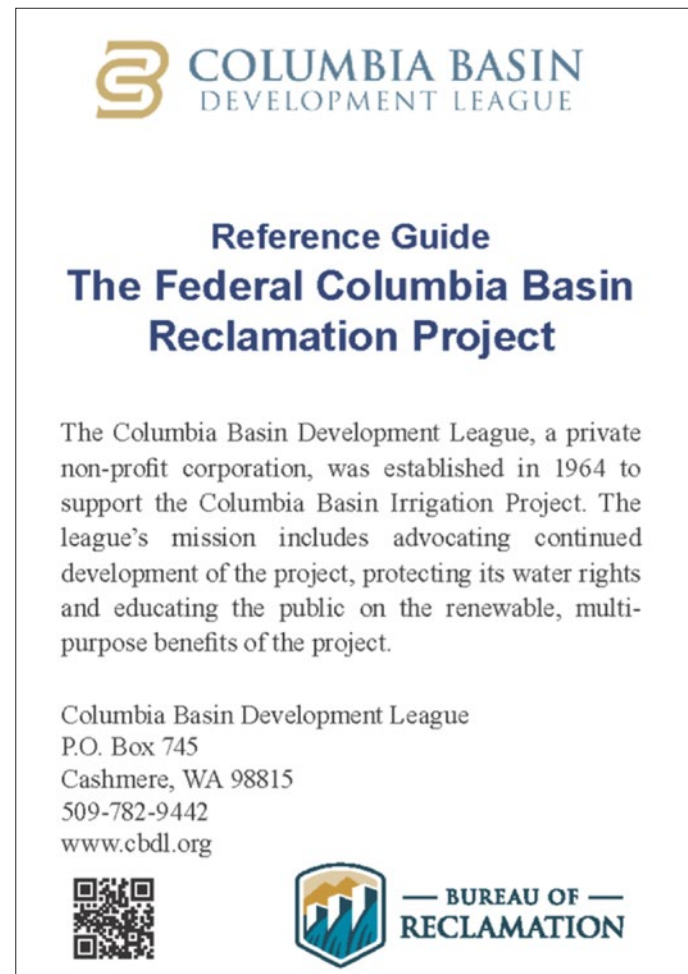
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RECLAMATION AND CBDL POCKET GUIDES ARE NOW AVAILABLE!

The League has once again partnered with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation to produce an updated version of our tri-fold pocket Reference Guide to the Columbia Basin Project. This guide has been a key asset for the dissemination of accurate and current information about the Project for years and revamping the information in it is an exciting step in furthering effective and accessible information about the Project.

The updated pocket guide offers a succinct yet detailed overview of the Project featuring detailed statistics on hydropower capacity, irrigation infrastructure, crop and economic value, and more. CBDL is continuing to collaborate with our partners to distribute these guides.

Contact info@cbd.org for your own copies. 





COLUMBIA BASIN DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE

Reference Guide
The Federal Columbia Basin Reclamation Project

The Columbia Basin Development League, a private non-profit corporation, was established in 1964 to support the Columbia Basin Irrigation Project. The league's mission includes advocating continued development of the project, protecting its water rights and educating the public on the renewable, multi-purpose benefits of the project.

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  — BUREAU OF RECLAMATION

COLUMBIA BASIN DEVELOPMENT LEAGUE CELEBRATES 60 YEARS AT ANNUAL CONFERENCE



Conference attendees enjoyed a full day of informative and engaging programming, networking opportunities, and a full catered lunch.

On October 29, the Columbia Basin Development League (League) celebrated its 60th Annual Conference and Meeting in Moses Lake, WA. The event marked six decades of dedication to advocacy and progress for the Columbia Basin Project, showcasing the League's ongoing commitment to the region.

In addition to presentations on a number of interesting topics (Power Points can be viewed and downloaded on the League's website), the outcome of elections for terms beginning in 2025 were announced. Six board members were re-elected to the board:

- Kelly Cochrane (Kahlotus)
- JJ Danz (Mesa)
- Jon Erickson (Othello)
- Matt Harris (Moses Lake)
- Michele Kiesz (Ritzville)
- John Preston (Warden)

The League also honored outgoing board chair Dale Pomeroy (Warden), whose tenure as chair began in 2023 and ends on December 31, 2024.

At the board meeting after the annual meeting, the board elected board officers and at large members to comprise the 2025 executive committee:




State Representative Mary Dye is recognized with Honorary Membership at this year's Conference.

- Chair: Jon Erickson (Moses Lake)
- Past Chair: Dale Pomeroy (Warden)
- Vice Chair: David Dormier (Quincy)
- Secretary: Clark Kagele (Odessa)
- Treasurer: Rich Burres (Kennewick)
- At Large: Matt Harris (Moses Lake)
- At Large: Kevin Lyle (Othello)
- At Large: Michele Kiesz (Ritzville)
- At Large: Derek Friehe (Moses Lake)

Time was also dedicated during the conference to recognizing outstanding service. The League presented its coveted Honorary Life Membership Award to U.S. Representative Cathy McMorris Rodger for her decades of representation and steadfast advocacy for Columbia Basin Project constituents in Congress. Additionally, Washington State Representative Mary Dye received the award for her unwavering commitment to securing funding for the Odessa Ground Water Replacement Program (OGWRP) and her dedication to farmers across the region.

The League also recognized perseverance and dedication with its Perseverance Award. Longtime supporter Orman Johnson, remembered for his exceptional community service, was posthumously honored. Mike Schwisow of Schwisow & Associates received the award for decades of dedicated advocacy, as he steps down as the League's Government Relations Director.

The event concluded with a keynote presentation by Congressman Dan Newhouse along with heartfelt thanks to attendees, honorees, presenters, and sponsors, whose contributions made the 60th Annual Conference a success. Together, these efforts continue to support the mission of advancing the Columbia Basin Project for the benefit of the regional economy, agriculture, and quality of life.

For more information, visit www.cbdl.org. 



Mike Schwisow receives the Perseverance Award at this year's Conference.

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Friehe Farms
HDR Engineering
Highline Grain Growers, Inc.
L.J. Olsen Inc
Lad Irrigation Co
Lincoln County Commissioners
Marlin Hutterian Brethren

Earthbourne Resources Inc
East Columbia Basin Irrigation District
EL & JH Ray Farms LLC
Erlandsen & Associates Inc
Escure Farms Inc
Flying T LLC
Franz Lund LLC
Fresno Valves & Castings Inc
GeoEngineers, Inc.
Glen Bair
Grant County Economic Development Council
Grant County PUD
Haida Management Services
Halverson Northwest Law Group
Henry Field
Highstreet Insurance Services
Horning Bros LLC
Horrigan Farms
Isaak Brothers
J&E Schafer Farms Inc
Jack L Gilbert & Sons Inc
Johnston Property Management LLC
Jon & Sharon Fink
Jones Produce, Inc
Kagele Acres Inc.
Kagele Family Farms LLC
Kagele-Kiesz Farms
Kelly Shinn
Kenison Franz
Kiesz Farms, Inc.
Knep Ag, Inc
L&L Ag Production LLC
Landau Associates
Leffel, Otis & Warwick, PS
Lenwood Farms Inc
Lincoln County Conservation District
Lindcrest Ranch / Preston Farms LLC

Lyle Family Land LLC
Mark Booker
Marvin and Neil Joint Venture
Mary Shinn
McGuire, DeWulf, Kragt, & Johnson
McKay Seed Company
MCL Farms
MGS AG Inc
Middleton Family Farm
Mona Freriks
Moody Family
Moses Lake Irrigation & Rehabilitation District
Muse Farms
Owl Lake LLC
Palmer Lake Ranches
Para Ranch Lands Inc
Parsons Behle & Latimer
Phillips Windy Hill LLC
Piper Farms LLC
Pomeroy Farms
Port of Moses Lake
Port of Quincy
Port of Royal Slope
Port of Warden
Prior Farms LLC
Pruett Farm LLC
Pure Line Seeds, Inc
R & J Family Farms, Inc
Richard Erickson
Richard Quirk
Rod Rottinghaus Farms
Roger Bailie
Rose Bair
Rosebud Vineyards, Inc
RP Stucky Properties LLC
Rubicon Water
SAC Enterprises Inc
Sackmann Law Office
Schibel Farms

Schneider Farms—Pasco LLC
Schroeder Law Offices PC
Schwisow & Associates
Seed-Rite Inc
SKOG Enterprises, LLC
Skone Irrigation Warden / Pasco
Soiltest Farm Consultants Inc
Stahl Hutterian Brethren
Sunray Farms LLC
Sunset Farms Inc
Ted Tschirky
Thomas Guderian
Tippet Company of Washington LLC
Tom Downs Farms
Treat Farms
Triple C Land Company
TRReapers
Umpqua Bank
Voise Farms
Voss Farms of Pasco LLC
Wajer Farms, Inc
Washington Association of Wheat Growers
Washington Fruit & Produce Co
Wilbur Security Company
Windy Prairie Inc

RECIPROCAL

Greater Connell Area Chamber of Commerce
Greater Spokane Incorporated
Moses Lake Chamber of Commerce
Othello Chamber of Commerce
Quincy Valley Chamber of Commerce
Washington State Water Resources Association
Wenatchee Valley Chamber of Commerce