

Farm Internship Program

2024 Report to the Legislature

December 2024

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Executive Summary

Introduction

The 2014 Washington State Legislature authorized the Department of Labor & Industries (L&I) to establish the Farm Internship Pilot Project. The goals of the project were to enable interns to safely work on small farms while learning about farming practices and obtaining hands-on experience, and to address a growing need to train the next generation of farmers.

The average age of a farmer, which has been rising for decades, was 58.3 years in 2012 -- up from 57.1 years in 2007. Prior to this pilot project, small farms would exchange informal on-farm education for a stipend or volunteer labor; however, these workers/interns were at risk because of the lack of insurance to protect against injuries. The Farm Internship Pilot Project ensured that participating interns received workers' compensation protections.

In 2024, the legislature transitioned this work from a project to permanent operations. The bill also expanded to include all Washington counties.

2024 Information Update

Participation

The pilot project began in Skagit and San Juan counties in 2010. Over the next five years, the project expanded to 20 counties. In 2024, the project became a permanent program covering all Washington counties. The number of participating farms and interns rose exponentially – from four farms and seven interns in 2010 to 159 farms and 189 interns as of this report.

In the most current period, May 2023 through Oct. 2024, 17 farms applied for and received a special certificate enabling them to participate, and 34 interns were trained.

Educational activities

All participating farms provided education-focused work and activities based on the bona fide curriculum of an educational or vocational institution as part of their internship program. Interns received in-person instruction in hands-on farming techniques and practiced those techniques as part of their regular duties throughout the course of the internship.

From May 2023 through October 2024, the program provided interns with increased educational opportunities, which continued to be a major focus of the project. Educational activities offered by internships in the participating counties included, but were not limited to:

- Hands-on farming experience.
- Assigned reading and writing about farming practices and opportunities to take formal agricultural courses.
- Space on farms to experiment with innovative farming methods.
- Trips to neighboring farms to observe, learn from others, and build networks.
- Presentations and teaching opportunities at farms and associated farming organizations.

Wages and other compensation provided

Compensation for interns is not required; however, most participating farms offered their interns compensation of some kind, such as a stipend, room and board, and/or farm produce.

Workers' compensation claims filed

No workers' compensation claims were filed from May 2023 to October 2024. Over the life of

the project, one claim was filed due to a minor injury, with no work days lost.

Subsequent employment of interns

During this time period, seventeen interns were employed by the farms where they trained after completing their internships. Others were employed in similar positions elsewhere, continued their education, changed to another field of work, or started their own farms.

Farm Internship Program

The Farm Internship Program coordinator conducts check-ins with interns and farmers by visiting each farm during harvest season or a busy time of year to view the environment and working conditions and discuss the project's merits.

During these visits, the coordinator interviews each intern and farmer separately and in private, to identify concerns, clarify information, mitigate any potential issues, and verify compliance with project requirements.

The program provides a means for small farms to continue a longstanding practice of educational internships in compliance with labor laws and regulations, and to provide safety to farm interns through the workers' compensation system. In essence, the Farm Internship Program helps keep Washington safe and working.

Introduction

Small farms have historically relied on informal internships to train the next generation of farmers. Informal internships are intended to be mutually beneficial both to farms and to those who wish to enter the farming industry. Washington's Farm Internship Pilot Project, established under RCW 49.12.471, aims to provide interns with opportunities to learn farming techniques while minimizing legal risks for small farms by requiring workers' compensation insurance while on the job. To qualify, small farms must provide a structured, approved curriculum and opportunities for hands-on experience for interns. During the 2023 legislative session, SSB 5156 passed, making this law permanent.

Farms must receive a special certificate to participate. Interns participating in the Farm Internship Project are exempt from Minimum Wage Act requirements, which include wage and hour regulations. Participating farms are not required to pay or otherwise compensate interns; however, they are required to purchase workers' compensation insurance for their interns.

To qualify for a special certificate, farms are required to:

- Have annual sales of less than \$265,000 per year.
- Have no serious violations of Industrial Insurance or Minimum Wage Act requirements, such as unpaid wages to employees, which would indicate potential noncompliance with the terms of an internship agreement.
- Demonstrate that participation in the program will not create unfair competitive labor cost advantages, and will not affect wages and working standards for experienced workers in the industry.
- Prevent displacing (or replacing) a paid worker with an intern.
- Demonstrate that interns would perform work for the farm under an internship program based on the bona fide curriculum of an educational or vocational institution designed to teach farm interns about farming practices and farm enterprises.

Reporting Requirements

The law that created the Farm Internship Program requires L&I to monitor and evaluate the farm internships participating in the project and report to the legislature by Dec. 31, 2024 on participation levels, educational activities provided, wages paid, workers' compensation claims filed, and subsequent employment of interns.

As a result of the passage of [Substitute Senate Bill 5156](#), effective May 4, 2023, the law means:

- All 39 counties in Washington State are now eligible to participate in the Farm Internship Program.
- The Farm Internship Program no longer expires.
- There are new requirements for farms located in the 19 counties that became eligible to participate in the program in 2023. The remaining 20 counties do not share these additional requirements, as they predate the latest changes in the law. The new requirements are:
 - If the farm employs more than one intern, the farm must employ at least one intern who has direct experience working as a migrant farmworker or whose parent or grandparent has direct experience working as a migrant farmworker.
 - If a farm is employing only one intern and the farm does not receive any other applications from individuals who meet the migrant farmworker criteria, then the above requirement does not apply.
 - These requirements apply to the following Washington counties: Adams, Asotin, Benton, Clallam, Columbia, Douglas, Ferry, Franklin, Garfield, Grays Harbor, Klickitat, Mason, Okanogan, Pacific, Pend Oreille, Skamania, Stevens, Wahkiakum, and Whitman.
- The program must encourage interns in all counties to participate in career and technical education or other educational content with courses in agriculture or related programs of study.

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

Participating farms

From May 3, 2024, to October 31, 2024, 17 farms applied for and received certificates enabling them to participate in the Farm Internship Program, bringing the total number of participating farms to 159 since the pilot began in 2010. Not all the farms that received certificates employed interns. The number of interns employed at each farm varied from year to year. An individual farm is not allowed to employ more than three interns at any one time.

During the period when the program was limited to farms in certain counties (2014-2019), 22 farms applied to participate in the program but were denied because they were located in counties that were not eligible. For the entire period of the program (2014-2024), other reasons for denial included incomplete applications, incomplete tax submissions, and inability to renew workers' compensation coverage.

Participating interns

Thirty-four new interns were trained at small farms between May 2023 and Oct. 2024, bringing the total number of participating interns over the entire project to 189. Except for one instance, all internships were shorter than a year, typically ranging from three to six months. The length of time varied based on the particular farm's size, number of interns, and length of harvest season – which is often the preferred time for interns to learn farming essentials.

EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES

Interns received in-person instruction in hands-on farming techniques and practiced those techniques as part of their regular duties throughout the course of the internship. All participating farms provided education-focused work and activities based on the curriculum of an educational or vocational institution as part of their internship program. L&I reviewed the submitted curricula to ensure they met educational standards.

Each educational program was tailored to the specific nature of work performed at each farm, as well as the farmer's own background, experience, and teaching style. Most farmers chose to focus on agricultural hands-on education rather than standard academic reading and writing assignments, though some farmers did recommend books and other materials for interns to review before starting their internships.

Some interns were given reading/writing assignments, participated in seminar-style discussions with neighboring farms and their interns, and/or had opportunities to take formal agricultural courses from Washington State University, Organic Farm Schools, and other educational organizations. Some examples of curriculum resources used are available on [L&I's Workers' Rights page](#). Any prescribed educational curriculum was mapped out at the beginning of the internship.

Some farms also provided a space for interns to try their own experimental techniques for growing agricultural and horticultural crops. Farmers also took interns on field trips, to workshops, or to local farming events.

Individual stakeholders, including the Agricultural Resources Committee, the Washington Farm Bureau, the Washington Sustainable Food & Farming Network, and Washington State University Extension, did most of this outreach throughout the project.

Notable educational programs offered in FY 2024 included:

- **Farmer Innovation, Education, and Leadership Development (FIELD) Program (*Mystery Bay Farms*)** -- Jefferson County FIELD is an educational program developed by farmers and the Jefferson County WSU Small Farms Team, in which interns are paired with a host farm mentor who provides them with comprehensive instruction in farm operations. This is supplemented by intensive weekly workshops in such subject areas as humane animal slaughter, water law, farm construction, cider production, and marketing.
- **Kitsap Farm Internship Program (*Around the Table Farm and Persephone Farm*)** -- The goal of this program is to collectively provide instruction and hands-on learning in small farm agricultural practices with emphasis on Kitsap County as a farming community. This program focuses on instructional days with explanation, discussion, reading assignments and demonstration. There is also application of the topic at the farm where the instruction took place. Occasional readings on the topics provide in-depth views. Interns are also engaged in daily diverse practicum activities on their host farm that results in 35-40 hours per week of learning experience.

WAGES AND OTHER COMPENSATION PROVIDED

Prior to the start of an internship, participating farms and interns must sign a written agreement describing the program offered by the farm, the responsibilities and expectations of the intern and the farm, the activities of the farm, the type of work to be performed by the intern, and any compensation the farm would provide to the intern. The written agreements must also explicitly

state that interns are not entitled to unemployment benefits or minimum wages for work and activities performed as part of the internship program for the duration of the internship. However, every intern must be covered for work-related injuries through workers' compensation.

Though it was not required, the majority of farms (over 95% from May 2023 to October 2024) offered some form of compensation to their interns. The amount and type of compensation varied from farm to farm, and most commonly consisted of hourly or monthly stipends, room and board, or farm produce.

WORKERS' COMPENSATION CLAIMS FILED

No workers' compensation claims were filed for injuries sustained on the farm by interns from May 2023 to October 2024.

Of the 189 interns who participated since 2010, one filed a workers' compensation claim in FY 2018 for a minor injury incurred during the internship. The injury sustained did not cause the intern to miss any work days.

SUBSEQUENT EMPLOYMENT OF INTERNS

As a direct result of the program, 18 of the 189 total participating interns (about 10%) were employed by the farms where their internships took place. For the remainder of the interns, as in previous years, subsequent employment varied widely, with interns obtaining employment at other farms, starting their own farms or farm-related businesses, continuing their education elsewhere, or obtaining employment with nonprofit organizations in other communities. Some interns also determined, by virtue of the internship experience, that farming was not their field of interest.

Conclusion

During FY 2024, the Farm Internship Program continued to successfully enable 34 interns to work on 17 small farms while learning about farming practices and obtaining hands-on experience in farming activities in a safe and legal way. No interns filed workers' compensation claims during this period, though they were covered if they were injured while working on the farm.

Farms continued to benefit from the opportunity to pass on their knowledge of agriculture and agricultural enterprise, and to build a working relationship with the next generation of the industry while not displacing existing workers. Finally, with the expansion of this program statewide and removal of the expiration date, the Farm Internship Program is poised for continued success.