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Washington State Senate

Senator Jim Honeyford
15th Legislative District

All of Klickitat and
Skamania counties,
south Yakima County
and southeast Clark County

MEMO

DATE: 4 August 2009

TO: Members, Stockwater Task Force

FROM: Senator Jim Honeyford

Dear Fellow Work Group Members:

Though I am unable to attend the first meeting, I have reviewed the agenda and the list of participants. There is one major facet that is being overlooked. There were the large roaming bands of sheep that once existed in this state and could again exist in this state if consumer preferences changed away from synthetic fabrics and back to natural fabrics. During World War II, the demand for wool to provide warm clothing for our airmen, sailors and soldiers exceeded supply.

As many of us are interested in state history, and particularly with agricultural history, there is an understanding of the various types of sheep operations that existed in the state and of the changes to this once major industry. Within and near my legislative district were a number of large sheep operators such as the Coffin Brothers, the Mercers, the Flowers, and the Martinez family, to name just a few. Outside my district were the McGregors, the DeRuwes, the Coppersmiths, the Harders and many more.

Bands of sheep not only grazed on properties owned by the sheep owners, they grazed on public lands, in open range areas, and across extensive amounts of private lands after crops were harvested. I specifically remember the Martinez sheep grazing, in the mid 1950's, on my in-laws farm after the sugar beets were harvested. Did these operations obtain water rights at every stop along the migration route? Obviously, it would not have been feasible to do that back then, and it would not be feasible to do so today.

Not only were these sheep operations large, they collectively formed the Washington Wool Growers Association who actively engaged in industry related issues both in Washington State and in Washington D.C. The industry has declined and so the sheep industry has much less presence.

As the work group does not contain a specific representative of the sheep industry, I believe that we need to invite them to attend to assure their important perspective and needs are reflected in the final work group report. The two largest sheep operators today are the Martinez family of Moxee and Max Fernandez of Centerville, both in the 15th Legislative District. I will contact the Martinez and the Mercer families to obtain the historical numbers regarding the size of their bands.