

Food Policy Forum Meeting Summary

WASHINGTON STATE
FOOD POLICY FORUM

Thursday, June 4, 2026 • 1:00–3:45 PM

Key Takeaways

- The Tenino Agriculture Innovation Park demonstrates how sustained public-private collaboration, with government reducing barriers and private partners driving investment, can successfully support rural economic development and strengthen local agriculture.
- In a constrained and reactive legislative environment, cross-sector collaboration and long-standing relationships were critical to advancing shared priorities and achieving collective progress.
- July 2026-June 2027 Administrative and Vice Chair nominations were announced. Jon DeVaney will serve as the Admin Chair and Melissa Spear will serve as the Vice Chair.

Site Visits at Riverbrook Ranch and the Tenino Agriculture Innovation Park

Riverbrook Ranch

Riverbrook Ranch is a diversified cattle ranch in Tenino, WA. Kevin and Kristal Jensen spoke with participants about their experience across a variety of dimensions of farm viability.

- The Jensen's offer a 150+ year-old barn for weddings, a U-cut Christmas tree farm for winter agritourism, grow their own hay for 300+ beef cattle, and sell grass-finished meat products at their on-ranch store. Their customers span the Seattle-Portland corridor. Limited local processing capacity (no custom-exempt facility in Thurston County) is a major challenge.



- Water resources: They have invested heavily in upgrading irrigation systems, moving away from less efficient equipment. They have transitioned from big gun to center pivot systems, utilize wireless soil moisture monitoring technology to improve irrigation timing, and implement rotational grazing. As summers become drier, these systems help extend pasture productivity.

- Land and regulatory pressures: Property taxes, permitting costs, land use regulations, and competition for land (public agencies, land trusts, etc.) are persistent pressures. Open space taxation has been an important source of financial support.
- Transition planning: Taking over the farm from the previous generation took about a decade and involved navigating differing management philosophies (e.g., irrigation systems, feeding practices).
- Changing agricultural landscape: They described the loss of other farms, including chicken and dairy operations. Dairy farms were once a key source of manure for fertilizer. Kevin described the shift as becoming an “ag island,” with fewer neighboring farms to share resources and support a connected agricultural landscape.

Tenino Agriculture Innovation Park

The next site visit took place at the Tenino Agricultural Innovation Park, where participants were welcomed by Aslan Meade (Thurston Economic Development Council representative and Food Policy Forum member) and Tenino Mayor Dave Watterson. Participants met with businesses affiliated with the park, including Colvin Provisions, Hot Babe Hot Sauce, Simply Organic Café & Catering, and Gondola Ventures.

The park is a collaborative effort between the Economic Development Council (EDC), the City of Tenino, and private partners. The site has significant room for growth—leaders noted the potential for up to eight additional buildings. In a town of fewer than 2,000 residents, the park represents an important investment in local agricultural economic development.

Processing and market access challenges: Eric Klein (Colvin Provisions) noted that meat from Colvin Ranch must be processed in Moses Lake—about four hours away—highlighting ongoing regional processing gaps. They are currently piloting a brick-and-mortar storefront at the Ag Park, Colvin Provisions, as a direct-to-consumer strategy.

Hot Babe Hot Sauce: The business grows approximately 1,800 lbs of peppers from seeds sourced from the Caribbean. They reach customers through farmers markets, co-ops, grocery stores, self-distribution, and a robust online sales platform. The EDC provided business support services to Hot Babe Hot Sauce, while Gondola Ventures helped create conditions for incubation by offering a graduated rent model.

Welcome & Opening Remarks

Petra Vallila-Buchman, Ross Strategic facilitator, welcomed participants to the hybrid meeting which took place online and in-person at the Agriculture Innovation Park in Tenino, Washington. Petra provided an overview of the meeting agenda, and conducted roll call. Chris Elder, King County Natural Resources and Parks (KCNRP) and Forum Administrative Chair, expressed appreciation for the strong collaboration between local government, economic development efforts, and private partnerships that culminated at this meeting, calling it a critical ingredient to the Forum’s success. Chris also shared gratitude and excitement for the experience, thanking the organizers and Forum members who made the in-person site visits and hybrid Forum meeting possible.

Public-Private Partnerships for Food System Infrastructure

A panel of decision-makers, tenants, and partners from across the public and private sectors consisted of Aslan Meade, Thurston Economic Development Council (ECD); Representative Peter Abbarno, representing the 20th Legislative District; Eric Klein, Colvin Ranch; and Wayne Fournier, Thurston County Commissioner,

discussed the story behind the development of the Tenino Agriculture Innovation Park and their roles in making it a reality. The EDC played a central coordinating role, leading early planning, conducting an agricultural economy study, securing grants, and managing project development. Commissioner Fournier helped champion the vision from its earliest stages, while Representative Abbarno supported the project through capital budget funding and policy guidance. Private partners like Colvin Ranch are now advancing major investments, particularly in meat processing and value-added agriculture.

The development of the park reflects a gradual evolution from an informal idea into a structured, phased project. Early efforts required creativity, experimentation, and incremental steps—such as securing funding for basic infrastructure like water and sewer lines—before moving into more formal planning and execution. **Public entities, including the city, port, state, and federal government, provided funding, planning support, and infrastructure, while the EDC leveraged private-sector expertise through board members and advisors to shape the project.** Phase One included both publicly funded and privately funded buildings, along with ready-to-develop sites for future expansion.

Overall, the Ag Innovation Park stands as a strong example of a public-private partnership, with each sector playing a complementary role. **Government entities focused on reducing barriers, building infrastructure, and creating an enabling environment, while private companies invested in facilities, operations, and business growth.** This collaboration helped address challenges faced by small agricultural producers, such as processing, distribution, and market access, while also navigating the balance between public investment and private benefit. Together, these efforts demonstrate how coordinated partnerships can drive rural economic development, support local agriculture, and create scalable models for other regions

Discussion

One Forum member raised the question of whether there are core ingredients or a repeatable framework to guide the development of successful public-private partnerships. Panelists emphasized that success is less about specific funding matches and more about strategically using public investment to catalyze private sector job creation and generate broader community benefits. Effective partnerships are grounded in solving real problems, improving quality of life, and supporting small businesses without concentrating benefits too narrowly. Ultimately, success depends on motivated individuals across both sectors who bring the drive, capacity, and commitment to turn ideas into reality, often rooted in local investment and community pride. Participants also asked about the long-term revenue model for sustaining the Agriculture Innovation Park. Panelists explained that funding comes from a mix of public sources including Real Estate Investment Funds (REIT), capital budget appropriations, and other government financing tools alongside revenue generated by the park itself. As the park develops, tenant leases, land rents, and business activity are expected to generate the income needed to sustain operations and repay public investments. In the long term, the model relies on the success of private businesses within the park, whose growth and stability underpin its financial viability.

Another Forum member asked how the Center for Business Innovation supports new businesses and whether it provides coaching and mentoring. Aslan explained that the EDC has developed a comprehensive system of free business support services, helping entrepreneurs start, grow, and scale through coaching, training, and access to government contracts. This capacity enabled intentional design of the Ag Innovation Park as more than just physical infrastructure, integrating business support and an innovation-focused environment from the outset. A key priority has been bringing these services directly into rural communities so local businesses can access the support they need to succeed.

Making Sense of Legislative Session

This session focused on collectively making sense of the recent legislative session by exploring not just what happened, but what it means for the Forum's priorities going forward. Rather than developing a legislative strategy or identifying specific champions, the discussion emphasized peer learning and examined how outcomes relate to key priority areas for the Forum. These include the intersection between climate change and agricultural water supply, highlighting infrastructure projects supported through public-private partnerships, strengthening food security coordination, improving farm viability for small and mid-scale producers, and emphasizing the importance of succession planning resources and services in Washington that support transitioning farmers.

A panel that consisted of Jon DeVaney, WA Tree Fruit Association (WSTFA), Claire Lane, Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition, Caleb Gwerder, Washington Farm Bureau, and Katie Rains, Washington State Department of Agriculture, highlighted that the legislative session was highly reactive, shaped largely by budget constraints and federal actions that influenced which policies advanced or stalled. They discussed how fiscal limitations prevented many promising bills from moving forward, while some policy-only initiatives succeeded. Others, like water planning efforts, advanced indirectly outside the legislative process. Panelists emphasized the complexity of balancing proactive policy goals with defensive efforts against regulations that could negatively affect agricultural viability and supply chains. They also underscored the importance of the Food Policy Forum's cross-sector collaboration and longstanding relationships that drove progress, as seen in the passage of HB 2238, a Statewide Food Security Strategy, which reflected shared priorities around hunger, farm viability, and system-wide coordination.

Team rosters and priority topics are available in Appendix A and B, respectively.

Discussion

One member asked whether legislators were aware of the Forum's past and current work. Panelists noted that legislators are increasingly influenced by the Forum's work, especially its systems-based, cross-sector approach, even if they do not explicitly reference it. Another member emphasized the Forum's valuable role in supporting and defending existing programs such as the infrastructure grants for regional markets. Additional suggestions included sending a letter to the Governor's Office and the Department of Ecology to offer the Forum's support in helping structure something like an Office of Western Washington Water.

The conversation turned to the development of a Washington state farm bill, where one member asked why the Forum's comprehensive, system-based recommendations couldn't serve as a foundation for informing a framework like a farm bill on a state level. Building on this, another member asked how the Forum might formalize its relationship with legislators to play a more direct advisory role in any future state farm bill-related development processes.

Administrative & Vice Chair Nominations

Hilary, Washington State Conservation Commission, shared that the Forum's Administrative Chair, Chris Elder, KCONRP, has completed his term and will roll off the leadership team starting in July. Jon DeVaney, the Forum's Previous Vice Chair, will step into the role as Administrative Chair. Hilary thanked Chris and Jon for their contributions and noted that Melissa Spear, Tilth Alliance, was nominated by three Forum members to serve as the new Vice Chair. Petra shared that Melissa's term will begin on July 1, 2026, and no objections were raised regarding her appointment. Petra also reminded Forum members that the Administrative and Vice Chair's lead core functions include opening and closing meetings, representing the Forum's goals in

engagements with the Legislature, participating in regular agenda development, and helping to elevate the voices and perspectives of members.

Closing Reflections & Next Steps

Petra noted that the same topical teams will connect in July to continue advancing their priorities and the next full Forum meeting is scheduled for **August 6, 2026**.

Jon DeVaney (WSTFA), the Forum's Vice Chair, closed the meeting by expressing appreciation for those who attended in person, noting that site visits provide valuable opportunities to build trust, strengthen connections, and communicate more effectively than in a virtual setting. He shared a key takeaway that there is no simple formula for legislative or Forum success, reinforcing the importance of focusing on core elements while remaining flexible and ready to seize opportunities as they arise.

Appendix A. Topical Team Rosters

Below is the list of members associated with each topical team.

Agricultural Land Protection and Availability and Next Generation Farming Team

- Addie Candib, American Farmland Trust
- Caleb Gwerder, WA Farm Bureau
- Chris Elder, King County Dept. of Natural Resources and Parks
- Hilary Aten, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Conservation Commission
- Heather Wendt, WA Association of Conservation Districts
- KayDee Gilkey, WA Association of Wheat Growers
- Rep. Mary Dye, WA State Legislature
- Nate Lewis, WA Farmland Trust
- Tom Salzer, WA Association of Conservation Districts

Food Insecurity Team

- Aaron Czyzewski, Food Lifeline
- Anna Nepomuceno, Northwest Harvest
- Brice Montgomery, WA Dept. of Social and Health Services
- Chris Voigt, WA State Potato Commission
- Claire Lane, Anti-Hunger & Nutrition Coalition
- Diane Dempster, Clark County Food System Council
- Jennifer Otten, UW Food Systems, Nutrition, and Health
- Katie Rains, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Dept. of Agriculture
- Kyle Unland, WA Dept. of Health
- Leanne Eko, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction

Impacts of Climate Change Team

- Caleb Gwerder, WA Farm Bureau
- Chad Kruger, WSU Office of Research
- Chris Voigt, WA State Potato Commission

- Chris Elder, King County Dept. of Natural Resources and Parks
- Hilary Aten, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Conservation Commission
- Jon DeVaney, WA State Tree Fruit Association
- Sen. Judy Warnick, WA State Legislature
- Laura Raymond, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Dept. of Agriculture
- Linda Neunzig, Snohomish County
- Melissa Spear, Tilth Alliance
- Sen. Rebecca Saldaña, WA State Legislature
- Richard Conlin, Conlin Columbia Partnership for Cities

Alleviating Barriers to Small and Mid-Scale Farm Viability and Market Access Team

- Addie Candib, American Farmland Trust
- Anna Nepomuceno, Northwest Harvest
- Brian Estes, LINC Foods
- Caleb Gwerder, WA Farm Bureau
- Diane Dempster, Clark County Food Systems Council
- Jon DeVaney, WA State Tree Fruit Association
- Laura Raymond, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Dept. of Agriculture
- Marcia Ostrom, WSU Food Systems Program
- Melissa Spear, Tilth Alliance
- Nate Lewis, WA Farmland Trust
- P.J. Cawley, Charlie's Produce

Regional Food Infrastructure and Institutional Procurement for Economic Development Team

- Aslan Meade, Thurston Economic Development Council
- Brian Estes, LINC Foods
- Jennifer Otten, UW Food Systems, Nutrition, and Health
- Laura Raymond, on behalf of the Director of the WA State Dept. of Agriculture
- Leanne Eko, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
- Linda Neunzig, Snohomish County
- Marie Spiker, UW Food Systems, Nutrition, and Health
- P.J. Cawley, Charlie's Produce
- Sen. Rebecca Saldaña, WA State Legislature
- Tim Crosby, Thread Fund

Appendix B. Forum Priorities 2025-27

Following a multi-phase planning process beginning in April 2025, the Forum established five teams to advance the following priorities for the 2025-27 biennium:

Team Name	2025-27 Topical Priorities
Impacts of Climate Change	• Water Supply for Agriculture and Food Production • Climate Resilience for Agriculture and Food Production
Agricultural Land Protection and Availability and Next Generation Farming	• Succession Planning and Incentives
Alleviating Barriers to Small and Mid-Scale Farm Viability and Market Access	• Advanced Technical Expertise and Knowledge Transfer
Regional Food Infrastructure and Institutional Procurement for Economic Development	• Public-Private Partnership Models for Infrastructure Finance • Strategic Infrastructure Planning and Coordination
Food Insecurity	• Food System Coordination for Food Security • Eligibility and Access for Food Assistance Program