



Food Systems

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

March 31, 2021

Letter of Recommendation for AP Contribution Award

For Nicole Witham, Extension Coordinator Specialist – Statewide Program Coordinator

This past year was full of many challenges for the WSU FSP and Nicole was instrumental in the growth and success of our programs throughout 2020. The year started out with Nicole participating in the Cascadia Grains Conference, OSU Small Farms Conference and creating a panel for the UW Food Systems Seminar series on Protein for the Planet with local livestock producers. She was looking forward to planning and leading efforts around WA Meat Up – with a large in-person event set for 2020. She was actively planning all of the 2020 Farm Walks while also coordinating delivery of Cultivating Success through our VA Grant program across WA. Then everything changed with the statewide shutdown in mid-March. We had just submitted an USDA NIFA BFRDP proposal and work shifted from grant meetings to COVID response meetings, several each day, often with several of the same people.

Nicole quickly shifted her work in response to both the urgent needs across the WA food system, but also the need to change program delivery methods given the “stay home, stay healthy” orders. She continued to reach out to the WA Meat Up network that was collaboratively initiated by WSU FSP and WSDA Regional Markets in 2019, convening bi-weekly calls with food system leaders and livestock producers across WA. This work eventually led to the submission of a CARES ACT proposal in July 2020 to support WA livestock processors and build technical and educational capacity at WSU. She was the co-lead on this effort with Laura Raymond (WSDA). Through this work, over 50 livestock processors in WA received \$4.6million in grant funds to increase capacity for regional slaughter and processing. WSU received \$325K of CARES ACT funds to support the WA Meat Up Technical Assistance Team, purchase a mobile meat processing classroom, and build out capacity at the WSU Meat Lab in Pullman, WA. Nicole managed several aspects of this work and continues to lead this effort within the FSP as we move forward with extension and outreach planning.

Another major pivot that Nicole managed was transitioning our CS classes from in-person to virtual classes offered statewide. We were able to manage this change in programming because of Nicole’s diligence in moving the project forward, despite challenges with working through WSU AOI, the class was offered in the fall of 2020 with over 200 participants from across the state. The model was so successful, that it is being offered again this spring 2021, with plans to continue to offer a condensed state-wide version of CS virtually beyond the pandemic. Partners

across the state have enthusiastically participated in this new class format and have expressed how impressed they are with Nicole's facilitation and opportunity to build a virtual, online cohort of new and beginning farmers and ranchers in WA. The WSU FSP will build on this successful model for years to come thanks to her hard work.

One of Nicole's biggest projects during 2020 was figuring out what to do with our nearly two decades old Farm Walks series (in collaboration with Tilth Alliance). Nicole lead's the Farm Walks for WSU FSP and had started planning for the 2020 program year when COVID hit. She quickly transitioned the Farm Walks program from an in-person event to a podcast series. She worked tirelessly all summer to learn how to use new technology, booking guests, building a new website, and learning how to be a podcast host. This new Farm Walks model was launched in early 2021, with six podcasts now available for download. Like with our other programs throughout COVID, we have seen access to our programs increase because of the virtual format – and Nicole's Farm Walks are a big hit. We will continue this model beyond COVID, mixing podcasts with live events because of the success that Nicole has had with this format.

A major aspect of Nicole's work relates to the WSU Food Systems Team and how we communicate and convene. In 2019, we had initiated the WSU First Friday's Food Systems Team Update. We began meeting once a month, with FSP Team members giving quick updates. With the onset of COVID, we took these monthly check-ins and expanded them to weekly check-ins from 10-12pm through the WSU FSP COVID-19 HUB. We began HUB meetings in April and conducted 28 throughout 2020 with on average more than 100 people participating in or viewing each call. During the fall of 2020, we changed the name to FSP HUB, dropping COVID, and making calls more general, but still with the focus on responding to needs across the WA food system. Nicole also managed a FSP website update to brand and market our HUB calls and provide resources for sectors across the WA food system related to COVID-19. Through these HUB calls, several new projects were initiated, people shared stories and provided support to one another, and new partnerships were formed.

Nicole has a diverse and strong skillset across several different areas, many of which are not directly related to her position description. She often leans in and contributes to work outside of her program areas because she has such a unique and powerful skill set. Nicole has been central to helping the WSU FSP advance with her design skills and web development skills, often needing to do projects that in the past were managed by CAHNRS Communications or other departments within WSU. Without her support, we would not have advanced as much as we have in the past three years.

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