WSU fund to help fruit industry

By Matt Baide

Moving across the country is never easy, but for Dr. Desmond Layne, the move to this area has been great.

Layne is the first hire from WSU’s Tree Fruit Campaign and Tree Fruit endowment.

“The goal ultimately was to raise funds that would go into an endowment that would be managed by Washington State University and the tree fruit industry, to serve the industry with research and technology transfer and support for the primary research farms where we do tree fruit research,” Layne said.

The goal of the campaign is to raise $52 million from two special project industry assessments. The first assessment was put to a vote of the growers in 2011, which was passed. With the project passing, cherry growers pay $4 per ton on sweet cherries and $1 per ton on other stone fruits such as apricots, nectarines, peaches and plums.

With the money that is being raised, there are three areas that are being funded for the project. These include hiring faculty research chairs, investing in information and technology transfer and investing in research orchard operations. An endowed chair is a faculty position at the university that is for an established scientist who will build a research group in their particular expertise. The specific need is for the particular expertise targeted towards the specific needs of the industry.

“Industry identified research priorities include orchard systems management, soil health, disease management, pest management and post-harvest issues. It could also be any number of other key issues that the industry identifies as top priorities in the future,” Layne said. “It’s really a historic opportunity. The tree fruit endowment is the largest gift to WSU that has ever occurred, so it’s a big deal.”

Layne is one of the endowed chairs. He is also the Tree Fruit Extension Program Leader and a Professor of Pomology in the Horticulture Department. He spent the last 15 years in South Carolina at Clemson University, primarily working with the peach industry, before moving to the Wenatchee Valley. He said the area is the most beautiful place he has ever lived and he has found the people to be warm and friendly.

His primary area is doing applied field research and overseeing the information and technology transfer to the growers.

“It’s a shared responsibility, it’s a true partnership,” Layne said. “The industry has something called an endowment advisory committee. Seven individuals from the industry have been appointed from various organizations to work directly with the college Dean, me, other endowed chairs to ensure that we are all on the same page with advice and different directions that these programs will go.”

Layne spoke at the Lake Chelan Horticulture day, giving an update on the progress. He has spoken at 8 events throughout the region, letting people know that the project is moving forward.

“It’s a reporting back to the people kind of presentation,” Layne said. “We want the industry to know that we are here to serve them and we listen to them to discern what the key issues are that we can help.”

Layne shared that he is currently working on a new tree fruit web site for the fruit growers throughout the state. He wants the web site to be a comprehensive site that is a “one-stop-shop” where growers can go to get research-based information.

“There is a need. I think, from the growers standpoint, to be able to come to one place to be able to access the different types of information that they are looking for. We want to make it easy for them to search for that kind of information so that it wouldn’t waste their time if they are trying to learn about a specific thing that could be helpful to them,” Layne said.

One of the ultimate goals for the project is to create a world-class team of technology transfer individuals and services to assist the tree fruit industry in Washington.

“Eventually, what I would hope down the road is that WSU would have the best tree fruit research and extension outreach team of any university in the world,” Layne said. “I believe that is a goal that we will reach, simply because of the investments that are occurring now. We already have the world’s best tree fruit industry!”

“It’s an exciting time to be in Washington, the fruit industry is a dynamic, productive and profitable industry,” Layne said. “They are committed to the success of their businesses and the future. They’ve been aggressive in partnering with the university in unprecedented ways and the university administration is a very committed partner and will make the right investments in the future.”

Matt Baide can be reached at 509-662-2513 or by email: qahirreporter@gmail.com