

# PUGET SOUND BUSINESS JOURNAL

## Seattle law firm works the field: Agricultural practice booms

Peter Verbrugge admits to being skeptical at first.

His longtime Yakima attorneys had just joined forces with a Seattle law firm, Stokes Lawrence, and the manager of Valley Fruit Orchards LLC, wasn't sure what to expect.

"I was curious, maybe a little concerned. Why did they feel they needed to do this?" he said.

When litigators from the Seattle Stokes Lawrence office helped his company squash a \$20 million lawsuit by the Equal Employment Commission, the answer became clear.

"They had experience that was phenomenal," Verbrugge said. "They've really put together a good team."

The Stokes Lawrence agricultural squad combines 16 attorneys split between the main Seattle office and a Yakima branch, called Stokes Lawrence Velikanje Moore & Shore. Since opening the Yakima office in 2007, the agricultural practice has consistently constituted about 20 percent of the firm's annual revenue.

The versatility has made Stokes Lawrence the go-to choice for many of the state's key agricultural players, said Mike Gempler, executive director of the Washington Growers League.

"I like the fact that they have multiple attorneys with experience and knowledge of the system that affects us," Gempler said.

Besides representing the Growers League in court, the firm reviews its Agricultural Employees Handbook, partners for training, and sends lawyers to educate agricultural organizations on both sides of the mountains.

"There's a tremendous demand for legal advice coming from the agriculture industry," said Aviva Kamm, an attorney in the Seattle office who specializes in employee relations. "Our firm has really been responding to that demand."

Employee relations, business operations, intellectual property and succession planning are among the top agricultural legal needs. Many cases deal with issues unique to farming and ranching, requiring attorneys with specialized knowledge.

Kamm, who once grew vegetables and milked cows on an Israel kibbutz, has



worked on agricultural cases since joining Stokes Lawrence the week the Yakima office opened.

She has kept busy lately helping clients figure out how to comply with a state Supreme Court ruling granting farm workers additional, separate pay for rest breaks. A current case before the court addresses when an employer must have a license or contract to bring a seasonal worker on site.

Another hot-button topic is the federal H-2A visa guest worker program, which allows employers to import foreign laborers to fill temporary agricultural jobs. Washington state has become the second-largest user of H-2A workers behind North Carolina, despite national criticism that the program is too burdensome, costly and complex.

Water rights and food safety continue to be important issues, said Dustin Yeager, a lawyer in the Yakima office who specializes in business operations. Sophisticated technology increases the need to protect intellectual property and trademarks.

Joining forces with the Seattle firm provides a "deeper bench," Yeager said. It wasn't simply a case of a Seattle firm wanting to get into agriculture.

"We found a lot of good synergy. It's nice to have someone who can work on, say, trademark issues day in and day out, and when

there's major litigation, be able to dedicate more than one lawyer to the case," Yeager said. "We had specialties you don't find at ordinary, run-of-the-mill Central Washington firms."

The efforts have impressed Verbrugge, who uses Stokes Lawrence for several different legal needs.

He has retained personal relationships with his previous Yakima attorneys while forging new ones with lawyers from the Seattle office, including a former Stokes Lawrence lawyer who still comes to his home for harvest parties.

"I have not met a person out of their office," he said, "that I don't care for."

Next up for Stokes Lawrence is to expand its influence in Eastern Washington. It just made an offer to an attorney in Tri-Cities.

Kamm said she expects the practice will continue to grow organically.

"We have the knowledge and experience, since we've been working through these issues for tens, if not hundreds, of clients," she said. "How does the Affordable Care Act apply to this industry? That's not something you can just pull out of your pocket."



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