

# 2008 County Assistance Grants

Report to the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office

**WASHINGTON STATE CONSERVATION COMMISSION  
OFFICE OF FARMLAND PRESERVATION**

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### Background

In 2007, it was recognized by staff of the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) and the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC) that there was a need to provide financial and technical assistance to county planning staff to develop local farmland preservation programs. By providing support to local entities to develop agriculture strategic plans, it was hoped farmland preservation actions could be sustained over time.

To further these goals, RCO identified and set aside \$200,000 from the farmland preservation portion of the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP) funding to be used for grants to local entities. The grant program would be administered by the Office of Farmland Preservation (OFP). There were 14 applications for the grants, from which eight were selected: Clallam, Clark, Jefferson, Kittitas, Klickitat, San Juan, Thurston, and Whatcom.

### Purpose

The grants were intended to assist counties in creating a farmland preservation program or to increase capacity of existing programs. A primary objective of the grants was to help counties develop strategies that could lead to future grant applications seeking funding for innovative farmland programs and acquisition of agricultural easements.

Grants were used to:

- Assess local interest through interviews, surveys, town meetings, county fairs, site visitations and telephone contact;
- Develop priorities for farmland to be preserved including identification of agricultural activities, GIS data analysis, and priority locations using GIS and county zoning plans;
- Develop a local farmland preservation strategy including but not limited to developing recommendations for consideration by local government, strategies for acquisition through fee or less than fee channels, landowner incentives, and voluntary actions;
- Develop a local process for identifying high priority farms;
- Assist local government in developing criteria for Open Space designations through the Public Benefit Rating System;
- Develop media outreach and education through radio and print;
- Engaged local entities and local elected officials.

### Lessons Learned

Overall the success of these grants is measured by the effect it has had on the local community. Each entity brought together stakeholders and interested parties to discuss what preservation means in their community. Many counties have been influenced by the work of the entities via one-on-one and formal discussion with local government.

A key “lesson learned” from the process is counties are facing very difficult financial decisions for all the services they provide. Farmland preservation activities at the local level may suffer not because of lack of interest but because other issues such as criminal justice, transportation and social services are a higher priority. In the future the farmland preservation grants should be available to entities other than counties, such as conservation districts or non-

governmental organizations, who would then work with the counties to implement the activities covered by the grant.

Some of the lessons learned include:

- Other entities should be allowed to apply for the local grants because of the financial stresses faced by counties and the competing policy needs that must be balanced.
- A successful local effort will include the involvement of the county government (including elected officials and planning staff), the conservation district, WSU Extension, and local non-governmental organizations representing a variety of interests.
- County agriculture strategic plans are useful for a variety of purposes, including local land use planning, evaluating farmland preservation grant proposals, community and stakeholder engagement, and guiding local economic development strategies for agriculture related businesses. Development of these plans should be encouraged in the grants program.
- Due to the severe financial situation faced by counties, direct technical assistance by OFP staff to county staff and to local NGOs can help advance state farmland preservation objectives while enhancing local engagement. Continued support for OFP staff in these areas is recommended.
- Continued funding is needed for future grant programs, as well as funding to continue the successful projects started with the grants.

The final county reports submitted as a grant requirement are available through the Office of Farmland Preservation web page (<http://ofp.scc.wa.gov/>) or by contacting the office directly.

## Next Steps

The 2009 legislature provided \$70 million for the WWRP grants in the 2009-2011 biennium. OFP recommends the continuation of the farmland preservation local grants in the amount of \$200,000 per fiscal year. The next cycle of grants would incorporate the lessons learned from the first round.

In addition, OFP recommends funding be made available from the WWRP funds to provide for one full-time position tasked with providing technical assistance to counties and local entities for the development and implementation of local agriculture strategic plans.

# ASSISTANCE GRANT SUMMARIES

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## **Clallam County - \$25,000**

A feasibility report and survey was submitted to the Board of County Commissioners. Trust for Public Land (TPL) prepared the report and conducted a survey to be used by a coalition consisting of North Olympic Land Trust, Friends of the Fields, the Port Angeles Realtors Association, the Sequim Realtors Association, and the TPL. The coalition will use the report to evaluate potential funding sources for land conservation and farmland preservation within the county.

The coalition conducted an initial review of the county comprehensive plan and zoning code for sections that address agricultural activities and prepared an action plan to address these codes. Information was obtained from the North Olympic Land Trust indicating land already preserved through conservation easements for processing into the GIS database. GIS information was also obtained from the Clallam Conservation District identifying locations of farmland and farming activities to help develop a land data base that will identify key at-risk farms. Maps showing these locations were produced and submitted to the Board of County Commissioners.

The Clallam County Department of Community Development submitted a series of reports to the Board of County Commissioners. The first summarized TDR programs around the state, provided an analysis of key elements to a successful TDR program, and proposed strategies for Clallam County to consider in updating its TDR program.

The second report reviewed and analyzed the effectiveness of the county's current Agricultural Resource Zone clustering development provisions and proposed strategies for the county to consider for improving those provisions.

The third report focused on the county ordinances relating to farmland preservation, and proposed strategies to improve the effectiveness of those ordinances.

Finally, a brochure was produced targeted to the general public that outlines programs and incentives available for the preservation of local farmland. The brochure will be available in print and online.

## **Clark County - \$25,000**

Clark County used their assistance grant to organize a farm preservation advisory committee to assist with development of the Clark County farmland preservation plan. Seven meetings of the advisory committee were convened and the group developed an initial list of farm issues to be discussed by the committee. The advisory committee worked to identify, evaluate and prioritize farm areas/projects using GMA designations, conservation area acquisition plans and other sources. The committee also identified and recommended tools and strategies to help preserve farms and support services as well as conducted stakeholder interviews to help inform the advisory committee. The group finalized their Agriculture Preservation Strategies Report and submitted it to the Clark County Board of County Commissioners for review. The final report was adopted by the Board to be used to prepare a plan that establishes eligibility for the WWRP Farmland Preservation Grants and other funding sources.

A sample of the general themes of committee discussions included:

- There is a place for agriculture in Clark County and people who want to pursue it;
- Agriculture contributes to the local economy and there are opportunities to expand;
- The climate is favorable to produce a very diverse array of agricultural products;

- The diversity in both the range of products produced and the scale of operations is a strength;
- There is a growing trend for local commodities and the opportunity to harness the interest to support local growers;
- Tapping into the local demand by creating a more positive context within which to pursue agriculture benefits is important, and doing so will:
  - Reconnect increasingly urban populations with their agricultural neighbors and the production processes which the county depends upon;
  - Increase food security;
  - Reduce the community's carbon footprint; and
  - Educate citizens about, and attracting them to, healthy diets and activities.

### **Jefferson County - \$25,000**

Jefferson County partnered with the Jefferson LandWorks Collaborative (JLWC) in the implementation of their grant. The JLWC is a network of eight local organizations working strategically together to keep farming and forestry economically viable, productive, and profitable in Jefferson County.

JLWC hosted a series of succession planning workshops, provided outreach to landowners, refined their GIS mapping project, developed an educational packet for land owners, and identified tenant farmers and/or agricultural operations that are looking for expansion or leasing/purchasing of land and connected them with landowners who are not currently utilizing all of their farm ground.

They also worked with Washington FarmLink to have lease templates available for landowners. JLWC visited each potential lease site to assess its suitability and to actively recruit new growers interested in these parcels. This effort generated a list of 9 potential sites available for lease.

To garner more accurate crop and land use data, they conducted phone surveys of all local farms obtaining accurate information on location, size, crops, and contact information. They worked closely with landowners and presented LandWorks to several local groups including the Jefferson County Association of Realtors. JLWC updated their brochure and website to allow greater visibility of work for landowners and general public.

LandWorks partners co-hosted a regional food summit with agricultural economist Ken Meter presenting data for the region. Participants included farmers, institutional buyers, consumers, educators, restaurateurs and others to discuss the infrastructure needed to build a resilient food system locally. LandWorks and WSU partnered with the local paper on publishing a guide to local farms accompanied by an article about LandWorks and the role of entrepreneurs in the building of rural farm economies.

In conjunction with the WSU Jefferson County Farm Tour, LandWorks hosted the screening of the film "Good Food" in Port Townsend. It was followed by a discussion with the filmmakers who traveled the Pacific Northwest to document the resurgence of small farms. The event spurred the opportunity to promote and educate the public about the work of the LandWorks Collaborative and to discuss the implications of loss of viable farmland.

### **Kittitas County - \$25,000**

The Kittitas County grant represents a good example of an important "lesson learned" if we are to seek the development and implementation of agriculture strategic planning in all counties in the state. The County had intended to use the grant funds to identify Agricultural Production Districts (APDs) which would be a part of a comprehensive plan to conserve and keep available land for farming in the county and help preserve the agricultural economic sector in the county. Unfortunately, the County was facing a number of important land use and environmental actions at a time of financial constraint. They also experienced staff changes in the Development

Community Services program leading to a lack of focus on the grant and farmland preservation activities. None of the tasks were completed by Kittitas.

The experiences of Kittitas County serve as an important lesson. Counties will need technical and financial assistance to develop agricultural strategic plans and to engage the local communities in the development of those plans. Other local entities will usually be available to make that happen and the grants program should be modified to do so.

### **Klickitat County - \$25,000**

Klickitat County contracted with the American Farmland Trust (AFT) who made an initial assessment of potential issues and prepared a working discussion paper on "Options and Issues for Protecting Agricultural Lands in Klickitat County" along with supporting materials. Public meeting notices of six community meetings conducted by AFT were distributed following an outreach plan developed by AFT. All meeting notices were published in the local paper and county planning staff contacted forty-five landowners by written correspondence or phone calls to invite to the meetings. During the meetings AFT presented various tools used for farmland preservation which was followed by a facilitated in-depth discussion that focused on a community vision of farming in the County in the future, impediments to maintaining farmland in farm use, and possible solutions. Twenty-two recommendations were developed in the document "Keeping Farmland Available for Klickitat County Agriculture: Report to the Klickitat County Commission" This was distributed to the Klickitat County Commission in December of 2008 and is available online at: <http://www.farmland.org/programs/states/wa/Klickitat-County-Papers.asp>

### **San Juan County - \$25,000**

The San Juan County Agricultural Resources Committee (ARC) was the lead, with help from San Juan Conservation District, San Juan County Land Bank, and San Juan Preservation Trust. Two articles on farmland preservation were published in three printed newspapers and three online newspapers. The articles gave an overview of state Ag Open Space Tax program, and the process of donating or selling conservation easements to either the Land Bank or Preservation Trust. So far, one landowner has contacted ARC interested in a conservation easement. ARC has discussed an "early warning system" with the County Assessor where ARC would find out if a landowner is soon to be out of compliance with the Ag Open Space Tax program. ARC would contact the landowner and offer assistance. There were three public meetings held on three different islands to share information on farmland preservation and the county open space tax. A workshop on inheritance and farm transition was also held. ARC worked with the County Public Works Department to develop a map to help in prioritizing farmland preservation areas.

Two additional articles on preservation were published in the local paper where ARC now has a monthly spot. Articles covered economics of farmland services and need, and outlined the benefits of local food. ARC also conducted a live radio interview covering local food, land preservation, and a "farm to school" program. While the "early warning system" ARC has with the County Assessor has not stopped farms from leaving the program, the close alliance with the assessor has been very beneficial for agricultural data. Media and outreach efforts have led several land managers to contact ARC for more information. ARC updated the San Juan County Council and presented recommendations including incorporating a 'no net loss' of farmland policy into the county's comprehensive plan, allocation of funds from farms leaving Ag Open Space to finance farmland preservation, rewriting the Public Benefit Rating System of Open Space to facilitate preservation and consideration of building permit quotas, down-zoning, and a PDR program. ARC continued its collaboration with WSU Extension and San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild to establish baseline data on farming and food in San Juan County. They also coordinated with Snohomish County to create a regional food shed map. The scope of the agriculture mapping project was enlarged to gather more data.

An audit of San Juan County's Open Space program was initiated by the Washington Department of Revenue. The County Assessor mailed an audit to all farms in the county. ARC mailed a follow up letter illustrating the significant ramifications of not responding and offering assistance in completing the audit questionnaire. This technical involvement allowed ARC to assist the county in rewriting the county's Public Benefit Rating System which will allow farms removed from Open Space Ag to be included in the Open-Open Space Program. Monthly articles continue to appear in local newspaper which goes to each box holder in the county.

### **Thurston County - \$25,000**

County staff worked with the Ag Advisory Committee to develop an agriculture strategy. As part of this effort, the County and the Committee held a workshop with members of the community, providing an opportunity for county residents to learn about the need for, and explore strategies to, conserving working lands and to allow land owners to express desires for specific requirements and benefits to be included in a strategic plan. The county Ag Advisory Committee pursued a parallel process to advocate for farm and working lands conservation and held a workshop where the information from the public was incorporated into the Ag Advisory Committee consideration of a county agriculture strategy. The Committee used some of the grant funds for a contract for assistance in writing an ag strategy that will be presented to the County Commissioners.

### **Whatcom County - \$22,979**

The Whatcom County Farmland Preservation OFP grant project worked to enhance and support a coordinated approach to the preservation of agricultural land by creating community support for agricultural preservation initiatives. In accomplishing this goal, the project complimented other County programs and policies aimed at preserving farming and agricultural lands.

The County submitted four white papers covering a Purchase of Development Rights Program(PDR) assessment; public involvement summary of a PDR program; a summary of impediments and opportunities related to agricultural planning in Whatcom County; and finally, the feasibility of a Transfer of Development Rights program.

The first paper examined the county's current PDR program and target areas by utilizing recent GIS technology to look at program potential, development pressures, and loss of agricultural land. The report reviewed targeted areas, and assessed the PDR program accomplishments against the county's stated protection goals.

The second paper examined the attitudes in the agricultural community about the PDR program and if it had met expectations. The County contracted with Whatcom Farm Friends to create an outreach and public involvement plan related to the county's ongoing agricultural work program. The final Public Involvement Plan Report submitted by Whatcom Farm Friends is available on the OFP web page.

The third paper provided a summary report of impediments and opportunities created through various levels of regulation of the agricultural program. It included recommendations for improving local control and revenue generation, and drafts of ordinances and zoning changes that may support this.

Finally, the fourth paper examined what the opportunities might be to merge the county PDR program with a banking mechanism that allows for Transfer of Development Rights (TDRs). The report outlined the feasibility of a TDR program and concluded through several contributing factors that the success rate is low.

All four of these papers can be viewed by going to <http://ofp.scc.wa.gov/index.php/preservation-grants>