

2010 County Assistance Grants

Report to the Recreation and Conservation Office

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

October 2011

Office of Farmland Preservation

COUNTY TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE GRANT REPORT

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Background

In 2007 and again in 2009, the Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) and the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC) recognized there was a need to provide financial and technical assistance to counties to develop local farmland preservation programs and strategies which included utilizing conservation easement funding from local, state, federal, and private funding. Developing local priorities and actions is important for building efforts to protect and enhance agriculture and helping guide changes and considerations of county planning and code changes. By providing support to local entities to develop agriculture strategic plans, it was hoped farmland preservation actions could be sustained over time through a “tool box” approach.

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 to issue grants to local entities to pursue developing local strategies for preserving farmland through a wide array of opportunities including utilizing state funding from WWRP for agricultural conservation easements. There were twelve county applications for the grants, from which eight were selected: Island, Kitsap, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish, Thurston, Whatcom, and Yakima. Regrettably, Island County was unable to get under contract with us and the timing did not allow the funds to be awarded to another county.

Purpose

These technical assistance planning grants are intended to assist counties in creating farmland preservation strategies, programs, priorities and to increase capacity of existing programs and also to identify priority farmlands in the county that could be considered for state funding of agricultural conservation easements through the Washington Wildlife and Protection Programs Farmland Preservation Program and other fund sources.

These grants are essential for raising public awareness and support of farmland preservation in their respective county. The grants have led to adoption of recommendations and resolutions to better support agriculture in the county and has laid a ground work for initiating the multiple farmland preservation tools available including agricultural conservation easements. These efforts can be used to support conservation easement funding requests, development of policies and regulations that take agriculture into consideration, and consider other cost and time effective ways of supporting and preserving agriculture.

Grants were used to:

- Develop county ordinances for farmland preservation;
- 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;
- Develop recommendations for changes to existing county farmland preservation programs;
- 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 agricultural and 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 continue to face very difficult financial decisions for all the services they provide. Farmland preservation activities and advancements 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 of a higher priority. In the future, farmland preservation grants should be made 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.
- Successful local efforts have included the involvement of citizens, county government (including elected officials and planning staff), conservation districts, local 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.
- There is not always concern about the tools to protect farmland including prioritizing parcels for agricultural easements;
- Due to the 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;
- With funding for direct agricultural conservation easements being severely limited, continued utilization of alternative funding to develop other components of local farmland preservation is needed.

Next Steps

1. A key next step will be to **monitor the implementation and advancement** of the agricultural strategic plans and identified areas for preservation. OFP staff will notify counties of funding opportunities for planning and preservation as well as work with county staff where appropriate to integrate key elements of their work and offer support before county commissioners and key stakeholders.
2. **Coordinate with the Department of Commerce** on their Tool Box for Planners webpage and integrate all of the local county planning work done with this round of grants and past round of grants as well as other relevant agricultural planning information. The purpose will be to create a resource accessible by the public with the primary audience intended to be local planners looking for examples of agricultural planning, adopted and considered ordinances, scoring criteria for farmland preservation, and strategies for preserving and enhancing agriculture in Washington state.
3. Coordinate with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife on their 2011-2017 strategic plans under Goal 1. This would include **utilizing the developed county plans** and identifying a pilot area to work through the stated goal below.
 - a. Enhance working relationship with the Washington State Conservation Commission by utilizing approaches to land acquisition that blend the maintenance of working agricultural lands with the conservation of fish and wildlife during the 2009-11 biennium. (2011-2017 Draft Strategic Plan – Goal 1:6(b))
4. Identify funding to **coordinate agricultural plans for other counties**. Recreation and Conservation Office funding has effectively been used to identify areas of preservation, however, limitations exist which include having to contract solely with counties. OFP would like to work with counties on agricultural planning that could work to address agricultural issues such as designations and implementation practices.
5. **Report on the results** of grants through the Office of Farmland Preservation Newsletter and through local media.

COUNTY ASSISTANCE GRANT SUMMARIES

Kitsap County - \$25,000

Kitsap County completed all the elements of their grant. A final outcome was adoption by resolution (Resolution No. 136-2011) the Kitsap County Strategic Agricultural Plan and Inventory. This plan will be used in future planning policy discussions, comprehensive plan amendments, development regulations and other agricultural efforts.

With input from stakeholders, citizens, and elected officials, the following strategies were recommended to assess viable ways to preserve farmland countywide and bolster the food chain:

- Expand Comprehensive Plan policies and development regulations regarding local farming and foods. These include adopting a right to farm ordinance, refocusing the transfer of development rights program and the review of other regulatory reform (e.g. on-farm processing and sales).
- Partner with local agencies that have related expertise (WSU Extension, Conservation District, Health District, and Farm Bureau for example).
- Facilitate coordination between farming communities and the seasonal and year-round workforce and educational internships.
- Expand access for local foods to schools, food banks, grocers and restaurants, and diverse neighborhoods.
- Provide technical assistance on agricultural best management practices, product branding, marketing and technology.
- Coordinate opportunities for responsible composting of agricultural waste products.
- Expand the marketing and application of Buy Local provisions to grow the local market for crops and animal products and support farmers' markets and other local sales outlets.
- Continue to enhance and update agricultural mapping and coordinate a survey of local commercial kitchens.
- Encourage collaboration between agricultural associations and producers on processing infrastructure.

With assistance of WSU Extension, the Kitsap Conservation District, and Chase Economics as well as citizen groups such as Food and Farm Policy Council, the plan includes the following components:

- An inventory and mapping of existing and potential agricultural land;
- A mechanism to prioritize land for agriculture and preservation and develop a database of landowners and farmers, and;
- Strategies for preserving agriculture in Kitsap

Other strategies may apply through grassroots efforts with farmers and producers in specific areas who know their geography and practices best. Local farmers could propose ideas for application in their area for review by Kitsap County and the public, including:

- Implement agricultural zoning.

- Acquiring land or agricultural conservation easements for farming and food production through funding from the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Programs Farmland Preservation Program and other state and federal programs.
- Explore financial incentives (such as farm energy audits, tax incentives)
- Consider other regulatory reform (e.g. animal densities or setbacks).

It is expected the effort will lead to increased awareness and participation in agricultural planning, conservation easements, and policies that support agriculture in Kitsap County.

San Juan County - \$25,000

San Juan County completed all elements of the grant with a primary outcome being a strategic plan which guides protection efforts in San Juan County and identifies priority farmland to protect through easements. The San Juan County (SJC) Agricultural Strategic Action Plan was developed collaboratively by the SJC Agricultural Resource Committee (ARC), the San Juan County Land Bank (Land Bank), and the San Juan Preservation Trust. In addition, SJC developed a parcel level listing of priority farmland to protect on Orcas Island, San Juan Island, and Lopez Island. It is intended that this strategic plan will lead to pursuits of funding from Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program's Farmland Preservation Program and other state and federal programs.

The ARC, Land Bank and San Juan Preservation Trust presented the strategic plan in mid-September 2011, and requested that they:

- 1) Support and adopt policies and legislation that strengthens ag;
- 2) Support development of a collaborative approach to protection of agriculture combined with strengthening of the business of agriculture. The team will conduct a feasibility of establishing a collaborative approach, to be presented back to Council later this year;

The plan identifies key goals and strategies that will result in the preservation of priority farmland and in strategic actions to strengthen agriculture in San Juan County. Extensive outreach to stakeholders throughout the county provided essential input in the identification of priority issues and goals, and a mapping analysis was conducted to identify priority farmland for conservation.

One of the actions identified in their strategic plan for farmland preservation was to conduct regular updates to identify and map priority farmland for conservation. One of the goals of this grant was to identify and map priority farmland, based on a combination of criteria, including size, threat, connectivity to other farmland, history of farming, current use, etc., thus establishing a database for future conservation decisions. A current list of priority properties for conservation has been compiled. The plan in looking ahead, recommends the Agricultural Resources Committee, San Juan Preservation Trust, and San Juan County Land Bank should meet yearly to assess past farmland conservation efforts and update the list to identify opportunities and available funding.

Below are some of the key findings and recommended actions from the strategic planning process.

- SJC has ample farmland for farming, including land historically farmed that is now marginally farmed for hay or used for grazing.
 - Providing access to farmable land owned by non-farmers is essential to maintaining and expanding the agricultural economy.
- The mandates of the Land Bank and the San Juan Preservation Trust include protection of farmland, and over 3,000 acres have already been conserved.
 - Continued commitment by these organizations to the conservation of active farmland will be strengthened by collaborative approaches to farmland management, programs to link farmers to conserved land, and funding to support these efforts.
- The average age of farmers in San Juan County is 61.8 years, higher than in other parts of the state. The majority of farmers in the county today have no plan for transferring their farm operation to the next generation, and for many, the value of their farmland as real estate is one of their greatest assets and a necessary part of their retirement plan.
 - Appropriate state or local policies and regulations, as well as training, support, and resources are necessary to promote effective transfer, succession, and leasing of farmland for a new generation of farmers.
- The average size of farms in San Juan County is now 20 acres, compared to 228 acres in 1964, reflecting the shift away from large farms with livestock operations to small, diversified farms growing market crops and some livestock for local consumption.
 - Conservation efforts should focus on “farmsheds”—areas with clusters of active small farms—as well as larger historic farms, thereby helping to preserve and maintain critical farm-related infrastructure and networking among farmers.
- The geographic isolation of San Juan County and the resulting high cost of infrastructure, inputs, and transportation act to limit the creation of infrastructure necessary for storage, value added processing, and expansion of local agricultural production, businesses, and markets.
 - Innovative, mobile, cooperative approaches are needed to serve the needs of producers on each island.
- The high cost of land and shortage of affordable housing are the two highest challenges for new farmers in San Juan County.
 - Access to affordable farmland and housing, and programs for training and mentoring, combined with a strong market for agricultural products are necessary to support the next generation of farmers.
- Public and private land conservation organizations seek to provide public benefits through access, views, and habitat and historical preservation.
 - These organizations could further benefit the community by encouraging opportunities such as educational programs on the farm, food production for food bank or local schools, new farmer training, affordable access for new farmers, or research by public agencies such as WSU Research Station.

Following the countywide outreach meetings that established the above issues, stakeholders then identified the top five priorities among these issues. The strategic plan focuses on recommended actions relative to the top five priorities.

The top five priorities are:

- Preserve farmland for farming through easement or acquisition.
- Adopt and promote scale-appropriate state and local regulations in order to foster farm businesses and support a thriving local farm economy
- Promote opportunities for new farmers to establish successful farms in San Juan County
- Develop adequate access to infrastructure necessary to process and maintain diverse agricultural operations
- Expand local and regional marketing opportunities.

As the result of this strategic planning process, it is clear that success in protecting farmland will ultimately be defined not only by the amount of farmland conserved, but also by the productive, profitable, and sustainable use of that farmland by local farmers, thereby contributing to a strong, diversified economy that benefits farmers and their community.

In addition, SJC developed a parcel level listing of priority farmland to protect on Orcas Island, San Juan Island, and Lopez Island.

Skagit County - \$25,000

A primary objective of the assistance grant was to formalize a partnership with Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland (SPF) to help better leverage the private funding SPF can bring to the Farmland Legacy Program and update the Farmland Legacy Strategic Plan. A resolution for adopting the strategic plan will be before the County Commissioners this fall.

The updated strategic plan, with its updated process for identifying priority farms to be protected with conservation easements, includes alternative ways to protect farms and the prime agricultural soils including utilizing Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program's Farmland Preservation Grant program and other identified resources for farmland protection. It also has options that will help stretch the funding dollars and options for farmers to use as voluntary alternatives.

Since the county program was established in 1997, circumstances have changed and adjustments were seen as necessary to keep the program effective and relevant. Most importantly, applications have exceeded the availability of funding in recent rounds, and the Committee has been forced with tough choices about which proposals to approve. This has surfaced some issues with the selection criteria and points system, and particularly in the ability of the Committee to justify funding decisions based on a transparent and objective process. In addition, there are some considerations that have arisen over time, such as the availability of matching funds, which have become far more important than is reflected in the 1997 selection criteria and point system.

The program review identified several changes to the program to keep it current and effective. The recommended changes were developed by the Conservation Futures Advisory Committee in early 2011 in consultation with the Agricultural Advisory Board, American Farmland Trust, Skagitonians staff and leadership, and the general public. The Committee presented the proposed recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners in June 2011. At the time of this report, further action is pending.

The recommendations submitted to the Board of County Commissioners are as follows:

- Recommendation One: Retain the Current Dedication of Conservation Futures Tax Funding to Farmland Preservation
- Recommendation Two: Supplement Funding for the Purchase of Development Rights on Farmland
- Recommendation Three: Select Projects Using Two Review and Selection Rounds per Year
- Recommendation Four: Modify the Proposal Scoring System to Better Address Program Principles
- Recommendation Five: Modify the Treatment of Financial Considerations in Scoring Proposals
- Recommendation Six: Eliminate Use of the Scoring Process to Define the Price for the Purchase of Development Rights
- Recommendation Seven: Review and Revise Procedures Following the Two 2011-12 Selection Rounds

Snohomish County - \$25,000

Grant funds were used to develop an agricultural preservation strategy that integrates and coordinates the various protection tools including easements, to develop a countywide system for prioritizing farms, and to partner with the agricultural community to complete the prioritization.

On September 27, 2011, the Planning and Community Development Committee of the Snohomish County Council directed staff to prepare ordinances for adoption of a countywide Transfer of Development Rights program based on the recommendations that were developed with funding support from the grant. There are still several steps in the formal consideration process, including consultation with cities and farmers, and a hearing in front of the Planning Commission. Final adoption will occur sometime in 2012. The policy direction is to move forward consistent with the analysis the county was able to do thanks to the farmland preservation grant. The analysis shows the potential to permanently conserve up to 40,000 acres of designated farmland and to add up to 9,000 additional acres of farmland that are not currently designated.

A primary outcome of the project has been a countywide strategy that ties together all the various tools and funding sources for farmland preservation, including state farmland preservation grants, federal grants, local conservation futures funding, and Transfer of Development Rights. It also includes a system for prioritizing lands for preservation, recognizing that different funding sources might have different criteria and that multiple tools could be used in an area and even on a single farm. The project team and the consultants have delivered a set of recommendations to Snohomish County for updating and expanding the farmland preservation programs.

One of the key challenges faced by the project team came when working to identify which farmland would have the highest priority for protection in the program.

Attempts to get specific about what types of farmland are the highest priorities were met with opposition from farmers whose land would not be included in that group and some who believed that all agricultural land is equally important. Extensive efforts to develop specific criteria using soils, lot size, hydrology, elevation, proximity to infrastructure, zoning, threat of development, and other factors met resistance from groups that say we must preserve all farmland. The Snohomish County Farm Bureau promoted a policy of no net loss of farmland, and it has opposed labeling any farm land as a lower priority. In the end, consensus emerged to keep the priorities very general so that we do not miss opportunities to preserve farmland.

Thus, the identification of priority farmland is more general than originally imagined in order to build and maintain broad support for the strategy from the agricultural community. Priorities are expressed in terms of characteristics (location relative to floodway, size of parcel, etc.) rather than specific parcels so that no farmland is excluded from participation. The priorities will guide the timing of acquisitions of conservation easements or fee interests through conservation easements that can be funded by the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program's Farmland Preservation Grant program and other state and federal grants, with the eventual goal of permanent protection of all farmland in the county.

The recommended update and expansion of Snohomish County's farmland preservation strategy requires consideration and action by the County Council. The legislative adoption process takes time and was planned to take place after completion of the grant-funded work. The County Council has formally acknowledged receipt of the recommendations and directed staff to bring the policy issues before council for discussion and direction. Formal adoption of policy and code amendments will follow.

In addition, the county is funding continued work on the Sustainable Lands Strategy, with federal, state, tribal and local partners. This second phase will extend on the framework that has been developed and will implement it and test it through pilot projects.

Thurston County - \$25,000

The purpose of this effort was to develop a county Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) ordinance which would be a major step in preserving working farms in Thurston County. The ordinance would create a mechanism for determining priority working lands for preservation. This mechanism will allow the county to rank properties and create a list of high priority farms to preserve with PDR's and local funding from conservation futures program and the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program's Farmland Preservation Grant program as well as other funding sources.

An ordinance to establish a PDR program in Thurston County was drafted with the input of stakeholders and public participation. The ordinance was adopted by the Thurston County Board of County Commissioners on September 27th. The ordinance establishes a PDR program in Thurston County. The ordinance will:

- Establish a voluntary purchase of development rights program for Thurston County which will enhance the protection of the county's farmland, enhance the long-term viability of the agricultural enterprises within the county and provide public benefit by retaining properties in permanent resource use.
- Maximize the benefit of County expenditures by applying PDR funds as a source to match other grants.
- Facilitate partnerships in the preservation and management of agricultural lands by favoring the expenditure of PDR funds for acquisitions that will be owned and managed by entities that are eligible to acquire and manage such lands, as determined by the criteria of existing state and federal agricultural lands preservation grant programs.

Whatcom County - \$25,000

Grant funding was used to coordinate and integrate the County's efforts through the development of an agricultural strategic plan and proposing changes to the Purchase of Development Rights program in an effort to prioritize parcels for protection.

A resolution was adopted unanimously by the Whatcom County Council on July 26, 2011. The resolution endorses the Whatcom County Ag Strategic Plan and commits to the time and resources necessary for its implementation and affirms the important role of the Agricultural Advisory Committee and the Ag Program staff in developing recommendations for appropriate code changes and comp plan amendments as identified in the Whatcom County Ag Strategic Plan.

In addition, an RFP was released for Agricultural Strategic Plan implementation work on September 7, 2011 with proposals due on the 20th. They expect to have a contract in place by mid to late October 2011.

In addition, the County submitted pre-proposal to Ecology/Commerce through the Puget Sound Partnership/EPA Watershed RFP which was an outflow from the discussions that took place through the Agricultural Strategic Plan development work.

The elements of the agricultural strategic plan include:

- Updated GIS information to include more detailed data on what land is in farming, farm infrastructure, residential and other uses;
- Outreach activities to the community including elected officials, citizens, farmers and landowners;
- Defining and identifying strategic farmland for protection through updated Purchase of Development Rights applicant evaluation criteria;
- Developing implementation strategies and methodologies for the tools identified by the Agricultural Advisory Committee; and
- Funding options.

The county PDR program has been in place since 2001. A key result of this grant for the PDR program was a proposed process by which the county can determine which lands within the protection area should be prioritized in light of future funding constraints.

A prioritized listing of properties was not fully completed due to the delays that backed them up. What they did submit was a draft prioritization process for identifying this list. This is currently part of both their advisory committee's work plans for this coming year (PDR Oversight Committee and Agricultural Advisory Committee); they are taking the mapping that was accomplished through support from the grant, and using (or modifying) the criteria listed in the draft prioritization process to identify parcels/farms that meet the criteria. The PDR committee will use this for targeted outreach for new applicants; some of which will hopefully be packaged to submit during the next Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program Farmland Preservation grant round opening. The Agricultural Advisory Committee will use it for incentive program development & implementation (of which PDR is one option).

An outcome of the priority exercise was an identified need to narrow the area of lands prioritized for protection in order to make the best use of limited funding and be strategic in their efforts. There was general agreement within the agricultural community leadership that a relatively contiguous block of land should be identified for agricultural policy protection, as opposed to scattered sites throughout the county. It is the areas in and around the core where agriculture is to be encouraged and prioritized through financial and programmatic incentives and expanded use opportunities. In light of this, there was also consensus that smaller areas are important in order to augment the minimum base.

They proposed a process by which they can determine which lands within the areas described above may fall into categories within a matrix they developed.

Yakima County - \$25,000

The Office of Farmland Preservation grant was utilized to establish a system to prioritize farmland for preservation in Yakima County. This was an important step for purchase of development right efforts in the County that would consider Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program Farmland Preservation funding.

The grant gave county staff an opportunity to research agricultural laws and policies affecting Yakima County, research programs and organizations related to farmland preservation, research the economics of agriculture and research, evaluate and compile agricultural statistics. This effort enabled the county to seek public input on key farmland protection tools and priorities and create a tool to help in the conservation of farmland. Respondents identified attributes that stakeholders in Yakima County think are vital to farmland preservation. Overall, identifying these key factors, knowing the funding opportunities available including the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program Farmland Preservation, it is expected this tool will be used in consideration of policy and funding opportunities.

Maps were created to visually demonstrate the areas of high, medium and low priority farmland and a ranking system was developed based on the survey results.

The work product and plan is intended to assist agricultural operators and others interested in preserving agricultural lands within Yakima County.