

Benton County Agricultural Viability

Example Agricultural Viability Provisions in Voluntary Stewardship Work Plans

Based on Draft Chapter 3, Agricultural Context, Section 3.3 several agricultural viability concerns were noted:

- **Adequate agricultural water rights and resources** – Reliable water supplies that retain water rights for agriculture now and in the future are important. Irrigation districts could potentially provide monitoring and may contribute to stewardship work plans.
- **Adequate agricultural land resources base** – increased development is a challenge for achieving the agriculture and conservation goals of the VSP. Sprawl and orchard conversion are happening. The cost of land is a problem. There is a need for succession planning. At the same time there is a need to allow agriculture to expand. Where is agriculture the highest and best use? Where are critical areas that cannot be compromised? Are there priority corridors that can be retained and allow agriculture elsewhere? Often the corridors for wildlife are likely to be in areas that are not suited for growing, e.g. due to slopes or poor growing conditions in ravines.
- **Reasonable regulatory standards (environmental and labor)** – regulatory certainty is important and there should be an avoidance of excessive regulations. The regulations should be science-based.
- **Adequate farm-to-market infrastructure** – there has been vertical integration of production and distribution. In the lower valley there is an issue with the amount of potable water for wineries and processing plants. How many more plants can be sustained?
- **Adequate community support, technical assistance, and public education** – sufficient resources are needed.

Based on these concerns, the following could be developed into additional Agricultural Viability Aims, beyond those included in Chapter 7 goals and benchmarks, which currently focus on the intersection of agriculture and critical areas:

- Promote adequate agricultural water rights and resources.
- Protect and expand the agricultural land base.
- Avoid excessive regulations and promote competitiveness.
- Ensure there is adequate farm-to-market infrastructure including processing, distribution, marketing, education, and research and development.

Are there other potential agricultural viability aims?

Do you have suggestions about tracking agricultural viability aims?

What incentives would you like to see in the Work Plan?

See compilation of example goals, incentives, and tracking measures in the State Agriculture Strategic Plan and other County VSP Work Plans.

WSDA Agriculture Strategic Plan

[Executive Summary]

WASHINGTON Agriculture

Strategic Plan 2020 and BEYOND

3

Categorized Areas of Recommendation

CATEGORY #1 Make Agriculture a Priority

– *critical to socio-economic vitality*

- Business environment conducive to success
- Assemble agency and industry leadership
- Economic development program

CATEGORY #2 Eliminate Regulatory Barriers

– *promote competitiveness*

- Blue Ribbon Panel to evaluate the impact of regulations
- Agencies provide outreach and meet to improve consistency
- Construct a model Agricultural Impact Statement

CATEGORY #3 Protect Resources

– *availability and access*

- Land
- Water
- Labor
- Energy
- Capital and credit

CATEGORY #4 Strengthen Supportive Services

– *assure competitiveness*

- Education
- Transportation
- Science, technology, research and development
- Processing and preparation
- Marketing services
- Information, communication, and outreach
- Producer associations and formal commissions

CATEGORY #5 Harness Emerging Opportunities

– *identify, monitor and respond*

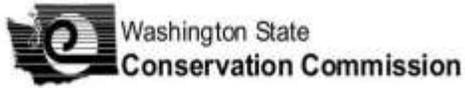
- Organic, sustainable and local
- Multi-year farm bills
- Food safety and food security
- Climate change
- Risk management

Strategies for the future:

Analyze, Respond, Allocate and Improve



State Conservation Commission Agriculture Viability Toolkit



Agricultural Viability Toolkit

The intent of this document is to provide VSP workgroups with tools to individually define what agricultural viability is, and identify ways to improve ag viability, in their county and community.

One Suggested Definition¹

Agricultural viability can be defined as the ability of a farmer or group of farmers to:

- productively farm on a given piece of land or in a specific area,
- maintain an economically viable farm business,
- keep the land in agriculture long-term, and
- steward the land so it will remain productive into the future.

SWOT Analysis

One useful tool for work groups to consider in analyzing ways to meet the statutory mandate of maintaining and enhancing agricultural viability is a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. An analysis of each Ag specific sector may be beneficial to facilitate this process. After your workgroup has talked about the unique characteristics of agriculture in your county, a SWOT analysis can help identify opportunities to capitalize on strengths and improve or eliminate weaknesses and threats to Ag viability in your county. As a framework for this assessment, VSP work groups may also want to consider the five general areas described below (and any other areas or issues added to the list by your group):

1. A stable and secure base of agricultural land and water resources
2. Shared agricultural production and market infrastructures and services
3. Technical support to promote agricultural viability and conservation
4. Education, training and succession planning
5. A welcoming business environment

1. A stable and secure base of agricultural land and water resources

For agriculture to thrive in Washington State, adequate land and water resources must be available for agricultural uses. Urbanization, real estate markets, and increasing land values put increasing pressure on rural agricultural lands. The preservation of farm land available for agricultural uses is done through the promotion of various farmland preservation tools and programs including, agricultural conservation easements, estate planning, succession planning, new and innovative farming opportunities, and a commitment to enhancing agricultural zoning. Farmland protection programs play a vital part to keep agricultural lands in production. In addition, programs that promote agricultural access to water supplies, a stable and fair legal system to protect water rights, and provisions to secure water and improve water right reliability during times of drought are important components of a productive

¹ This definition was originally found in the "Farming in the Floodplain Project: Existing Conditions Report", August 2016, Environmental Services Associate.

agricultural land base. Water needs to be available in sufficient quantities and at the right times in order to ensure viable agriculture in Washington.

2. Shared agricultural production and farm-to-market infrastructures and services

In order for agriculture to remain viable in Washington State, the infrastructure that supports it must be in place and well maintained. Agricultural irrigation and drainage districts, utilities, processing facilities, transportation and port systems, and market access systems must remain accessible and affordable to the agricultural community. This includes the work of commodity commissions and other programs in developing and promoting local and export agricultural market opportunities, as well as programs to reduce trade barriers and support Ag-friendly trade agreements. Agricultural operators also require readily available access to accurate and timely information to meet ongoing changes in the marketplace. In addition, agricultural equipment and supplies need to be available to the local agricultural producer.

3. Technical support to promote agricultural viability and conservation

Many conservation practices, as set out by the Natural Resource Conservation Service and others, are supportive of agricultural viability. Through technical assistance provided by local conservation districts, WSU Extension and similar programs, farmers should be encouraged to institute conservation practices to ensure the continued capability of their land to produce crops and to conserve natural resources. Balance should be sought between conservation enhancement programs and the ability of a landowner to choose the use of their land. The need to protect sensitive critical areas should be balanced against the farmer's need to be economically viable, and solutions sought should promote both improved conservation and Ag viability.

4. Education, research and succession planning

Federal, state and local research and educational efforts that support agricultural viability should be fostered and encouraged. Sustaining a healthy state university and community college system, for instance, supports innovative crop research and development of technologies and production efficiencies Washington growers can implement. Producers can also benefit from access to governmental and nongovernmental programs that help producers with farm bill issues, business and financial planning, access to capital, value-added processing, product development, specialty crop issues and marketing.

In addition, an effort should be made to coordinate the education of the general public and newly elected policy-makers. In counties with significant urbanization pressures, particular emphasis on farm-to-table outreach, agri-tourism and fairs should be considered. This will help demonstrate the importance and value of agriculture in Washington, as well as the interconnectivity between agricultural viability and the overall quality of urban and rural life.

The average age of an agricultural operator in Washington State is nearly 60 years old. Estate and Succession planning is imperative to furthering the viability of agricultural operations in Washington. Promoting and supporting efforts like local farm-focused estate planning workshops can be a benefit to not only an aging generation of farm owners, but to new and beginning farmers as well. Newer farmers -

those at the beginning of their career that are seeking farming opportunities - can meet older landowners in an atmosphere where all parties are learning about planning challenges and how to overcome them.

When new and younger operators do get involved in agriculture, for them to be viable in their operations they must be educated on the technical and economic aspects of farm operations and practices as well as on governmental programs, permitting, and procedures that may affect their operation. Labor apprenticeships such as those implemented by the State of Washington are a method for growers to secure seasonal labor and help train the next generation of farmers.

5. A welcoming business environment

To maintain agricultural viability, state and local governments should promote a stable and welcoming business environment, and should look for opportunities to partner with the agricultural community on efforts and incentives to improve both agricultural viability and the natural environment. Farm operators understand the need for reasonable regulation, but regulation must also take into account the economics of running a viable agricultural operation. Agricultural operators deal with low margins and other economic factors including cost of production that can make viability precarious for them. To reduce time and cost impacts, governmental regulations and permit processes affecting agricultural producers should be predictable, affordable and not overly burdensome. Property taxes, zoning ordinances, nutrient management regulations, and air and water quality regulations should be enacted with viable agriculture in mind.

Chelan County VSP: Authorized 3/13/17

Suggested Agricultural Viability Aims:

Agricultural Viability Aims I through IV were identified in Tables 11-18 and are more specific to the interface with critical areas. Aim V and Aim VI are also listed below and more broadly address the aim of implementing conservation practices to avoid unnecessary regulations **and are considered Priorities for evaluation and implementation:**

- AG Aim-I. Protect agricultural activities from geologic hazards such as erosion and landslides.
- AG Aim-II. Promote economical water, soil, pest, and nutrient management that maximizes produce quality.
- AG Aim-III. Protect orchards and vineyards from wildlife and pest damage.
- AG Aim-IV. Avoid water contamination, damage to crops, loss of livestock, increased susceptibility of livestock to disease, and damaged farm machinery due to flooding.
- AG Aim-V. Promote the prevalence of conservation practices to help avoid unnecessary local critical area regulations.
- AG Aim-VI. Increase the viability of the agricultural industry in Chelan County.

Suggested Agricultural Viability Tracking Measures

Agricultural Viability Tracking Measures 1 through 4 were identified in Tables 11-18 and are more specific to the interface with critical areas. Tracking Measures 5, 6, and 7 address the prevalence of conservation practices and increasing agricultural viability through farm infrastructure and technical assistance.

- AG Track-1. Increased agricultural crop production and economic value annually.
- AG Track-2. Designated agricultural land in Comprehensive Plan continues to be protected.
- AG Track-3. Water resources necessary for producers are available and reliable.
- AG Track-4. Producers have more regulatory stability in Chelan County.
- AG Track-5. On-farm and commercial storage, aggregation, and distribution services are available.
- AG Track-6. Necessary supplies, equipment, and other farm inputs are accessible and available.
- AG Track-7. Producers have access to farm business expertise, training, and practical research that advances farm profitability and conservation.

Suggested Agricultural Viability Incentives and Activities:

- Incentive-1 Priority funding set aside and made available by federal, state, and local sources to support VSP Program participation by farmers and ranchers. Applications for conservation practices could score higher for VSP participants such as through CCD, NRCS, and other agencies.
- Incentive-2 Provide information to farmers and ranchers about available tax incentives for participating agricultural producers.
- Incentive-3 Seek new tax incentives by the state legislature that recognize VSP participation. Due to local tax burden shifts when an incentive program is authorized by state law, carefully consider new tax incentives.
- Incentive-4 Promote VSP participation through recognition, branding for marketing purposes (such as through farmers markets, CSAs, others).
- Incentive-5 Ensure carbon taxes and cap and trade systems for greenhouse gas emissions do not apply to agricultural activities.

- Incentive-6 Ensure the County Comprehensive Plan, capital investments, and zoning code provide strong support for agricultural infrastructure that may be located within urban areas, such as packing houses, etc.
- Incentive-7 Promote Comprehensive Plan Policies and regulations that support agricultural operators to keep land in farming. Evaluate allowances for agricultural accessory uses or homes for agricultural operators; for example consider where homesteading in County code can be made more flexible.
- Incentive-8 Consider alternative alignments for recreational trails to avoid abutting farmers and ranchers.
- Incentive-9 Evaluate appropriate densities and site planning for rural residential or urban residential uses that abut designated agricultural lands to minimize interface, protect necessary agricultural practices, and reduce pressure for agricultural conversion.
- Incentive-10 Establish an agricultural viability committee that can advise Chelan County and other agencies on measures to promote the agricultural economy.
- Incentive-11 Explore a “farmbudsman” program where farmers and ranchers can obtain objective and comprehensive advice on federal, state, and local laws that affect agricultural activities, e.g. water rights.

Suggested Agricultural Viability Outcomes for Information Tracking:

Based on implementing Agricultural Viability Aims, Incentives, and Activities, the following desired outcomes will be tracked (Outcomes 1-3 were identified in Tables 11-18):

- Outcome-1 Increased agricultural crop production and economic value annually. See Section 3.1 for baseline as of VSP Work Program.
- Outcome-2 Designated agricultural land in Comprehensive Plan continues to be protected.
- Outcome-3 Water resources necessary for producers are available and reliable.
- Outcome-4 Producers have more regulatory stability in Chelan County.
- Outcome-5 On-farm and commercial storage, aggregation, and distribution services are available.
- Outcome-6 Necessary supplies, equipment, and other farm inputs are accessible and available.
- Outcome-7 Producers have access to farm business expertise, training, and practical research that advances farm profitability and conservation.

Grant County VSP: Draft Work Plan 1/17

Grant County’s Draft VSP Work Plan identifies regional and local elements of agricultural viability, and includes a SWOT analysis.

Agricultural Viability – Regional Elements

Concept	Detail
Stable and secure agricultural land base	Land conversion Stable water rights
Infrastructure and services	Utilities/irrigation Market access/transportation
Support for best farm management practices	Economically viable solutions Balanced approach
Education, training, and succession planning	Apprenticeships/training Interconnectivity with end users
Welcoming business environment	Stable regulatory environment Partnership-based environmental protection
Market trends/viability	Changing livestock and commodity prices can affect the number of producers that support economy
	Value added measures to make products more marketable

Agricultural Viability – Farm Elements

Concept	Detail
Reduce input costs	Energy (power, fuels)
	Chemicals
	Labor
Maintain/enhance land production capacity	Soil health
	Water systems and moisture management
	Nutrient management
	New technologies
Flexibility to respond to market conditions	Changing land in production
	Individual schedule for implementing farming practices
	Cropping choices
Incentives	Payment for measures
	Tax breaks
Managed farmland conversion	Urban development
	Maintaining resource lands
“No surprises” regulatory environment	CWA, CAA, ESA, and others
	County permitting (drainage and other requirements)
Protect private property rights	Recognizing and respecting rights
Environmental variation	Rainfall, temperature, and other environmental factors can affe

Grant County SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliable water source from the Columbia River • Reliable climate (dry fall weather) • Strong infrastructure • Transportation access (air, rail, interstate) • High-speed Internet access • Abundant, cheap electricity • Diverse agricultural support industry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reliance on export of products • Incentivizing younger generations to farm • High land prices • Distance from large market centers
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural processing facilities closer to producers • Expanding into the vegetable market • Vertical integration of individual farms • Education opportunities for new ideas • New technologies such as precision agriculture • Big Bend Community College • Eco Marketing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loss of small-size producers • High capitol producers coming from California • Land conversion and rising land prices • Groundwater shortage

Thurston County VSP: Approved Work Plan 3/17

1.5 Agricultural Viability Elements and Indicators Monitoring Matrix

Agricultural Viability Elements	Agricultural Viability Elements and Indicators	Monitoring Method & Agency
<p>WAC 355.195.010: A county that chooses to participate in the program is required to develop work plans to protect critical areas while maintaining the viability of agriculture through voluntary, incentive-based measures.</p> <p>Ag Element 1.1, Land Resources – Agriculture requires adequate land with good soil to produce healthy crops of food, fiber and fuel. Businesses that support agriculture need an adequate base of productive agricultural lands to remain viable.</p>	<p>Indic 1.1 – Acreage of agriculture measured by: (i) Ag activities that intersect with critical areas, and (ii) Acreage of farmland from the USDA Census</p> <p>Indic 1.2 – Acreage of agricultural area use change</p> <p>Indic 1.3 – Acreage in farmland protection programs, such as Open Space Farm and Ag, and designated agricultural land</p>	<p>Thurston County, watershed and countywide data from VSP mapping & USDA census</p> <p>Thurston Conservation District, collected through stewardship plans at the site level</p> <p>Thurston County, countywide data (could be watershed)</p>
<p>Ag Element 2.1, Water Resources – Agricultural production needs clean water to grow crops and farms/ranches need access to sufficient water resources in order to remain viable. Therefore laws must support farmers' existing and future water rights and farms' access to sufficient water quantity and quality.</p>	<p>Indic 2.1 – Water resources education and outreach efforts tracked by the number of hits on a water resources clearinghouse webpage and/or the number of outreach materials distributed</p> <p>Indic 2.2 – Number of irrigation efficiencies implemented and structural/operational improvements to water infrastructure</p> <p>Indic 2.3 – Number of water rights certifications, claims, permits, and applications, as well as transfers, banking and similar water conservation efforts</p>	<p>Thurston County, Thurston Conservation District, countywide data</p> <p>Thurston Conservation District, Stewardship Plans</p> <p>Thurston County, obtaining data from EDC (watershed and countywide)</p>
<p>Ag Element 3.1, Regulatory Reforms – Producers need reasonable and predictable standards and streamlined processes to reduce time and costs</p>	<p>Indic 3.1 – Outreach to farmers: Number of technical assistance staff (TCD and/or Ag Liaison) available and resources provided to facilitate a better understanding of the current rules and regulations</p> <p>Indic 3.2 – Outreach to policy-makers: Number of efforts/resources provided to support and promote policy-makers and regulators understanding of agriculture related issues, regulatory pressures, and making needed reforms to maintain or enhance ag viability</p> <p>Indic 3.3 – Number of new or amended ag related regulations and how they impact agriculture</p>	<p>Thurston Conservation District, countywide data</p> <p>Farm Bureau/Thurston County, countywide data</p> <p>Thurston County/Farm Bureau, countywide data and narrative</p>
<p>Ag Element 4.1, Infrastructure (hard & soft) – Agriculture needs "hard" infrastructure including transportation, water and waste utilities, access to markets and equipment. Agriculture also depends on "soft" infrastructure, or human capital and a healthy network of support, including training, education, research and technical assistance.</p>	<p>Indic 4.1 – New or improved agriculture infrastructure</p> <p>Indic 4.2 – Number of events or workshops for networking between farmers or between farmers and agencies</p> <p>Indic 4.3 – Number of assistance courses or educational workshops, number of pilot projects or demonstration events</p>	<p>DDC/WSU/Thurston County, countywide data</p> <p>Thurston Conservation District/Thurston County, countywide data</p> <p>Thurston Conservation District/WSU/Thurston County, countywide data</p>
<p>Ag Element 5.1, Markets – Economic viability of agriculture relies on the profitability of farm operations, including efficient production, diversification of agricultural products, direct marketing, value-added opportunities, available consumers, and agritourism.</p>	<p>Indic 5.1 – Number of farmers markets and/or CSA farm/sales</p> <p>Indic 5.2 – Branding efforts to increase value of agricultural products (i.e. number of "VSP Good Stevia" or other certifications)</p> <p>Indic 5.3 – Market Value of Ag* (USDA Ag Census) and local farmers markets revenue</p>	<p>Thurston County, countywide or watershed</p> <p>Thurston County/Thurston Conservation District, countywide</p> <p>Thurston County, countywide</p>

*This is currently a resource available to estimate the market value. If more resources become available, or the agricultural economy is evaluated using the two-tier proposed plan, this data source may be substituted using information from that economic analysis.

Vermont Farm to Plate Goals and Indicators

In 2009, Farm to Plate Investment Program legislation was signed into law and tasked the Vermont Sustainable Jobs Fund (VSJF) with the creation of a ten year Farm to Plate Strategic Plan to:

- increase economic development in Vermont's farm and food sector;
- create jobs in the farm and food economy;
- improve access to healthy local food for all Vermonters.

The plan has detailed goals and metrics. It can be found here: <http://www.vtfarmtoplate.com/plan/>.

Selected goals are listed below as they relate to some of the common issues in Washington – land, infrastructure, etc.

Goal 4: Options for farmers to reduce their production expenses will be widely disseminated and utilized.

Goal 5: Agricultural lands and soils will be available, affordable, and conserved for future generations of farmers and to meet the needs of Vermont's food system.

Goal 6: Farms and other food system operations will improve their overall environmental stewardship to deliver a net environmental benefit to the state.

Goal 9: The majority of farms will be profitable.

Goal 11: Vermont's food processing and manufacturing capacity will expand to meet the needs of a growing food system.

Goal 12: A sufficient supply of all scales and types of on-farm and commercial storage, aggregation, telecommunications, and distribution services will be available to meet the needs of increasing year-round food production and consumer demand.

Goal 19: Business planning and technical assistance services will be highly coordinated, strategic, and accessible to Vermont's food system businesses.

Goal 20: Food system entrepreneurs and farmers will have greater access to the right match of capital (grants, loans, mezzanine debt, equity, loan guarantees, leases, and incentives) to meet their financing needs at their stage of growth and for their scale of business.