

Determining Agricultural Viability within the Voluntary Stewardship Program



Washington State Department of Agriculture

August 2016

Agricultural viability was not clearly defined in the VSP statute, which allows each participating county to tailor the definition to meet their specific needs. For instance, agricultural viability may look very different in eastern Washington versus western Washington, or even vary between counties that abut each other and produce the same commodities (but have different strengths, threats, or opportunities).

WSDA believes the following steps may be helpful for counties starting to address agricultural viability. This is not intended to be prescriptive or exhaustive, but merely a starting point for discussion and group evaluation.

- **Strengths:** what are the pieces in place that strengthen your current agricultural economy? (Examples may include transportation corridors, access to niche markets, quality or quantity of production, available extension or higher education programs that promote/support agriculture, Right to Farm ordinances).
- **Threats:** this is also tiered and county-specific: what are threats to ag viability in your community? At the farm level (succession planning and available work force, aging equipment, access to newer technologies, transportation corridor concerns), at the county level (processing and packing house closures, regulatory burdens, residential encroachment), and at the state level (undetermined water rights, other regulatory burdens, funding changes for supportive programs)
- **Opportunities:** this is three tiered – what opportunities exist that could enhance agricultural viability (at the farm, at the county, at the state)? This could include improved connections with training and education programs (4-H, FFA, community and 4-year colleges), exploring niche markets to increase profitability, partnering with environmental partners to evaluate BMP's or install demonstration projects that increase farmable ground, streamlined permitting (at the county and state) for those farms participating in VSP, improving agricultural visibility throughout the county (at fairs, hosting an Ag Day, agritourism).

WSDA encourages workgroups to acknowledge threats that they have no control over but play a role in viability: market prices, port slowdowns/closures, fires, drought, and other climate impacts, Farm Bill changes, etc. While there is no expectation that these things will be addressed under VSP, your work plan is an important place to catalogue the importance of the agricultural economy in your county.