

VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

AGRICULTURAL VIABILITY



INTRODUCTION

The Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) provides an alternative approach for counties to address our state's Growth Management Act requirements. VSP uses a watershed-based, collaborative stewardship planning process, and relies on incentive-based practices for protecting critical areas, promoting viable agriculture, and encouraging cooperation among diverse stakeholders.

The purpose of the VSP is to “promote plans to protect and enhance critical areas within the area where agricultural activities are conducted, while maintaining and improving the long-term viability of agriculture in the state of Washington and reducing the conversion of farmland to

other uses....”¹ “The role of farming within the watershed, including the number and acreage of farms, the economic value of crops and livestock, and the risk of the conversion of farmland...” must be taken into account when a county initially opts into the VSP.²

Once a county opts into the VSP, it creates a VSP work group. That work group is charged, among other things, with crafting a work plan “to protect critical areas while maintaining the viability of agriculture in the watershed.”³ The work group must also incorporate applicable “farmland protection...” data and plans into the work plan.⁴

Once the work group has crafted its work plan, the work plan is submitted to the Conservation Commission through the VSP technical panel. The technical panel’s duty is to “assess whether at the end of ten years after receipt of funding, the work plan, in conjunction with other existing plans and regulations, will protect critical areas *while maintaining and enhancing the viability of agriculture in the watershed.*”⁵

DISCUSSION

This agricultural viability analysis is intended to assist VSP work groups in achieving their goals under the VSP statute to maintain and enhance the viability of agriculture. Within the framework of VSP, agricultural viability means the ability of an agricultural operator to potentially meet their financial obligations. Simply defined, agricultural viability is the ability of a farm to meet its financial obligations. Ultimately, it is the viability of the farm itself that is paramount in sustaining agriculture.

Farmland conversion has impacts on both farming communities and the environment: as open space and natural habitat are converted to other uses, land becomes more expensive, making it more difficult for existing and beginning farmers to access land.

Farmers are challenged with market conditions which create an economic environment in which farmers must constantly adapt by finding new market niches or increasing the scale of and costs of production to remain economically viable.

¹ RCW 36.70A.700(2)(a).

² RCW 36.70A.710(3)(a).

³ RCW 36.70A.720(1).

⁴ RCW 36.70A.720(1)(a).

⁵ RCW 36.70A.725(2), emphasis added.

To maintain and enhance agricultural viability, VSP work plans may consider five main areas:

- 1. A stable and secure agricultural land base**
- 2. Infrastructure and services**
- 3. Support for best farm management practices**
- 4. Education, training and succession planning**
- 5. A welcoming business environment**

- 1. A stable and secure agricultural land base**

For agriculture to thrive in Washington State, land must be available for agricultural uses. Urbanization, real estate markets, and land value puts increasing pressure on rural agricultural lands. The promotion of farm land available for agricultural uses is done through the use of tools associated with farmland preservation 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, access to water, a stable water right legal system, and provisions to secure water during times of drought are important components to the 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. Infrastructure and services**

In order for agriculture to remain viable in Washington State, the infrastructure that supports it must be in place. Utilities, irrigation systems, market access and transportation systems must remain relevant and accessible to the agricultural community. Equipment and supplies need to be available to the local agricultural producer.

- 3. Support for best farm management practices**

Best management practices, as set out by the Natural Resource Conservation Service and others, should be used to support agricultural viability. Farmers should be encouraged to institute those practices to ensure the continued capability of their land to produce crops and to conserve natural resources. Balance should be sought between those conservation enhancement programs and the ability of a landowner to choose the use of their land. The need to protect sensitive areas should be balanced against the farmer's need to be economically viable, and solutions sought that provide for both options.

4. Education, training and succession planning

The average age of an agricultural operator in Washington State is nearly 60 years old.⁶ Estate and Succession planning for that generation is imperative to furthering agricultural operations in Washington State. Promoting and supporting efforts like local farm focused estate planning workshops can be a benefit to not only an ownership generation of farmers, but new and beginning farmers. Newer farmers - those at the beginning of their career that are seeking a 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, they must be educated on farm operations and practices in order for them to be viable in their operation. Labor apprenticeships such as those implemented by the State of Washington are a method for growers to have seasonal labor and help train the next generation of farmers. Sustaining a healthy state and community college system supports promotion of innovative technologies implemented by growers in Washington.

Federal, state and local educational efforts should be fostered and encouraged. Agricultural operators need education not only in technical and economic aspects of farm operations, but also in governmental operations, programs, permitting, and procedures.

An effort should be made to coordinate the education of the general public and elected officials so that the value of agriculture and the interconnectivity of agricultural with urban and rural life can be demonstrated. With the continued urbanization of Washington State, a particular emphasis should be placed on urban populations and farm-to-table outreach activities.

5. A welcoming business environment

A stable, predictable, and not overly burdensome regulatory environment needs to be maintained by state and local government in order to foster agricultural viability. Farm operators understand the need for reasonable regulation, but regulation must also take into account the economics of running an agricultural operation. Property taxes, zoning ordinances, nutrient management regulations, air quality regulations should be enacted with an eye towards viable agriculture in mind.

Governmental agencies should look for opportunities to partner with the agricultural community on efforts to reduce pollution, promote natural resource conservation, and otherwise enhance our

⁶ National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS),
https://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/Ag_Overview/stateOverview.php?state=WASHINGTON, accessed 8.25.16

natural environment. Newly elected state and local public officials should be provided education on the importance of agriculture to Washington State. Public education should include a component to explain how agriculture contributes to the overall health and economic vitality of the state.

Providing for business development and issues targeted to the special considerations of the agricultural operator will enhance agricultural viability.

Agricultural operators deal with low margins and other economic factors including cost of production that can make viability precarious for them. Opportunities for business planning, access to capital, and foreign markets alleviate some of those pressures. New programs, such as value-added processing, labeling, and specialty crops and produces also help mitigate risk for operators.

DRAFT

RCW 36.70A.700(2)

(a) Promote plans to protect and enhance critical areas within the area where agricultural activities are conducted, while maintaining and improving the long-term viability of agriculture in the state of Washington and reducing the conversion of farmland to other uses;

RCW 36.70A.710

(3) In identifying watersheds to participate in the program, a county must consider: (a) The role of farming within the watershed, including the number and acreage of farms, the economic value of crops and livestock, and the risk of the conversion of farmland;

RCW 36.70A.720

(1) A watershed group designated by a county under RCW 36.70A.715 must develop a work plan to protect critical areas while maintaining the viability of agriculture in the watershed.

RCW 36.70A.720(1)

(a) Review and incorporate applicable water quality, watershed management, farmland protection, and species recovery data and plans;

RCW 36.70A.725

(2) The technical panel shall review the work plan and report to the director within forty-five days after the director receives the work plan. The technical panel shall assess whether at the end of ten years after receipt of funding, the work plan, in conjunction with other existing plans and regulations, will protect critical areas while maintaining and enhancing the viability of agriculture in the watershed.

(3)(a) If the technical panel determines the proposed work plan will protect critical areas while maintaining and enhancing the viability of agriculture in the watershed:

(i) It must recommend approval of the work plan; and

(ii) The director must approve the work plan.

(b) If the technical panel determines the proposed work plan will not protect critical areas while maintaining and enhancing the viability of agriculture in the watershed:

(i) It must identify the reasons for its determination; and

(ii) The director must advise the watershed group of the reasons for disapproval.

(4) The watershed group may modify and resubmit its work plan for review and approval consistent with this section.