

**Thurston League of Women Voters (LWV) Ad Hoc Committee on Agricultural Review Recommended Priority for Ag Survey:
County Policies, Non-regulatory actions, Regulations and Permitting, Economic Development**

Thurston County invites the community to take part in a new online survey to share perspective on local agriculture. You can complete the survey at this link: https://wsu.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_4UXg2R1wO0JRo3P. The LWV Ad Hoc Committee on the county's Ag Review work prepared this document to provide background on parts of the survey. We urge LWV members to devote time to completing this survey by the February 12 deadline.

The financial feasibility of farming is key to keeping farmers on the land and thus protecting against farmland loss. Farmers face unique financial challenges: high cost of farmland, low margins on sales from many farm products, cost of regulations, unexpected costs such as medical expenses, and need to fund their retirement. If farmers are unable to make a living on their farm, they will sell their land. Due to the high cost of farmland, often the land cannot be sold to another farmer but to someone who will take the land out of farm production.

While Thurston county has existing policies and programs designed to help farmers stay in business or fund their retirement, they are not robust enough to preclude farmland loss. Currently the county is losing 3,000 acres of farmland each year. The survey asks about your familiarity with these existing land use policies/programs and farmland preservation programs/tools:

- [Thurston County Comprehensive Plan](#) policies to protect farmland, including “no net loss” of farmland policy (see policies at the end of chapter 3)
- [Agritourism Overlay District](#)
- [Agricultural Code/Thurston County Development Regulations](#) – multiple land use codes proscribe or permit use.
- [County Zoning for Long-Term Agriculture and Nisqually Agriculture](#) (LTA/NA) – (see pages 8-11, chapter 3 Comprehensive Plan)
- [Sustainable Thurston](#) – see the [no net loss of farmland monitoring](#)
- [Voluntary Stewardship Program](#) (VSP)
- [Conservation Future Funding](#) (CF)
- [Transfer of Development Rights Program](#) (TRP)
- [Open Space or Current Use Tax Program](#) (Ag Open Space)

The survey also asks respondents to rank 28 programs or policies summarized in four categories. This community ranking will assist county staff to narrow the focus on a select few policies and programs to expand or create. On the following pages the Ad Hoc Committee shares additional information and the committee's priority recommendations. *These recommendations are those of the committee only. The Thurston County LWV has not taken a position on any aspect of this survey.*

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COUNTY POLICIES

	Survey Item to Rank (in order listed in survey)	LWV Committee Priority	Chance of Measurable Impact	Scope, Implementation Issue	Additional Comments
1	Designate more land as agricultural land of long-term commercial significance (called Long-term Agriculture or Nisqually Agriculture)	HIGH	Counties that designate more land as Long-term Ag have lower rates of farmland loss	Some \$s needed to reimburse farmland owners for any lost development rights.	The Growth Management Act (GMA) requires the county to designate farmland to assure it is preserved. Currently Thurston County has designed 15,878 acres. At least another 5,000 acres meets the designation requirements.
2	Reduce the ability of important agricultural lands outside of long-term ag zones to be subdivided and developed	HIGH	Whatcom and Pierce have created another ag zoning category that has the same subdivision rules as Long-term Ag	A range of protections are possible such as applying the same development limits as Long-term Ag areas.	Could increase protection for an additional 20,000 to 40,000 farmed acres that are not currently secured. 40,000 would cover almost all acres currently farmed, a lower number would cover only the higher quality soils that give productive yields.
3	Improve implementation of no net loss of farmland policy, e.g., by tracking conversation of farmland to other land uses	LOW	Call for monitoring rather than action	Currently track amount of conversion, but with no consistent analysis of impact of the conversion	A desirable form of monitoring, but not a policy action. Suggest this policy action instead: Add Comprehensive Plan policy statements regarding farm economic development (Chapter 8).
4	Identify locally-significant farmland on land use maps and create policies to protect it	HIGH	We depend on all our farmland, not just the best quality land.	Mapping alone will not provide benefit; positive impacts are attainable when linked to effective policy. New policies listed in the survey could protect these newly mapped acres.	Until recently, there was no reliable inventory of locally-significant ag land. We need to use good information to inform policy decisions. In addition, all farmland, especially pastureland, is of value to the community, even if it has less than the highest quality soils.
5	Review all proposed comprehensive plan/zoning amendments for potential impacts on agriculture	MIDDLE	This is part of planning for Ag – always considering the impact on farmland	Planning staff could implement without additional costs	
6	Fund/create an agricultural liaison staff position to help farmers navigate county regulations and programs	LOW	Could connect more farmers to programs and save time regarding meeting regulations	BoCC determines funding priorities. More analysis of position needed to define and clarify work versus existing staff, committees.	Funds for a permanent full-time position may be better spent on conservation easements or support of economic development actions.
7	Create incentives for property owners to opt-into long-term agricultural zoning	LOW	Owners can currently opt in; this would add some incentive	Currently permitted	An incentive rather than a policy approach

NON-REGULATORY ACTIONS (INCENTIVE OR VOLUNTARY)

	Survey Item to Rank (in order listed in survey)	LWV Committee Priority	Chance of Measurable Impact	Scope, Implementation Issue	Additional Comments
8	Provide technical assistance and access to funding to protect critical areas on farms in non-regulatory and collaborative manner (e.g., through the Voluntary Stewardship Program)	MIDDLE	Thurston Conservation District (TCD) provides this now	VSP actions can save land owners significant compliance expenses, thus keeping the farm in business	County could provide \$s to the TCD with additional funding to aid land owners under the VSP
9	Create more opportunities for farmers to sell development rights for their land to be used in urban areas (transfer for development rights program TDR))	LOW	Lack of a market: recently no urban buyers have been willing to buy rights	Staffing and structure already exists, some farms have rights for sale but with no buyers	Over the past 20 years 181 acres have been preserved using the TDR approach
10	Expand open space tax program (property tax relief) opportunities for smaller farmers	LOW	Impact would be farms close to urban area and thus with higher tax rates	Needs change of state law, significant effort to change the state law in past years proved unsuccessful	Current state law requires a regular tax, not lower, tax rate on 1 acre of any small farm (20 acres or less in size; majority of the farms). The higher rate is a disincentive to participation.
11	Fund a purchase of development rights program specifically for farmland	MIDDLE	New funding would increase the number of farms that could be preserved each year	May require new tax sources (e.g., 1% of selling price for real estate transactions or additional Conservation Futures taxes) or could be funded from a reallocation of recording fees.	Combining preservation of farmland with habitat protection, as is the case with Conservation Futures , may be a better fit for Thurston County, than a farmland only approach
12	Improve outreach to farmers about how to lower property taxes in exchange for maintain and undeveloped landscape via the open space tax program	MIDDLE	The tax savings can be significant, \$2,000 or more a year on 20 acre farm	Farmers cite program requirements that may preclude higher participation rates even with additional outreach	Currently 60 percent of farmland is in an Open Space Tax program (38,809 acres). Farmers must periodically share certain federal tax statements and face a tax payback if they sell the land to a non-farmer.
13	Provide more funding for Conservation Futures (CF) for land trusts or the county to purchase land or easement from retiring farmers	HIGH	Measurable impacts are directly tied to available funds. We could increase this tax levy to provide an additional \$0.5 million to the \$0.5 million currently available.	The county is not using all state-granted authority for CF. Increased funding can be authorized by vote of the BoCC alone or with the addition of a citizen vote	Conservation Futures works for farmland as well as habitat land. Land Trusts used CF \$s combined with other funding sources to preserve more than 2,500 acres of farmland in the county. Far more preservation is possible, given more funding.
14	Do more outreach to farmers around non-regulatory options to keep farmland, including opportunities for working lands easements	LOW	Without additional funding for easements impact would be low		Outreach is needed, but without increasing the funding for easements and other options, the additional demand could not be served

REGULATIONS AND PERMITTING

	Survey Item to Rank (in order listed in survey)	LWV Committee Priority	Chance of Measurable Impact	Scope, Implementation Issue	Additional Comments
15	Make the permit process easier for beneficial conservation enhancement projects	MIDDLE	Easier permitting would reduce farmer costs	Could be connected to VSP projects and any work needed to achieve the aims of a conservation easement	Not all farmers need to engage on these projects, so no benefit to them. Farmers prefer minimal burdens when seeking permits
16	Do more to education the community about the right-to-farm ordinance	LOW	Nuisance lawsuits are not a major cause of farmland loss		Right-to-farm, RCW 64.06.022, protects farmers from protections from nuisance lawsuits arising from standard agricultural and forest practices.
17	Review impacts to farmland when considering development applications, including impacts to water rights and loss of important farmland soils	HIGH	This is a fundamental part of planning for Ag – always considering the impact on farmland, yet we are not doing it.	County staff could review all relevant development applications (farmland meeting locally significant and Long-term Ag designation)	Currently, farmland loss and the loss of water rights are not part of development decisions. This procedural change would identify relevant impacts, inform the process, bringing us closer to the intent of the Growth Management Act.
18	Encourage the use of cluster development for subdivisions of important farmland (cluster houses in one area and setting aside a larger parcel for use as farming or open space)	MIDDLE	Applies when the owner wants to develop the land rather than sell/donate development rights	Nevertheless, the additional housing in the cluster, results in a net loss of farmland	Cluster development could help keep intact most of the land on the 57 farms that are larger (180 acres or more) but would not benefit smaller farms – most of the farms.
19	Decrease the maximum density in long-term agricultural zoning districts (currently 1 unit per 20 acres for the long-term ag zone; 1 unit per 40 acres for Nisqually ag zone)	HIGH	Decreasing density applies to larger farms, used with success in counties to the north of Thurston	Farmers should be paid for the loss of development rights (half as many rights as they now have), thus funding would be needed (could be funded over many years)	Thurston County is alone in allowing the best farmland to be divided into 20 acre lots, other counties allow division into 40 acre lots. Generally, there is greater benefit from larger blocks of farmland. This is a better alternative than cluster development as it reduces how many houses can be put on the land.
20	Create a program(s) for developers to mitigate the loss of important farmland to development, or charge impact fees for conversion to farmland to development or recreational use	MIDDLE	Mitigation or impact fees may not fully cover the cost of converting other land back into ag use	Would be a new program, could follow the approach for mitigation fees in the Habitat Conservation Plan	Mitigation fees are a standard means of charging developers for impacts on the common good and could be applied to farmland loss with a goal of using the funds to achieve no net loss of farmland

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

	Survey Item to Rank (in order listed in survey)	LWV Committee Priority	Chance of Measurable Impact	Scope, Implementation Issue	Additional Comments
21	Support agritourism and opportunities for the community to visit farms/farm stands, including consideration of expanding the Agritourism Overlay District	MIDDLE	Permits activities that can ensure economic viability on smaller farmers	Implement by expanding area covered by existing ordinance	Agritourism is currently limited to the Bountiful Byways implemented in 2012. Larger farm stands than elsewhere, rural guest housing/country inn, accessory indoor retail sales (75% PNW products), more days per year allowed for weddings, etc.
22	Help farmers find new markets (e.g., wholesale, farm-to-school, regional branding, aggregation distribution support)	HIGH	Multiple market options diversify income streams and thus financial resilience	Multi-year seed money would help create new markets	Thurston farmers rely upon viable markets for their livelihood. County funding and partnership with the Economic Development Council, regional Ports, etc., will bolster the sustainability of local farms.
23	Strengthen infrastructure for processing (e.g., recruit slaughter, storage, and processing facilities)	HIGH	Critical means of having multiple market options - to achieving goal of helping farmer find new markets (item above)	Frequently identified need. Locally available infrastructure is a basic requirement.	Processing facilities have been lost and need to be reestablished. As with market development, multi-year seed money and county partnerships will help Thurston farmers be more competitive.
24	Work with local financial institutions to find new ways to provide agricultural business support for new farmers	LOW	New farmers need more favorable support from financial institutions	Could also benefit existing farmers	Clearly a need as obtaining a farm loan is more difficult than for a home purchase or improvement loan. It is unclear what role the county could play.
25	Expand land linking programs to facilitate farmland access	LOW	Work of Thurston Conservation District (TCD)		County could increase funding for TCD to expand their existing land link that connects farmland owners and farmers seeking to buy or rent land
26	Expand farmer training programs including farmer-to-farmer learning, workshops, and mentoring	LOW	Work of WSU Extension and TCD		WSU Extension and TCD could receive funding from the county to expand their farmer training programs. Add this action instead: Encourage sale of ag supplies and related services on farms to add to farm income.
27	Explore reducing or eliminating fees charged by the county and local improvement districts on working lands, including permit fees	MIDDLE	Need to move beyond exploring to reducing some fees	Most fees are within the direct control of the BoCC	Reducing or eliminating fees add to the farmers' bottom line and economic viability, while recognizing the community benefit provided by farming activities
28	Expand teen/youth recruitment programs (e.g., 4H, FFA) to help bolster the future of farming in Thurston County	LOW	Thurston County does not lack for would-be farmers		These are youth leadership/educational programs that sometimes lead to recruitment. Expanding these would ignore the pipeline of recent immigrant farmers, and post-secondary sustainable ag programs.

The following eight (8) items received our HIGH priority. When we complete our surveys, we will rank these HIGH items as 1, 2 or 3 in their category.

Category	Number (on previous pages)	HIGH Priority Action	Existing or New Action
County Policy	1	Designate more land as agricultural land of long-term commercial significance	Existing in the Comprehensive Plan
	2	Reduce the ability of important agricultural lands outside long-term ag zones to be subdivided and developed	New
	4	Identify locally-significant farmland on land use maps and create policies to protect it	New
Non-regulatory Actions (incentive or voluntary)	13	Provide more funding for Conservation Future for land trusts or the county to purchase land or easements from retiring farmers	Existing
Regulations and Permitting	17	Review impacts on farmland when considering development applications, including impacts to water rights and loss of important farmland soils	New
	19	Decrease the maximum density in long-term agricultural zoning districts (currently 1 house/20 acre for long-term ag zone, 1/40 for Nisqually ag zone)	Modify existing
Economic development	22	Help farmers find new markets (e.g., wholesale, farm-to-school, regional branding, aggregation-distribution support)	New
	23	Strengthen infrastructure for processing (e.g., recruit slaughter, storage, and processing facilities)	New

We also ranked eleven (11) items as LOW priority either because they face implementation challenges or are unlikely to make a notable difference in the rate of future farmland loss. We gave a MIDDLE priority to nine (9) items, these we will rank at the level or 3, 4, or 5 (and 2, 3 in the non-regulatory category).

There are opportunities in the survey to add additional action items. Our additions are:

- County Policy: Adopt a No Net loss of Agricultural Land policy; revamp current Goal 1, Objective A policies to strengthen no net loss; adopt mitigation criteria for any conversion of Agricultural Land.
- Economic Development: Encourage on-farm sale of farm supplies and related services to diversify sources of farm income.
- Economic Development: Add an agricultural economic development objective to Chapter 8 of the Comprehensive Plan. Farming must be financially viable to protect against farmland loss