



Threats to King County Forests

While earlier planning and conservation efforts have done a great deal to protect King County's forestland, climate change, population increases, and legacies of improper management still threaten the longevity of these forests. The primary challenges for King County's forests come from risk of conversion and declining forest health. These challenges vary depending on the ownership and size of forested properties.

Although land in public ownership is unlikely to be converted to non-forest uses at a large scale, adequate funding is needed to actively manage these lands for ecological, social, and economic benefits. It is a challenge to balance timber production with non-timber forest benefits, but public land provides the ideal platform to demonstrate multiple-use forest management. Public land can provide examples of "ecologically sustainable, economically viable" forest management that can be replicated by private forestland owners. In addition, consideration must be given to the effects of taking public land out of commercial timber production. This can have a negative impact on the long-term commercial significance of other forestland (e.g., shifting harvest) and the associated timber-related businesses that depend on them, further reducing the economic viability of forest protection.

Most large tracts of private forestland are in the FPD (Figure 4). Zoning of commercial forestland helps to discourage subdivision and conversion. To further ensure that this critical land is not converted to smaller lots or residential use, King County plays a role in acquiring and monitoring conservation easements and transferring development rights. For this reason, a majority of the large tracts of private forestland is at low risk of conversion.

The FPD is buffered by midsized parcels (5–20 acres), which can limit forest fragmentation and reduce edge effect. Midsize tracts of forest are primarily found in rural- and forest-zoned regions of the County. Although residential and commercial development in these areas is restricted, there is a strong and growing demand for low-density residential development (e.g., one home per 5 acres). Opportunities for higher density development are limited, but possible.

Small-tract forestland is often in closest proximity to population centers and are the most at-risk for conversion. Smaller tracts of privately owned forestland tend to be in rural-zoned portions of the County and serve as a critical buffer between more contiguous forestland to the east and more highly fragmented, smaller forest blocks in urban/suburban areas to the west. All lands in this mosaic of ownership are important when managing forests at a landscape scale. Unfortunately, without technical and financial support, many of these smaller forested areas will continue to be degraded and developed; additionally, forest health will decline and risk from wildfire will increase.





Small-tract forestland owners represent a critical sector among land managers. Although they are responsible for forests that provide significant and essential public benefits, they often take on ownership of forests without any prior knowledge of forest management. Despite tending to lack the knowledge and skills needed to maintain and enhance the ecological values and functions of their land, they are typically open to training/education opportunities. A 2017 Washington State University (WSU) study found that 74% of small-tract forest owners in the Puget Sound region were likely to take advantage of education opportunities or to request technical assistance.²⁵ Indeed, if they neglect stewardship of their properties, forest health may decline, and wildfire risk may increase. Additionally, where their land borders other forested properties, these landowners can be problematic for neighbors by contributing to weed infestations and fire risk.

WSU Extension, supported by King County and KCD, offers small forest landowner classes that are in such high demand that seats typically fill on the day class enrollment opens. Although there is a need for more educational opportunities for private forest landowners, it is important to note that landowners take what they learn seriously and apply it to their forest stewardship programs. A 2020 WSU survey of participants in coached planning classes indicated that 84% had developed forest stewardship plans and that 87% of those consult the plans regularly (84% and 91% of King County forestland owners, respectively).²⁶ Furthermore, over 45% of class participants had enrolled in CUT programs and over 17% had taken advantage of forest stewardship cost-share programs (62% and 22% of King County forestland owners, respectively).

Lastly, about 90% of small forest landowner class participants had recommended the coached planning classes to other landowners and over 93% had shared information they gained from the classes with others (87% and 95%, respectively, for King County forestland owners), which is a strong measure of class effectiveness. Results were similar for class participants surveyed 1 year and 3 years after taking the classes. This demonstrates that there is a need to continue and increase forest stewardship education and technical assistance for small forest landowners in King County.

Actions necessary to restore a forest to healthy conditions can include but are not limited to: (1) harvesting to restore natural composition and structure or to thin overstocked stands, (2) planting species and genotypes better adapted to the projected future climate, and (3) invasive weed control. While much of King County's forested landscape needs stewardship to achieve desired conditions, many landowners, especially smaller forestland owners, are unaware of appropriate silvicultural practices, lack the technical expertise, or are challenged to find necessary resources to accomplish the needed work. These are all areas where King County is positioned to provide support.

²⁵ Zobrist, K. 2020. WSU Extension Forestry, pers. comm.

²⁶ Zobrist, K. December 31, 2020. King County Forest Stewardship Extension Education Final Report; Appendix 1a.



3.0 Review of 2009 Report

In 2009, the RFC released a report titled “Actions Required for King County to Conserve Rural Forests,”²⁷ which presented a set of priority actions that built upon the successful history of forest stewardship in King County. In that report, the Commission focused on actions that were primarily the responsibility of King County and were expected to achieve the following objectives:

- Retain the forestland base of King County
- Maintain and improve the health and resilience of these forests
- Encourage sustainable forest management practices
- Ensure that forestland owners are aware of the values, functions, and management needs of their land
- Ensure that forestland owners and managers have access to the resources they need to keep forests healthy
- Ensure that forestland owners have the knowledge and means to make optimal use of the resources available to them
- Strike a balance between advocating voluntary actions and imposing regulations

The recommendations presented in the 2009 report were developed to ensure that public and private forest owners and managers would be better able to manage their forestland. Beginning in 2018, the RFC reviewed progress on the 2009 actions and determined that more needed to be done to ensure that King County forest resources are maintained and enhanced and that forestland owners have the necessary tools to do so. Of the 26 recommended actions listed in the 2009 plan, significant and sustainable progress was made on 17 actions, modest progress was made on six actions, and there has not been any significant progress on three actions (Appendix A).

The six actions that need additional resource investment are:

- Increased support for public agency forest management
- Increased public education about the value of the local timber industry
- Greater focus on community fire risk reduction
- Additional clarity and streamlining of County land use code that pertains to forestry
- Securing a greater share of County revenue generated from timber harvests to reinvest in forest protection
- Ensuring long-term funding through Title III of the Secure Rural Schools Act

All but the last action (Title III funding) are included in the 2020 recommended actions.

²⁷ <https://your.kingcounty.gov/dnrp/library/water-and-land/forestry/commission-meetings/KCRFC-ForestActions2009.pdf>



The only 2009 recommended actions that were not addressed in any meaningful way were:

- Capping costs for County permits for forestry activities (as is done for farming)
- Developing strategies to support establishment of additional forest stewardship businesses
- Directing early withdrawal fees from timberland/designated forestland CUT programs to forestry programs (prohibited by state law)

All but the last action (CUT withdrawal fees) are included in the 2020 recommended actions.

This report builds on the progress stimulated by the 2009 report, retains those actions that are proven effective and continue to have value, “sunsets” actions that were completed or no longer considered priorities, and adds new actions that acknowledge the many changes in our forest landscape in the past 12 years.

4.0 2022 RFC Report

- The RFC decided that an update to the 2009 plan was imperative to fulfill the mandate to inform and advise King County decision makers and support forest landowners. Because of rapid population growth in the last decade, as well as impacts from climate change and invasive species, the 2009 report was no longer serving the purpose as a guiding document for policy and policy makers. This 2022 update to the 2009 report allows the County to stay abreast of current issues that impact forest cover and incorporates contributions from partner agencies and organizations. Many of the actions identified in this report support plans developed by the County that include strategies for forest conservation, such as the Clean Water Healthy Habitat Strategic Plan²⁸, the Strategic Climate Action Plan, the Land Conservation Initiative, and the 30-Year Forest Plan.
- This updated RFC Strategic Priorities report primarily serves to advise King County on important actions that can be taken over the next 10 years. The report is meant to guide policy development and implementation at the King County Council and Executive level, in addition to serving as a guiding document for RFC, DNRP, King County foresters, and collaborating agencies and partners. The RFC will review progress on the report annually to revisit goals, objectives, and actions and inform the County of what is working and what needs to be re-prioritized. After 10 years, progress on this report’s goals will be used to measure the County’s success in conserving forestland and retaining working forests.

²⁸ <https://kingcounty.gov/elected/executive/constantine/initiatives/clean-water-healthy-habitat.aspx>





The RFC developed the suite of objectives and related actions that, if fully implemented, will make significant contributions to achieving the vision it has created for forestland in rural King County. This vision includes three principal components:

- Maintenance of forestland in King County (i.e., no net loss)
- Management of forestland to improve forest health and to be more resilient to climate change
- Prevention of conversion of working forests to other uses and maintenance of a working forest land base and viable forest-based industry





To achieve this vision, forest management at all scales and under all ownerships will need to be supported. Because of general limited access to resources, there is a special need to support non-industrial forestland owners. The RFC stresses the need to create a community of small-tract forestland owners and service providers with the ability to effectively address the diverse needs of small-scale forest operations in King County. The RFC recognizes that, while many services are provided appropriately by private businesses or federal and state agencies, certain services and actions are best delivered by the closest provider to the landowner. Although a number of actions anticipate partner engagement, the recommendations outlined in this report are intended to inform the King County Council and King County Executive about actions County departments and staff can take to best address the needs of rural forest landowners.

Recommended actions are grouped into four focus areas, 16 objectives, and 65 actions. Each focus area includes a goal statement that represents intended measures of success. RFC support for the forestry programs currently being implemented by King County and partners is reflected in the fact that 35 of the 65 recommended actions are currently included in program work plans and are identified as "Continue." Those actions were deemed important enough to continue in the years ahead; however, it was recognized that many of those actions are currently under-resourced and that County and partners may not be able to achieve desired objectives without additional staff and/or financial support. Appendix F describes the status of actions that are already being implemented and identifies where more time or resources are needed to implement these actions.

Thirty of the 65 recommended actions are not currently included in work plans for King County forestry staff and partners and are identified as "New." Although all newly recommended actions were deemed important, the RFC recognizes that resources are limited and not all new actions need to be implemented immediately. New actions were prioritized as "Now," "Soon," and "Later," for those that are recommended to be initiated immediately, within the next 3-5 years, and within the next 6-10 years, respectively.



NEW RECOMMENDED ACTIONS ARE GROUPED BY RELATIVE IMPLEMENTATION PRIORITY









-  NOW = initiate immediately (10 actions)
-  SOON = initiate in the next 3 to 5 years (15 actions)
-  LATER = initiate within 6 to 10 years (4 actions)
-  CONTINUE (36 actions)

The focus areas, goals, objectives, and actions are outlined below (see Appendix F for more details).

Focus Area 1: Protection, Restoration, and Stewardship of Private Forestland

Goal Statement: Utilize King County resources to enable private forestland owners to effectively protect, restore, and steward their land. Increase the number of landowners who prepare comprehensive forest stewardship plans, ensure they are able to access financial and technical assistance needed to implement those plans, and implement forest stewardship practices.

Objective 1.1: Protect remaining priority privately-owned forest tracts not currently under easement, with special focus on protecting contiguous blocks of forest and meeting LCI goals.

-  1.1.1 Partner with DNR and land trusts to secure easements on forestland.
-  1.1.2 Increase public engagement and communication around objectives for acquisition and restoration (e.g., LCI).
-  1.1.3 Support acquisition of additional working-forest conservation easements on commercial forestlands that are LCI targets.
-  1.1.4 Where appropriate, design conservation easements to include an allowance for sustainable timber harvest.
-  1.1.5 Regularly monitor all working forest conservation easements to ensure terms of easement are being honored and work with forestland owners to resolve any issues of noncompliance.
-  1.1.6 Maintain CUT/Public Benefit Rating System (PBRS) program capacity to manage current program and explore opportunities to enhance existing current use programs to further reduce taxation-driven forestland conversion rates.
-  1.1.7 Ensure sufficient staff resources to meet LCI expectation for greater CUT/PBRS contribution and explore new approaches to expanding CUT/PBRS programs.
-  1.1.8 Evaluate forest cover and condition for land identified as high conservation value in the Land Conservation Initiative.






 NOW

 SOON





 LATER

 CONTINUE



Objective 1.2: Improve access to needed technical assistance to enable private forest landowners to retain forest cover and enhance forest health.

-  1.2.1 Provide support for and increase the capacity of state and local service providers to deliver forest stewardship technical assistance and advice to small forest landowners.
-  1.2.2 Identify and remove barriers for forestry-related businesses to ensure reasonable access to forestry contracting and consulting services.
-  1.2.3 Research best available science to better understand the linkage between forest protection/management and stormwater management as well as other ecosystem services and develop and implement science-based policies and practices to manage and conserve these ecosystem services; support delivery of forestry programs aligned with water quality and stormwater runoff management priorities.

Objective 1.3: Encourage forest stewardship through education, planning, active forest management, and partnerships.

-  1.3.1 Advise landowners about programs that support forest stewardship on private land.
-  1.3.2 Collaborate with KCD to expand capacity for increased delivery of technical and financial assistance services to forest landowners through KCD Rural Forest Stewardship, Wildfire Resiliency, and Landowner Incentive programs.
-  1.3.3 Collaborate with KCD and WSU Cooperative Extension Forestry to expand capacity for increased delivery of education (especially coached stewardship planning) and educational resources that enable forest landowners to meet both personal and King County management objectives.
-  1.3.4 When developing stewardship plans, include consideration of activities ongoing or planned for adjacent properties (both public and private) to leverage resources, enhance benefits, scale-up contractor and consultant services, and avoid unintended consequences.
-  1.3.5 Investigate and, if appropriate, establish a County-owned and -managed “demonstration forest” to serve as an example of forest management for landowners and an outdoor classroom that demonstrates various sustainable forest practices for students and King County residents; develop management and monitoring plans and secure project funding.


Objective 1.4: Increase the availability and access to financial incentive programs to support implementation of forest stewardship practices by small forest landowners.

-  1.4.1 Increase capacity for cost-share funding to forest landowners implementing on-the-ground forest stewardship practices.
-  1.4.2 Partner with DNR and the Washington State Conservation Commission to increase capacity to deliver financial incentives to forest landowners.










 NOW  SOON  LATER  CONTINUE

Objective 1.5. Promote understanding of the benefits of commercial timber production in King County and support increased production of locally produced forest products.




-  1.5.1 Explore opportunities to provide incentives for using locally sourced lumber and other forest products, starting with King County government projects.
-  1.5.2 Support small forest landowners maintaining working forests in King County by providing tax incentives for local sawmills.
-  1.5.3 Research strategies to incentivize greater use of locally sourced forest products that have been employed elsewhere and pursue adoption of appropriate strategies in King County.
-  1.5.4 Support efforts to develop markets for pulpwood.
-  1.5.5 Support Department of Local Services (DLS) to ensure wood recycling operations remain viable and accessible and meet industry standards for operation.
-  1.5.6 Explore opportunities to use pulpwood and wood waste in co-generation plants.
-  1.5.7 Collaborate within King County departments (DNRP and DLS) to support the establishment of permanent and mobile mills and kilns.
-  1.5.8 Support businesses focused on using local products (e.g., cross-laminated timber).

Objective 1.6: Reduce operating and permitting costs for forestry activities and remove permitting and other roadblocks to forestry practices.




-  1.6.1 Continue efforts to clarify permitting process and fee structure for forestry activities not governed by FPA.
-  1.6.2 Eliminate the need for King County Clearing and Grading permit for fire risk reduction activities within 150 feet of home.
-  1.6.3 Ensure there is adequate forestry expertise on DNRP/Department of Local Services-Permitting Division (DLS-PD) permit team.
-  1.6.4 Revise and update Forest Stewardship Plan Public Rule to establish framework for stewardship plans and ensure plans include actions to address climate change and increased wildfire risk.
-  1.6.5 Advocate for changes to County Code and Comprehensive Plan to ensure landowners are able to manage forestland and avoid loss of forest cover, and ensure other segments of forest industry are retained, including support for small mills and kilns.
-  1.6.6 Cap costs of permits for forest practices as has been done with agriculture.
-  1.6.7 Revise King County Code so that permits are not granted to applicants with outstanding compliance issues on the same or other applicant-owned property.



 NOW  SOON  LATER  CONTINUE

-  1.6.8 Revise King County Code to ensure that restoration activities are not treated the same as conversion/development (e.g., alternative permitting pathway).
-  1.6.9 Minimize regulatory burden for construction and maintenance activities related to forest management; eliminate duplication with state and County regulations.
-  1.6.10 Repair rural bridges to comply with loading and code requirements that accommodate log hauling and transportation of other forest products associated with noncommercial and commercial forest management activities.




Objective 1.7: Explore opportunities to expand programs that monetize ecosystem services on private and public land.

-  1.7.1 Expand King County's Forest Carbon Program to enable enrollment of privately owned forestland.
-  1.7.2 Educate forest landowners with holdings that do not meet King County LCI protection criteria about forest protection options, including CUT, PBRS, and alternative incentives for forestland protection such as the Rural Forest Carbon Program and TDR.
-  1.7.3 Increase program marketing to educate landowners about CUT, PBRS, TDR, and other program availability, targeting owners of LCI priority properties.

Focus Area 2: Acquisition, Restoration, and Stewardship of County-owned Forestland



Goal Statement: Secure sufficient funding to achieve the forestland preservation goals described in the LCI and provide managers with sufficient resources to implement forest stewardship plans. County-owned forestland should be examples of multiple use management that protects biodiversity, enhances carbon sequestration, provides recreation opportunities, and demonstrates ecologically sustainable and economically viable timber production.

Objective 2.1: Strengthen stewardship planning protocols for King County forestland.




-  2.1.1 Include forest stewardship policies that highlight restoration of natural forest composition and structure in the next version of the Parks Division Open Space Plan.
-  2.1.2 Ensure that stewardship of all forestland acquisitions is guided by approved plans. Brief, early action plans are required prior to any acquisition, and formal forest stewardship plans should be completed for all large properties within 6 to 12 months of acquisition.
-  2.1.3 Develop standard template for Forest Stewardship Plans for units of 200 acres or more.
-  2.1.4 Complete Forest Stewardship Plans for all Parks Division forest units of 200 acres or more by 2025; plans should clearly state desired future conditions and/or desired services to be provided/generated.
-  2.1.5 Support coordination among agencies, especially where ownerships are adjacent (e.g., USFS, DNR, Seattle Public Utilities [SPU]) to ensure that off-site impacts are minimized and resource benefits can be taken to scale.



 NOW  SOON  LATER  CONTINUE

-  2.1.6 Develop and implement streamlined planning process for smaller units.
-  2.1.7 Work with local, state, and federal partners to accelerate the rate of forestland acquisition to meet LCI goals.

Objective 2.2: Implement and monitor stewardship plans for all Parks Division forest units of 200 acres or more.

-  2.2.1 Complete development of 5- to 10-year forest stewardship operating plans for King County-owned forestland, which aggregate all high-priority stewardship actions for all units, regardless of size, with initial focus on units of 200 acres or more.
-  2.2.2 Explore additional opportunities to ensure adequate resources are available for restoration and management of County forestland and consider stewardship needs of all newly acquired properties.
-  2.2.3 Dedicate at least one forester full-time equivalent (“FTE”) to the Parks Division for forest stewardship work.


Objective 2.3: Identify opportunities to monetize ecosystem services to fund forestland acquisition and management.

-  2.3.1 Expand King County Rural Forest Carbon Project to support County land acquisition program.


Focus Area 3: Wildfire Hazard Reduction

Goal Statement: Develop and implement comprehensive wildfire plans that address issues related to wildfire risk reduction, wildfire response, and wildfire recovery. Improve forest resilience to climate change and implement preparedness plans to reduce forestland acres that experience uncontrolled burning.

Objective 3.1: Expand delivery of community and landowner wildfire risk management and safety planning services.



-  3.1.1 Increase cost-share funds to support wildfire risk reduction strategies, including construction of interior access roads.
-  3.1.2 Emphasize fire plan development and implementation at the community scale and ensure that there is collaboration among all parties engaged in wildfire risk reduction to deliver services more efficiently and effectively.
-  3.1.3 Deliver wildfire safety and fire risk management services to King County forest landowners and increase capacity to deliver fire risk management and fire resiliency planning to more rural King County forest landowners in the urban/rural wildland interface.

Objective 3.2: Develop comprehensive approach to rural wildfire planning.


-  3.2.1 Increase frequency of roadside maintenance, including mowing and control of flammable invasive species such as Scotch broom to reduce fire ignition along publicly maintained roads.






 NOW  SOON  LATER  CONTINUE

-  3.2.2 Support Office of Emergency Management coordination of comprehensive wildfire preparedness, response, and recovery plan.
-  3.2.3 Create “wildfire round table” that includes agencies and partner organizations focused on wildfire risk reduction in King County; meet regularly to understand roles and responsibilities, coordinate across entities to capitalize on opportunities and strengths, and share information and lessons learned.

Objective 3.3: Reduce risk to public forestland from park visitors.

-  3.3.1 Increase communications with the public about closures and burn bans; collaborate with adjacent agencies and landowners to ensure there is a common message.




Objective 3.4: Improve King County capacity for wildfire response and training capacity.

-  3.4.1 Deploy staff during and after high fire risk weather events for early fire detection.
-  3.4.2 Explore opportunities to train staff to be prepared to respond to wildfire in some capacity.
-  3.4.3 Enhance vehicle fleet to include vehicles and equipment capable of supporting early wildfire response.



Focus Area 4: Tribal Sovereignty and Cultural Resources

Goal Statement: Recognize and honor Tribal sovereignty and historic connections to forests in King County, which includes engaging with Tribes early in land use planning efforts.

Objective 4.1: Consult with Tribal Governments about forest management and protection.

-  4.1.1 Explicitly recognize Tribal treaty rights and Tribal sovereignty.
-  4.1.2 Recognize that each Tribe is a sovereign government with their own policies and processes.
-  4.1.3 Recognize the history, culture, and tradition of Tribes who historically occupied King County and the importance of forests to those Tribes in all documents related to and events held on land historically occupied or managed by local Tribes.

Objective 4.2: Engage with Tribal Governments early in any forest planning process.

-  4.2.1 Support greater engagement with all affected Tribes to support forest management and protection at a landscape scale.
-  4.2.2 Ensure all County departments have pre-project planning protocols to identify and protect culturally sensitive sites prior to initiation of any construction or site management actions, which may include archeological review, survey, or inadvertent discovery plans to guide response should cultural resource deposits be discovered during construction; Tribes should be consulted during the design of plans and protocols.