
WHATCOM COUNTY AGRICULTURAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE

March 11, 2025

Satpal Singh Sidhu
Whatcom County Executive
Whatcom County Council Members
311 Grand Avenue Suite 108
Bellingham, W 98225-4082

Dear Whatcom County Executive Sidhu and Whatcom County Council Members,

We write to you today as the Whatcom County Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC) to highlight the urgent challenges facing our agricultural community and to request your leadership in securing its future. We advocate for improved local government engagement to maintain our valuable working agricultural lands and the benefits they provide to the greater community. Farmers in Whatcom County are currently facing multiple threats, including high land prices accompanied by development pressures, the risk of losing crucial irrigation water, and volatile international and domestic markets.

Threats to Agricultural Land

- Since 1949 we have lost approximately 97,000 acres of agricultural land to housing and other developments, from 200,000 acres to 102,886.*
- Projected farmland loss: According to the American Farmland Trust's county-specific analysis, an additional 6,300-7,200 acres of farmland will be lost to development by 2040 if left unchecked.
- A further 1,931 estimated additional development rights remain in the AG zone as of 2019.
- County population is projected to grow by 67,638* by 2045.

As the Comprehensive Plan undergoes revision, this is a critical opportunity to secure our agricultural lands for future generations. While the Comprehensive Plan highlights the importance of agriculture in Whatcom, the breadth of the crisis at hand demands action beyond the plan's update. Additional attention is needed on zoning regulations and reviewing prime agricultural land outside of the Agriculture Zone. We have already begun this work and look forward to collaborating with the County Council on a direct and actionable plan to protect Whatcom's agricultural lands for future generations.

How the Executive/Council Can Address Current Challenges

- **Dedicated County Staff**
Authorize the AAC to develop a draft job description and research possible funding pathways for a dedicated agricultural position, as seen in King, Pierce, and Thurston Counties.
- **Water Rights Advocacy**
The county must play a key role in advocating for water security solutions at the state level. Whatcom County farmers need the county's support in working with the State Department of Ecology to secure reliable water rights.
- **Land Protection**
Looking to neighboring Skagit County as an example, we can strengthen farmland protections to secure a future for our agricultural community. Expanding conservation easements and funding for Purchase of Agricultural Easements (PACE) programs will help mitigate development pressures.

Failing to define responsible land-use policies could lead to unchecked development that threatens our agricultural lands, due to rapid population growth occurring in Whatcom County. If we do not act now, we risk following in the footsteps of other counties that have lost their core agricultural communities to development.

The AAC has worked diligently to assess and address the current critical needs of the farming communities of Whatcom. We are committed to representing the diverse faces of Whatcom's farming communities and ensuring their voices are heard. Addressing this challenge requires collaboration across councils, committees, and departments, and the AAC has initiated this work.

Now, we need the support of the County Council to achieve measurable outcomes and the actions listed above. These actions will have a positive impact on both the environment and economy of Whatcom County. They align with the Washington State Climate Resilience Strategy, which we further reference in the attached Appendix, along with examples of successful farmland protection efforts in other counties. We request a meeting to discuss these steps in greater detail. Please let us know a suitable time to continue this conversation.

Sincerely,



Chantel Welch, AAC Chair, on behalf of the Committee

Chantel Welch, Ag Programs (Chair)
Roger Kubalek, Ag Producer (Vice-Chair)
Alan Chapman, Whatcom Conservation District Board
Austin Lessen, Ag Producer
Brandon Richner, Ag Producer

Clay Pehl, Consumer of Ag Products
Eliza Steele, Ag Producer
Elli Harron, Ag Producer
Fred Likkel, Whatcom Family Farmers
Isaiah Del Giorgio, Ag Producer
Roger Hawley, Ag Producer

**Comprehensive plan and/or USDA Agricultural Census data*

APPENDIX

A Snapshot: Whatcom County Agriculture

Agriculture in Whatcom County is diverse, ranging from small scale market farms that supply food for their neighborhoods and the greater community, to mid-scale wholesale farms with a wider regional reach, to large-scale international suppliers. All of these farms contribute to our economy and environment, and all face external pressures.

We echo the [2024 Snoqualmie Valley Ag Strategic Plan](#) in noting that farms are “...under immense pressure, additional pressure from Covid recovery, labor shortages, regulations for food safety, energy costs, and changing markets...Farmers need the ability to be flexible, to immediately change and react to pressures in order to succeed. Farmers also need regulatory improvement and flexible agriculture support systems to meet these changes.”

The US Department of Agriculture conducts an agricultural census every five years, giving us a high-level snapshot for comparison over time. The 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture for Whatcom County highlighted, among other things:

- There are approximately 1,500 farms in Whatcom County, a number that is **decreasing over time** with the largest reduction reported for farms < 9 acres. This decrease **matches a national trend**, with small farms either consolidated into larger operations or developed for business or housing.
- Total market value of ag products sold from Whatcom County farms in 2022 was reported at **\$510,266,000; an increase** of over \$137 million from 2017. This total is fairly evenly split between crops and livestock/poultry. However, as the cost of production has also increased over time, this increased market value does not necessarily represent increased profitability. Total farm production expenses increased by over \$82 million and net cash farm income decreased by over \$60 million between 2017 and 2022.

Protecting Agricultural Land from Development

The American Farmland Trust’s (AFT) 2022 report, *Farms Under Threat: Choosing an Abundant Future*¹ recommends a “Better Built Cities” approach to curb sprawl. AFT projects a loss of 6,300-7,200² acres of Whatcom County farmland to development by 2040 if left unchecked, a number that could be reduced to 3,600 acres with protection measures. AFT suggests focusing on 1) Smart Growth, 2) Farmland Protection, 3) Smart Solar™ and improving 4) Farmland Access in order to strengthen county-level agricultural economies.

Skagit County³, using the Purchase of Agricultural Easement (PACE) program has protected 15,135 acres, or 17% of their total agricultural land from development, removing 283 development rights in the process. Their program was founded in 1996. While their efforts have been successful, the county is feeling increased pressure from solar development and battery banks, and feels the strain of the high cost of purchasing development rights. With additional funds dedicated to our easement program, Whatcom County could match the nimbleness of Skagit, and protect more farmland from development.

In King County⁴ although land conservation started in 1979, and there is a large tax base for funding, to-date they have only protected 16,400 acres through purchasing development rights (Conservation Futures Funding) and

¹ [Farms Under Threat 2040: Choosing an Abundant Future - FIC](#)

² *This report does not take local zoning into account, so we highlight that actual acres at risk for development are potentially much higher based on Whatcom zoning and development rights on lands under agricultural production.*

³ While the [2023 Annual Report.pdf](#) lists 14,325 acres, the AAC was given updated numbers by Skagit County employees at the December 2024 General Meeting

⁴ [Farmland Preservation Program - King County, Washington](#)

utilizing a Transfer of Development Rights program. Given high population pressures, the cost of land preservation is much higher today and faces additional barriers to success.

Whatcom County's Conservation Easement Program was founded in 2001 and has removed 208 development rights across 1,900 acres. Conservations Futures Funding is utilized for this program similarly to Skagit and King Counties, but due to those funds being shared with Parks and Public Works, Whatcom County relies on supplementary grant funding from partners such as the Natural Resources Conservation Service which are helpful but also time consuming and add further complications for applicants.

County	PDR/TDR Program Founded	Development Rights Removed	Acres Preserved through PACE programs
Skagit	1996	283	11,980 ⁵
King	1979	unknown	16,000+
Whatcom	2001	208	1,900

Agriculture and the Environment

We recognize that agricultural interests overlap and have the potential to strengthen other environmental and resource interests in Whatcom County. We recommend that the county use a holistic lens in considering land use and protection, resulting in wider economic and environmental benefits.

The recently released [Washington State Climate Resilience Strategy](#) mentions agriculture 31 times, with the following sections elevating linkages between agriculture and the environment. By supporting viable agricultural working lands and implementing innovative water solutions (#4 & #6 below) we will be better able to find solutions for agricultural landowners to engage in solutions for improved habitat restoration (#8)

Strategy 4: Support the vitality and viability of working lands through research, technical assistance, and incentives.

- Promote agricultural viability
- Explore novel market opportunities to support climate risk reduction efforts

Strategy 6: Implement innovative water conservation and management initiatives to ensure reliable and sufficient water for people, farms, ecosystems, wildlife, and fish.

- Prepare for water availability changes and implement projects in multi-benefit, large scale water plans
- Improve the resilience and efficiency of water use and infrastructure
- Improve water management by collecting, using, and standardizing shared water data across agencies

Strategy 8: Improve land management and restoration practices to help ecosystems, habitats, and species adapt to changing conditions.

- Strengthen climate-informed species and habitat management
- Prevent the worst effects of climate change on the Puget Sound ecosystem
- Support large-scale, interagency habitat planning and connectivity

⁵ Over 15,000 acres if including ag protection on short plats