



Voluntary Stewardship Program

A common-sense approach to protecting farmers and critical areas

Truly voluntary. After years of fighting, planning, and negotiating, the Washington Farm Bureau (WFB) worked closely with lawmakers and local Farm Bureau members to create legislation that would protect agriculture from unneeded critical area regulations. This effort resulted in the passage of the legislation in 2011 that created the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP).

Instead of imposing more stringent critical area regulations on agricultural activities, VSP is focused exclusively on voluntary actions by farmers and ranchers. This innovative act allows counties to create work groups to develop local work plans that will promote both the viability of agriculture and voluntary stewardship actions as an alternative to historic regulatory approaches used to protect critical areas.

Non-regulatory. VSP is a non-regulatory alternative within the state Growth Management Act (GMA). The goal of VSP is to reduce the tension between competing GMA goals related to agricultural viability and protection of critical areas. Critical areas include county designated wetlands, aquifer recharge areas, fish and wildlife habitat areas; frequently flooded areas, and geologically hazardous areas. To promote good outcomes for both agriculture and critical areas VSP prohibits expansion of critical area regulations on agriculture during VSP implementation. VSP instead encourages a spirit of cooperation and partnership among county, tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests.

Producer-centered. Producers cannot be required to participate or take any action to enhance critical areas under VSP, and those who choose to participate do so without risk. They can withdraw at any time without penalty. The goal is to broaden participation by making VSP a producer-friendly process developed by, with and for producers.

VSP also recognizes the importance of keeping farms and ranches viable, both to maintain food security and to reduce conversions of ag land to other uses that are less protective of critical areas. Conversions result in fewer open spaces, reduced habitat for wildlife, and paved developments that no longer provide the storm water absorbing and aquifer recharging benefits of working ag lands. By improving ag viability, VSP also seeks to boost the producer's capacity to invest in projects and technologies that can make a positive difference for critical area functions.

County-initiated. With strong encouragement from WFB, 28 counties opted into the VSP process. The 11 counties not participating will continue to be subject to the traditional GMA process, including contentious requirements to update critical area regulations. For the past two years, WFB has been working with local Farm Bureau members and VSP work groups to develop VSP pilot programs in Thurston and Chelan counties. These VSP “test drives” have helped prepare the way for good agricultural outcomes by identifying and addressing potential concerns with program implementation.

The state legislature’s 2015 budget funded work-plan development for the remaining 26 VSP counties. Now it is time for each of those counties to organize their local VSP work group processes. That is where the most important VSP work needs to get done. WFB has also created a VSP advisory committee to help local Farm Bureau representatives and work groups avoid potential friction points and carry out the unique vision of VSP.

Grassroots. County and state Farm Bureau representatives will work with their counties, conservation districts, and other work group members to develop local VSP work plans that address local agricultural and critical area needs. Each work group has three years from the date the county received funding to get its work plan approved. To get approved, each plan must be designed so that, after 10 years, work plan implementation will: 1) protect baseline critical area conditions; 2) maintain and enhance agricultural viability; and 3) encourage critical area enhancement through voluntary incentives.

Producer participation. Strong producer participation is the key to meeting the VSP approval tests. In turn, successful implementation of approved plans will be needed to protect agriculture from more stringent critical area regulations in the future. To implement approved work plans, conservation district staff or other work group approved technical assistance providers will help each participating producer understand options available under various conservation incentive and agricultural benefit programs. These technical assistance providers will then help the producer develop a site-specific stewardship plan with the goal of supporting good critical area outcomes and improving the viability of their operation.

Bottom line. VSP rejects the false choice between critical areas and ag viability. The legislature’s directives are clear: stop fighting costly court battles that divide communities and drain budgets. Instead, help your local VSP work groups develop good plans to maintain or enhance critical areas while also enhancing the viability of agriculture. We all need safe and nutritious local food. And we all need healthy critical areas. Improving the viability of our farmers and ranchers is the best way to get there. That is the bottom line.

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