Agricultural Viability in Puget Sound

A TOOLKIT FOR LOCAL ACTION

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American Farmland Trust
SAVING THE LAND THAT SUSTAINS US

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Background

Washington State lost nearly 98,000 acres of farmland to development between 2001 and 2016. As this trend continues, Washington stands to convert an additional 192,000 acres to development by 2040, with the largest impacts projected in Puget Sound counties. The loss of some of the region's most productive farmland will compromise many of the things Puget Sound residents value deeply: local food, open space, wildlife habitat, viewsheds, and tourism opportunities.

Known drivers of farmland loss include population growth and urban sprawl. But also at play are the social, economic, and structural factors that make it difficult for farmers to keep farming. As producers struggle to stay in business, they may be more inclined to exit farming and sell their land to the highest bidder. Increasingly, communities are searching for tools to help agricultural businesses stay viable and keep farmers on the land.

More information is needed about what strategies support agricultural viability, and what role those strategies can play in preventing farmland loss. To address this gap, American Farmland Trust (AFT) engaged support from the Puget Sound Partnership to engage in a collaborative research project that sought to answer the questions, *How do we define agricultural viability? How do we measure it? and How do we support it over time?*

In 2024, AFT conducted a survey of former, current, and aspiring farmers to help understand the state of, and opportunities for, agricultural viability in the Puget Sound region. Responses to the survey showed that the challenges facing farmers across the Puget Sound region are urgent, complex, and deeply interconnected. For instance, rising labor and input costs, market volatility, climate instability, and the high costs of compliance with state, local, and federal laws have eroded the financial and emotional resilience of the very people who sustain our food systems and steward our natural resources. In response, in April 2026, AFT released an Agricultural Viability Action Plan for Puget Sound, which articulated a vision for agricultural viability in the region, and outlined five core goals, as well as strategies and actions to support those goals.

Those five goals are to:

1. Protect Farmland from Conversion to Development
2. Improve Farmer Livelihoods and Business Viability
3. Increase Access to Farmland, Markets, Infrastructure, and Technical Assistance
4. Build Resilience to Climate Change and Natural Disasters
5. Support Producer Health and Wellbeing

AFT envisions a thriving agricultural landscape in the Puget Sound region where farmers are economically secure and resilient, land is permanently protected for agriculture, and farming contributes to environmental health and community wellbeing. Through strategic collaboration, innovation, and funding, communities can ensure that agriculture remains a cornerstone of economic stability, community wellbeing, and ecological health, and local governments have a unique role to play in bringing this vision to life.

Local governments and their community partners can play critical roles in accelerating farmland protection to preserve the remaining agricultural land base, streamlining local permitting processes, integrating agricultural viability objectives into comprehensive planning and food system investments, and coordinating with state and nonprofit partners to advance essential conservation and farm management practices that build resilience to natural hazards and climate impacts. Local governments can also invest in applied research, education, outreach, and other activities that improve producer capacity, increase conservation practice adoption, and advance innovative and resilient business models.

Many communities across the Puget Sound region are already innovating and deploying programs that embody the strategies outlined in the Agricultural Viability Action Plan. As a companion to the Action Plan, this Toolkit for Local Action highlights case studies from across the region where local governments and their partners are demonstrating leadership, creativity, and proactive response to the challenges facing agricultural producers. This toolkit is designed to inspire peer-to-peer learning and cross-pollination, and to help Puget Sound communities access the information and resources needed to scale the solutions that work to support agricultural viability.

Case Studies for Action

Goal 1: Protect Farmland from Conversion to Development

Strategy 1a: Better integrate farmland protection into local and regional planning.

Land-use decisions made today will determine whether farms have the land base needed to remain productive and economically viable in the future. When comprehensive plans, zoning, infrastructure investments, and economic development strategies are aligned with agricultural goals, communities can reduce farmland conversion, minimize land-use conflicts, and support long-term investments in agriculture. Integrating farmland protection into local planning, as demonstrated by Thurston County's Working Lands Conservation Strategy, helps ensure agriculture is treated as essential infrastructure rather than a temporary land use awaiting development. By coordinating conservation and growth strategies, communities can direct development to appropriate areas, preserve contiguous farmland, and create a more stable environment for agricultural businesses to grow and transition to the next generation.

DISCOVERY FARMS

CASE STUDY

THURSTON COUNTY'S WORKING LANDS CONSERVATION STRATEGY

Thurston County, Washington launched its Working Lands Conservation Strategy in 2024 to address increasing development pressure on agricultural and forest lands while sustaining the rural character central to the region's identity. The effort was grounded in concerns from local landowners and practitioners and designed to produce a practical, actionable approach to long-term conservation.

THURSTON COUNTY CPED

The county's working lands, which include farms, ranches, and forests, are essential to its economy, natural resource systems, and sense of place. However, population growth and development pressures have made it increasingly difficult to balance growth with conservation. Early engagement revealed that many landowners were concerned about policies such as downzoning, which could reduce land value, as well as the limited effectiveness of existing tools like Transfer of Development Rights and Purchase of Development Rights programs. These challenges highlighted the need for a stronger, better-funded conservation framework that aligns with economic realities and supports long-term land stewardship.

In response, the county established clear goals: to build durable funding and community support for conservation, direct growth toward planned development areas, sustain the economic viability of working lands, and expand practical tools that keep these lands in production. From the outset, the strategy emphasized both protecting land and supporting the people who manage it.

A defining feature of the effort was its collaborative approach. Thurston County convened a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) composed of farmers, foresters, Tribal representatives, conservation organizations, land trusts, and public agencies. Partners included organizations such as the American Farmland Trust, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Capitol Land Trust, and regional tribes, among many others. This group met several times through workshops

and facilitated discussions, helping shape the strategy with practical insights and on-the-ground experience. Participation grew over time, reflecting strong regional interest and investment in the work.

Alongside engagement, the county invested in robust technical analysis to guide decision-making. GIS mapping identified approximately 60,000 acres of farmland and 171,000 acres of working forests and applied a multi-benefit framework to highlight areas where conservation investments could deliver the greatest returns. Financial modeling compared different funding scenarios, including expansion of the Conservation Futures Tax and the potential adoption of a Conservation Real Estate Excise Tax (REET). This analysis showed that new or expanded funding tools could significantly increase conservation outcomes while also supporting long-term stewardship and restoration.

Importantly, Thurston County did not wait for the final plan to take action. Several improvements were implemented during the planning process, including reducing conservation easement recording costs, streamlining grant processes, and significantly lowering application fees for the open space tax program. These changes removed barriers for landowners and partners and quickly increased participation.

Through this effort, several key lessons emerged. Grounding the work in landowner concerns built trust and ensured relevance. Strong partnerships, both within the county and across the region, were essential to developing workable solutions. Combining community engagement with technical analysis strengthened decision-making, while removing administrative and financial barriers proved critical to expanding program participation. Perhaps most importantly, the county demonstrated that advancing early, incremental changes can build momentum and credibility for longer-term strategy implementation.

Looking ahead, Thurston County is focused on expanding conservation funding tools, strengthening stewardship and restoration funding, growing Transfer of Development Rights markets, and improving long-term forest management frameworks. The Working Lands Conservation Strategy positions the county to move from planning to sustained action, offering a replicable model for communities seeking to protect working lands while supporting local economies and rural livelihoods.

MORE INFORMATION: https://www.thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/community-planning-and-economic-development/community-planning/working-lands-conservation

Strategy 1b: Accelerate permanent protection from development of the region's most productive, versatile, and resilient agricultural lands.

Once farmland is converted to development, it is rarely returned to agricultural use. Protecting irreplaceable land resources helps ensure that future generations of farmers have access to the land base needed to produce food, support local economies, and adapt to changing environmental conditions. In AFT's 2024 survey of Puget Sound farmers, conservation easements were highlighted by respondents out as a "very effective" tool for supporting farmer livelihoods, however, achieving conservation at the scale needed in the Puget Sound region will require unlocking new funding sources. Tools such as Real Estate Excise Taxes (REET), like San Juan County is using, can provide the long-term capital necessary to purchase agricultural conservation easements, compensate landowners fairly, and permanently protect farmland before development pressures put it beyond reach.

CASE STUDY

USING REET TO FUND FARMLAND PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION IN SAN JUAN COUNTY

San Juan County, Washington has built one of the most durable local conservation funding models in the region by leveraging a voter-approved Real Estate Excise Tax (REET). First adopted in 1990, the county's 1% REET, applied to property purchases, funds the Conservation Land Bank and has enabled long-term protection of working lands, natural areas, and community access across the islands.


SAN JUAN LAND BANK

This approach is grounded in Washington State law, which authorizes counties to impose local REETs under RCW 82.46. These statutes allow jurisdictions to collect excise taxes on real estate transactions and dedicate revenues to public purposes, including conservation land acquisition and maintenance. San Juan County utilized this legal authority and secured voter approval to create a dedicated conservation funding stream that grows alongside development pressure, effectively capturing value from land transactions to reinvest in protecting the landscapes most at risk.

Funds generated through the REET are managed by the San Juan County Conservation Land Bank, a public program guided by a volunteer citizen commission. The Land Bank's mandate is to preserve lands with environmental, agricultural, scenic, and cultural value while ensuring they remain accessible and beneficial to the community. Unlike many conservation programs that focus solely on acquisition, San Juan County emphasizes active land use and stewardship, particularly for farmland. Conserved agricultural lands are often leased to local farmers, supported with infrastructure and restoration investments, and managed to remain productive contributors to the local economy.

Over more than three decades, this model has protected more than 5,000 acres across the islands, including landscapes that support ongoing agricultural use. Projects completed with partners such as the San Juan Preservation Trust, including areas like Turtleback Mountain, Mount Grant, and Watmough Bay, illustrate how conservation efforts can integrate habitat protection, farmland viability, and public access. Many conserved properties include trails, educational spaces, and working agricultural lands, helping residents and visitors experience and value these landscapes firsthand.

A key takeaway from San Juan County's experience is that conservation is not just about protecting land, but about sustaining it. REET funding supports ongoing stewardship activities such as habitat restoration, forest management, and agricultural leasing, ensuring that conserved lands remain healthy, productive, and accessible over time. This integrated approach

SAN JUAN LAND BANK

strengthens both ecological outcomes and local food systems while reinforcing public support for conservation investments.

By tying funding to real estate transactions, San Juan County has created a scalable mechanism that aligns conservation with growth, ensuring that increased development pressure generates additional resources for land protection. At the same time, the county demonstrates that protecting farmland requires more than acquisition; it requires active management and support for farmers to keep land in production. Public access has also been critical, as visible community benefits have helped sustain voter support for the REET across multiple reauthorizations. The county's success further reflects its ability to leverage Washington State's flexible legal framework while tailoring it to local priorities through voter approval and strong governance. Finally, because REET revenues fluctuate with market conditions, San Juan County has taken a balanced approach, pairing acquisitions with long-term stewardship and adjusting investments as revenues change. County voters also approved a REET for affordable housing, showing that conservation funding can be aligned with broader community priorities.

San Juan County's use of REET offers a powerful model for farmland protection in Washington State and beyond. By combining a dedicated funding source, strong community support, and a commitment to keeping land in active agricultural use, the county has created a resilient system that protects working lands while delivering lasting economic, environmental, and community benefits.

MORE INFORMATION: https://sjclandbank.org/

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Goal 2: Support Farmer Livelihoods and Business Viability

Strategy 2a: Conduct regulatory reform to create time and cost savings for farmers.

For many producers, especially small and mid-sized farms, navigating complex permitting and regulatory processes can consume time and resources that would be better spent on farming. Survey responses in 2024 reflected numerous challenges with current regulatory processes. Labor wages and compensation, land use zoning and permitting, and mandatory agricultural licenses, permits, and certifications each ranked high in the *agricultural challenges* section. Programs like Pierce County's that streamline permitting, lower fees, coordinate agency reviews, and create clearer pathways for agricultural activities can generate meaningful time and cost savings. These improvements help farmers invest more confidently, respond to market opportunities more quickly, and improve the long-term profitability and resilience of their operations.

CASE STUDY

PIERCE COUNTY'S PERMIT AND REGULATORY SUPPORT FOR AGRICULTURE

Navigating local permitting and land-use regulations can be a significant burden for farmers. To address this challenge, Pierce County has maintained dedicated agricultural permit and regulatory support since 2013, helping producers understand requirements, navigate permitting processes, and identify practical pathways for completing farm projects. Today, that work continues through the county's Associate Agricultural Planner, who serves as a central point of contact for agricultural landowners seeking regulatory guidance.

Producers connect with the program through the county website, referrals from the Pierce Conservation District Farm Team, Development Center staff, and word-of-mouth within the agricultural community. The agricultural planner then works with the producer or landowner to understand the project, answer questions, evaluate site conditions, identify applicable requirements, and connect them with the appropriate county staff and resources. The program also assists farmers in understanding site development requirements, evaluating potential impacts to critical areas, and identifying ways to accomplish their objectives while remaining compliant with county regulations.

Program staff help farmers navigate specific permitting pathways and, where appropriate, identify opportunities to streamline projects. One example is the county's agricultural exemption process for certain farm structures, which allows qualifying projects to proceed through a simplified affidavit review rather than a traditional permit process. This program also supports Pierce County code enforcement staff who occasionally have cases involving commercial agriculture. The

agriculture planner reviews specific regulatory requirements to guide code enforcement officers, participates in case meetings, and even joins officers for on-site case reviews.

A particularly important aspect of the program is its emphasis on relationships and communication. Rather than functioning solely as a technical permitting resource, the program is intentionally designed around care, responsiveness, consistency, and personal support. Farmers often enter regulatory processes frustrated, uncertain, or skeptical that local government understands the realities of agricultural operations. Pierce County's approach seeks to change that dynamic. By providing timely assistance and clear communication, Pierce County is building credibility within the agricultural community and is helping to create more constructive relationships between producers and local government.

Pierce County's provision of permit and regulatory support demonstrates that improving agricultural viability does not always require changing regulations. Sometimes, one of the most effective investments a local government can make is providing farmers with a knowledgeable, accessible partner who can help them navigate complex systems. By pairing technical expertise with a consistent commitment to communication, trust-building, and service, Pierce County has created a model that helps farmers save time, reduce uncertainty, and focus more of their energy on farming.

MORE INFORMATION: https://www.piercecountywa.gov/3447/Managing-Your-Farm


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Strategy 2b: Invest in innovation and research on small farms.

Investing in innovation and research helps farmers adapt to changing economic conditions, labor challenges, and climate impacts while improving productivity and resource efficiency. For small and mid-sized farms in particular, access to scale-appropriate technology can increase profitability, reduce risk, and strengthen long-term resilience without requiring dramatic changes to existing operations. Expanding access to new tools and equipment, as Snohomish County is experimenting with, can help overcome the financial barriers that often prevent small farms from adopting innovation. By reducing upfront costs and allowing producers to test new technologies before making significant investments, these approaches enable farmers to improve efficiency, conserve resources, and remain competitive in an increasingly challenging agricultural economy.

CASE STUDY

SNOHOMISH COUNTY'S AG TECH PROGRAM

Snohomish County, Washington has launched an innovative Agriculture Technology (Ag Tech) Program to help sustain the viability of local farms by expanding access to modern tools and data. Designed in response to rising labor costs, thin profit margins, and increasing climate pressures, the program provides farmers with no-cost access to advanced agricultural technologies that would otherwise be too expensive to adopt.

SNOHOMISH COUNTY AGRICULTURE OFFICE

The need for this program is particularly acute in Snohomish County, where farms tend to be smaller than large-scale operations elsewhere in the state. These producers often lack the capital to invest in new technologies, even when those tools could improve productivity and efficiency. County leaders recognized that without support, many farmers would struggle to remain competitive. With funding from the Department of Ecology's Floodplains by Design program, the Ag Tech Program was developed to address this gap by removing financial barriers and allowing farmers to experiment with new tools without taking on risk.

At the core of the program is a technology lending library. Farmers can borrow equipment and data tools at no cost, enabling them to test innovations before deciding whether to invest. Available technologies include soil mapping systems that analyze nutrients and field conditions in detail, soil moisture sensors that provide real-time data on water and temperature, and autonomous field equipment that assists with labor-intensive tasks such as transporting materials or supporting field operations.

SNOHOMISH COUNTY AGRICULTURE OFFICE

using the autonomous equipment to support tasks such as fertilizing crops and transporting supplies, while soil sensors and mapping tools are providing growers with new insights into their soil health and irrigation needs. These tools are helping farmers move toward more precise, data-driven practices that improve production, financial, and environmental outcomes. The program also shows the importance of pairing tools with education and support so farmers can fully realize their benefits.

The Ag Tech Program demonstrates how targeted investment in technology access can help ensure that local farms remain productive, competitive, and resilient. By lowering barriers to innovation, Snohomish County is not only supporting individual producers but also strengthening the long-term sustainability of its agricultural economy.

MORE INFORMATION: https://snohomishcountywa.gov/6651/Agriculture-Technology-Program

Strategy 2c: Address farm labor and workforce concerns.

Farms depend on a skilled workforce to remain productive, profitable, and resilient. Investing in workforce development programs, including farmer training, paid internships, apprenticeships, mentorship opportunities, and pathways to agricultural employment, helps cultivate the next generation of producers while addressing labor shortages and the aging farm population. By lowering barriers to entry and providing hands-on experience, programs like Harvest Pierce County strengthen farm businesses, support rural economies, and ensure that agricultural knowledge and skills are passed on to future generations.

CASE STUDY

HARVEST PIERCE COUNTY

As farmers age and barriers to entering agriculture continue to rise, workforce development has become one of the most important challenges facing the agricultural sector. Harvest Pierce County, a program of the Pierce Conservation District, is helping address this challenge by creating a pathway from agricultural education to farm business ownership. Through its Farm Foundations training program and Goss Incubator Farm, the initiative is equipping aspiring farmers with the skills, land access, infrastructure, and support needed to launch successful farm businesses.

The program begins with Farm Foundations, a free, season-long training program that combines classroom instruction with hands-on field experience. Participants learn agroecology, soil and plant science, farm planning, business management, and production practices while working directly on local farms. Designed for beginning farmers and career changers, the program provides practical experience without requiring a full-time commitment, helping participants build the knowledge and confidence needed to pursue farming as a profession.

Graduates can take the next step through the Goss Incubator Farm, a 4.5-acre farm business incubator operated by Pierce Conservation District on land leased from Washington State University Extension's Goss Research Farm. The incubator serves as a launching pad for beginning farmers by providing resources that are often prohibitively expensive or inaccessible for new farm businesses, including affordable access to land, shared infrastructure, equipment, technical assistance, and peer support.

The incubator model directly addresses one of the greatest barriers to agricultural viability: access to land and capital. Farmers participating in the program can test business concepts, develop production skills, establish markets, and generate income without the substantial financial

investment required to purchase land or build infrastructure. The farm currently supports multiple farm businesses producing vegetables, flowers, culturally important crops, herbs, and other specialty products, creating opportunities for farmers from diverse backgrounds to establish viable enterprises.

A defining feature of Harvest Pierce County is its strong network of partnerships. Pierce Conservation District works closely with Washington State University Extension, which provides access to the Goss Research Farm site, as well as public agencies, philanthropic funders, and community organizations that support local food systems. Recent investments in infrastructure, including irrigation, electricity, storage facilities, walk-in coolers, wash-and-pack stations, and equipment, have expanded the program's capacity to support both farmers and broader community food system initiatives.

The program demonstrates how workforce development and agricultural viability are closely linked. By combining education, mentorship, land access, and business incubation, Harvest Pierce County helps beginning farmers move from interest to enterprise. Participants gain not only technical farming skills but also experience in marketing, business planning, and farm management.


HARVEST PIERCE COUNTY

Harvest Pierce County offers a compelling model for building agricultural viability from the ground up. By creating a clear pathway from training to business ownership and leveraging strong public-sector partnerships, the program is helping cultivate the next generation of farmers while strengthening the region's agricultural economy and local food system.

MORE INFORMATION: https://piercecd.org/190/Urban-Agriculture

Goal 3: Improve Access to Farmland, Markets, Infrastructure, and Technical Assistance

Strategy 3a: Provide secure, affordable, long-term access to land for current and beginning farmers.

"Finding affordable land to buy" was the top challenge identified by respondents to AFT's 2024 survey of Puget Sound farmers, with almost half of respondents identifying land access as an "extreme" challenge. Programs like King County's that lease publicly owned farmland can address the persistent challenge of land access, help ensure that protected farmland remains in active production, create opportunities for historically underserved and beginning farmers, and support the next generation of agricultural businesses by lowering barriers to entry and fostering long-term stewardship of working lands.

CASE STUDY

KING COUNTY'S FARMLAND LEASING PROGRAM

High land values, development pressure, and competition for agricultural land make it difficult for new and expanding producers to establish viable farm businesses. King County began leasing farmland in the late 1980s, and in 2019 refocused the program in response to community input on priorities for affordable land access.

Today, the county manages a portfolio of approximately 200 acres of farmable land, leased to about 60 farm businesses, with an average lease size of roughly three acres. Most leases are short-term, typically ranging from two to five years, creating affordable entry points for producers who may not yet be able to purchase land or secure larger, long-term leases.

A key goal of the program is to create pathways into farming for producers who face systemic barriers to land access. King County prioritizes opportunities for beginning farmers, immigrant and refugee farmers, and Black, Indigenous, and other historically underserved producers. By providing access to land, irrigation, and basic farming infrastructure, the program allows farmers to build business experience, develop markets, and generate revenue without the significant capital investment required to purchase farmland.

The county's Horseneck Farm project illustrates this approach. Located on preserved farmland in the Green River Valley, the site was designed to increase access to agricultural land through a shared-use model that can accommodate multiple small farm businesses. Rather than concentrating resources in a single operation, the property creates opportunities for numerous producers to access farmland, infrastructure, and support services that would otherwise be difficult to obtain individually. Some farmers on the site expanded from quarter- and half-acre leases to successfully farming two to four acres as their production experience and market outlets grew.

The program recognizes that land access alone is not enough to ensure success. King County works with partners including King Conservation District, Highline College, Business Impact

Northwest, SnoValley Tilth, Washington Farmland Trust, and others to provide technical assistance, business planning support, culturally appropriate outreach, connections to financial and marketing resources, and in some cases, support to transition from leasing County-owned land to longer-term land tenure elsewhere. These partnerships are critical to helping farmers move beyond land access toward long-term business viability.

Several important lessons emerge from King County's experience. First, permanently protecting farmland is only part of the solution; equally important is ensuring that farmers can access and afford that land. Small-acreage leases can serve as an effective incubation strategy, allowing producers to test business models, develop markets, and build equity before taking on larger operations. At the same time, the costs to a public agency to manage land leases can be significant: infrastructure improvements and maintenance, site management, utilities, and staff time. These costs can be much higher than the revenue provided by lease income and can be a limiting factor in program expansion and scalability.

However, with the right resources and capacity in place, public ownership combined with strategic partnerships can help address longstanding inequities in farmland access by lowering barriers for historically underserved communities, and leasing programs can help keep publicly protected farmland actively farmed while supporting the next generation of agricultural entrepreneurs.

King County's Farmland Leasing Program demonstrates how local governments can move beyond farmland preservation alone and invest directly in agricultural viability. By making affordable land available, supporting new farmers, and leveraging partnerships to provide technical assistance, the program is helping ensure that protected farmland remains productive and that a new generation of producers has the opportunity to succeed.

MORE INFORMATION: https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dnrp/nature-recreation/environment-ecology-conservation/agriculture-farming

Strategy 3b: Increase support for intergenerational farm transitions.

Intentional support for intergenerational farm transitions is essential to agricultural viability as aging farmers retire and farmland changes hands. Without clear pathways for succession and transfer, farmland is more likely to leave agricultural production, reducing opportunities for the next generation of producers. Programs like South Sound FarmLink help address this challenge by connecting retiring landowners with beginning and expanding farmers and providing resources to support land access and succession planning. This type of program helps keep farmland in production while creating opportunities for the next generation to establish and grow farm businesses.

CASE STUDY

SOUTH SOUND FARMLINK

As elsewhere in the region, access to affordable farmland is one of the greatest challenges facing agriculture in the South Sound. As land values rise and many farmers approach retirement, new and expanding producers often struggle to find land while farmland owners face uncertainty about how to keep their properties in agricultural use. South Sound FarmLink, a program of the Thurston Conservation District, was created to address both challenges by connecting farmers seeking land with landowners interested in leasing, selling, or transitioning their farmland to the next generation.

The program recognizes that agricultural viability depends not only on protecting farmland from development, but also on ensuring that farmers can access and actively steward that land. Through a farmland matching database, technical assistance, lease development support, educational workshops, and succession-planning resources, South Sound FarmLink helps create lasting partnerships that keep farmland in production and support the growth of local farm businesses.

South Sound FarmLink is facilitating farmer-landowner matches that benefit both parties. Farmers gain access to land without the significant capital investment required to purchase property, while landowners can generate income, receive assistance navigating leases and farm transitions, and ensure their land remains productive. Conservation District staff provide support throughout the process, including matching assistance, lease templates, technical resources, and connections to financial and planning tools.

The program has already produced tangible results. Since launching in 2015, South Sound FarmLink has enrolled 80 farm seekers and 32 landowners and facilitated 15 matches. Participants report that these connections have secured long-term access to land, enabled business growth, and preserved working farmland that might otherwise have been vulnerable to development or disuse. The program's reach and impact demonstrate how trusted intermediary organizations can play an important role in reducing barriers, facilitating relationships, and helping both farmers and landowners navigate complex decisions.

South Sound FarmLink exemplifies how relatively modest investments in land-access programs can generate significant benefits for agricultural viability. By connecting people, providing technical

support, and creating pathways for farmland to remain in active use, the program is helping preserve the region's agricultural heritage while creating opportunities for the next generation of farmers.

MORE INFORMATION: https://thurstoncd.com/working-lands/south-sound-farmlink/

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Strategy 3c: Support small and mid-size farmers to diversify market channels.

Supporting small and mid-sized farmers in diversifying their market channels, including through public procurement programs, farm-to-school initiatives, and institutional purchasing, is important for agricultural viability because it creates stable, reliable markets that reduce dependence on a single buyer or sales outlet. As WSU Extension is demonstrating in Jefferson and Clallam Counties, expanding access to local and regional markets helps farmers increase profitability, manage risk, build stronger connections with their communities, and keep more food dollars circulating within the local economy.

CASE STUDY

WSU EXTENSION'S FARM TO COMMUNITY PROGRAM IN JEFFERSON AND CLALLAM COUNTIES

Washington State University (WSU) Extension's Regional Small Farms Program serving Clallam, Jefferson, andKitsap counties houses a Farm to Community program that is strengthening agricultural viability by connecting local farmers with schools, food banks, and other community institutions. Building on more than a decade of Farm to Food Pantry work, the program expanded in 2022 to include dedicated value chain coordination that helps local producers access reliable markets while increasing the availability of fresh, locally grown food in rural communities.

WSU CLALLAM COUNTY EXTENSION

The program operates through two primary channels: Farm to School and Farm to Food Pantry. Rather than functioning as a brick-and-mortar food hub, WSU Extension serves as a relationship builder and market facilitator, helping farmers and institutions navigate procurement requirements, coordinate orders, aggregate product availability, and solve delivery challenges. This role is particularly important in rural communities, where schools, food banks, and small farms often lack the staff capacity and infrastructure needed to develop and sustain direct purchasing relationships on their own.

The program has produced measurable results. In 2025, WSU Extension worked with 20 to 30 farms and supported 21 schools, food banks, and food distribution sites across the North Olympia Peninsula, enabling its partners to purchase a total of $174,900 in local food through a combination of funding streams.

Beyond the numbers, the program has generated meaningful benefits for both farmers and institutions. Through Farm to Food Pantry efforts, local food banks have become an increasingly important market outlet for regional producers, creating new revenue opportunities while improving access to fresh produce for community members. Schools report that coordinated deliveries and procurement assistance have made local purchasing much more feasible. Farmers have gained access to new markets and, in some cases, have adjusted production to meet institutional demand. One grower, for example, began scaling up production of a small romaine lettuce variety specifically for school meals. WSU Extension has also helped connect school purchasing programs with emerging crop opportunities, such as sweet potatoes grown as part of regional trials.

WSU CLALLAM COUNTY EXTENSION

The program has been particularly innovative in its use of existing community infrastructure. WSU Extension has partnered with local food banks to leverage their warehouses, cold storage facilities, trucks, and distribution routes. Food banks already distribute food throughout rural communities, making them ideal partners for aggregating and transporting locally grown products. This approach has reduced costs and expanded market access for farmers, and improved food distribution to remote communities.


WSU CLALLAM COUNTY EXTENSION

Several challenges have emerged, the most significant of which is funding. Large federal grant programs have at times dramatically increased local procurement, but these opportunities decline when funding cycles end. Schools and food banks often operate on tight budgets and must compete with low-cost conventional supply chains. Seasonal availability, food safety requirements, and distribution logistics can also create barriers, particularly for small producers.

WSU Extension's experience navigating these challenges points to several key takeaways. First, dedicated value chain coordination matters. Even when farmers and institutions want to work together, relationships require ongoing facilitation and communication to succeed. Second, communities do not always need to build new infrastructure; existing assets such as food banks, Extension programs, and conservation districts can often be leveraged to support local food systems. Finally, success depends on designing systems that work for both buyers and sellers, making local purchasing easier, more reliable, and more accessible for everyone involved.

The Farm to Community program demonstrates that relatively modest investments in coordination and relationship-building can create meaningful new market opportunities for farmers while strengthening food security and community resilience. By helping schools, food banks, and farms work together, WSU Extension is building a more connected and viable regional food system that keeps more dollars in the local economy while expanding access to fresh, locally grown food.

MORE INFORMATION: https://extension.wsu.edu/regionalsmallfarms/

Strategy 3d: Invest in shared infrastructure to support aggregation, storage, and processing.

Both on-farm infrastructure (fencing, barns, storage) and large-scale processing facilities (e.g. meat processing) ranked highly in AFT's farmer survey as "extreme" challenges. Investments in shared infrastructure for aggregation, storage, processing, and distribution help farmers access larger markets, reduce costs, and capture more value from what they produce. For many small and mid-sized farms, these facilities provide the scale and market access needed to remain competitive. Public-private partnerships offer an effective way to address infrastructure gaps by combining public investment and technical support with private sector capital and expertise. As demonstrated by the Tenino Agriculture Innovation Park, these partnerships can create shared assets that strengthen regional food supply chains while supporting farm profitability and rural economic development.

CASE STUDY

TENINO AGRICULTURE INNOVATION PARK

The Tenino Agriculture Innovation Park in Thurston County, Washington demonstrates how public-private partnerships can create the infrastructure and business support systems needed to strengthen agricultural viability while driving rural economic development. Located on a 13-acre site in the City of Tenino, the park was intentionally designed to support value-added agriculture, food processing, agritourism, and agricultural entrepreneurship, helping farmers capture more value from what they produce and keep more economic activity within the region.

THURSTON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

The project emerged from a regional recognition that agricultural producers often struggle not because of a lack of production capacity, but because they lack access to processing, distribution, marketing, and business-development infrastructure. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed these vulnerabilities, particularly around local food supply chains and meat processing capacity. Regional leaders saw an opportunity to create a hub that would help farmers and food businesses scale up, access new markets, and build a more resilient local food economy.

The Tenino Ag Park was built through an extensive partnership involving the City of Tenino, Thurston Economic Development Council (EDC), Dragonwheel Investment Group, Colvin

Ranch, Washington State Department of Commerce, Port of Olympia, Thurston County, and Washington State University Extension. Public partners provided land, infrastructure investments, grants, planning support, and technical assistance, while private sector partners invested in facilities and business development.

Rather than functioning as a traditional industrial park, the Ag Park was designed specifically around agricultural and food-related enterprises. The development includes business and office space, agritourism retail, an event center, a food processing kitchen, a café, innovation and business support services, and sites for agricultural manufacturers and processors. The goal is to help businesses move beyond primary production into higher-value activities such as food processing, packaging, agritourism, and direct marketing.

The park's greatest contribution to farm viability is its focus on filling critical infrastructure gaps. By creating space for food processing, storage, distribution, and future meat-processing facilities, the project helps producers retain more value locally and reduce dependence on distant facilities. Future phases are expected to expand regional meat-processing capacity, addressing a longstanding challenge that has forced many livestock producers to travel long distances to access processing services.

The Ag Park also serves as a business incubation and innovation hub. Current tenants include food businesses, catering operations, agricultural enterprises, and rural development organizations, creating a collaborative environment where entrepreneurs can access resources, expertise, and markets. By co-locating businesses and support services, the park is helping build a stronger agricultural value chain while creating jobs and expanding economic opportunities in a rural community.

Several lessons emerge from the Tenino Ag Park experience. First, public investment can play a catalytic role in attracting private capital for projects that serve community goals but may be difficult for the private sector to undertake alone. Second, regional partnerships are essential. The Ag Park succeeded because nonprofit support organizations, educational institutions, and private investors partnered with support from every level of government—city, county, port, state and federal—and aligned around a shared vision for agricultural development. Finally, investing in value-added agriculture creates benefits that extend beyond individual farms, strengthening food security, rural employment, tourism, and regional economic resilience.

The Tenino Agriculture Innovation Park offers a replicable model for communities seeking to support working lands through economic development. By combining strategic public investment with private-sector entrepreneurship, the project demonstrates how partnerships can create the infrastructure, services, and market opportunities needed to keep agriculture economically viable.

MORE INFORMATION: https://teninoagpark.com/

Goal 4: Build Resilience to Climate Change and Natural Disasters

Strategy 4a: Increase adoption of soil stewardship and conservation practices.

Healthy soils and clean water are the foundations of farm resilience. Practices such as cover cropping, reduced tillage, rotational grazing, riparian buffers, and improved nutrient management increase soil organic matter, improve water infiltration and storage, reduce erosion, and help farms better withstand both flooding and drought. By protecting soil and water resources, these practices help farms recover more quickly from extreme weather events while reducing long-term production risks. Respondents to AFT's farmer survey identified "Financial incentives for conservation practices," as a very effective support for agricultural viability. As climate-driven weather extremes become more common across Puget Sound, programs like Mason County's Voluntary Stewardship Program deliver investments in soil health and other conservation practices that help producers remain productive, resilient, and economically competitive while delivering important environmental benefits for surrounding communities and ecosystems.

SHAWN LINEHAN

CASE STUDY

MASON COUNTY'S VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

Washington's Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) was created in 2011 as an alternative to a purely regulatory approach for protecting critical areas on agricultural lands under the Growth Management Act. Rather than relying primarily on regulation, VSP encourages landowners to voluntarily implement stewardship practices that protect natural resources while maintaining agricultural viability. Counties that opt into the program develop locally led watershed work plans, provide technical assistance and incentives to landowners, monitor outcomes, and adaptively manage their efforts over time. Today, 27 Washington counties participate in VSP, however only a handful are within the Puget Sound region.

Among participating Puget Sound counties, Mason County offers a particularly interesting example of how VSP can be adapted to local conditions. Unlike many agricultural regions where VSP focuses primarily on traditional farmland conservation concerns, Mason County's program sits at the intersection of agriculture, salmon recovery, shellfish production, forestry, and coastal watershed protection. With approximately 25,000 acres of commercial shellfish-growing areas and a landscape defined by streams, estuaries, and shoreline habitats, protecting water quality is inseparable from supporting the county's agricultural economy. The county's VSP program is administered by Mason Conservation District on behalf of Mason County and guided by a volunteer watershed work group representing farmers, local government, and community stakeholders.

Since implementation began in 2017, Mason County has used VSP to bring together conservation planning, watershed monitoring, technical assistance, and agricultural support. Rather than treating conservation and agricultural production as competing objectives, the program seeks to identify practices that benefit both farmers and critical areas.

A distinguishing feature of Mason County's VSP program is its emphasis on adaptive management. Through monitoring and implementation, program staff have identified opportunities to better align program priorities with actual watershed conditions and producer needs. As the county approaches its next reporting cycle, staff are revising goals and metrics to focus more directly on observed watershed challenges and opportunities rather than simply tracking compliance with the original workplan.

The introduction of VSP cost-share funding has also transformed implementation. For many years, VSP relied primarily on coordination, technical assistance, and documenting stewardship practices funded through other programs. More recently, dedicated VSP cost-share funding has allowed Mason County to directly support projects that combine conservation outcomes with agricultural viability benefits. Recent projects have included manure storage facilities, heavy-use area protection, roof runoff management, irrigation improvements, working riparian buffers, and high tunnels.

Several projects illustrate the program's innovative approach. A silvopasture project combined forestry, agricultural production, habitat enhancement, and water quality protection while helping a family restore farmland using practices that reflected earlier generations of stewardship. Another project involved collaboration with the Squaxin Island Tribe to combine conservation planning with traditional ecological knowledge in support of Tribal food sovereignty. Staff are also exploring how conservation planning approaches traditionally used on farms might be adapted for shellfish producers operating in the tidelands, recognizing the importance of aquaculture to Mason County's agricultural economy.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of VSP in Mason County has been growing producer engagement. Program staff report that landowners who initially participate in a single project frequently return to implement additional stewardship practices, often investing their own resources alongside available cost-share funding. The program has helped create a culture in which stewardship is viewed as an investment in long-term farm success rather than simply a conservation requirement. Producers routinely refer neighbors and other landowners to the program, expanding participation through peer-to-peer relationships and trusted local connections.

Mason County's Voluntary Stewardship Program shows how local implementation of a statewide framework can successfully support agricultural viability while protecting critical natural resources. By combining adaptive management, targeted investments, strong partnerships, and producer-led stewardship, the program has become a model for advancing both watershed health and the long-term resilience of agriculture across Puget Sound's ecologically significant landscapes.

MORE INFORMATION: https://www.masoncd.org/vsp.html


USDA/LANCE CHEUNG

Strategy 4b: Advance climate resilient agriculture.

Farmers in the Puget Sound region are increasingly affected by hotter summers, changing precipitation patterns, drought, and growing competition for limited water resources. Investing in water-efficient irrigation, water storage, recycled water, and soil health practices, as well as research and demonstration projects—like the Sammamish Valley Recycled Water Project—that showcase innovation, will help farms maintain productivity, adapt to climate change, and ensure a reliable food supply while protecting the region's watersheds and ecosystems.

CASE STUDY

SAMMAMISH VALLEY RECYCLED WATER PROJECT

As climate change, population growth, and increasing competition for water place pressure on Washington's rivers and streams, farmers are facing growing challenges in securing reliable irrigation supplies. The Sammamish Valley Recycled Water Project, led by Washington Water Trust in partnership with King County, university researchers, and local agricultural producers, demonstrates how recycled water can support both agricultural viability and environmental restoration by providing a sustainable alternative to river withdrawals for irrigation.

While recycled water is widely used to grow food in other regions, this project focused on the Sammamish Valley, where farmers depend on water from the Sammamish River, groundwater, and municipal sources to irrigate crops during the summer growing season. These withdrawals occur at the same time river flows are at their lowest and when cool, clean water is most critical for salmon and other aquatic species. Project partners identified recycled water (highly treated and disinfected wastewater) as a potential solution that could meet agricultural water needs while reducing pressure on freshwater sources.

Washington Water Trust launched the project to evaluate whether recycled water could serve as a safe, reliable, and publicly acceptable irrigation source for food production. Beginning in 2020, the project combined scientific research, farmer engagement, and community outreach to better understand both the opportunities and concerns associated with using recycled water in agriculture. Producers participated in structured interviews and demonstration garden presentations, and food consumers were engaged with surveys and focus groups, while researchers evaluated the effects of recycled water irrigation on soil health, crop performance, and food safety.

Results from the demonstration project were encouraging. Researchers found that crops irrigated with recycled water produced yields equal to or greater than those irrigated with river water and that contaminants of emerging concern, such as trace pharmaceuticals and personal care products,

were present at extremely low levels. The study concluded that recycled water irrigation posed a low risk to human health and did not represent a significant source of contaminants in food crops. Consumer outreach also found strong public support, especially when recycled water use was connected to salmon recovery and environmental benefits.

The agricultural implications are significant. Recycled water provides a climate-resilient water source that is available when irrigation demand is highest, helping farmers maintain production during increasingly dry summers. Unlike traditional freshwater supplies, recycled water is generated continuously by communities, creating a dependable source of irrigation water that is less vulnerable to drought and changing hydrologic conditions. By diversifying water supplies, the project helps strengthen long-term farm viability while reducing uncertainty for agricultural producers.

WASHINGTON WATER TRUST

The environmental benefits are equally important. Project partners estimate that if irrigators in the basin switched from river diversions to recycled water, as much as five cubic feet per second of additional flow could remain in the Sammamish River during the irrigation season. During periods of critically low summer flows, that could represent a substantial increase in water available for salmon and other aquatic species. The project illustrates how agricultural production and ecosystem restoration can be advanced together rather than treated as competing objectives.

The Sammamish Valley Recycled Water Project showcases how effective demonstration projects and locally relevant research can be in addressing concerns about new technologies and building confidence among farmers and consumers. It also demonstrates how partnerships are essential to addressing complex challenges that no single organization could solve alone.

By pairing scientific research with practical implementation, the project demonstrates how innovative water solutions can support productive agriculture while helping restore the river systems that are vital to the region's ecological health, offering a compelling model for the future of water management in the Puget Sound region.

MORE INFORMATION: https://www.washingtonwatertrust.org/projects/sammamish-recycled-water-project/

Strategy 4c: Invest in disaster preparedness and recovery for farms and rural communities.

Floods, droughts, wildfires, extreme weather, and other disruptions can cause significant losses to crops, livestock, infrastructure, and farm income. Proactive investments in emergency planning, resilient infrastructure, risk-reduction practices, and recovery assistance can help farmers withstand and recover more quickly from disasters, reducing long-term economic impacts and keeping agricultural land in production. As the Northwest Agricultural Business Center has demonstrated in Skagit County, strengthening the capacity of rural communities to prepare for and respond to emergencies also protects local food systems, supports rural economies, and enhances the overall resilience of the agricultural sector in the face of increasing climate and environmental challenges.

CASE STUDY

SKAGIT COUNTY FLOOD RESPONSE

In December 2025, a series of severe storms brought widespread flooding to western Washington, inundating farmland, damaging infrastructure, disrupting transportation corridors, and impacting agricultural operations across the region. Farmers in Whatcom, Skagit, Snohomish, and King counties faced flooded fields, damaged equipment, contaminated soils, and significant production losses at a time when many were preparing for the 2026 growing season. In response, a network of local nonprofits, foundations, and agricultural organizations mobilized to provide emergency assistance to affected producers.

In Skagit County, the Northwest Agriculture Business Center (NABC) played a key implementation role. Working with the Skagit Community Foundation and Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, NABC helped design the grant program, conduct outreach, review applications, verify eligibility, and distribute funds to impacted producers. Rather than serving as the primary fundraiser, NABC acted as a trusted intermediary between farmers and funding sources, ultimately distributing approximately $110,000 to 20 Skagit County producers.

Farmers were eligible to apply for grants of up to $10,000 to offset flood-related losses. Applications documented damages including flooded production fields, ruined livestock feed, contaminated soils, damaged equipment, and losses to overwintering crops and orchards. While individual farm losses often ranged from $50,000 to more than $100,000, the grants provided a critical source of immediate recovery support while producers pursued other options.

The effort demonstrated the importance of trusted relationships in disaster response. Through its Latino Farmer Business Development Program, NABC was able to reach historically underserved producers who might otherwise have been missed by relief efforts. Application materials were made available in multiple languages, and staff provided direct assistance to help farmers navigate documentation requirements. Nearly half of the producers receiving assistance through NABC were underserved farmers.

NABC received more than 50 applications for the program. Each application went through a structured review process to verify applicant identity and eligibility before approval, since the program provided direct assistance to individual producers using limited recovery funds. This review confirmed applicant identity and eligibility through document verification, cross checks against producer records, and direct outreach where information required clarification.

This additional diligence extended the distribution timeline, with most checks issued in the spring of 2026. NABC has since incorporated the verification procedures developed during this program into its standard practice for future disaster response and direct assistance programs, ensuring that applicant identity and eligibility are confirmed as an integral step in the process rather than an added measure.

A key outcome of the flood recovery effort was the emergence of a broader regional flood response network. NABC joined regular conversations with Washington Farmland Trust, Snoqualmie Valley Preservation Alliance, Pike Place Market Foundation, Seattle Farmers Market, the Community Food Co-op, Tilth Alliance, and other partners. Collectively, these organizations distributed an estimated $1.5 to $1.7 million in flood recovery assistance across affected agricultural communities. The group continues to meet to identify opportunities for greater coordination before future disasters occur.

Among the ideas now being explored are shared data collection standards, coordinated outreach strategies, and development of a centralized information hub where producers can quickly identify available assistance following an emergency. Organizers have also discussed ways to streamline applications and reduce administrative burdens on farmers who may otherwise be required to navigate multiple funding programs during a crisis.

The December 2025 floods underscored the vulnerability of Puget Sound agriculture to increasingly frequent and severe weather events. They also demonstrated the value of strong community partnerships. By combining local fundraising, trusted farmer relationships, multilingual outreach, and regional coordination, NABC and its partners helped farmers begin the recovery process while laying the groundwork for a more resilient agricultural disaster response system in the future.

MORE INFORMATION: https://www.agbizcenter.org/skagit-flood-relief/

Goal 5: Support Producer Health and Wellbeing

Strategy 5a: Improve farmer and farmworker access to health insurance and care.

A healthy, stable workforce is fundamental to a thriving agricultural economy. Farmers and farmworkers often face long hours, physically demanding work, seasonal income fluctuations, and limited access to services, particularly in rural communities. Expanding access to affordable healthcare and childcare enables parents to remain in the workforce, and helps reduce stress, improve well-being, and strengthen worker retention. By investing in the people who grow, harvest, and distribute food, programs like the Whatcom County Healthy Children's Fund can help address workforce shortages, support family stability, and ensure that farms have the skilled labor needed to remain productive and resilient over the long term.

CASE STUDY

WHATCOM HEALTHY CHILDREN'S FUND

In 2022, Whatcom County voters approved the Healthy Children's Fund (HCF), creating a dedicated property tax levy to support children from birth to age five and their families. The fund generates approximately $10 million annually and was established to address longstanding challenges related to childcare access, school readiness, behavioral health, housing stability, and family well-being. The Healthy Children's Fund has the potential to be an important contributor to agricultural viability by addressing one of the most significant barriers facing farm and rural families: access to affordable childcare and family support services.

In Whatcom County, most agricultural employers, farmworkers, and farm families live in rural areas where childcare, healthcare, transportation, and early childhood services are often limited. The Healthy Children's Fund helps address these gaps by investing in childcare expansion, early learning programs, behavioral health services, developmental screening, doula care, family support programs, and basic needs assistance throughout the county.

A defining feature of the fund is its emphasis on equitable access for rural communities. Families living in areas such as Sumas, Nooksack, Everson, and the Mount Baker region often face greater barriers to services than residents of Bellingham and other urban centers. To address these disparities, the fund prioritizes projects serving rural communities and awards additional points during grant review processes to applicants working outside Bellingham. This intentional focus ensures that investments reach many of the communities that support Whatcom County's agricultural economy.

To date, the fund has invested more than $12.5 million in local programs, helped create more than 300 new childcare and early learning slots, and supported thousands of children and families countywide. Investments have expanded infant and toddler care, strengthened the behavioral health workforce, increased access to doula services, and helped distribute diapers, formula, and hygiene supplies through community organizations and food banks.

Several programs have direct relevance for agricultural communities. The fund has supported services for Spanish-speaking and Mixtec-speaking families, migrant and farmworker households, and Medicaid-eligible residents, helping connect families with resources that can otherwise be difficult to access in rural areas. The fund has also supported innovative efforts to bring occupational therapy, speech services, developmental screening, and mental health supports directly into childcare settings and community playgroups, reducing transportation barriers and minimizing the need for working parents to miss work in order to access services.

The Whatcom Healthy Children's Fund offers several lessons for other communities. First, dedicated local funding provides stability that short-term grants cannot. Second, communities should clearly identify priority populations and desired outcomes rather than spreading resources too thinly across many competing needs. Third, long-term success requires investing not only in programs, but also in the infrastructure, facilities, workforce, and delivery systems needed to sustain those services over time.

By expanding childcare access, strengthening support systems for farmworker and rural families, increasing access to healthcare and behavioral health services, and helping rural communities thrive, the fund addresses many of the underlying factors that influence whether agricultural regions can attract and retain the workforce they need. As rural communities across Puget Sound grapple with childcare shortages and workforce challenges, Whatcom County offers a compelling example of how family-centered investments can strengthen both community well-being and the long-term viability of agriculture.

MORE INFORMATION: https://www.healthychildrensfund.org/

Strategy 5b: Support farmer and farmworker mental health and wellbeing.

Supporting farmer mental health is essential to agricultural viability because farmers face significant pressures from weather, markets, labor availability, debt, and succession planning. Prolonged stress can affect decision-making, business performance, family relationships, and long-term farm resilience. Programs like WSU Extension Skagit County's Pizza for Producers create opportunities for connection and reduce stigma around mental health. By helping farmers build support networks and access resources before a crisis occurs, these efforts contribute to a healthier, more resilient agricultural sector that is better equipped to navigate change and uncertainty.

CASE STUDY

WSU EXTENSION SKAGIT COUNTY'S PIZZA FOR PRODUCERS PROGRAM

Agricultural viability depends not only on access to land, markets, and infrastructure, but also on the health and well-being of the people who farm. Recognizing the growing stress facing producers, Washington State University (WSU) Extension in Skagit County launched Pizza for Producers, an innovative outreach program that uses food, community gathering, and conversation to reduce stigma around mental health and connect farmers with support resources.

The program was developed in response to the unique dynamics confronting agricultural communities. Farmers routinely face stressors outside their control, including weather, commodity prices, labor shortages, rising production costs, and market uncertainty. At the same time, the culture of agriculture often emphasizes self-reliance, making it difficult for producers to seek help when they are struggling. WSU Extension identified a need for new approaches that meet farmers where they are and create opportunities for connection and support.


WSU EXTENSION SKAGIT COUNTY

Pizza for Producers uses a mobile wood-fired pizza oven to bring farmers, farmworkers, and community members together at agricultural events. While participants learn to make pizza and share a meal, WSU staff provide information about mental health resources, farm stress programs, and suicide prevention services. The informal setting lowers barriers to conversation and creates a welcoming environment where people can connect with one another and discuss challenges they might not otherwise share.

The program has become a regular feature at agricultural gatherings, including the Skagit Ag Summit, which brings together producers and agricultural professionals to discuss issues such as farm succession, land use, innovation, and long-term farm viability. By integrating mental health

outreach into existing industry events, WSU Extension is helping normalize conversations about stress and well-being while reaching producers where they already gather.

Pizza for Producers demonstrates that relatively simple community-building activities can have meaningful impacts. By creating spaces for connection and conversation, WSU Extension is helping ensure that the people behind agriculture have the support they need to continue farming, stewarding land, and contributing to the long-term viability of the region's agricultural economy.

MORE INFORMATION: https://pizza4producers.com/

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Conclusion

Agriculture in the Puget Sound region stands at a pivotal moment. Without immediate, coordinated action, we risk losing the farmland, farmers, and natural resources that sustain our communities. The goals and strategies in the Agricultural Viability Action Plan for Puget Sound are not long-term aspirations; they are urgent priorities that demand bold leadership and decisive investment now. Protecting irreplaceable working lands, strengthening farmer livelihoods, expanding equitable farmland access, preparing for climate extremes, and supporting the health and wellbeing of those who feed our region cannot wait.

Local governments are uniquely positioned to lead this work. Counties, cities, conservation districts, and regional partners can integrate farmland protection into comprehensive planning, invest in agricultural infrastructure and workforce development, reduce regulatory barriers, expand access to public lands, support farm-to-community purchasing programs, strengthen disaster preparedness, and leverage innovative funding tools to protect and sustain working lands. The case studies highlighted throughout this toolkit demonstrate that practical solutions to farmer-identified challenges already exist across the region. The question before us is not whether these strategies can work, but whether we have the commitment to implement and scale them.

No single county or organization can address these challenges alone. The future of agriculture in Puget Sound depends on continued collaboration, peer-to-peer learning, and the sharing of resources, ideas, and lessons learned across jurisdictions. By strengthening networks among counties, conservation districts, Extension programs, tribal governments, nonprofit organizations, and agricultural producers, we can accelerate innovation, avoid duplicating efforts, and build on successful models already being tested throughout the region. Together, we can create a stronger regional community of practice that advances agricultural viability, adapts to emerging challenges, and ensures that farming remains an integral part of the Puget Sound landscape for generations to come.

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American Farmland Trust would also like to thank the many other individuals who contributed their expertise to this project. The Agricultural Viability Action Plan and this Toolkit for Action reflect the areas of shared priority across the organizations that form the Puget Sound Agricultural Viability Advisory Committee. This document should not be considered a comprehensive policy platform for any individual organization. For more information about this Action Plan or American Farmland Trust's work supported by the Puget Sound Partnership, please contact Addie Candib, Pacific Northwest Regional Director, at acandib@farmland.org.


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