

Puget Sound Agricultural Viability Farmer Survey Results - Island County



In 2024, American Farmland Trust conducted a survey of former, current, and aspiring farmers to help understand the state of and opportunities for increasing agricultural viability for producers in the Puget Sound region.

This report only includes insights from 31 respondents in Island County (response counts vary by question). For an overview of all responses, visit farmland.org/PNW.

The Farms

Farm ownership

65% of respondents own their land, another 19% work on a combination of owned and leased land. 10% work on land owned or leased by someone else.

Farm type and location

- 74% operate a commercial enterprise.
- 81% are rural farmers, 26% of respondents are peri-urban, and 3% farm within an urban area.

Farm size

- < 1 acre: 13%
- 1-9 acres: 45%
- 10-49 acres: 26%
- 50-179 acres: 13%
- 180 acres +: 3%

Top three markets

- Direct sale (90%)
- Wholesale (52%)
- Charitable Donation (23%)

Agritourism

31% of respondents offer agritourism, with farm tours (56%), u-pick (56%) and farm education (44%) as the highest selected categories of agritourism.

Top three production sectors

- Vegetables (58%)
- Small Fruits (52%)
- Herbs (42%)

Revenue

Self-reported gross sales range from less than \$1,000 to \$499,000.

Net profits (n=26) reported on a scale from <\$1 to \$500,000+:
26% report < \$1 profit
13% report \$1 - 1,000 profit
30% report \$1,000 - 9,999 profit
13% report \$10,000-19,999 profit
17% report \$25,000 - 99,000 profit

Respondents

In this report we present responses from current farmers in Island County (n=31). 94% of respondents identify as the 'owner and manager' of their farm.

A majority of respondents (78%) self-identify as white or of European descent (n=23). 67% selected 'female' for gender (n=24)

Ages are fairly split among ranges, with 64% of respondents falling in the 35-54 age range.

52% (n=21) are first generation farmers, and 67% are new or beginning farmers (not 100% overlap between those two categories).

**Percentages are of total responses*



Agricultural Viability

Of the 28 responses to the open-ended question "What does agricultural viability mean to you?" the top emergent themes were:

- Financial stability/profitability
- Sustainability
- Community

We are subject to a menagerie of forces beyond our direct control... regulations, broad market changes, changing demographics and politics, and above all: weather. After making rationed decisions about all of the things we know, make educated guesses about those we don't, and accepting what we cannot control, it all shakes out in the books whether agriculture in each individual circumstance remains viable.

-Island County farmer

Digging In: Local Challenges

Challenge Scale

- Extreme
- Moderate
- Minor
- Not a challenge
- Not applicable.

Respondents identified and rated the local agricultural-related challenges that they face based on perceived severity (see scale). Challenges were organized in five categories.

Within each category, we present the top responses rated as “extreme” or “moderate” and highlight the top three overall responses (n=27).

Land/water

- Finding affordable land to buy (23)**
- Unpredictable or extreme weather (22)
- Certainty of future water access (22)

Profitability

- Lack of time to do all needed farm work (26)**
- Cost of production compared to market prices (25)
- Cost of labor (wages and benefits) (22)
- Availability of farm services and supplies (22)

Infrastructure

- On-farm infrastructure (e.g. fencing, barns, storage) (22)
- Farm Equipment (19)
- Meat processing facilities (17)
- Farmworker housing (17)**

Regulation/certification

- Food safety (21)
- Mandatory agricultural licenses, permits, certifications (20)
- Labor, wages and compensation (19)
- Organic certification (18)
- Land use zoning and permitting (17)**

Livelihood/well-being

- Physical demands and bodily pain (22)
- Retirement planning (20)
- Stress and mental health (19)
- Personal or family health insurance and medical costs (18)**

My uncle retired three years ago [and] my husband and I decided to take the reins. It was unattainable financially. My husband went back to a full time job and now my sister and I run the farm. We are exhausted and work seven days a week. We feel a huge sense of responsibility to care for the land. We also love it in so many ways. We belong to a wonderful and supportive community, but becoming economically sustainable is a huge challenge.

-Island County farmer

**These responses were the highest ‘extreme’ challenges in their respective categories.

Effectiveness of Supports

Respondents were asked to rate a list of 20 efforts to support farmers in the Puget Sound region as either very, moderately, somewhat, or not effective, asking: *“In your personal experience, how effective are these [efforts] in supporting the livelihoods of farmers?”*

Top responses for “very effective”:

- Grants to support on-farm infrastructure (8)
- Support for cooperative distribution and food hubs (8)
- Conservation easements that protect farmland (6)

Top responses for “moderately effective”

- Support for cooperative distribution and food hubs (10)
- Development of new markets (8)
- Technical assistance for farm management and practices (7)
- Marketing and branding (7)

Top responses for “not at all effective”:

- Meat processing facilities (9)
- Conservation easements that protect farmland (9)
- Enhanced public perception and understanding of farmland (9)

Top responses for “I am not aware of these efforts in my community”:

- Transportation infrastructure (14)
- Disaster protection and response (14)
- Water infrastructure projects (e.g. diking, drainage, irrigation) (12)
- Collaborative solutions for access to water (12)

The highest ranked out of ‘very’ or ‘moderately’ effective (combined) was *Support for cooperative distribution and food hubs* (18) followed by *Grants to support on-farm infrastructure* (14) and *Development of new markets* (12). These could be good starting points for expanded county-level support.

As with other counties, we saw some of the highest responses under the category of “I am not aware of these efforts in my community.” This could be due to the nonexistence of supports and/or a need for increased marketing/information sharing. Research could be done at the county level to better understand these responses.

Who do you turn to when seeking trusted information and support?

When looking for trusted information and support, farmers overwhelmingly turn to:

- Other farmers (85%);
- Followed by Washington State University Extension (52%); and
- Conservation Districts/Washington State Department of Agriculture/USDA NRCS (tied at 37%).

“[We need] land use/zoning policy that would help to lower costs and barriers to farmers who want to live and own the land they farm and develop permanent infrastructure. Also, more cost sharing/cooperative management for large farm equipment, storage facilities, and tools

-Island County farmer

Opportunities

When asked the open-ended question “*What types of future investments in agriculture would be most beneficial for farmers in your area?*” suggestions presented focused on the following, with respondent examples given for each:

Infrastructure:

This was the highest response category, with folks noting a need for:

- Meat Processing (noted in seven responses)
- Commercial Kitchens (noted three times)
- Affordable Housing
- Co-op Grocery
- Tractor repair
- Year-round farmers markets
- Food hub infrastructure
- On-farm infrastructure

One respondent noted, “*Moving the markets for agricultural products closer to the farms, and not just for small volume produce. The dairies used to act as this, **economic centers which were fed by a variety of agricultural enterprises**. When they left, nothing replaced them. Many small operations vacated and everyone who remains today are fighting for scraps.*”

Funding:

Respondents called out easier access to funding, either through grants or *affordable* land loans.

“*The kind of grants that can make a real difference to a farming operation take a **huge amount of time and expertise** to complete. In the end, the farmers who usually receive grants have the kind of resources to hire people to write them, or are part of organizations that are large enough to have staff or teams to help submit the needed information. Small, independent family farms do not have the resources, time, and sometimes the experience or background to successfully apply for grants.*”

Land and Zoning:

Respondents noted a need for land access support and improvements to zoning.

“*Land use/zoning policy that would help to **lower costs and barriers** to farmers who want to live and own the land they farm and develop permanent infrastructure.*”

Key Takeaways

The highest ranked challenges were:

- Cost of production compared to market prices
- Lack of time to do all needed farm work
- Land Access

In contrast, the highest ranked supports were all in the market development and infrastructure space: *support for cooperative distribution and food hubs, grants to support on-farm infrastructure, and development of new markets*

Suggested next steps include further development of needs that will benefit multiple producers, including infrastructure (markets and processing), land access (zoning and funding), and labor challenges (cost and housing).



For more information visit: farmland.org/agricultural-viability-in-puget-sound