Puget Sound Agricultural Viability Farmer Survey Results - King County

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

This report only includes responses from King County (n=36). For an overview of all responses, visit farmland.org/PNW

Respondents

A majority of respondents (97%) self-identify as white or of European descent. 61% of respondents identified as female; 33% male, and 6% selected non-binary.

Ages are fairly evenly divided, with representation between 25-75+. Most respondents (75%) fall between 35-64 years.

78% are first generation farmers, and 56% are new or beginning farmers (not 100% overlap between those two categories).

The Farms

Farm ownership

Just under half of respondents (47%) own their land, with 36% solely leasing, and 27.5% on a combination of owned and leased land.

**Percentages are of total responses.*

Farm type and location

- 81% operate a commercial enterprise; 6% are non-commercial (<$1,00 in annual sales)
- 41% of respondents are rural farmers; 64% farm in the peri-urban zone and 11% farm within city limits.

Farm size

While most scales of farming are represented, the highest responses are from operations of:

- 1-9 acres (31%)
- 10-49 acres (31%)

No farms over 1,000 acres responded to the survey.

Top three markets

- Direct sale (89%)
- Wholesale (33%)
- Charitable Donation (17%)

Top production sectors

- Vegetables (58%)
- Flowers (50%)
- Small Fruits (39%)
- Livestock/Poultry Products (36%)

Revenue

Self-reported sales range from less than $1,000 to $249,999.

Net profits were reported on a scale from < $1 to $500,000+, with no respondents selecting higher than $99,999 in profits. Just over half (58%) of respondents report <1,000 in sales.

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Agricultural Viability

Of the 36 responses to the open-ended question “What does agricultural viability mean to you?” the top emergent themes were:

- **Financial stability** e.g. “Being able to make a living farming full time (i.e. generating an income for myself and my business partner that's sustainable to live on in King County)”
- **Succession/longevity** e.g. “Allowing the producer to support themselves for the present, as well as the future without selling the home they’ve built.“
- **Environmental** e.g. “Sustainable practices that resolve and build soil health, financial health and a fair contribution as members of society that are respected.“

-King County farmers

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: extreme, moderate, minor, not a challenge, and not applicable.

Within each category, we present the top responses rated as "extreme" or "moderate" and highlight the top three overall responses.

Land/water

- Finding affordable land to buy (30)**
- Maintaining secure land tenure (28)
- Finding affordable land to lease (27)
- Access to water due to lack of infrastructure (27)

Profitability

- Cost of production compared to market prices (34)**
- Lack of time to do all needed farm work (31)
- Cost of labor (wages and benefits) (28)

Infrastructure

- On-farm infrastructure (e.g. fencing, barns, storage) (27)**
- Farm Equipment (23)
- Wash/Pack Facilities (15)
- Farmworker Housing (15)

Regulation/certification

- Land use zoning and permitting (25)**
- Labor, wages and compensation (23)
- Critical areas (18)

Livelihood/well-being

- Physical demands and bodily pain (26)
- Personal or family health insurance and medical costs (26)**
- Finding or maintaining affordable housing (26)

> *"We have been privileged to begin the farm journey with capital, access to land, and much educational/business experience yet continue to face barriers including cost of equipment, supplies, and permits, licenses, and certifications, making it impossible for us to quit our day jobs and farm full time."*
>
> -King County farmer

**This response was the highest ranked as "extreme" in each respective category. The highest response across all challenge categories as was "*finding affordable land to buy*", with 86% of respondents selecting 'extreme' for this challenge.

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":

- Technical support for meeting regulatory requirements (7)
- Grants to support on-farm infrastructure (7)
- Collaborative solutions for access to water (7)
- Conservation easements that protect farmland (7)

If we combine "very effective" *and* "moderately effective", we can add **support for cooperative distribution and food hubs** as a high-ranking selection, along with the four mentioned above.

Top responses for "somewhat effective"

- Conservation easements that protect farmland (11)
- Technical assistance for farm management and practices (9)
- Development of new markets (12)

Top responses for "not at all effective":

- Transportation infrastructure projects (9)
- Financial assistance for conservation practices (8)
- Enhanced public perception and understanding of farming (8)

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

- Regulatory reform (19)
- Workforce development (18)
- Value-added processing facilities (18)

It's important to note that the highest number of selections for any category were in response to "I am not aware of these efforts in my community." A good starting point for the county could be in examining public awareness of existing programs.

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

For trusted information and support, farmers turn to:

- Other farmers (88%), followed by
- Washington State University Extension (52%), and
- Conservation Districts (42%)

Photo: Beneath the Looking Glass, LLC

Opportunities

When asked, "What types of future investments in agriculture would be most beneficial for farmers in your area?" suggestions presented focused on:

- Zoning and permitting reform
- Reducing barriers to entry/barriers to success
- Financial supports and market development

Zoning and permitting reform

- "**Tax reductions** on farmland & infrastructure are needed."
- "I would like to know about an easy path to **move from being zoned residential to being zoned agricultural**...I would rather take the hit in land value instead of property taxes, which are currently 20K for me per annum."
- "**Extensive ag zoning**, so we aren't fragmented..."
- "Force business owners to **follow the rules about how farmland is used**."

Reducing barriers to entry

- "We need real money put into **helping farmers purchase land**. Conservation easements on large parcels do not help most farmers afford the high prices."
- "Additional access to grants, not only does the grant help farmers but the application process forces us to sit down and really **develop our business plans** and **refine our values**."
- "Reduce the costs, paperwork, and other barriers to entry into the agriculture business. Make it much easier to get **exempted from property taxes** on land use for agriculture."

Financial support and market development

- "There are lots of small to medium-sized farms in KC and having **shared infrastructure** (e.g. meat processing in close proximity, machinery & implement cooperative, etc.) would go a long way."
- "Support accessing additional **sales channels**, **market research** of what is in demand - how can we be **shifting to meet local demand**. Have no time to do this with day to day operation of farm."

> *"Agriculture, in the highest level of sustainability, should be at the center of community. So, in reality, community health and wellness is dependent on agricultural viability, which in turn is dependent on soil viability."*
>
> -King County Farmer

Photo by Markus Spiske

Key Takeaways

While King County has unique and persistent challenges, farmer respondents suggested a variety of measures to address land access, market support, regulatory relief, and more. An analysis of existing programs, effectiveness of messaging, and barriers to access could be a starting point that leads to long-term strategic reform.