

Puget Sound Agricultural Viability Farmer Survey Results - Pierce 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 33 respondents in Pierce County (*response counts vary by question*). For an overview of all responses, visit farmland.org/PNW.

The Farms

Farm ownership

60% of respondents own their land, with another 24% working on a combination of owned and leased land. 9% solely lease land.

Farm type and location

- 88% operate a commercial enterprise.
- 58% of respondents are peri-urban farmers; 33% are rural, and 18% farm within an urban area.

Farm size

- < 1 acre: 15%
- 1-9 acres: 24%
- 10-49 acres: 24%
- 50-179 acres: 12%
- 180 acres +: 24%

Top three markets

- Direct sale (79%)
- Wholesale (58%)
- Charitable Donation (27%)

Agritourism

53% of respondents offer agritourism, with farm tours (47%), u-pick (47%) and pumpkin patch (35%) as the highest selected.

Top three production sectors

- Vegetables (48%)
- Small Fruits (48%)
- Herbs (39%)

Revenue

Self-reported gross sales range from less than \$1,000 to \$500,000+

Net profits (n=26) reported on a scale from < \$1 to \$500,000+:

- 27% report < \$1 profit
- 15% report \$1,000-9,999
- 27% report \$10,000-24,999 profit
- 15% report \$25,000-99,999 profit
- 15% report \$100,000+ profit

Respondents

In this report we present responses from current farmers in Pierce County (n=33). 88% of respondents identify as the 'owner and manager' of their farm.

A majority of respondents (74%) self-identify as white or of European descent. Just over half (54%) selected 'male' for gender. n=28

Ages are fairly split among ranges, with the highest representation (32%) between the ages of 45-54.

74% (n=19) are first generation farmers, and 39% are new or beginning farmers (not 100% overlap between those two categories).

**Percentages are of total responses*



Agricultural Viability

Of the 33 responses to the open-ended question "What does agricultural viability mean to you?" the top emergent themes were:

- financial stability/profitability
- sustainability
- generational connections/tradition

Several respondents mentioned the need for farmers and farmworkers to make a "living wage". Sustainability in practices was repeated multiple times, and several responses referenced community and familial connections, including a desire to pass down the operation to the next generation.

Being able to feed others and my family while earning a respectable wage and doing so with sustainable agricultural practices.

-Pierce 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 four overall responses. n=30.

Land/water

- Finding affordable land to buy (24)
- Unpredictable or extreme weather (22)
- Other climate related-changes to land or water (20)

Profitability

- Cost of production compared to market prices (26)**
- Lack of time to do all needed farm work (29)
- Cost of labor (wages and benefits) (22)
- Cost of business insurance (22)

Infrastructure

- On-farm infrastructure (e.g. fencing, barns, storage) (15)
- Farm Equipment (17)
- Cold Storage (14)

Regulation/certification

- Labor, wages and compensation (21)
- Land use zoning and permitting (19)
- Mandatory agricultural licenses, permits, and certifications (19)

Livelihood/well-being

- Personal or family health insurance and medical costs (20)
- Stress and mental health (17)
- Physical demands and bodily pain (25)

“In the past 6 years of our operation we have struggled to keep up with rising minimum wage, both for myself (owner, primary year-round operator) and for any seasonal employees we are able to afford. I raise my product prices each year but in the past two years I have not been able to keep up with rising costs and wages, which has led to not being able to afford to hire enough help, more strain on my body and on our family, and having to severely scale back production and the business...”

-Pierce County farmer

***This response was the highest ranked as “extreme” in Profitability with 18 (62%) selections, followed by ‘lack of time to do all needed farm work,’ selected 17 times.*

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 (10)
- Changes to land use zoning to support agriculture (6)
- Technical assistance for farm management and practices (6)
- Financial incentives for conservation practices (6)

Top responses for “moderately effective”

- Technical assistance for business planning and management (8)
- Technical support for meeting regulatory requirements (8)

Top responses for “not at all effective”:

- Development of new markets (9)
- Technical support for meeting regulatory requirements (9)
- Changes to land use zoning to support agriculture (9)
- Regulatory reform (9)

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

- Meat processing facilities (14)
- Collaborative solutions for access to water (14)
- Disaster protection and response (11)
- Workforce development (10)
- Development of new markets (10)
- Support for cooperative distribution and food hubs (10)
- Enhanced public perception and understanding of farming (10)

“Change has to happen with local, state, and federal zoning and land use policy for agriculture to remain viable to the next generation before it is too late.”

-Pierce County farmer



Photo: Townsend Walton.

There were **no real standouts** when it comes to the effectiveness of supports, with the **highest** responses coming in the category of ‘I am not aware of these efforts in my community.’ Over one-third of respondents selected each of the seven aforementioned efforts as potentially nonexistent in Pierce County. A **good starting point** for the county could be in **examining public awareness of existing programs**.

An additional focus could be placed on **examining why the next highest response rates were under “not at all effective”** (market development, regulatory support and reform, zoning) and understanding the **barriers and opportunities for refining these programs** in Pierce County.

Opportunities

When asked, “*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:

Funding:

- “[I] wish we could receive the type of funding we see in other counties for no till drill, pasture seed, conservation, gutters for water management of high use areas...”

Land Use:

- “Protecting land from being covered in houses, denser growth in towns and cities...Purchase of development rights [at] a fair market price.”

Infrastructure:

- “Revitalize infrastructure and the National Grange model...Capital investment funding...local infrastructure for value added products.”

Regulations:

- “Zoning changes to protect farmland from housing development would be way more cost effective than conservation easements that try and save one small piece of farmland at a time. Creat[e] true agricultural zones that are affordable to farm and not subject to the crazy real estate market...”

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

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

- Other farmers (90%), followed by
- Washington State University Extension (66%)

Key Takeaways

Overall, responses indicate that Pierce County farmers are **struggling to make a profit from farming** due to:

- Cost of production compared to market prices
- Lack of time to do all needed farm work
- Cost of labor (wages and benefits)
- Cost of business insurance

Persistent Challenges

Consistent with other counties across Puget Sound, land access from an affordability standpoint is one of the highest ranked challenges. One respondent notes “*Anything supporting affordable land access would be extremely helpful, this is probably the most challenging piece especially in urban and peri-urban areas which are under extreme development pressure despite [still] having a lot of open land...*”

Outside of financial viability, both physical and mental stress and strain are significant challenges identified by respondents, consistent with results from other counties and across the nation.



Photo: Orting Veterans Farm

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