

Puget Sound Agricultural Viability Farmer Survey Results - Whatcom 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 responses from current farmers who selected Whatcom County as their farm location. For an overview of all responses, visit farmland.org/PNW

Respondents

In this report we present responses from current farmers in Whatcom County (n=40).

A majority of these respondents self-identify as white or of European descent, with gender equally split between male or female.

Ages are fairly evenly distributed among ranges, with the only missing category (no responses) in 55-64.

34% are first generation farmers, and 34% are new or beginning farmers. There is not 100% overlap between these categories.

*Percentages are of total responses



The Farms

Farm type and location

Majority are commercial enterprise. 67% consider themselves rural farmers, with 32% in the peri-urban zone (outside city limits, but close to the urban edge) and 5% within city limits.

Farm size

While all scales of farming are represented, the highest responses come from farms of 1-9 acres (30%), to 10-49 acres (22%) and 180-499 acres (20%)

Farm ownership

Just under half of respondents own their land, with another 27.5% working on a combination of owned and leased land.

Top three markets

Direct sale (72%)
Wholesale (57%)
Cooperative Markets (40%)

Top three production sectors

Vegetables (60%)
Small Fruits (37%)
Livestock/Poultry Products (37%)

Revenue

Self-reported sales range from \$2,500-500,000+, with over half of respondents (16/30) reporting \$100,000 and up in sales.

Net profits are reported on a scale from < \$1 to \$500,000+, with no respondents selecting higher than \$249,999 in profits. The majority of responses (58%) report less than \$10,000 in profit.



Agricultural Viability

Of the 37 responses to the open-ended question “What does agricultural viability mean to you?” the top three emergent themes are:

- sustainability
- profitability
- stewardship

In these responses, “sustainability” is often mentioned in conjunction with environmental, financial, or physical/mental, as well as with reference to “sustaining communities”.

“Agricultural viability to me encompasses the economic, political, practical, and environmental conditions necessary for agriculture and agriculturalists (farmers) to sustain their communities and themselves with the food and products they produce.”

-Whatcom County farmer

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 are organized in five categories, as seen below.

Within each category, we present the top responses rated as “extreme” or “moderate” and highlighted the top five overall responses. For each category n=35.

Profitability

- Cost of production compared to market prices* (30)
- Lack of time to do all needed farm work* (30)
- Cost of labor (wages and benefits)

Land/water

- Certainty of future water access* (e.g. drought, adjudication) (32)
- Finding affordable land to buy* (30)
- Access to water due to water rights/water law

Infrastructure

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

Regulation/certification

- Labor wages and compensation
- Mandatory agricultural licenses, permits, and certifications
- Land use zoning and permitting
- Food safety

Livelihood/well-being

- Personal or family health insurance and medical costs* (28)
- Physical demands and bodily pain
- Stress and mental health

As seen in the overall Puget Sound survey results, there are a variety of factors affecting the viability of their enterprises. Potentially reflective of the current adjudication of water rights, 91% of respondents indicate that certainty of water access was the top challenge. As we’ll see in the “Opportunities” section, fixing water access is a high priority.

Additional high ranked challenges include a lack of time, cost of production, and land affordability. While these findings are not unusual, they highlight the persistent and consistent challenges that farmers navigate.



“Economic inflation raising costs of everything we need has been a challenge, as has extreme weather and lack of access to capital we need for infrastructure needs”

-Whatcom farmer



Effectiveness of Supports

Respondents rated 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?”

Very and Moderately Effective

Top responses for “very effective”:

- Grants to support **on-farm infrastructure** (13)
- Support for **cooperative distribution and food hubs** (10)
- **Meat processing** facilities (9)

If we consider the combination of those selecting “very effective” or “moderately effective”, we can add the following as high-ranking answers:

- **Conservation easements** to protect farmland
- **Technical assistance** for farm management and practices

Somewhat or Not Effective

Supports with lower rankings (“somewhat effective”) include:

- Technical assistance for business planning and management (18)
- Technical support for meeting regulatory requirements (16)
- Technical assistance for farm management and practices (15)

Comparatively, the supports ranked “*not at all effective*” had low responses, with no higher than five responses (16%) for any one support.

Low Community Awareness

It’s also important to note that twice as many respondents selected “*I am not aware of these efforts in my community*” for some of these responses, indicating room for improvement when it comes to messaging, as well as highlighting potential gaps in service. The following were selected under this category by more than 30% of respondents:

- Transportation infrastructure projects
- Meat processing facilities
- Changes to land use zoning to support agriculture
- Regulatory reform
- Collaborative solutions for access to water
- Workforce development.

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

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

- Other farmers, followed by
- Conservation Districts, and
- Washington State University Extension Services

While other entities may not rank as high, it is not clear whether that is due to the quality of advice or a lack of awareness by information seekers.



Opportunities

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

Financial supports for land and key infrastructure

- *Incubator or cooperatively owned farms*
- *Co-packing plants*
- *Mental health services*
- *Land access support*
- *Education and funding for small farms*
- *Promotion of farms*
- *Support for beginning farmer land access*

Securing water for the future of farming

- *Making access to water available perpetually*
- *Land/water access*
- *Water rights for new farmers with sustainable growing practices*
- *Access to the water [needed] to farm*

Protecting land from development.

- *Grants/funding for easements and assistance with applications*
- *Protection of farm land from developers*
- *Zoning improvements*
- *Policies that discourage urban sprawl*

Some of these opportunities reflect the “most effective” supports, indicating potential benefits from increased funding or assistance in those areas (e.g. grants, conservation easements).

Key Takeaways

While on a whole the results in this survey are in line with the greater Puget Sound region, we see some key callouts in both *Challenges* and *Opportunities* that could be examined more closely by service providers and policy makers in Whatcom County.

Overall there is a clear need for additional supports in order for producers to attain viability, with the highest needs around water and land access, and improving profit margins on sales.

“The future of the farming industry is dependent upon me and others like me to provide crops for local communities and allowing me to in turn feed and provide for my own family. It's a pretty amazing thing to be a part of that cycle!”

-Whatcom farmer



Photo: Shawn Linehan