

An Agricultural Viability Action Plan for Puget Sound



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American Farmland Trust
SAVING THE LAND THAT SUSTAINS US

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) sought support from the [Puget Sound Partnership](#) to engage in a collaborative research project that seeks 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. 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.

Through strategic collaboration, innovation, and funding we can reverse this trajectory and ensure that agriculture remains a cornerstone of economic stability, community wellbeing, and ecological health. Working with an advisory committee that included farmers, conservation districts, agricultural service providers, county planners, and state agencies, and coordinating with other entities engaged in research about agricultural viability, AFT combined an extensive literature review and stakeholder interviews with the findings from the farmer survey to develop this Agricultural Viability Action Plan for Puget Sound.



A Vision for Agricultural Viability

American Farmland Trust 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.

To achieve this vision, collaborative partnerships across agencies, local governments, and nonprofit organizations must move beyond isolated programs and strategize together to address systemic gaps across the agricultural community. This includes coordinating strategies to promote water and soil stewardship practices, equitable and affordable farmland access programs, regional infrastructure and market investments, and supports for health and wellbeing that recognize farmers as essential stewards of critical natural resources.

This Action Plan recommends that:

- **State agencies** should align regulatory, financial, and technical assistance programs to reduce administrative burdens, improve cost-effectiveness, and ensure that incentives reach small- and mid-scale producers. Agencies should prioritize streamlined permitting processes, equitable access to conservation funding, increased access to markets, and targeted infrastructure investments in climate-resilient agricultural practices.
- **Local governments** should accelerate farmland protection to preserve the remaining agricultural land base, streamline local permitting processes, integrate agricultural viability objectives in comprehensive planning and food system investments, and coordinate with state and nonprofit partners to advance essential conservation and farm management practices that build resilience to natural hazards and climate impacts.
- **Conservation districts, universities, and nonprofit organizations** should continue to advance applied research, education, outreach, and other activities that improve producer capacity, increase conservation practice adoption, advance innovative and resilient business models, support collective marketing strategies, and accelerate the pace of permanent farmland protection.
- **Elected officials** should dedicate resources for soil health, water stewardship, natural disaster preparedness and recovery, and rural healthcare access. Legislative priorities should include continued funding for permanent farmland protection, ongoing funding for research and extension support for small to mid-scale farms, funding for local procurement and institutional purchasing, long-term funding for disaster preparedness and recovery, and developing mechanisms to support farmer health, safety, and mental wellbeing.
- **Community members and consumers** must recognize and embrace their role in sustaining the agricultural backbone of the Puget Sound region through local purchasing, policy advocacy, and participation in farmer-centered initiatives.

By aligning state, regional, and local investments with the five goals and associated strategies and actions identified below, partners can continue to protect essential working lands, strengthen rural economies, and preserve Puget Sound's natural resources.

Goals

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



Strategies & Actions

GOAL 1: Protect Farmland from Conversion to Development

STRATEGY 1A: Better integrate farmland protection into local and regional planning.

ACTIONS:

- Develop and adopt farmland protection policies in county comprehensive plans.
- Establish, expand, and/or better fund county Purchase of Development Rights and Transfer of Development Rights programs, including providing necessary staffing to administer the programs.
- Expand the existing regional Transfer of Development Rights program to include all counties throughout Puget Sound.
- Map and prioritize high-value agricultural lands for protection and retention through zoning and conservation easements.
- Establish and/or encourage collaboration between agricultural advisory committees at the county level.
- Expand agricultural and open space zoning to include smaller parcels and parcels already in agricultural use and develop other strategies to protect small acreage parcels and farms located outside of agricultural zones.



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

ACTIONS:

- Increase funding for programs that support permanent protection of working lands, including county Conservation Futures programs, Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, Farmland Protection and Land Access program, and Floodplains by Design.
- Invest in staff and technical capacity at land trusts and conservation organizations so they can develop, finance, and deliver more farmland protection projects.
- Encourage counties to pass and utilize Conservation Real Estate Excise Taxes to fund farmland protection.
- Enact permanent property tax protections for permanently protected lands.

GOAL 2: Support Farmer Livelihoods and Business Viability

STRATEGY 2A: Conduct regulatory reform to create time and cost savings for farmers.

ACTIONS:

- Where possible, reduce or waive costs or implement sliding-scale payment structures for permit fees and utility costs for small and/or cost-burdened farms.
- Invest in free voluntary technical assistance for small farmers to maintain permit and regulatory compliance.
- Streamline permit and regulatory paperwork to reduce total hours needed to achieve and maintain compliance.
- Develop and provide example policy and regulatory language to support county-level adoption of code that supports farmers.

STRATEGY 2B: Invest in innovation and research on small farms.

ACTIONS:

- Increase access to new tools and scale-appropriate technology for small farmers through cost-share, low-interest financing, local equipment rental libraries, and other strategies.
- Invest in outreach and extension to disseminate information about innovative tools, technology, and methods.
- Fund and encourage on-farm research relevant to small, diversified farms.



STRATEGY 2C: Address farm labor and workforce concerns.

ACTIONS:

- Invest in formal and informal workforce development programs that facilitate farmer training, paid internships and apprenticeships, employment opportunities, and mentorship.
- Address farm labor housing access for small acreage farms by investing in affordable housing near agricultural areas, streamlining permitting for on-farm housing, and expanding options for temporary and seasonal housing.
- Examine existing wage and overtime rules and develop regulations that support farm labor needs while providing adequate protections for farm workers.

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.

ACTIONS:

- Inventory public owned lands (in school districts, parks, etc.) to assess high value agricultural soils and make farmable public lands available for long-term farm leases to beginning, young, and underserved farmers.
- Develop training for agricultural service providers to increase literacy about non-traditional land transfers, creative leasing arrangements, and collaborative farming approaches.
- Provide robust funding for programs that facilitate land access, such as the Housing Finance Commissions' Farmland Protection Affordability Investment (FarmPAI) program, and the Conservation Commission's Farmland Protection and Land Access program.
- Ensure state-funded easement programs allow for affordability provisions such as Rights of First Refusal to be included in easement language.
- Support and fund small farm training programs and incubators that support access to land.
- Explore funding options that enable aspiring farmers to access capital for land purchases.



STRATEGY 3B: Increase support for intergenerational farm transitions.

ACTIONS:

- Fund programs that provide long-term, individualized coaching for exiting generation farmers to help them develop and implement succession plans.
- Fund local and statewide land linking programs to connect landowners with aspiring farmers.

STRATEGY 3C: Support small and mid-size farmers to diversify market channels.

ACTIONS:

- Incentivize public procurement of locally grown foods.
- Continue and increase funding for Farm to School and Farm to Food Pantry programs.
- Update local regulations to allow income-generating uses that are secondary and incidental to agriculture on all farmland.
- Invest in branding networks that resonate with consumers, increase consumption of locally grown food, and raise visibility of environmentally friendly farming practices.

STRATEGY 3D: Invest in shared infrastructure to support aggregation, storage, and processing.

ACTIONS:

- Conduct an analysis of meat processing gaps and bottlenecks across the Puget Sound region to ensure strategic investment in new infrastructure development.
- Continue providing robust funding for the State Department of Agriculture's Local Food System Infrastructure Grant program.
- Provide grant application technical assistance for small farms from underserved communities to increase their competitiveness in grant and loan application processes.
- Increase technical assistance for farmers to access value-added services, aggregation services, and expanded distribution opportunities.
- Explore public/private partnerships to increase financial and technical support for cooperative distribution and food hub infrastructure.



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GOAL 4: Build Resilience to Climate Change and Natural Disasters

STRATEGY 4A: Increase adoption of soil stewardship and conservation practices.

ACTIONS:

- Increase project funding for farmers to implement conservation practices.
- Increase outreach for and enrollment in state and local programs focused on soil stewardship, conservation practices, and resilience.
- Increase farmers' access to ecosystem services marketplaces.
- Reduce the financial burden on landowners from implementing best management practices to protect natural resources and critical areas.
- Fund continued research about soil health and best management practices.
- Increase funding for the Conservation Commission's Conservation Technical Assistance Fund to increase capacity for voluntary technical assistance, producer support, and conservation project development.



STRATEGY 4B: Advance climate resilient agriculture.

ACTIONS:

- Develop water resilience training and capacity for agricultural service providers to build literacy in crops, irrigation strategies, tools, and other means that farmers can use to thrive with less water.
- Fund research focused on drought- and heat-tolerant crop types and varieties appropriate for the Puget Sound region, and fund training and support for producers who need assistance in transitioning production systems.
- Subsidize and encourage the use of water sensors and weather monitoring equipment on farms to reduce use of irrigation; provide training to interpret the data they collect.
- Increase technical assistance to encourage in-stream leases on farms with historic water rights and protect agricultural water rights from relinquishment.
- Increase funding for the Conservation Commission's Irrigation Efficiencies Program to fund irrigation management plans, technical assistance, and small- to large-scale irrigation efficiency projects.
- Fund research and implementation of innovative practices like reclaimed water to increase access to water for agricultural purposes.

STRATEGY 4C: Invest in disaster preparedness and recovery for farms and rural communities.

ACTIONS:

- Integrate agriculture into county disaster planning processes and responses.
- Identify and address county regulations that may prevent farmers from preparing for natural disasters.
- Fund disaster recovery for farmers, as well as facilitation of disaster planning and preparedness, through programs such as the Conservation Commission's Disaster Assistance Program (DAP).
- Fund and expand programs that educate about the health risks of exposure to heat, smoke, flooding, and other extreme conditions.
- Fund the Conservation Commission's Forest Health and Wildfire Preparedness Program to increase planning for and recovery from the effects of catastrophic wildfire on rural lands.





GOAL 5: Support Producer Health and Wellbeing

STRATEGY 5A: Improve farmer and farmworker access to health insurance and care.

ACTIONS:

- Provide language-appropriate caseworkers to assist farm operators and farmworkers in enrolling in health insurance through Washington's Health Plan Finder.
- Assess opportunities for group bargaining to get competitive insurance rates for small farm businesses and their workers.
- Fund subsidies to offset the rising costs of health insurance.

STRATEGY 5B: Support farmer and farmworker mental health and wellbeing.

ACTIONS:

- Increase awareness of farmer suicide risk emergency call lines.
- Fund and incentivize agricultural service provider participation in mental health awareness trainings such as Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) and Changing our Mental and Emotional Trajectory (COMET).
- Fund and expand access to Washington State University Extension's Free Therapy Voucher Program for farmers.
- Expand the roster of therapists available through the Free Therapy Voucher program, particularly to include Spanish-speaking therapists.
- Provide robust and ongoing funding to WSU's Farm Stress Prevention program for program development and technical assistance.
- Integrate farm stress and mental health topics into other agricultural outreach and extension activities.
- Designate a lead within state and local agricultural agencies and organizations to staff an ongoing statewide working group on mental health and wellbeing.



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 strategies in this plan 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.

State agencies, local governments, conservation partners, and elected officials each have a critical role to play, but lasting change will only be possible if the broader community also steps forward. Residents, consumers, and advocates must use their voices, their purchasing power, and their civic engagement to champion a future where farming remains viable and valued. Every policy decision, funding allocation, and community action taken today shapes whether the next generation will inherit a resilient agricultural landscape or the loss of an irreplaceable resource.

Together, we can choose a different future: one where region's farmland is protected, farmers are supported, rural economies are strong, and communities continue to be nourished by a vibrant, local agricultural system. The moment to act is now.

Puget Sound Agricultural Viability Advisory Committee Members

- Elizabeth Bragg, Long Hearing Farm
- Kate Delavan, Washington State Conservation Commission
- Maxime Etilé, Northwest Agriculture Business Center
- Diane Fish, Kitsap Conservation District
- Sarah Moorehead, Thurston Conservation District
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- Katie Rains, Washington State Department of Agriculture
- Clea Rome, Clallam County WSU Extension
- Lauren Silver-Turner, Snoqualmie Valley Preservation Alliance
- Ellie Steensma Corbin, Whatcom Family Farmers
- Faith Van De Putte, San Juan County Agricultural Resources Committee
- Laura Vary, Puget Sound Partnership



American Farmland Trust would also like to thank the many other individuals who contributed their expertise to these recommendations. These recommendations 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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