

Dear BOCC,

At our meeting of May 21, 2020, the Thurston County Agriculture Committee (“Ag Committee”) reviewed the highlights of the third draft of Thurston County’s Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP).

On Page 107 of the HCP there is a table outlining projected acreages for habitat conservation. According to this table, 3,469 acres would need to be included in the conservation program for recovery of county-specific species. Of these 3469 acres, 433 acres would be working lands with perpetual conservation easements, 2,698 acres would be new “reserves,” and 339 acres would be existing “preserves.” We believe these acreage numbers should be modified to increase support for agriculture.

First, ~~t~~The Ag Committee strongly encourages Thurston County to increase the acreage of working lands with conservation easements and reduce the acreage included in non-agricultural reserves. The proposed allocation is 16% in working lands, with 84% in non-agricultural reserves. We believe every possible effort should be made to reverse these percentage allocations ~~the BOCC and county sta byff to~~ favoring conservation easements on working lands over reserves/preserves, for the following reasons:

- Food security and increased food production.
- Tax dollars provided to county.
- Preserves would cost tax dollars to maintain.
- Agritourism opportunities on preserved working lands.
- All listed species have been studied and found~~proven~~ to be compatible with working lands.
- Some of the species, especially the Oregon Spotted Frog, may~~would~~ not survive without grazing.
- Proper grazing enhances soil health, reduces fire fuel loads, and reduces noxious weeds.

Second, ~~t~~The Ag Committee recommends that livestock grazing be considered as a management tool on existing preserves and on any new reserves established under the HCP. We believe that science supports the conclusion that all listed Thurston County species thrive at least as well on properly grazed land as on un-grazed preserves. In fact, pocket gopher density may be higher on grazed land. There is a good local example of the viability of grazing leases on prairie land: a WSU and CNLM farmer cooperato ~~r~~ is currently grazing on preserved prairie spotted frog habitat.

Third,~~t~~The Ag Committee also recommends that the Comp Plan specifically provide~~allow~~ for additional working lands to be set up in conservation easements and kept as working lands for the protection of endangered and threatened species. The Committee believes that, with the proper financial incentives, farmers will voluntarily commit much more than 433 acres to combined use for both agriculture and species preservation.

The Ag committee supports the recovery of all threatened and endangered species, but feels that grazing and other,~~among other~~ compatible~~common~~ agricultural practices, should be integrated with species preservation~~be tools managed correctly~~ to support both animals and agriculture, and to maintain~~keep the lands as~~ working lands wherever possible.

Sincerely,

Thurston County Agriculture Committee