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## THURSTON COUNTY WORKING LANDS STRATEGIC PLAN

### Introduction

Working Lands not only provide intrinsic value but also security and protection of the county's sources of foods and fiber. Maintaining a viable and vigorous working lands economy is a high priority for Thurston County. This is demonstrated in goal 2, objective A of the Natural Resource chapter in the county's Comprehensive Plan. Partnerships to promote policies that remove barriers to economic sustainability and expansion into new markets, while at the same time increasing the opportunity for producers to meet their own economic goals within the community are common goals. Government's role should be as a collaborative partner with producers. The purpose of the collaboration is to work in on-going manner through issues and challenges as they are identified.

This Plan established a basis for encouraging and insuring a continued and coordinated approach to the preservation of agriculture and forestry's economic viability. This Plan complements the county Comprehensive Plan and the policies and directives of Growth Management legislation adopted by the Washington State Legislature. Information within this plan outlines trends leading to the loss of working lands, the community benefit of these lands; it also provides strategies for the protection of working lands.

This Plan outlines Threats and Opportunities as well as Strategies to Conserve Working Lands that were identified through the public involvement exercises. It is performance based, with strategies and implementation tools such as benchmarks to provide measurable outcomes.

### Working Lands History in Thurston County

Working Lands have been a mainstay of the economy of Thurston County for the past 200 years. Forestry specifically dominated the economy until the mid 1900's. Forestry and agriculture carved out a landscape that still exists. Today, both working lands and their cultural landscape are threatened by the loss of farms and forestry lands, the loss of important agricultural soils, ecosystem and open space. Results from a satellite imagery-based study show that more than 32,000 acres of lands were converted from intact forest lands, agricultural lands, or large expanses of shrubby vegetation to urban lands between 1985 and 2000. The majority (57 percent) of urban conversions took place on previously forested lands.<sup>1</sup> The U.S.D.A. Census of Agriculture shows an increase in the number of farms and acres from 529 farms and 65,211 acres in the 1974 census to 1288 farms and 80,617 acres in the 2007 census.<sup>2</sup> While it appears that more farms and acreage exist today than in 1974, this change must be carefully analyzed. In the 2007 census a greater number of farms are less than nine acres in size than in previous years. There is an ever increasing number of these smaller farms that specialize in niche crops including: organic products, row crops, herbs and berries. The number of Community Supported Agriculture operations has risen by eight in the past two years.<sup>3</sup> Also, some of these newer farms are located on marginal soils. It is possible that with the desire for organic foods, additional smaller farms meet dollar value of the census criteria. Also, additional farm categories were added to the census in recent years. In the 1997, 2002 and 2007 censuses statistical adjustments were used to account for farms missed or miscalculated in the census; this methodology differs from that used in previous censuses. Although the census can provide important information, the imagery-based study shows the conversion of lands from working lands to other non-production uses. Another strong indicator of the changes to Thurston County is the reduction of commercial operation. Between 1995 and 2008 the number of dairies has declined from twenty-one to nine. The number of fryer operations has declined from five to one. In the 1970 & early 80's there were over a 1000 acres rotating between peas and sweet corn. There are no longer any large commercial growers of peas and sweet corn. In the past twenty years two of the

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<sup>1</sup>The Rate of Urbanization and Forest Harvest in Thurston County 1985-2000 A Land Cover and Change Detection Satellite Remote Sensing Study, Final Report, January 2002 prepared by: Thurston Regional Planning Council can be found online at <http://www.trpc.org/resources/rateofurbanizationforesthharvest19852000.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> U.S.D.A. National Agricultural Statistical Services 1974 and 2007 Census of Agriculture.

<sup>3</sup> Thurston County Direct Sales Farm Map

remaining livestock sale yards located within Thurston County and Lewis County have gone out of business, leaving only two in Western Washington.<sup>4</sup>

The conversion of farmland to other uses is a complex process, often taking place over a period of fifteen or twenty years. The loss of large commercial operation associated with the ever increasing population and the desire to live in a rural environment result in the conversion of working lands. It involves such factors as farm profitability, residential growth pressures, residential development encroachment and limit the operator's ability to work the land, land values, personal decisions about work and retirement, community expectations, taxes and government programs, incentives, and regulations. The result is loss of local processing plants, slaughter houses, and livestock sale yards and other related businesses, These many factors contribute to the decline of acres in production and the reduction of the acreage farmers can afford to farm.

Population growth is one major factor in play. Thurston County continues to be one of the fastest growing counties in Washington State, which has increased the demand for available land. Between 1990 and 2008 the county's growth has exceeded 2.1% annually. This growth pattern is anticipated to extend well into the future. Population Forecasts indicate that that the county will grow by 127,700 residents by the year 2030 for a total of 373,000 residents.<sup>5</sup> The majority of population increase has resulted from migration into the county. This is a result of a relatively stable economy, a high quality of life, and a lower cost of living than counties to the north. These trends underscore the need for a well-thought out visionary action plan to protect those remaining resources in the county.

Once a working lands operation goes under, the land either lies fallow or is often sold for development. Being a fast growing county with high rising market values is not the only reason working lands in the county are being targeted for conversion to residential uses. This is also occurring because working lands, typically are flat, make up large land holdings and have available water rights. Additionally, the average age of farmers in Thurston County is 56.9 years.<sup>6</sup> These farmers are finding it difficult to transfer land to the next generation as new farmers cannot afford to purchase resource land at market values.

Several studies throughout the country have concluded that the tax returns to the community from farms are greater than the service or facility outlays they require. This has been well documented through community services studies across the nation and in Washington State. Working lands are of great fiscal value to local communities. Working lands generate more public revenue than they receive back in public services. On average, residential development has a negative net fiscal impact and providing residential uses with public services must be subsidized by other community land uses. In Skagit County for every dollar paid by working lands they received 51 cents in public services. In Okanogan County for every dollar paid by working lands they received 56 cents in public services. Residential development in Skagit County received \$1.25 of services for every dollar paid. In Okanogan County the cost of services is slightly less at \$1.06 per dollar paid.<sup>7</sup>

Farming at the local level in Thurston County is no less important. Not only is agriculture an industry in the county but it has an influence on community quality of life. The value of farm products sold is more than \$117,000,000 in Thurston County<sup>4</sup> currently and as this money circulates through the local economy, it supports business in other sectors. Moreover, Thurston County's character, like many historically rural counties, is defined in large part by the presence and distribution of farmland.

The proportion of Thurston County farmers who are approaching retirement is ever increasing in

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<sup>4</sup> Conversation with Dave Nygard, Thurston County Conservation District - February 25, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> The Profile 2008, 26<sup>th</sup> Edition prepared by: Thurston Regional Planning Council can be found online at <http://www.trpc.org/programs/estimates+and+forecasts/demographics/the+profile.htm>

<sup>6</sup> U.S.D.A. National Agricultural Statistical Services 2007 Census of Agriculture.

<sup>7</sup> American Farmland Trust 1999 and 2007, online at [http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/27757/COCS\\_09-2007.pdf](http://www.farmlandinfo.org/documents/27757/COCS_09-2007.pdf)

association with the median age of producers in the county. Within the next decade, the sale of these farms is a logical progression, converting the farms' value into retirement reserves for the owners. The opportunities for these kinds of sales have grown significantly due to the market value of property. Future generations of producers are leaving working lands or can't compete with developers for the land. Given these circumstances, the future of farm tenure may change dramatically unless the transfer of farm businesses within families and to other interested individuals is encouraged and promoted.

As working lands in Thurston County are lost the county also loses the critical public benefits these farms provide. Well-managed working lands do not pollute, but instead they generate important environmental values. Working lands provide a multitude of public benefits. Assisting landowners in staying in active production is necessary to maximize conservation benefits such as: reducing air and water pollution; preserving open and green spaces; preserving fish and wildlife habitats; preserving threatened and endangered species and migration corridors; managing and protecting watersheds and wetlands; protecting clean water and aquifer recharge; maintaining scenic landscapes and recreational amenities; preventing soil erosion and improving soil quality; reducing the negative impacts of flooding; improving resilience to drought and invasive species; helping to sequester greenhouse gases and protecting sustainable capacities to produce food and fiber. Such benefits translate into enormous value to the county and support a high quality of life for all Thurston County Residents.

The diversity of Thurston County agriculture is growing with respect to the kinds of enterprises represented and the characteristics of its owners. Even though large farms are the most visible because of the extent of their land use, history, and the economic value of their products, the largest quantity of farms in Thurston County are between 1 and 9 acres. These small operations or part-time operators engaged in field crop and vegetable production, small livestock enterprises, equine, and organic operations.

This Plan examines the changes that have taken place over time and the state of the working lands economy today. It defines strategies that shape the framework for actions to be taken to ensure that despite changes in agriculture as it has been known in Thurston County, the working lands community can continue to prosper and continue to be a valuable asset to the community quality of life.

In summary, there is great potential in the agricultural, human, and economic resources of Thurston County. This plan provides strategies and steps in the right direction that may mitigate or solve the issues impacting working lands in Thurston County.

## **Background**

### Overview

The purpose of this plan is to build on a three decade history by county staff and the Agricultural Advisory Committee of Thurston County support of working lands to take the county to the next step in insuring a sustainable and healthy working lands physical and economic base. In the context of this plan working lands include agricultural and small family forest lands. This plan looks at the importance of working lands and those who work them, the larger context within which working lands exists, and historical highlights of efforts in Thurston County.

It then discusses strategic factors that present threats and opportunities for working lands and focuses on strengths and weaknesses in Thurston County. A number of strategies are discussed that would strengthen the future for working lands. These strategies are prioritized for immediate and longer term action, and benchmarks to measure progress and success are introduced. These strategies should provide a wide-ranging, but coherent, set of opportunities for conservation of lands and economic sustainability for those who work these lands.

This document has been presented to the public for review and comment. Ultimately, the final document will be adopted through resolution and can be used to compete for grants and other resources that can

broaden the success of the conservation effort. The plan will provide a foundation that can be strengthened as new initiatives, such as emerging conservation tools or sources of funding, become available.

Inventory information about working lands and changes through time are included in Appendix B of the Strategic Plan. There are many published sets of statistical information from the past, such as the 1978 Citizen's Report on Agriculture and the 1992 Farm Survey and 1994 Farm Census Report discussed below in the section on Thurston County history. More recent sources of data include the Washington State University Extension Service report (circa 2006) "Agriculture in Thurston County Washington; Trends, Needs and Implications for Washington State University Extension." The recently available 2007 Agricultural Census will also provide currency as does 2008 information compiled and aggregated by the South of the Sound Community Farm Land Trust, and a brief highlighting of statistics gathered in 2008 by Fred Colvin, Agriculture Committee Chair.

Some statistical information is also provided in Chapter 3 (Natural Resource Lands) of the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan, revised in 2003, and information is provided on Thurston County's Webpage. Trends, such as conversion rates and physical attributes of working lands in Thurston County, provide a foundation for the content of the plan.

In addition the University of Washington, College of Forest Resources, through the Rural Technology Initiative has recently completed a Washington State Forestland Database. A new agricultural database prepared by the same office will be available in the future through funding by the Office of Farmland Preservation in the Washington State Conservation Commission. These databases will be updated annually. Thurston County should review these materials to ascertain their relevance for planning purposes.

It is often challenging to use datasets from different sources and timeframes since definitions and categories change from organization to organization and over time. In addition formulas used to extrapolate sample responses may not fit Thurston County realities. Ground-truthing should always be a component of inventory statistical analyses for working lands. It will be important that Thurston County develop its own data collection system for working lands, especially one that is accurate for conversion rates of working lands and acreages for agricultural and forest lands; the Working Lands Advocate (See Strategy #1) would have responsibility for overseeing the project.

Working Lands are defined generally as "farm and forestry management" ... of land "... that raise food, grow trees and support jobs and local economies." (from Governor Gregoire's Working Lands Initiative). In Thurston County these lands include food and fiber products as well as other products including, but not limited to turf, nursery stock, livestock, and hay. Working lands in Thurston County also use sustainable practices through stewardship of the land for present and future generations. Working lands contribute to healthy rural communities and a local supply of quality food and fiber products. Finally, although this plan does not explicitly focus on aquacultural working lands, many of the issues and strategies may be useful to that sector of working lands and county policy.

Underlying principle of this working lands strategic plan: **Intrinsic value**

Since much, if not all, of our social, political, and economic structures and institutions are driven by values (i.e., if we value something, we're more likely to take care of it), it is essential to focus on the intrinsic value of working lands to society. This intrinsic value then needs to be reflected in economic, political, and educational measures that will conserve working lands.

Intrinsic means giving equal weight to agricultural and forestland uses *as they are*, not seeing them as lands held until they can be shifted to a so-called higher, better, typically urban use. Likewise, working lands cannot be seen as having value *solely* for urban benefit, for example, viewsheds, open space, possible recreation use, or as representing a nostalgia for past connections to the land in one's background or family. These may be value-added contributions that working lands can make to society, but they have to be done on terms that are compatible with the need to work the lands successfully.

Instead, we must broaden the concepts of conservation, stewardship, sustainability, and progress to assign unique values/contributions to society from working lands, such as food security, that are seen and legally supported as equivalent to other uses of land traditionally considered as "highest and best uses." This legal context must be structured in a way that recognizes the unique skills and knowledge that farmers and forest land owners have to contribute to maintaining healthy working lands. The worth of the working lands are significantly diminished if those who work the land are not equally valued.

Unused working lands are not reaching their potential for contributing to the well-being of society. The same can be said for a residential neighborhood with a number of vacant or un-maintained houses or commercial areas with empty stores. While there is some merit to holding working lands from production for a temporary length of time in order to have future lands available for working, this is not beneficial if used as a permanent way to create open space.

***This plan should be seen as helping build that intrinsic value foundation.***

#### Context

Research on conserving working lands throughout the United States and here in Washington State and through civic engagement, shows that priority and commitment must be given to conserving working lands and those who work them. In Washington State, there are a number of successful accomplishments that Thurston County can draw on in crafting its set of initiatives, notably Pierce, King, Skagit, and Jefferson Counties and state projects, such as the Working Lands Initiative, the Office of Farmland Preservation and advisory Task Force in the state Conservation Commission, and support provided by the Small Forest Land Owners Office at the state Department of Natural Resources. Projects by the American Farmland Trust in Washington State have also contributed to a stronger working lands sector. The William D. Ruckelshaus Center, jointly supported by Washington State University and the University of Washington, may be helpful in resolving conflicts that may rise as a working lands plan is implemented.

This plan aims to strengthen the Thurston County's Comprehensive Plan implementation of the goals and actions that support agricultural lands. Some of the policies and actions that have already been well implemented include; the Purchase of Development Rights Program in the Nisqually Valley; a strong on-going commitment by the Noxious Weed Control Board to eradicate noxious weeds; the formation in collaboration with ten other jurisdictions, of the Chehalis River Basin Flood Authority to develop a basin-wide flood hazard management plan; and efforts to include the Thurston County Agricultural Committee in the development application process.

Documentation is extensive about the unique roles of agriculture and forests nationally and locally as they contribute to a healthy democracy, environment, and quality of life. Understanding the critical and unique roles these lands play is increasingly important, and leadership must be found in government, in the non profit and private sectors, and in an active citizenry to chart a successful course for conserving these natural resource sectors in the economy and society.

#### *Political Context and Justification*

One political focus has been the need for food security, making sure that the United States continues to be able to feed its people. Loss of productive lands and barriers to new farmers and forest land owners are elements that must be addressed to maintain food and fiber security. Another aspect of maintaining a strong productive base is the value of surplus food and technical aid to share with other nations either through export or humanitarian aid. This support of the world can help other nations address, causes of instability, and hunger.

Strategies for addressing climate change and ways to reduce global warming are also central in the political arena. Contributions that agricultural and forest lands make to lowering temperatures are well documented and include carbon sequestration and a source of alternative fuels such as animal wastes, fiber sources from forests and crops, especially plants that are not food crops (switchgrass and some forest material as current examples; others are being developed regularly).

### *Economic Context and Justification*

Products from agricultural and forest land production are an important component of Thurston County's economy.<sup>8</sup> Washington State is an important player in export markets. Working lands can provide essential resources for shifting to alternative sources of energy. These activities may well find funding in the 2009 National Economic Stimulus package. This shift will provide new technology and innovation that will help employment as well as balance of trade. Whether providing locations for wind and/or solar infrastructure or growing the raw fuel source, agricultural and forest lands will be an important part of the solution to energy independence.

Other economic factors include access to markets. As transportation costs continue to rise and the transportation network becomes more degraded through lack of sufficient maintenance, it will become increasingly important that more local production sources with shorter transportation requirements be valued. This will include not only the growth of innovative initiatives such as farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, and on-farm direct sales, but also efforts that will give support to larger scale working lands businesses.

It is also critical that a working lands infrastructure exist locally. If no processing plants, sawmills, commercial establishments selling equipment, or veterinary services are available, it makes it difficult for working lands to fulfill their production capability. When infrastructure is fragmented or non-existent it is difficult to maintain a critical mass of working lands. A cornerstone of a successful working lands business is having flexibility for changing production to meet changing market conditions. Farmers and forest land owners must be assured of a predictable economic future in order to make long term investments that will enable success. The same is also essential for encouraging and enabling new persons to become farmers and forest land owners.

Last, but certainly not least, is the reality that working lands are the only production mode that is renewable and sustainable. Increasingly, working lands are being credited with measurable economic value they provide the state. A prime example for Washington State is protecting, restoring, and/or building new salmon habitat. Monetary value of agricultural lands cannot compete in the real estate market with other land uses. Other uses almost always have a higher dollar value. Using the real estate market value exclusively does not give sufficient opportunity to cost out other economic values inherent in working lands that are important to the economy and society.

### *Social Context and Justification*

A number of social issues are relevant to conservation of working lands. Our country has historically been rural, although urbanization, industrialization, and population growth have changed the landscape to one that is increasingly urban. However, the rural landscape and working lands are still a very important part of our cultural fabric. The stewardship of working lands provided by those who work them is a strong benefit for society and for the land.

Rural communities and their economies provide a diversity that is important both for those who have continued to live in rural areas as well as opportunities for urban dwellers to move as technology enables an increasing number of people to live in locations remote from their place of employment. It can be argued that rural communities can be environmentally healthier-- for example, reduced air pollution-- when compared to urban centers. And close-by food sources can certainly offer to both rural and urban dwellers products that are fresher because of shorter transportation distances and time to market.

Working lands provide a range of social benefits, some difficult to quantify, for urban dwellers as well as rural dwellers. A few include open space or more natural settings that can be valued aesthetically through viewsheds or used either recreationally (for example, trails) and economically through direct access to products or tourism (farm tours, corn mazes). Other recreational values can be identified through equestrian interests and those of working dogs. Working lands enterprises can be stand alone or developed in conjunction with other production modes. Rural communities and working lands can also

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<sup>8</sup> The Profile 2008, 26<sup>th</sup> Edition prepared by: Thurston Regional Planning Council can be found online at <http://www.trpc.org/programs/estimates+and+forecasts/demographics/the+profile.htm>

provide unique educational opportunities through field trips or class projects; these educational opportunities extend from K-12 through higher education.

#### *Environmental Context and Justification*

Working lands are an essential component of the environmental health of the landscape. The lower intensity of land use insures that more of the land is affected minimally when compared to higher intensity land uses. For example, the percentage of impervious surface is typically smaller for working lands than might be the case in urban areas. Lower intensity uses and stewardship practices can protect water and air quality, provide carbon sequestration, flooding mitigation, wildlife and fish habitat protection and wildlife connectivity through corridors leading to protected areas and riparian zones, wetland protection, aquifer recharge, and open space.

One way to measure environmental contributions is through a lifecycle analysis. For example, the contribution of trees and a forest are relatively long term and offer different benefits at different stages. Developing analyses that look at life cycle attributes of different products can provide a fuller understanding of the environmental context of working lands. These contributions cannot be discounted given the threats faced from climate change, loss of species, and increasing pollution.

#### *Washington State Context*

The working lands situation in Washington State is generally represented in the contextual aspects discussed above. In addition, the state has taken actions to address working lands more formally. For example, several relevant statutes should be highlighted. As mentioned above, the Open Space Act does allow current use taxation for qualified agricultural and forest lands as long as they are used for natural resource purposes. The state also created the Office of Farmland Preservation in 2007. The legislature has been working on a pilot Transfer of Development Rights statute for King, Pierce, Snohomish, and Kitsap Counties that may provide more insight and tools for using that approach in Thurston County. Under the Growth Management Act adopted in 1990, natural resource lands are given more support than had been the case previously. This has been done by establishing urban growth areas and boundaries, identifying resource lands for all counties, identifying critical areas, and designating long term commercially significant agricultural and forest lands.

At the local level, there are a number of county efforts. King County is working to protect agricultural lands through their historical and current purchase program. Pierce County's current efforts focus on economic factors that are critical for conservation success. Skagit County has active conservation programs, especially through non profit involvement. The Cascade Land Conservancy is also providing strong leadership in King, Snohomish, Pierce, and Kittitas Counties for conserving working lands and those who steward them. Thurston County has benefited from, and in some cases in partnership with, the work of Capitol Land Trust, South of the Sound Community Farm Land Trust, Nisqually Land Trust and Chehalis River Basin Land Trust as well as efforts by The Nature Conservancy and Trust for Public Land.

#### *Land Conversion*

Finally, the discussion on context would not be complete without mention of the conversion of working lands to other land uses. This issue is consistently serious at the national, state, and local levels. At its heart the ease with which conversion can occur is based in the issues identified in the *Intrinsic value* section above. Also, results from a satellite imagery-based study show that more than 32,000 acres of lands were converted from intact forest lands, agricultural lands, or large expanses of shrubby vegetation to urban lands between 1985 and 2000. The majority (fifty-seven percent) of urban conversions took place on previously forested lands.<sup>9</sup> If working lands are seen primarily as lands being held until needed for urbanization and if no measures are in place to support the economic needs of those working the lands, conversion of these lands will continue at the same pace. Successful stewardship of and making a livelihood from working lands requires a level of long term stability. When a farmer undertakes a

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<sup>9</sup>The Rate of Urbanization and Forest Harvest in Thurston County 1985-2000 A Land Cover and Change Detection Satellite Remote Sensing Study, Final Report, January 2002 prepared by: Thurston Regional Planning Council can be found online at <http://www.trpc.org/resources/rateofurbanizationforestharvest19852000.pdf>

conservation easement or agreement to enter an agricultural/forest land district or zone or even enroll in an open space program, it is a commitment that requires reciprocity from the government to help make the commitment work. This Plan, and others from the other jurisdictions referenced, is focused on identifying strategies that could help realize the obligation.

#### History of This Effort

The history of Thurston County's efforts began over three decades ago. "The first statement of county policy concerning agriculture was contained in the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan of 1975. The Plan documented the importance of agriculture as a valuable county resource and established the goal of supporting and protecting the future of farming." (p. 1, *Agriculture in Thurston County, a Citizen's Report*) Subsequent to the adoption of the 1975 Comprehensive Plan, sub areas were designated throughout the county. The planning process associated with these designations was to develop recommended goals and specific land uses in these areas. Participants were to address agricultural issues, especially the loss of agricultural lands and businesses in their sub area and recommend solutions to the county. However, it became apparent during the sub area process that agricultural and forestry concerns were county-wide and that solutions should be found for Thurston County as a whole.

In 1976 the Thurston County Planning Commission addressed the need for a county-wide solution and developed a proposal for Agricultural Districts to be included in the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance; land uses were excluded and division of agricultural lands into residential lots was restricted. However, farmers expressed opposition, believing the proposal did not fully account for economic realities faced by the farmers. Therefore, the Planning Commission did not approve the proposed amendments. However, in 1977 the county Commissioners did add a "Nuisance Amendment" to the Comprehensive Plan to provide some restrictions on development adjacent to farms. (The proposed and adopted amendments are included in Appendix B and C of the 1978 *Agriculture Report*.)

In 1977 a request was made to the Thurston County Board of County Commissioners to establish a citizen's committee that would inventory and study agricultural lands and survey farming operations in the county in more detail, and make recommendations to the Commissioners. The Commissioners voted to establish the committee and study design, setting a deadline of June 1978. The committee had 22 members representing the agricultural community and other interested citizens. Their report, presented to the Commissioners in 1978, and titled *Agriculture in Thurston County: A Citizen's Report*, included a number of recommendations that included establishing the Thurston County Agricultural Advisory Committee to provide advice to the Commissioners. The report also recommended amendments to the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Ordinance that would set up a voluntary Agriculture Area. Recommendations included suggestions such as signage in agricultural areas and annual tours for decision makers to farms and working forests. The Agricultural Committee is still in existence and active although subsequent amendments to the Plan and Zoning Ordinance replaced the earlier land use provisions. A copy of the 1978 Report is available at Thurston County Development Services.

The next significant focus on agriculture came from the state with the adoption of the Growth Management Act in 1990. This act required all counties to inventory natural resource lands (agriculture, forest lands, mineral lands) and to support them in land use planning activities under the Act. Thurston County responded to the mandate and established natural resource zones of long term commercial significance. The county's Agricultural Committee and county staff also initiated discussions of transfer of development rights with several cities including Olympia, Lacey, and Tumwater; provisions' enabling this is part of county policy. The county also designated farm lands in the Nisqually Valley as qualified to participate in a purchase of development rights program. Several farms in the Nisqually Valley did sell their development rights to the county. Lessons learned from that work will inform future purchase of development rights programs in the county to build a program that is voluntary.

In 1994 the Thurston County Agriculture Committee and staff in Thurston County Advance Planning and Historic Preservation prepared an extensive report titled *Agriculture in Thurston County—1994 Farm Survey and 1992 Farm Census Report*. This report and its recommendations were prepared based on responses in the survey (29% returned of the 1250 sent out). The report indicates an increase in the number of farms and market value of products.

Recommendations in the document from the Thurston County Agriculture Committee were:

"-Continue to support the Thurston County Agricultural Advisory Committee, the Washington State Cooperative Extension program and other agencies which assist farmers.

-Support the Farmer's Market.

-Provide assistance to farmers through a marketing brochure for direct sales of produce.

-Consider a 'locally produced' labeling program.

-Provide public information about already enacted right-to-farm ordinances and on-farm marketing regulations.

-Continue to provide public information about farming in Thurston County including signage, public programs, and publications."

The next significant event for natural resource lands and planning was an action brought against Thurston County by Futurewise, a non profit organization that focuses on growth management and land use regulation issues in the state, to the Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board. The action alleged that Thurston County was not in compliance with the Growth Management Act. The Board's decision found that the extensive one unit per five acres in the rural areas of the county did not sufficiently protect natural resource lands as required by the Growth Management Act. The county has recently completed a rezoning effort in order to bring the county into compliance with the Growth Management Act.

Another recent historical piece was the effort sponsored by Trust for Public Lands to document public attitudes about conserving working lands in Thurston County and willingness to support a ballot issue to provide additional funding for agricultural and forest lands as well as water quality in lakes, creeks, and Puget Sound and conservation of forests, natural areas, farms, trails and parks. Two surveys were conducted in 2008, both of which found good support for working lands and a willingness to be taxed in order to support them. However, the county Commissioners decided not to place a measure on the ballot.

Finally, the current work by the Agricultural Committee and the county to prepare a strategic plan for working lands may represent a pivotal time in which support for working lands and those who work them could be strengthened and institutionalized more fully within the public sector.

Throughout the history of efforts in Thurston County to focus on working lands, data have been gathered that demonstrate the characteristics of agricultural and forest lands. These data consistently show that working lands are significant contributors to the economy and provide a diversity of products. The scope of this strategic planning effort has not focused on an inventory component; however, some data is provided in Appendix B.

#### Conclusion of Introduction and Background

Thurston County has had a history of over thirty years working to conserve and support working lands. It is upon this rich base of information and initiatives that future efforts can build. From this history it can be argued that citizens and decision makers in Thurston County have consistently viewed working lands as essential contributors to a diverse and healthy landscape and that efforts to improve the economic landscape for those who work these lands are equally important.

As more lands are converted or face the threat of conversion to urban land uses and as barriers are identified that work to prevent entering the farming or forest land ownership, a stronger focus on what solutions are needed and workable is needed. The sources for these solutions lie in the history of the county as well as different approaches currently used by other counties in the state. The most effective solutions should be voluntary for working lands, address sustainability and issues of perpetuity as well as help insure economic viability for those who steward these lands.

#### **Strategic Factors Affecting Efforts To Conserve Working Lands (Threats/Opportunities)**

This part of the plan will provide an initial discussion of factors that can be seen as opportunities or threats to conserving working lands and those who work them. This will be followed by a brief representation of strengths and weaknesses that could be ascribed to working lands in Thurston County. As is often the case, a factor can be viewed as threat or opportunity; the challenge for Thurston County will be to adopt strategies that will move the particular factor into the opportunity category. Key for their effectiveness will be actions that provide long term predictability, economic stability, and flexibility in economic decision making for producers.

## Threats and Opportunities

### *Political Factors*

Within the political sphere the shift from a rural to urban electorate could be seen as a threat since urban voters now outnumber rural voters. Since urban voters are more separated from rural interests, they might not be sufficiently informed to support those interests. However, there are clear examples in Washington State political arenas that urban voters, in fact, do support the importance of working lands on the landscape and understand the need for economic viability at some level. However, the question of priority still remains.

Certainly, the contributions that working lands can make to national security by providing food security, alternative sources of energy, and carbon sequestration are strong opportunities for working lands. A number of laws and regulations affect working lands at federal, state, local levels. A few examples include the Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, Healthy Forests Restoration Act, Growth Management Act, Forest Practices Act, Open Space Act, Thurston County Comprehensive Plan, Critical Areas Ordinance, and Zoning Ordinance, building and other permits and fees. Each of these can be seen as a threat or opportunity depending on the situation. Some of the strategies identified below can work to emphasize the opportunity factor.

### *Economic Factors*

Economic factors affect working lands at both a global level as well as regional and local levels. The history and ability of working lands in Washington State to compete in a global market and support the national balance of trade through exports provide continuing opportunities. The threat, however, is also real, for example, the county produces must compete with Canadian lumber imports. Domestically, the same principles affecting competitiveness and access to markets are also at play. As Washington State has urbanized, the loss of working lands and the infrastructure that supported them historically has made it more difficult to compete effectively or as broadly as was possible in earlier times. Thurston County certainly represents one of those areas where urbanization has been increasing fairly rapidly and where loss of infrastructure is a critical issue.

As Washington State has broadened its economic base to include other industries, there is a danger of less support for the working lands sector; however, the recent efforts through the Governor's working lands initiative and the pilot transfer of development rights statute represent opportunities to strengthen the ability of working lands to continue to contribute significantly to the state and local economies. Other statutes such as the Open Space Act can provide some tax relief to those who enroll. A significant threat is any barrier that exists making it difficult for new people to enter careers with working lands; these barriers can take many forms including the high cost of land, difficulties gaining open space designation, building up marginal soils, access to markets, and financing a new business start-up. These threats can be off set by providing current and future farmers with information about government grants and loans that are currently available to protect and enhance farmlands. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has grants available to provide landowners with assistance with infrastructure and management practices. These grants include: the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), Technical Services Providers (TSP), and the Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG). The previous list are just some of the grants available. An applicant can fund up to 100% of certain projects.

Access to markets will continue to be both a threat and opportunity. A key for future success will probably be the extent to which working lands in Thurston County can access regional and local markets. This

access will include traditional markets as well as emerging ones. Emerging markets range from participating in alternative energy development from both agricultural and forest lands and additional direct marketing opportunities. Strategies that support opportunities will need to focus on the range of acreage sizes of working lands in the county and on the types of infrastructure that will be needed to support these new production opportunities.

Changing technologies also may represent threats or opportunities. An example of a threat for forest working lands could be the increased use of other building materials such as recycled aluminum and steel and new uses for wood such as laminates, mixing with plastics and recycled materials. This could lessen the reliance on traditional wood products such as saw logs. However, it could be considered an opportunity if the forest lands in Thurston County were able to supply products suitable for some of these new technologies.

Access to water and water rights will be a critical strategic factor in the future. Threats will come from urban water users in competition for a fixed resource. Irrigation is an essential component for agriculture in Thurston County, and as is the case throughout the state, water rights are fully allocated, representing another aspect of the threat in this area. Washington water law, as is true elsewhere in the Western United States, has a principle of continuous use ("use it or lose it") that may work against the well-being of working lands. Changing conditions, especially economic markets, may require changing agricultural uses that use differing amounts of water for some period. It would be helpful if the Department of Ecology took this into account when looking at the history of use. An approach that provides a trust in which rights could be stored until needed could provide some relief for this issue. Another difficult issue is how stock water is defined and allocated.

Although water marketing is not currently a part of Washington State water law, relatively recent changes in state law have made it somewhat easier to transfer rights. Thurston County implemented one of the changes in the county several years ago by establishing the three-person Water Conservancy Board. This Board makes recommendations to the state Department of Ecology for changes in water rights in Thurston County; actions by this Board and Ecology could represent opportunities. In addition the state passed a law making it possible to "bank" water rights for eventual use; before that, the "use it or lose it" provision in Washington water law could be used to cause relinquishment of water rights after a period of non use. Finally, recognizing the positive contributions that working lands, using best management practices, provide for protecting water quality and supply is an opportunity for the county.

Again, as in the case with political factors, actions taken by state and local entities will determine the extent to which economic factors play out as threats or opportunities.

#### *Social Factors*

In the social realm there are also threats and opportunities. Probably the largest threat is increasing population in the state and county and the resulting pressure to urbanize previously rural areas. The Growth Management Act at the state level and policies and regulations adopted by Thurston County, such as the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan and land use ordinances, provide a framework for managing population growth and distribution.

Values held about working lands and those who work them are very important in assessing threats and opportunities. A critical focus is the values and interests held by urban dwellers and those moving into rural areas. Typically, these may be mixed. Some support working lands and working lands operations such as viewscapes, recreational opportunities, access to local food sources, are certainly opportunities that can be addressed through strategies. Other values might be threats, such as a contradiction between a traditional urban perception of working lands and a rural definition that incorporates early and late working hours, dust, noise, odors, changes in the landscape (harvest regimes for forests), forest management practices that can contribute to better ecological features in working forests, or lack of understanding about the importance of not going onto neighboring working lands inappropriately. The challenge in addressing values will be to develop strategies that provide a stronger link between urban and rural values, such as through education and dialogue.

### *Environmental Factors*

Threats often focus on land use and environmental laws and regulations. Primary concerns focus on the Endangered Species Act at the national level and Critical Areas Ordinances at the state and local levels. Other possible threats are new state stormwater regulations mandated to the counties that require on-site management of stormwater. Opportunities in this area can develop from several sources including demonstration of the contributions that working lands can and do make to protecting environmentally sensitive lands and species. Examples are working lands buffers and environmental services. Working lands can also contribute to protecting clean air and water, including marine and fresh, surface and groundwater. A new opportunity is the recent establishment of the Partnership for Puget Sound by the state, which provides new resources to protect and restore Puget Sound.

Another contextual opportunity that exists in Washington State is the strong commitment within the natural resources arena to find collaborative solutions to problems. Examples include the Timber, Fish, and Wildlife Agreement and process as well as current collaborative efforts embedded in the adaptive management approach to forest management and regulation under the Forest Practices Act. Most recently, parties in a lawsuit about spotted owls are engaging in a collaborative settlement process to find workable solutions for the future of the owl. Strategies could explore a collaborative problem solving model for working lands in Thurston County.

Initiatives to provide locations for alternative sources of energy as well as the raw material for alternatives are also environmental opportunities; likewise, carbon sequestration on both agricultural and forest lands provides an environmental opportunity. Current work during the legislative session underscores the contributions that working lands, especially forest lands, will make in carbon markets.

Finally, the fact that working lands provide environmental services to the county in the form of reduced pollution, water quality and quantity and especially for drinking water, air quality, wildlife habitat, and shoreline health, to name a few, is a significant opportunity. The lower intensity land use in terms of impervious cover, transportation needs, and open space are valuable attributes that benefit rural and urban dwellers and certainly represent a clear opportunity within a strategic assessment. Given the right choices that conserve working land and those who work them, sustainability could also become a unique strategic opportunity.

### Strengths and Weaknesses in Thurston County

Thurston County has a number of strengths in its effort to conserve working lands and those who work them. First is the land ethic that those involved with working lands typically embrace. There is an emotional attachment to the land that is inherent in stewardship; stewardship and sustainable practices have value not only for the land but also for citizens who are not involved directly with working lands. The agricultural base is diverse and includes new farmers. The marketing efforts have had successes such as Farmers' Markets in the urban areas, direct sales on site, and creative approaches such as Community-Supported Agriculture endeavors. Public support for a healthy working lands component in the local economy and social fabric is strong, and legal support through policy and regulations is also a positive factor, including right to farm, the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan, the purchase of development rights in the Nisqually Valley, and development of a framework for a transfer of development rights system.

Weaknesses include a working land base that is somewhat fragmented and not always sufficiently buffered from urban land uses and barriers that discourage entry into the field. It is unclear at this time how the recent effort to lower densities in some part of rural Thurston County will help the urban land use pressure on working lands.

Commitments of support from the Thurston County Planning Commission and Thurston County Board of County Commissioners and the Agricultural Advisory Committee will be important to facilitate many of the components of this plan. Dedicated staff support and understanding of issues are critical factors for including the voice of working lands. Staffing and visibility for working lands will be critical for strengthening the conservation of working lands in the future.

## Strategies to Conserve Working Lands

This section will discuss a number of strategies for implementation that Thurston County should take in order to support working lands and those who work them. Prioritization will provide at least two levels of importance; implementation for the first level should begin as soon as the final strategic plan has been adopted. At that same time the next level(s) should be set on a timeline for implementation.

The *Thurston County Comprehensive Plan*, "Chapter Three--Natural Resource Lands" is strongly supportive of working lands. The "Goals, Objectives, and Policies" part of the chapter contains a number of recommended actions, which should be incorporated into strategic directions for the county. Comprehensive Plan Goals 1 and 2 focus on agricultural lands, and Goals 4, 5, and 6 give attention to forest lands. (See Appendix A.) *Goal 3 pertains to mineral lands and is outside the purview of this plan.* A future analysis should cost out the strategies that have been given priority in existing county policy and those in the final *Thurston County Working Lands Strategic Plan* and develop tactics for putting them into place.

Implementation of the recommendations will focus on incentives, voluntary participation, and flexibility. Implementation should also recognize that given the locations and diversity of sizes of working lands in Thurston County, at least two tiers of access to strategies that will conserve working lands are needed: the first tier is designated long term commercially significant resource lands and large proximate parcels, and the second tier is made up of smaller and/or more isolated parcels, some of which may be near urban areas. Criteria that provide access to the strategies could be based on performance measures—contribution to overall well-being of working lands and the county-- rather than just using criteria such as soil type, parcel size, and proximity to other working lands. This would enable smaller parcels to participate more fully.

Throughout the implementation period, effective communication should be maintained with the public, stakeholders, and other interested constituencies in order to demonstrate that actions are being taken and that targeted changes are occurring. Future research will continue to identify new strategies that the county can consider.

These strategies are classified in four categories but are intermingled in accordance with their priority status. The categories include the following strategies: Working Lands Advocate, Economic Sustainability, Regulatory and Political and Education and Outreach.

### First Priority Level Strategies

- 1) **Thurston County should take the lead in creating a position for a Working Lands Advocate; this person would have the primary staff role for carrying out the strategies identified in this Strategic Plan.** (Working Lands Advocate Strategy)

The Thurston County Agriculture Committee should be involved throughout the hiring process including writing the position description and interviewing and evaluating candidates. The most important strategy for implementing this plan is establishing this position and choosing a qualified person to fill the position. Other counties have recognized the importance of such an action, and looking at Thurston County's history since the mid-1970's, it can be argued that working lands might be in a stronger, more prominent position if such a position had been in place historically.

The responsibilities for such a position goes beyond those of a more typical ombudsperson, who would provide a point of contact with government for gathering information and help in identifying the right offices or persons in order to achieve some end. These activities are important and would be part of this position; however, the person would also have what could be considered an advocacy role. This person would work with the Thurston County Agricultural Advisory Committee and others in the working lands arena to insure that they were notified of relevant issues and problems and make sure they had appropriate and sufficient information to recommend or decide a course of action. The position would also help the Agricultural Committee be visible and participate effectively in the political arena and larger

community. S/he would provide an essential communication link between working lands constituencies and other groups. This person would also help to implement initiatives of the Agricultural Committee such as conferences, workshops, tours and other educational and outreach functions and in maintaining an accurate database of working lands in the county. In short, the position would insure that working lands were visible and involved in relevant activities and decision points and that the Working Lands Strategic Plan is implemented fully and in a timely manner.

There are several models for locating the position. One model would be the lead staff for the Thurston County Agricultural Advisory Committee and would be located in the Board of County Commissioners' Office. The advantages to this are the high level of visibility and proximity to decision making and the ability for the position to focus on working lands. A second model would continue to have staffing for the Agricultural Committee in the planning department for the county. This provides access to land use information, but runs the risk of competing with other staffing needs in the department, possibly resulting in a minimal level of staff support. A third model for consideration at this time is locating the position outside county government, but in an agency that is deeply involved with working lands; an example could be the Thurston Conservation District or Washington State University Extension Service. The advantages include being "at arm's length" from the county and having different funding sources. Staff would also have a background in working lands. The potential disadvantage is being outside the core county bureaucracy and power structure. If the position still were to staff the Agricultural Committee, it would probably have to occur under the terms of an interagency agreement. Finally, another model would locate the position in one agency, but fund it through agreements or contractual arrangements by multiple sources.

Funding will be an issue wherever the Working Lands Advocate is located. Interagency and interjurisdictional agreements as well as collaborative action among public, non profit, and private sectors, including support by industry, could be required to make the position whole. A workable tactic for launching such a position might be either as a grant-funded pilot for several years or through a capacity-building grant that would provide funds for the position as well as the infrastructure for the office, including a webpage, outreach and educational programs, and materials to support the activities of the office for at least three years. Other grants could be sought to fully or partially fund the initiative after the initial period.

Several county-wide Planning Policies support a role for Thurston County in an economic development function; they provide an appropriate context for a number of the strategies in this plan.

- 2) **Thurston County should institute an on-going Purchase of Development Rights (PDR) program and make funds available for purchase of development rights for working lands throughout the county on an annual basis. To the extent needed, a PDR program, with earmarked funding, should be in the Capital Facilities Plan each year. Working lands need to be prioritized every year so that a significant portion of Conservation Futures funding is allocated to working lands preservation. Additional sources of funding should also be sought; one example could be revenue bonds.** (Regulatory and Political Strategy)

This strategy is included in Thurston County's Comprehensive Plan and has been used in one area of the county. It is also used by other jurisdictions in this region. Decisions will have to be made about funding sources and priority for qualifying lands. Certainly one group would be those lands within a long term commercially significant designation, but there may be other working lands close to those areas or more isolated that should also be considered for application. Dedicated sources of funding should be developed. For example, the 1978 Agriculture Report recommended setting aside Conservation Futures monies for a purchase program.

- 3) **Initiating discussions with the Northwest Agricultural Business Center to bring their programs to Thurston County.** (Economic Sustainability Strategy)

The Northwest Agricultural Business Center "provides Northwest Washington farmers with the skills and the resources required to profitably and efficiently supply their products to consumers, retailers, wholesalers, food service operators and food manufacturers. Through these efforts we contribute to a

sustainable environmentally and economically sound agricultural industry thereby preserving our region's farming heritage for future generations. Our work is made possible by supporters from government, the agricultural industry, the community, and farm consumers who share our values and vision." (NW Agricultural Business Center Webpage) The Center offers a range of workshops, seminars, and courses that provide information, skills, and networks to those on working lands. These activities have also included transitional planning, which addresses the need to shift working lands to the next family and/or non-family generation that will work the lands. Most recently, the Center has initiated a new communication and networking structure, The Puget Sound Food Network, to improve its work with participants

- 4) **Thurston County should give particular attention and assistance through transitional planning for the next generation of farmers and family forest owners in implementing these strategies as well as addressing other factors that may cause barriers.** (Economic Sustainability Strategy)

Special attention should be given to people entering the working lands economic sector. All of the strategies under economic viability as well as those below are especially important for new farmers and family forest owners. The complexities of achieving success with working lands are especially daunting for new people because of both internal and external factors. Other counties in Western Washington have developed different tactics that could be useful in Thurston County. Innovative approaches, such as FarmLink, which provide a way to connect those wanting to enter the working lands field and those who are ready to leave working lands. Federal agencies, such as the Farm Service Agency, also provide funds for some new working lands participants.

- 5) **Thurston County should investigate fees that are applied to working lands and identify ones that should be eliminated or modified.** (Regulatory and Political Strategy)

One example is the current stormwater fee; working lands usually mitigate stormwater runoff, rather than cause it. If this is the case, working lands should be given a tax credit for assistance in achieving county policy. Others might include Local Improvement District assessments or other assessments tied to urban development. The Comprehensive Plan discourages the establishment of such districts in agricultural areas of long term commercial significance; however, they are not prohibited and can be established in areas of working lands not included in this category.

- 6) **Thurston County should review relevant codes to determine alternative standards for working lands that would still protect public and workplace safety.** (Regulatory and Political Strategy)

Often, the various codes in the county apply commercial or urban standards to working lands structures or uses. The regulatory changes made in Jefferson County in 2004 provide an excellent model and starting place for this review. ("Agriculture in Jefferson County," Information Booklet, Summer 2004, Department of Community Development). Another source would be the research done by the state's Office of Farmland Preservation in the Washington State Conservation Commission; it found that eight counties fully or partially exempt agricultural structures. The other counties have a wide range of fees that are assessed. This issue has been brought to the state legislature and may see future legislative action. Another example would be standards applied to parking areas on working lands for customers for direct marketing or recreational and tourism purposes. A review of policies should define more clearly the difference between an agricultural and commercial use.

- 7) **Thurston County should investigate the types of problems that might arise with the complexity of multiple applications and propose a solution that would address the problem; the goal is to review working lands applications in a cohesive, comprehensive way. The pre submission conference could provide a useful model.** (Regulatory and Political Strategy)

Streamlining the process for multiple applications to different county departments; for example, a farmer or forest land owner might need services in the Assessor's Office, the Auditor's Office, the County Roads Department, and Development Services in order to achieve a particular goal. At present the applicant would have to work with each separate department starting anew with the application process. The way

that regulatory reform improved the land use process for development applications with one staff assigned a lead role for the entire processing period is a very good model.

- 8) **Thurston County should strengthen its Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) component through education about what it can achieve and by providing technical advice for sending area owners who want to pursue a transfer of development rights. Thurston County should take the lead working with urban jurisdictions in the county to develop a robust TDR market and clearly defined process. This initiative should also include educational programs and technical advice for cities and those in receiving areas.** (Regulatory and Political Strategy)

Transfer of development rights (TDR) is a tool considered in the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan, and a process is in place through a Memorandum of Understanding for transferring development rights from a sending area in the county to a receiving area within the city limits of Lacey, Olympia, and Tumwater. Typically, these development rights, which operate in the marketplace, are used for density bonuses although Olympia also uses TDR to lower density in the designated residential zone. Again, other jurisdictions have active TDR programs in place that Thurston County could analyze. For example, as reported in the January 2009 Springboard Magazine, "Timber, but no homes, on 45,500-acre swath," Plum Creek Timber Company recently gave up development rights on 45,500 acres and received credit, allocated at one unit per eighty acres of forest land, that can be sold to urban developers to build 514 residential units in cities in King County.

- 9) **Thurston County should research and explore the use of mitigation as a tool to off set the conversion of lands to urban uses. Inclusion in the Comprehensive Plan should be encouraged.** (Regulatory and Political Strategy)

Mitigation is a relatively new concept in growth management. Its conceptual base is similar to that of wetland mitigation; when development affects wetlands, a cost is incurred. The cost can be addressed in a number of ways including cash or by providing other comparable wetland sites, often using a multiplier so that more wetland is provided than existed previously. In some instances constructed wetlands are allowed. Wetlands can also be banked.

For growth management, mitigation measures could be applied not only to development proposals close to agricultural areas, especially if in a buffer, but could also be applied when growth boundaries are being expanded. For example, a city *or developer* would be required to buy development rights to offset growth into a previously rural area. The rights could be banked by the city until used in its designated receiving areas.

The following strategies are also necessary for working lands preservation but are a lower priority than the previous strategies. These strategies are listed in no particular order.

#### Second Priority Level Strategies

- **A study should be undertaken to identify what aspects of the infrastructure in Thurston County are most critical for the future well being of working lands and identify tactics for rebuilding if it is currently absent or strengthening if it is threatened.** (Economic Sustainability Strategy)

It should be remembered that a regional, multi-county perspective might be needed for a successful solution.

- **The county should reach out to owners to explain what is entailed for tax benefits from the Open Space Act and encourage enrollment.** (Economic Sustainability Strategy)

Tax benefits exist in Washington State for owners of working lands. For example, owners of working lands should be encouraged to take advantage of current use taxation in the Open Space Act. Other tax issues are also critical for owners of working lands, such as estate taxes.

- **In cases where the tax benefit is not connected to a county-administered program, the county can provide information of a general nature directing the person to the appropriate sources for advice. The Thurston County Agricultural Committee could also sponsor educational workshops about tax issues and successional planning for working lands.** (Economic Sustainability Strategy)
- **Thurston County should provide assistance with building and strengthening local and niche markets, helping with issues of access and creation of these markets.**(Economic Sustainability Strategy)

This strategic element could be done in collaboration with other agencies and organizations such as the Economic Development Council, the Port of Olympia, and Washington State University's Extension Service. The county should contact other jurisdictions to gain more ideas and insight to implement this initiative.

- **Thurston County should continue to recognize and support the need to provide water rights to working lands.**( Economic Sustainability Strategy)

Availability and access to water can be a critical issue for working lands. The Thurston County Comprehensive Plan emphasizes the importance of making sure that "adequate water rights should be reserved for designated agricultural land of long term commercial significance." This commitment should also be extended to farms not included in these particular areas, but also contributing economically. Water reserved for agriculture will become increasingly important as cities need more water, and as other external factors, such as the Endangered Species Act, require water for species. It is essential that working lands not be squeezed in the middle of competing demands. The Water Conservancy Board with jurisdiction in Thurston County may also be a source for solutions as well as the water banking law.

- **Thurston County should study ways in which zoning could be used to help working lands. Thurston County should continue to use a range of zoning strategies, but in ways that encourage and enable farmers and family forest owners to thrive economically.**(Regulatory and Political Strategy)

A number of zoning-based options exist to address conservation of working lands and their economic viability. These include clustering, large lot zoning, a sliding scale for density based on the size of the parcel, agricultural districts and areas, and agricultural zones. Many of these can be incentive based, allowing for more density or uses. The agricultural and forestry districts and areas are sometimes voluntary, again with an incentive package to make them workable for agricultural and forest land uses. The concept of clustering is included in the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan as is natural resource zoning; however, the concept of clustering close to resource lands has been called into question because it may exacerbate incompatibility between the agricultural or forest lands and that of residential uses. It is very important that residential dwellers understand fully the nature of working lands' activities and right to farm provisions in state and local law and policy. The concept of "no surprises" should be emphasized.

- **Thurston County should include these two tools, conservation easements and fee simple purchase, in its Comprehensive Plan and help educate citizens and working land owners about their benefits.**( Regulatory and Political Strategy)

Removing the possibility of development through conservation easements and fee simple purchase are two tools that are available to the county in its efforts to conserve working lands. Conservation easements are contracts between two willing parties, the property owner and the entity that will hold the easements. The easements can include any number of conditions and details about what is allowed on the property in the future; in that way they provide flexibility for both parties. Conservation easements run with the land in perpetuity. Most typically, easements are held by land trusts as non profit organizations, but government can be involved in brokering the agreements or by requiring easements for access to particular programs. Easements and purchased lands can also be held by non profit organizations through partnership agreements; this can help insure the land stays in a working land status rather than just open space, for example.

Fee simple purchase is probably the most expensive tool for conserving working lands, but may be justified with particularly significant parcels. It should only occur in a willing seller situation. A number of

innovative approaches are being considered in other jurisdictions. Examples include providing a venue for new farmers to have access to productive lands in a leasing arrangement or lease to buy. The City of Bellevue's blueberry park is another example of saving productive land for public benefit and use; however, this example does not address the need to maintain economic viability for the farmer unless the public ownership and use could contribute to maintaining a critical mass of working lands

- **Thurston County should prepare recommendations to be discussed with the Agricultural Committee for ways to improve the visibility of the Thurston County Agricultural Committee and their inclusion in work of the county that affects working lands. This increased visibility should include contacts with the cities as well.**( Regulatory and Political Strategy)

It is essential that the Thurston County Agricultural Advisory Committee be included in relevant networks where county action could affect working lands. Currently, development applications that have some bearing on working lands are reviewed by the Agricultural Committee. However, it does not appear that the Agricultural Committee has regular contact with the Thurston County Planning Commission, Board of County Commissioners, or decision makers and staff in the cities. It is positive that one member of the Agricultural Committee also serves on the Planning Commission; institutionalizing that shared membership would be a positive next step.

- **Thurston County should provide educational strategies that include those who own and manage working land, staff in Thurston County departments whose work is related to working lands, and the public. The county should also implement outreach efforts to constituencies and stakeholders interested in working lands.**( Education and Outreach Strategy)

For those who own and manage working lands, educational programs should provide information through seminars, workshops, and courses, including production practices, marketing opportunities, estate planning, and farm business management models. To the extent feasible these opportunities should be in Thurston County; however, when opportunities are provided by several counties working together, the venue may be elsewhere. Examples of sources of training and technical advice are the Northwest Agricultural Business Center, the Small Forest Landowners' Office in the state Department of Natural Resources, Washington State University Extension Service, Thurston Conservation District, and the US Natural Resource Conservation Service. The Agricultural Committee should also study the possibility of an annual conference on agricultural and forest land issues that would help educate the working lands community. An example is Snohomish County's "Focus on Farming." This conference could also be open to other interested constituencies as well as the public.

For staff in Thurston County departments, the educational program would be focused on increasing staff understanding of working lands issues that might be related to their job. A provision for staff training is included in the Comprehensive Plan.

Information for the public should be provided in a number of ways; examples could include a regular booth at Farmer's Markets or through an annual open house event that highlight working lands in Thurston. Public awareness could also be increased through a "Buy Local" campaign, farm tours, or wider distribution of publications such as the annual Farm Map for Thurston County. Staff for the Agricultural Committee should also maintain close contact with staff in other jurisdictions, such as Skagit, Snohomish, King, and Pierce, to share information about initiatives that might be suitable in Thurston County.

Outreach efforts could focus at least initially on constituencies and stakeholders who are interested in or support working lands. One result might be the formation of new partnerships and coalitions for working lands. For example, a number of groups in the conservation community are redefining aspects of their work to include working lands and those who work the lands. Examples include The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Lands, Cascade Land Conservancy, South of the Sound Community Farm Land Trust, Capitol Land Trust, Nisqually Land Trust, and the Chehalis River Basin Land Trust.

Examples of other partnership opportunities and technical assistance might include the North West Agricultural Business Center and the Rural Technology Initiative. The latter was developed by the University of Washington and Washington State University Cooperative Extension "to accelerate the implementation of new technologies in rural forest resource-based communities." Several forest organizations should also be contacted; examples include South Sound Chapter of Washington Farm Forestry Association, the Northwest Natural Resources Group, Washington Tree Farm Program, and the Family Forest Foundation. Other agencies include the Washington State Conservation Commission whose "Land Use Position Statement," September 20, 2007, demonstrates strong support for working lands in the state. In some cases these partnerships would access educational and technical assistance opportunities for Thurston County. Generally, reaching out could open the door to new resources for Thurston County working lands.

Outreach initiatives might include tours of working lands, seminars open to the public on critical issues for working lands, or presentation in schools. Future Farmers of America and 4-H organizations should be approached for cooperative projects. Conferences could also be organized; an example is Snohomish County's Focus on Farming. Another outreach effort would be an annual event celebrating the contributions of working lands to residents in the county; examples are "harvest celebrations" held in neighboring counties. An important focus of outreach efforts would be linking urban and rural areas of the county.

#### Benchmarks and Metrics

Benchmarks and metrics serve to maintain focus on adopted strategies to insure that they are implemented effectively and in a timely manner. In this section benchmarks and metrics are presented that will enable judgment of measurable success for the strategies. Metrics are measures at one data point; benchmarks represent steps in the right direction measured over time. For implementation of this plan, metrics will be reviewed on an annual basis, and benchmarks will be assessed on a five-year schedule as trends become clearer.

For the purpose of this plan benchmarks will only be presented for the first priority level strategies listed above. During the first year after the Working Lands Strategic Plan has been adopted, the Agriculture Committee should work towards achieving the benchmarks and metrics. All of the priority strategies are to be implemented within the first 5-years. The Agricultural Committee can prioritize the other strategies once progress is made on the original nine.

Priority Strategies and accompanying Benchmarks and Metrics follow.

#### Strategy to establish a Working Lands Advocate.

**Benchmark:** the Working Lands Advocate position has been working successfully to carry out all strategies included in the Working Lands Strategic Plan adopted in 2009 by the Board of Thurston County Commissioners.

**Metric:**

-Within first year: A position has been established, funded, and filled.

#### Strategy to bring Northwest Agricultural Business Center programs to Thurston County.

**Benchmark:** A successful relationship has been developed between the Northwest Agricultural Business Center and Thurston County through the Working Lands Advocate, and programs have been tailored to the needs of Thurston County working lands.

**Metric:**

-The Northwest Agricultural Business Center offers programs in Thurston County.

#### Strategy to make it easier for the next generation of farmers and forest land owners to enter and succeed in the working lands field.

**Benchmark:** The Working Lands Advocate has identified and helped next generation farmers and forest land owners to have access to working lands and be successful in their chosen production focus.

**Metrics:**

- Publications are available directing new persons to resources in and outside Thurston County that will help with transition into a working lands profession.
- Workshops and other educational opportunities are in place to help with transition planning and in overcoming barriers to successful entry into the field.
- The working Lands Advocate has documented successful transitions of the next generation of those on working lands.

Strategy to make changes to fees for working lands in Thurston County.

**Benchmark:** Fees that are deleterious to the economy of healthy working lands have been removed or modified to lessen negative effects.

**Metric:**

- The Stormwater Fee is not levied on working lands.

Strategy to make changes to permits for working lands in Thurston County.

**Benchmark:** Permits that are not appropriate for working lands have been modified to fit better the realities of working lands.

**Metrics:**

- The Thurston County Codes have been reviewed for their impact on working lands.
- Changes have been made to reduce negative impacts and reflect the needs of working lands.

Strategy to streamline application process for working lands.

**Benchmark:** The application process in Thurston County for working lands has been changed to provide the type of coordination and assistance available for development applications.

**Metrics:**

- Staff have been identified in the Resource Stewardship Department who respond in an integrated and coordinated way to working lands applications.

Strategy to adopt a Purchase of Development Rights program throughout Thurston County.

**Benchmark:** The Board of County Commissioners has adopted and funded a Purchase of Development Rights Program.

**Metrics:**

- The program is available throughout the county.
- Purchase of development rights transactions have been completed.
- Funding is provided on an annual basis from a range of sources including Conservation Futures.

Strategy to implement more fully Thurston County's Transfer of Development Rights Program.

**Benchmark:** The county's Transfer of Development Rights program is fully operational.

**Metrics:**

- Markets have been created for TDRs, and TDR staff have been identified.
- Information about the TDR program is readily available from all participating jurisdictions.
- Sending and receiving areas have been established.
- Transactions have occurred between willing sellers and willing buyers.
- Density goals of receiving area jurisdictions have been obtained by completed transfers of development rights.

Strategy to study mitigation tools and incorporate as needed in the Comprehensive Plan and implementation regulations.

**Benchmark:** Thurston County has researched existing, and followed emerging, mitigation tools and has implemented those suited to the county.

**Metrics:**

- Mitigation measures are in place to compensate when changes are made that expand the urban growth boundaries into previously rural areas.
- Mitigation measures are employed when working lands are converted to urban uses.

**Conclusion**

Summary

Thurston County is at a critical and pivotal point in its history of conserving working lands and those who work them. It is critical in terms of the land base that still exists in the face of conversion pressures, and it is critical from the standpoint of the context described above that is affecting working lands and their future role in society. It is also good timing because a significant amount of research and action are occurring across the country and in Washington State for working lands. This can provide *unique opportunities* for creative and effective solutions here in Thurston County and elsewhere. This time for action may also enable cost-effective collaborative solutions across jurisdictions that also involve the non profit and private sectors.

This plan is not required by the Growth Management Act. Although lands within both the designate agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance and the designate forest lands of long-term commercial significance may utilize this plan, there is no particular designation required to participate. Involvement in the preservation components of this plan is completely voluntary.

Next Steps

After the Thurston County Agricultural Advisory Committee adopts a recommended strategic plan for working lands, the draft will be taken through the appropriate steps within the county's decision making structure and to the public for comment and advice. This process should move forward as soon as possible. At the conclusion of the process, the actions by the Board of County Commissioners should be placed on a calendar for implementation, and funding sources should be identified.

A regular review of accomplishments should occur under the direction of the Agricultural Committee, and actions should be initiated that will better achieve the strategies of the plan.

A five-year review will probably be used ultimately; however, in the early years of implementing this Strategic Plan, an annual review will be of value in order to make unanticipated changes in a timely manner. An important part of the review might be to complete an environmental scan for Thurston County working lands, looking ahead to identify on a regular basis the short range and long range threats and opportunities and to assess the strengths and weakness of the county to respond to better them.

Sufficient funding of the implementation of the strategic plan will be of the utmost importance. Sources include, but are not limited to, the county budget, Conservation Futures allocations, Open Space Withdrawal Penalty funds, forest excise taxes, a ballot bond issue, and grants. Collaborative funding from state and federal agencies, including the Conservation District and Washington State Extension Service, and from non profit and private sources should also be explored.

As this Thurston County Strategic Plan for Working Lands is successfully implemented, working lands and those who work them will remain as essential components and contributors to a healthy economy, social fabric, and environmental quality in Thurston County.

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