



WASHINGTON STATE FOOD POLICY FORUM

Land Use Policy Solutions to Stem Agricultural Land Loss

Prepared by Washington State Food Policy Forum
December 2022

Introduction

The Washington Food Policy Forum is charged with several goals, including to increase the availability of Washington-grown foods throughout the state and provide for the continued economic viability of Washington food production. Recognizing the growing pressure to convert agricultural land to other uses, in its 2019 consensus report, the Forum identified agricultural land protection as a key topic warranting the Forum's attention. The Forum presents the following ideas for the 2023 legislative session on land use policies that could help stem the loss of land needed to produce food.

The Forum is a venue for discussing food system issues and the tensions that exist in advancing food system change. Solutions to one component of a system inevitably impact another. The Forum recognizes the complexity of the ideas it is putting forward. The complexity includes protecting rural agricultural lands from sprawl while also preserving affordable housing in increasingly dense urban communities. The Forum drew on the diversity of its members in terms of sector and scale to see the ideas in this document from a variety of vantage points. The Forum understands that land use planning is complex, and each community is best suited to make decisions about the place they live.

The US Census of Agriculture reported a loss of 640,000 acres of Washington's land in farms between 2002 and 2017. Since then, the challenges for farmland have only gotten more difficult and complex as existing problems have grown and new issues have emerged. To support food production in Washington, action is needed to protect agricultural land from conversion.

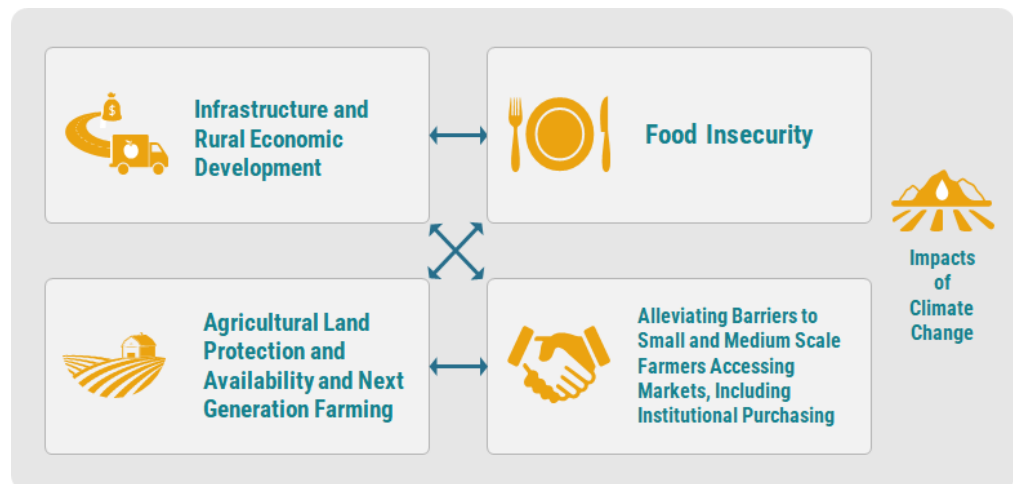


Figure 1: The Food Policy Forum Food System Lens

In early 2022, the Forum identified land use policy solutions to respond to agricultural land loss as a priority for the year. Agricultural land protection is a key component of the Forum's food system lens that guides its work (Figure 1). To develop the ideas included in this document, a subcommittee of Forum members participated in months of meetings, discussions, and collaborative engagement to learn more about the drivers and patterns of agricultural land loss and identify areas that warrant more attention from the legislature and stakeholders statewide. To support the development of recommendations, the Forum hosted an informational session for members, stakeholders, and the public to learn about the patterns and drivers of farmland and agricultural infrastructure loss across

Washington. This list of ideas includes practical and actionable land use policy solutions to support the retention of agricultural land.

On December 1st, the Forum reached consensus on the below 11 recommendations. One voting member stood aside from the process given recent appointment to the Forum, their stand aside votes are not separately notated in the recommendation list¹.

The Forum recognizes that farmland loss is a complex and multifaceted issue, and that these land use policy recommendations are not an entire solution for the challenges facing agriculture in Washington. Economic viability, succession planning, regulatory barriers, workforce challenges, and other issues remain important and critical to the success of agriculture.

Stemming agricultural land loss in Washington is urgent and attainable. The Forum believes these solutions will set our state on the path to do so.

¹ Full voting participation detailed in Appendix A.

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Urban Infill

Population growth, the demand for more housing, and suburban sprawl continue to create considerable pressures to develop farmland into other uses. Building more housing in urban areas helps preserve natural and working lands. Urban infill, often referred to as middle housing, builds housing in areas that are already designated for development and that are already served by urban infrastructure, such as transportation, utilities, and other public services. Developing needed housing in urban areas will reduce pressure to convert farmland. This recommendation looks at a way urban communities throughout the state can accommodate our state's growing population, allowing property owners in cities to build more diverse housing options. The Forum notes that as housing is developed, considerations of affordability and livability are of the utmost importance, as housing pricing that displaces people from the urban core also contributes to sprawl.

Recommendation: Relieve the pressure to develop agricultural land by requiring cities to allow more options for in-fill housing, such as accessory dwelling units, duplexes, triplexes, townhomes, and courtyard apartments.

Consensus reached; two stand asides²

² Stand asides detailed in Appendix B and minority opinions detailed in Appendix C

City Annexation and UGA Expansion

While strategies to build more housing in urban areas are necessary to protect farmland, it is also realistic to expect that city annexations and the expansion of urban growth areas will continue to a degree. Some land will still be needed to meet population demands and to support emerging economic endeavors that are needed by agriculture, such as food processing facilities. Understanding the impact that these actions have on farmland within and adjacent to future urban growth should be understood and considered by the local community.

Recommendation: Prior to allowing a city annexation or urban growth area expansion, require the completion of an agricultural impact statement that sufficiently addresses the concerns raised.

Consensus reached; no stand asides

Mitigation for Lost Farmland

Agricultural land conversion continues to fragment agricultural communities and remove agricultural lands from production. This loss of farmable acres and the associated impacts to agricultural communities continues to degrade the productivity and farmability of remaining agricultural acreage. Based on language in the King County comprehensive plan, this recommendation proposes a schema for compensating for lost farmland acres where conversion is unavoidable.

Recommendation: Require government land use actions that result in the loss of agricultural land, including eminent domain and actions that remove land from agricultural zoning, to be mitigated by conserving adjacent farmland that is comparable in size, soil quality, and agricultural value. If adjacent farmland is not available, farmland in other areas or unfarmed land restored to production can be used for mitigation at a rate of three acres for every acre lost.

Consensus reached; one stand aside³

³ Stand asides detailed in Appendix B

Limited Area of More Intense Rural Development (LAMIRD)

In 2022, the legislature passed a law that allows more options for development and redevelopment inside Limited Areas of More Intense Rural Development (LAMIRDs), which are isolated pockets of more intense development in rural areas. There are potential benefits and risks associated with increasing development in rural communities. Concentrating rural development in LAMIRDs could contain residential sprawl and provide services needed by agricultural and rural communities. However, new development requires public utilities and water, which come at a cost. This study would evaluate options for increasing development in LAMIRDS to provide guidance for local planning decisions.

Recommendation: The Office of Farmland Preservation and Department of Commerce should evaluate how concentrating growth in Limited Areas of More Intensive Rural Development (LAMIRDs) could be used to prevent or mitigate the loss of farmland.

Consensus reached; no stand asides

Impact of Public Land Acquisition Projects

This recommendation is similar to the above recommendation about agricultural impact statements, but it relates to large-scale public projects carried out by state agencies, which will sometimes require the acquisition of agricultural land to convert to other uses. Understanding the impact that these projects have on farmland should be understood and considered.

Recommendation: Require state agencies to complete an agricultural impact statement for public projects that involve the acquisition and/or conversion of farmland.

Consensus reached; one stand aside⁴

⁴ Stand asides detailed in Appendix B

Water Availability

The Growth Management Act does not require planning for water when determining zoning designations that allow or promote agricultural use. Similarly, the Watershed Management Act does not require that watershed planning efforts consider associated land use designations in watershed management plan development. To protect farmland and support agriculture, clarification of the relationship between these two acts is needed. This recommendation includes finding a pathway to legal water access for local food production. The evaluation should consider future water availability and opportunities for water conservation, irrigation modernization, soil health improvements, ecosystem protections, and complementary zoned land uses. Existing efforts underway in certain parts of the state may directly relate to this recommendation.

Recommendation: Engage with the Department of Ecology, Department of Commerce, and Office of Farmland Preservation to evaluate and clarify the relationship between the Growth Management Act and Watershed Management Act to plan for adequate legal water for agricultural purposes on lands zoned for or currently utilized for agriculture across the state, including the development and implementation of pilot projects that foster collaboration for providing water for people, fish, and farms, such as water banks, irrigation modernization, and other mechanisms to ensure sufficient water supply for agriculture.

Consensus reached; no stand asides

Solar Siting

Under the Clean Energy Transformation Act, Washington is committed to an electricity supply free of greenhouse gas emissions by 2045. Many proposals to develop solar energy have emerged to meet this goal, particularly in Eastern Washington. This has created conflicts with current land uses, including farmland, ranchland, and wildlife habitat. The legislature previously funded a Least-Conflict Solar Siting project for the Columbia Plateau, which began in June 2022. The goal of this process is to create a map that identifies areas of least conflict, which could be prioritized for solar energy development. This recommendation encourages the legislature to enact policies that are responsive to the outcome of this project and prioritize solar energy development in areas not needed to support food production.

Recommendation: Implement policies that direct solar development onto lands identified as having “least conflict” through the Least-Conflict Solar Siting process on the Columbia Plateau and develop similar policies statewide. As the highest priority, incentivize renewable energy development on preferred sites, such as rooftops, structures, and brownfields.

Consensus reached; no stand asides

Permanent Protection of Farmland

Washington needs to invest heavily in the permanent protection of farmland. Past recommendations from the Forum focus on funding for the agricultural easement account at the State Conservation Commission, which sat empty since its creation over 20 years ago until the 2022 legislative session. The initial \$2 million investment in the Farmland Protection and Land Access program is already working to save farmland from development so it can continue to provide food for local communities. This biennium, SCC has requested \$4 million to continue this program. The Forum recommends significantly more funding for easement programs at SCC, which should be easy to access, offer priority to historically disadvantaged farmers, and be nimble in the fast-moving real estate market. Further detail along with the Forum's equity considerations can be found in the [Forum's 2021 report](#) to the legislature.

Recommendation: Substantially increase the funding for farmland protection transactions, advancing the previous Forum request of \$100 million dollars for the State Conservation Commission to purchase development rights and agricultural conservation easements, with priority given to historically disadvantaged farmers.

Consensus reached; no stand asides

Conservation Programs

Supporting the viability of agriculture in tandem with habitat recovery efforts will yield greater benefits for both the environment and food system. When farmers are required to implement conservation projects without compensation, they are often forced to leave the land because their farm business is no longer viable. This leaves the land vulnerable to development. Voluntary conservation programs are critical to keep farmers on the land while advancing recovery goals. To be successful, these programs need to be sufficiently funded to provide incentives and technical assistance. When these programs are fully funded, they will leverage federal funding to bring substantial resources to implement conservation projects in Washington, including funding that will become available through the Inflation Reduction Act.

Recommendation: Fully fund state voluntary conservation programs to support the viability of agriculture and protect critical areas and habitat.

Consensus reached; no stand asides

Support for Local Governments

Much of the work necessary to protect farmland happens at the local level, which requires significant resources for county government. Under the Growth Management Act, counties are required to designate agricultural land and identify steps to preserve them. The legislature should provide adequate resources to support counties and conservation districts in planning for agriculture and implementing tools to preserve Washington's farmland.

Recommendation: Significantly increase financial and technical support for local governments and conservation districts to implement tools to retain farmland, especially for under-resourced counties at high risk of losing farmland. Support the Department of Commerce to evaluate tools and local regulations that can either support or impede agriculture.

Consensus reached; no stand asides

Urban Agriculture

To preserve rural working lands from development, more housing should be developed in urban areas. However, for this to be successful, it's important that people continue to choose to live in urban places. Just as cities establish parks and open space to maintain livable communities, opportunities to grow food enhances the livability of urban places. Community gardens give people access to grow their own food and urban farms create jobs, provide fresh food, and expose future farmers to career development. Innovative farming techniques are being developed to grow more food on less space, including indoor agricultural operations. The Forum understands that urban planning is complex and each community is best suited to make decisions about the place they live. A review of the opportunities and barriers to urban agriculture will support local governments as they plan for the future of their communities.

Recommendation: Increase access to fresh food by supporting urban, peri-urban, indoor, and other emerging agricultural production, directing the Office of Farmland Preservation to conduct a stakeholder review of the opportunities and barriers.

Consensus reached; no stand asides

Appendix A – Forum Membership

* Indicates present for December 1st vote

° Indicates participation in the Land Use Policy Action Team

Member		Organization
Aaron	Czyzewski*	Food Lifeline
Addie	Candib (Alternate: Dani Madrone°)*	American Farmland Trust
Ali	Jensen*	Whatcom County Health Department
Alyssa	Auvinen*	WA State Department of Health
Aslan	Meade (Alternate: Tina Sharp)	Thurston Economic Development Council
Babette	Roberts*	WA State Department of Social and Health Services
Brian	Estes*	LINC Foods
Brooklyn	Holton	Initiative for Rural Innovation and Stewardship
Chad	Kruger*	Washington State University - CSANR
Chris	Elder*°	Whatcom County Public Works
Chris	Pettit* (Alternate: Ron Shultz°)	WA State Conservation Commission
Chris	Voigt*°	WA State Potato Commission
Christina	Wong*	Northwest Harvest
Claire	Lane*	WA State Anti-Hunger and Nutrition Coalition
Colleen	Donovan	WA State Farmers Market Association
Dan	Wood*°	WA State Dairy Federation
Derek	Sandison (Alternate: Laura Raymond*)	WA Dept. of Agriculture
Diana	Carlen	WA Association of Wheat Growers
Diane	Dempster (Alternate: Kristine Perry)*°	Clark County Food System Council
Jon	DeVaney°	WA Tree Fruit Association
Jen	Otten (Alternate: Marie Spiker) ⁵	University of Washington
Judy	Warnick	WA State Legislature

⁵ Stood aside from voting process on December 1st given recent appointment to the Forum

Member		Organization
Kate	Delavan ^o	WA State Conservation Commission
Kirsten	Ringén	Food Northwest
Leanne	Eko*	Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction
Linda	Neunzig* ^o	Snohomish County
Marcia	Ostrom*	WSU - Food Systems Program
Mary	Dye*	WA State Legislature
Mary	Embleton* ^o	King Conservation District
Melissa	Spear*	Tilth Alliance
Mia	Gregerson (Alternate: Alicia Finch)*	WA State Legislature
Nate	Lewis	WA Farmland Trust
Patrick "PJ"	Cawley*	Charlie's Produce
Richard	Conlin*	Conlin Columbia Partnership for Cities
Tim	Crosby*	Thread Fund
Tom	Salzer	WA Association of Conservation Districts
Yasmin	Trudeau	Washington State Legislature

The Food Policy Forum is supported by the following staff:

Washington State Conservation Commission: *Ron Shultz, Paige DeChambeau, Karla Heinitz, Sarah Wilcox, and Alicia McClendon*

Washington State Department of Agriculture: *Laura Raymond*

Ross Strategic: *Petra Vallila-Buchman, Sarah Sarfaty Epstein, and Micaela Unda*

Appendix B – Stand Aside Votes

Recommendation	Stand Asides
Urban Infill Relieve the pressure to develop agricultural land by requiring cities to allow more options for in-fill housing, such as accessory dwelling units, duplexes, triplexes, townhomes, and courtyard apartments.	Representative Mary Dye, Washington State Legislature Patrick “PJ” Cawley, Charlies Produce ⁶
Mitigation of Lost Farmland Require government land use actions that result in the loss of agricultural land, including eminent domain and actions that remove land from agricultural zoning, to be mitigated by conserving adjacent farmland that is comparable in size, soil quality, and agricultural value. If adjacent farmland is not available, farmland in other areas or unfarmed land restored to production can be used for mitigation at a rate of three acres for every acre lost.	Leanne Eko, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)
Impact of Public Land Acquisition Require state agencies to complete an agricultural impact statement for public projects that involve the acquisition and/or conversion of farmland.	Leanne Eko, Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI)

⁶ Minority Opinions for Urban Infill stand asides appear in Appendix C

Appendix C – Urban Infill Minority Opinions

Representative Mary Dye, Washington State Legislature:

Washington State has embarked on the policy of urban density intending to preserve agricultural lands and wildlands. Since the growth management act was enacted in 1990, the population has increased 2.5 million. Most have settled around the Puget Sound. Concentrating human populations has caused significant degradation of the ecosystem of the Puget Sound marine estuary.

During the same time frame, agricultural communities and timber towns have experienced economic stagnation and lack of opportunity. Negative economic trends in natural resource-based regions have led to more migration to better paying jobs in urban centers.

The question as to whether condensing populations has prevented or even slowed the loss of farms and farmers. Economics of farming drove the consolidation of farms and forced many to leave the industry over the same timeframe that the Growth Management Act has been in force. Limiting the footprint of the urban areas has not significantly protected agricultural lands from the economic realities facing farmers. Urban populations supported policies that had the unintentional consequences of increasing costs and risks in agriculture, further driving farm consolidation and driving many more from the vocation. Recent climate policies continue the trend by inflating fuel and fertilizer prices. The farming community is reeling from the stress and concerns of policies that are increasing risk in the industry.

Creating multifamily housing to infill within the strict urban boundaries creates social conditions that further policies unfavorable to traditional agriculture and timber industries.

The Food Policy Forum should lead in reconsidering the negative effects of deep urbanization and environmental and sociological harms caused by condensing human development. The Forum should be forward thinking in the need to reconnect people to the act of food production by re-examining the way we design our living spaces and consider the importance of integrating green spaces and opportunities for urban and suburban agriculture to flourish.

The Food Policy Forum should also consider the impacts of a population that is now 89% urban on the farming community and seek ways to integrate the urban communities to a greater empathy and understanding of the food production systems in our State. Understanding that Washington feeds the world, and those same products are also available for our communities with abundance, quality, and affordability. But promoting policies that restrict our access to energy will threaten not only the farmers, but also the secure knowledge that the food will always be available at your local grocery, restaurant, or food bank. Natural Resources managed for the global market creates the economy of scale that assures food security for our own people.

Patrick “PJ” Cawley, Charlie’s Produce:

I will stand-aside on urban infill. I support Representative Dye’s statement on the need to increase the opportunity for urban agriculture. The lack of ability to make population centers denser is not a problem for agriculture. Housing in urban areas is a deep and complex issue that the food policy forum does not need to tackle.