

Voluntary Stewardship Program in Thurston County

Background and Progress in Thurston County
Chehalis Basin Partnership
April 22, 2016



Presentation Overview

- Purpose and Scope
- Background Information
- VSP Process
- Challenges and Successes
- Next Steps
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- Questions



Purpose and Scope

The VSP is an alternative, incentive-based approach for Thurston County to protect and improve the long term-viability of agriculture and reduce farmland conversion **county-wide**, while also protecting and voluntarily enhancing critical areas **within the vicinity of agricultural activities.**



Dual Goals

Protect and voluntarily enhance Critical Areas in areas with agricultural activities



Image source: Habitat Work Schedule

Protect and Improve the long-term viability of agriculture, while reducing farmland conversion in the county



Image source: WSU Ext. Services Thurston County

Background Info

- 2007 - Legislature charged the Ruckelshaus Center to examine the conflict between agriculture and protecting critical areas under the GMA.
- The VSP was the result of the facilitated stakeholder discussions of the Ruckelshaus Center.
- 2011 - Legislature passes and Governor signs.



¹Thurston County Farmland Inventory Report for the South of the Sound Community Farm Land Trust, 2009

What the Statute Does

- The VSP is created at the Conservation Commission
- Counties are given two options:
 - Opt-in to the VSP, or
 - Continue under existing law (GMA) to protect critical areas on ag lands
- 27 of 39 counties opted-in.



Process Overview

Thurston County opted-in Jan, 2012 and received funding to develop the Work Plan Jan, 2014

Voluntary Stewardship Program Process

County opts in
Funding is provided
Local Watershed Group Identified

Initial funding ended June 30, 2015

First meeting May 28, 2014

Local Watershed Group Develops Work Plan
Work Plan Identifies Critical Areas and Ag Activities
Work Plan Includes Measurable Benchmarks for Program and Resource Results

Contract extended to finish

Work Plan Submitted to Conservation Commission for Approval
Reviewed by State Technical Team
Upon Approval, Sent to Watershed Group for Implementation

Local Groups Must Report on Progress Every Five Years
Must Show Progress on Benchmarks or Implement Adaptive Management Approaches

Local Group Implements Work Plan
Focused Outreach to Landowners to Develop Farm Lands Protecting Critical Areas
Status Reports Delivered to Conservation Commission Must Show Progress on Measurable Benchmarks

Work Group Partners:
agricultural producers, WA Farm Bureau, Conservation Commission, Dept. of Ecology, WDFW, WSU ext., WSDA, CNLM, Thurston Conservation District, TRPC, Chehalis Tribe, and other stakeholders.

Progress of Work Plan Development:

- Work Plan Draft finished June 30, 2015
- Ag subcommittee revised the draft Work Plan in Aug, 2015

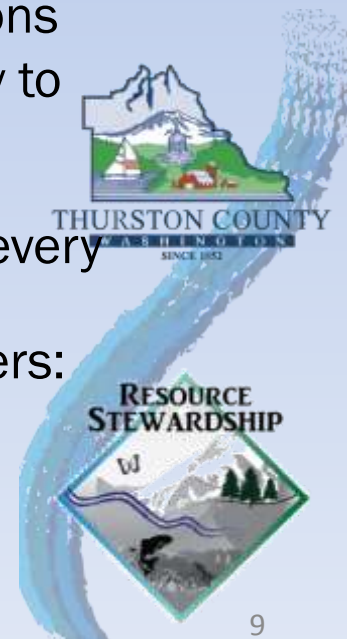
Opting-in to the Program

- Thurston County adopted an ordinance opting-in to the program in January 2012. Funded Jan 2014.
- The program applies to all unincorporated property upon which agricultural activities occur within the participating watersheds identified for consideration as priority.
- Thurston County nominated all of its watersheds as priority (Chehalis, Deschutes, Nisqually, & Puget Sound).
- The county conferred with tribes and stakeholders before designating the watershed group to develop the work plan.
 - The VSP watershed work group decided to focus on the Chehalis Watershed for initial project development.



Role of Work Group

- The Work Group must develop a Work Plan designed to meet the dual goals for Critical Areas and Agricultural Viability
- The Work Plan must:
 - Include Existing Information and Resource Conditions:
 - Water quality, watershed management, farmland protection plans, etc.
 - Measurable goals and benchmarks
 - Existing development regulations relied upon to achieve the goals
 - Identify agricultural activities and critical area intersections
 - Plan for participation and landowner outreach necessary to meet the protection and enhancement goals and benchmarks
 - Plan for monitoring and reporting, periodic evaluations (every 5 years), and adaptive management
 - Appoint a lead technical assistance provider to landowners:
 - ✓ Thurston Conservation District, pending funding



Approval of Work Plan

- The work plan is submitted to the director of the WA State Conservation Commission (WSCC) for approval
- The director submits the work plan to a technical panel (WDFW, WSDA, Ecology, WSCC) for review
- The technical panel is to review the work plan and assess whether the plan will meet the dual goals
- If the technical panel determines the plan will accomplish its goals, the WSCC director will approve
- If the technical panel determines the plan will not accomplish its goals, the WSCC director must advise the watershed group the reasons for the disapproval, allows for an iterative process





Successes

- The Work Group has been formed, met regularly, and completed a draft Work Plan by June 30, 2015
- Diverse groups working together towards common goals
- Better understanding of viewpoints and issues on all sides
- Work Group agreed on Stewardship Plans methodology and practices
- Appointed a lead technical assistance provider:
 - Thurston Conservation District
- Hit the ground running again in March

The background of the slide is a collage of various agricultural and natural images. In the top left, there are large, ripe red and yellow apples hanging from a tree. To the right, there are several crates filled with small, round red and yellow tomatoes. In the bottom left, a close-up shows a yellow and black striped butterfly on a green leaf. In the bottom right, there are bright yellow bell peppers. The central text box is overlaid on these images.

Challenges

- Building trust within the diverse Work Group
- Making progress and developing work products
- Defining Ag viability and how to measure
- Mapping agricultural activities not just farmland
- Funding for next steps is unclear
- Outreach and implementation needs to be funded, as well as monitoring to determine success



Next Steps

- Finish and submit the Work Plan
- Finish existing info and baseline condition reports and monitoring plan
- Fine tune the Stewardship Plan process
 - Plan for Outreach and Participation
- Identify priority areas and specific strategies for implementation
 - Seek additional funding
 - Implement Work Plan
- Monitor successes and improvements

Recommendations

- Work Group: maintain clarity of goals and objectives
 - Form small “subcommittee” to develop work products for review
- Work Plan: focus on identifying priority areas where critical areas and agricultural activities overlap and specific strategies for protection and enhancement of both
- Implementation: funding and staffing
 - Need funding for the technical assistance provider: outreach and implementation, such as gathering participants and developing Stewardship Plans with agricultural operators
 - Need to have a staff position that is dedicated to be a liaison to the agricultural community and for watershed level monitoring of VSP

Questions?

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