

# I. Introduction

Policy 3.4.1 of the 2007 Clark County Comprehensive Growth Management Plan stipulates:

“The county shall encourage the conservation of the county’s designated agricultural lands for long-term commercial and non-commercial agricultural uses and shall protect the opportunity for these lands to support the widest variety of agricultural crops and products as listed in RCW 36.70A.030(2) by:

- maintaining public roads in capital improvement plans to accommodate the transport of agricultural commodities;
- encourage cooperative resource management among agricultural land owners, environmental groups, state and federal resource agencies and federally recognized Native American tribes for managing the county's public and private agricultural lands;
- encouraging the continuation of commercial agriculture by: 1) supporting land trades that result in consolidated agricultural ownership, 2) encouraging the maintenance of agricultural lands in current use property tax classifications, including those classifications as provided for in RCW 84.34 and CCC Chapter 3.08, and 3) working with agricultural landowners and managers to identify and develop other incentives for continued farming; and,
- encouraging agricultural land use as a clean industry incorporating tax breaks, right to farm, purchase of development rights, transfer of development rights and other economic means and develop strategies to support farming practices.”

In order to identify short- and long-term actions to protect the opportunity to pursue and enhance commercial and non-commercial agriculture in Clark County, the Board of County Commissioners convened a committee of farmers wishing to continue in agriculture in Clark County and related interests such as representatives of food cooperatives, farmers’ markets and farm resource agencies in March, 2008. Facilitation support of the committee was provided by a farm preservation technical assistance grant through the State Resource Conservation Office and State Conservation Commission Office of Farmland Preservation.

## II. Farming in Clark County

There are many views about what defines a commercial farmer or agricultural operator. At one end of the spectrum only the larger agricultural producers that are able to produce a family wage income (\$43,000 +) from their operation may be considered farmers. At the other end anyone that produces plants or livestock for sale, regardless of the amount of sales, are considered farmers or agricultural operators. The US Census of Agriculture reports “farm” information on any operation with sales of at least \$1,000 per year. The 2002 US. Census of Agriculture reported there was a grand total of 1,596 farms in Clark

County with an average farm size of 44 acres.<sup>1</sup> Data from the 2007 Census of Agriculture is scheduled for release in February 2009.

In developing strategies to support agriculture, the Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee took a broader view of what constitutes a farm, in order to develop tools that would help both the large and small producers in the county. Following is a list of barriers to a more robust agricultural sector in the county identified by the Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee and recommended strategies to respond to the barriers and better support agriculture in the county.<sup>2</sup> Next steps and funding recommendations to implement these strategies are also included.

### III. Barrier: Institutional Limitations

The Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee believed that farm interests could be better represented in the county through following two significant institutional changes.

**A. Appoint an Agricultural Commission to coordinate review and provide input on proposed policies and regulations that have substantial impact on farmers prior to adoption.**

An Agriculture Commission could provide farmers the opportunity to take an active role in land use decisions and in the development and evaluation of policies, regulations and incentives that can affect agriculture in Clark County. At least half of the commission members should be engaged in the business of producing an agricultural commodity for market. The commission may also include persons with demonstrated knowledge, experience and interest in such support activities as agricultural real estate, food and feed processing, wholesale and retail marketing, produce buying, direct marketing, supply and finance.

Professional staff should support the commission. The commission should have a regular public meeting schedule at which they discuss and make recommendations on issues brought before them by neighbors, landowners, private organizations, non-governmental associations and staff from the County, Washington State University Extension Service, and other federal and state agencies. The Agricultural Commission could be the lead entity to implement many of the strategies outlined in this report. Staff to the Agriculture Commission, may be assigned many of the duties discussed in the farmbudsperson strategy identified in Section VI.

#### **Next Steps**

- Develop an organizational strategy for implementation of the program.
- Develop a long-term funding plan for ongoing operation of the program.

---

<sup>1</sup> Globalwise, Inc. Analysis of the Agricultural Economic Trends and Conditions in Clark County, Washington. April, 2007

<sup>2</sup> King County. Farm and Forest Analysis, Chapter 5, A Strategy to Preserve Farms and Farming. 1997. This document served as a key source document for the Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee's analysis of issues and identification of strategies to support farming in Clark County.

- Develop job description(s) for program staff.

## **B. Establish Agricultural Production Districts**

Agriculture Production Districts are specific geographic areas, regardless of zoning, where farming will be actively supported by the county over the long term. The Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee identified a goal of maintaining or aggregating contiguous blocks of land 100-150 acres in size as a desirable goal toward which to direct many of the strategies discussed in this document. If designated, Clark County will concentrate its efforts to maintain and enhance agricultural activities in the agricultural production districts. They should be considered priority areas for purchase and/or transfer of development rights and use of cluster development concepts to maintain or aggregate larger contiguous blocks of land dedicated primarily to agricultural activities as described in Section IV. Urban lands adjacent to agricultural production districts may be priority areas for implementing buffer zoning policies as described in Section IX.

### **Next Steps**

- Inventory and map existing agricultural operations in Clark County.
- Based on the inventory, recommend proposed selection criteria and target areas to establish agriculture production districts for consideration by the Board of County Commissioners.

## **C. Funding**

# **IV. Barrier: The High Cost of Land**

The dramatic rise in land values during the past two decades has caused problems for many farmers in Clark County and other urbanizing counties in the state of Washington. Many farmlands are now much more valuable as potential residential or commercial lands. Today, most new farmers cannot afford to acquire good farmland. Existing farmers cannot acquire additional lands and many feel the economic pressures to sell their land and get out of farming.

## **A. Use existing publicly-owned land or acquire farmland to create a lease-back program to farmers.**

Clark County and Vancouver-Clark Parks own and manage over 7,400 acres of land. Across all categories of parks and open space, over 6200 acres of this total are considered undeveloped.<sup>3</sup> Currently there are agricultural leases with 13 individuals covering 428 acres of land. Crops cultivated on leased land include berries, corn and hay.

---

<sup>3</sup> Vancouver-Clark Parks and Recreation. Comprehensive Parks, Recreation and Open Space Plan. May, 2007

Developing criteria to screen undeveloped lands for agricultural suitability could reveal additional agricultural lease opportunities. Committee members indicated that terms of lease should be at least 5 years in order to capitalize the investment to prepare and manage these lands for agriculture. Among the important criteria to consider would be whether there was a history of farming the property, the scale of the agricultural activity proposed, whether safe and convenient access for farm equipment is available, and the sources of funding used to acquire properties. Many grant sources were received based on a County commitment to certain uses and improvements for the properties. Almost all grant sources have a conversion clause that precludes use of properties for other purposes.

### **Next Steps**

- Develop criteria for determining whether existing publicly owned land is suited to agricultural activities.
- Conduct a search for County-owned land that could be leased to farmers based on the criteria.
- Consider the fee simple acquisition of additional lands that meet suitability criteria.
- Develop model leases.
- Develop and issue requests for proposals to lease county land, should the Board of County Commissioners determine to initiate a formal lease-back program.

### **B. Utilize clustering, transfer of development rights, and density bonuses to encourage landowners to keep their lands in agricultural use.**

Clark County Code Section 40.210.020(D) allows rural cluster developments in the R-5, R-10 and R-20 districts. In the R-5 district the remainder lot must be at least 65% of the area of the cluster site. In the R-10 and R-20 the remainder parcel must be at least 75% of the area of the site. There are two options for achieving maximum cluster lot yield:

1. Placing the entire lot yield in a cluster and restricting use of the remainder lot to forest, farm or open space uses, including approval of a forest, farm or open space management plan for the remainder parcel (an example is creating 4 1-acre lots on a 20-acre parcel in the R-5 zone and creating a non-buildable remainder lot of 16 acres); or
2. Requesting the remainder lot to be a buildable parcel, reducing by 1 the number of residential lots created in the cluster (an example is creating 3 1-acre lots on a 20-acre parcel in the R-5 zone and a 17-acre remainder lot that is considered buildable, providing the overall maximum yield of 4 lots). A limited building envelope for the remainder property is also required to be approved.

Since adoption of the ordinance in 1999, 34 cluster applications involving 1,118 acres of land have been approved yielding 217 residential lots. All of the clusters have reserved the remainder lots as buildable parcels.

Approximately 14,570 acres of R-5, R-10 and R-20 land are in agricultural current use taxation. So there is significant potential for use of the existing cluster development provisions as a tool to support farming. The Rural Lands Task Force has also recommended revisiting cluster development recommendations. During development of CCC 40.210.020(D) there was significant consideration of density bonuses in conjunction with cluster subdivisions. The Rural Lands Task Force has discussed this, as well as possibly expanding cluster subdivision applicability to additional rural zoning districts.

The Rural and Natural Resources Element of the Clark County Comprehensive Growth Management Plan identifies institution of a purchase and/or transfer of development rights program as one of the strategies for implementing the farm and forest protection policies of the plan.

### **Next Steps**

- Implement a Transfer of Development Rights program as called for in Chapter 3, Rural and Natural Resource Element of the 2007 Comprehensive Growth Management Plan. Consider Rural Centers and areas within urban growth boundaries as potential “receiving areas” for development rights. Consider surrounding rural and resource lands as primary “sending areas” from which development rights are transferred.
- Review parcels in the Rural Residential zoning districts to determine which may best support agriculture and how the cluster ordinance may be effectively used to promote agricultural activities. Review the cluster ordinance to determine whether revisions, including broadening of the applicability of the cluster concept to other zoning districts, would effectively support and enhance agriculture.

### **C. Acquire additional development rights for key farmlands.**

State and federal grant programs currently exist to support farm preservation efforts. The State Resource Conservation Office has a farm and agricultural land grant program. The primary focus of the farmland program is to acquire development rights on farmlands in Washington and ensure the land remains available for agricultural practices.

To meet the grant program goal, those awarded grants will purchase development rights on farmland, typically through purchase of an agricultural conservation easement. If a sponsor buys land in fee, the sponsor must record an agricultural conservation easement on the property and then sell the land, subject to the easement, for agricultural uses. Purchasing long-term (25 + years) leases of land is also allowed, but to meet the primary program goal of ensuring land remains available for agricultural practices, there is a preference for projects that provide this assurance through agricultural conservation easements in perpetuity.

Only cities and counties may apply and applicants must provide at least 50 percent of the total project cost. Matching shares of more than 50 percent are encouraged. Applications that include a higher match than the minimum required will receive additional points in the evaluation.

Federal programs include: The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act of 2005 and its predecessors for “transportation enhancements.” Easement acquisitions that protect scenic views and historic sites along transportation routes are eligible for these funds. The federal Farmland Protection Program (FPP), established in the 1996 Farm Bill provides matching funds to state, local and tribal agricultural easement acquisitions programs. The 2002 Farm Bill expanded the program to include certain non-governmental organizations. In addition to these sources of funding, several programs reported financial contributions from private sources. The 2008 Farm Bill authorized \$743 million for the FPP through fiscal year 2012.<sup>4</sup>

### **Next Steps**

- Implement a Purchase of Development Rights program as called for in Chapter 3, Rural and Natural Resource Element of the 2007 Comprehensive Growth Management Plan.
- Initiate an outreach program to agricultural producers to determine interest in participating in a purchase of development rights program, particularly those meeting eligibility requirements for state and federal grant funding.

### **D. The next major funding initiative for the purpose of acquiring open space or resource lands should include a sizable amount of funds to acquire additional development rights in Clark County.**

The Rural and Natural Resources Element of the Clark County Comprehensive Growth Management Plan calls for the evaluation of the feasibility of placing a purchase of development rights program before the voters as one of the strategies for implementing the farm and forest protection policies of the plan.

A June 2008 poll of voters indicated considerable support (68% indicating it was extremely or very important) for programs to protect working farms in Clark County.

The Conservation Areas Acquisition Plan, adopted by the Board of County Commissioners in 2004, identifies key habitat, greenway and farm areas in Clark County and recommends a phase one goal of acquiring development rights on between 1,750 to 2,400 acres of farm land. While County Commissioners chose not to refer a measure to voters upon adoption of the plan in 2004, \$11,900,000 of an overall habitat, greenway, farm conservation budget of \$45,157,250 was recommended for consideration.

### **Next Steps**

- Actively involve agricultural interests in the discussion about a future funding initiative for open space and resource lands.
- Include the preservation of farmlands among the themes that the funding initiative should address.

---

<sup>4</sup> American Farmland Trust. Farmland Information Fact Sheet: Status of Local PACE Programs. September, 2008

- Identify potential parcels that could be among the priorities for the purchase of development rights program.
- Identify a range of cost estimates for those parcels.

**E. Develop a farm-link program matching retiring farmers with current farmers or new farmers.**

As farmers reach retirement age, and development pressures increase, it has become increasingly likely that agricultural lands will be acquired by individuals who can afford large rural estates, but who may not have an interest in sustaining commercial agriculture. Or, at the fringe of urban growth boundaries, land speculators may buy-up agricultural land, continue to lease land for agricultural use in order to retain current use taxation eligibility until such time as land may be brought into urban growth boundaries and developed for residential, commercial and industrial uses. Of the 46,880 acres in current use taxation, it appears that about 8,840 acres are within urban growth boundaries. It is likely that most of these parcels are owned by individuals or businesses that are unlikely to keep the land in agricultural production into the foreseeable future.

Farm Link programs are designed to match farmers planning for retirement, and other interested landowners, with farmers hoping to acquire or lease agricultural land. Farm Link programs are being used in 23 states to reduce the rate of conversion of farmland.

At the present time, over 50 percent of all U.S. farm assets are held by farmers age 55 and over.<sup>5</sup> While we do not have statistics for Clark County, anecdotal knowledge of the County's farming community suggests there are a considerable number of older farmers, many who know their children may not continue the family farm.

The Farm Link model is an innovative and workable method to help retiring landowners who want their lands to continue in agricultural production to find new or existing farmers who can use those available lands. Conversely, it can also help existing or new farmers identify good agricultural lands to acquire or lease.

In its very basic form, a link program serves as a clearinghouse and database containing names of retiring farmers and those looking for land. Retiring farmers, or sellers of farmland, register with a Farm Link program and receive a list of new or existing farmers whose farming interests are compatible with theirs. The retiring farmer then selects an individual with whom he or she feels most comfortable and a meeting is arranged. The details of any relationship (acquisition or lease) are worked out between the two parties and their legal counsel. The objective is often a gradual transition that may take from three to 10 years. In some cases, the retiring farmer retains most of the ownership and management responsibilities for an initial period, giving the new farmer time to learn the business.

The largest Farm Link programs offer follow-up services, negotiation and mediation services, goal-setting workshops, farm start-up and financial strategies, resource directories, and estate planning services.

**Next Steps**

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. King County.

- Review organizational alternatives and prepare recommendations about which organization should implement the program.
- Develop program goals and guidelines and scope of the program to undertake.
- Initiate discussions with adjacent counties to determine their level of interest in participating in multi-county Farm Link program.

#### **F. Funding**

## **V. Barrier: High Production Cost and Low Return for Farm Products**

Farmers describe a variety of economic, regulatory, and social factors that have reduced the profitability of their farms during the last several decades. The reasons may vary from one type of farmer to the next, but the dairy, vegetable, berry, and livestock farmers agree that it has become difficult to make a living as a farmer in Clark County.

On the other hand, farmers also mention a number of factors that are within the control of local and state government that also have an influence on their profit margins. Farmers frequently mention the cost of meeting environmental regulatory requirements, rising property taxes as surrounding land values increase, and for small farmers the cost of marketing and promotion, as important factors affecting their profitability. Incentives designed to meet these challenges should help farmers increase the profit margin of their business.

#### **A. Expand the existing tax incentive programs to provide further benefit to farmers.**

Current use taxation, modified procedures for critical areas permits and exemption of agricultural structures from building permits are the primary incentives available to farmers that are under the county's control. At the state level gas tax exemptions for farm equipment and sales tax exemptions for replacement parts for major equipment and repairs are helpful.

The committee recommends that the county look at potential modifications to current use taxation procedures, particularly those regarding minimum acreage standards for current use assessment eligibility and the practice of excluding one full acre encompassing the farm home site from the reduced assessment area. State enabling authority may be necessary for the Assessor to modify the current standards.

#### **Next Steps**

- Initiate a review of the county's current use assessment program. Compare with state enabling legislation to determine if there is local flexibility to expand the program.
- Should state legislative authorization be necessary, initiate discussions with other Western Washington counties in an effort to develop a collaborative legislative strategy.
- Conduct an analysis of the potential loss of income for special purpose districts should current use taxation programs expand and initiate discussions with special purpose districts to develop legislative strategy they can support.
- Include the issue in the County's 2009-10 legislative package.

**B. Assist farmers in securing health insurance through the state of Washington.**

The Washington State Farm Bureau has cooperative health benefit programs for members of the Bureau. However, the State Insurance Commissioner has ruled that that farmers in "border counties," such as Clark and Walla Walla counties, should seek benefits in Oregon. Members of the committee that have investigated the issue indicate that costs to purchase through Oregon are prohibitive.

The committee recommends requesting the State Insurance Commissioner to re-evaluate this policy.

**Next Steps**

- Work with the Cowlitz-Clark Farm Bureau to identify and quantify discrepancies in cost of obtaining health insurance between "border counties" as described by the State Insurance Commissioner and other counties in the state of Washington.
- Develop a legislative agenda item for the 2009-2010 session that places farmers in all counties on equal footing.

**C. Establish a revolving loan fund to assist farmers.**

Farmers, particularly small-scale farmers typical of Clark County, may need help financing the purchase or replacement of equipment, seeds, fencing, crop expansion or other materials to begin a new operation or expand an existing one prior to sale of their products. The committee recommends the revolving fund be financed primarily by farmers wishing to access its assets. Start-up funding from the county and capacity-building contributions from private foundations would also be helpful to establish a sufficient revolving loan balance in order for the fund to become self-sustaining.

**Next Steps**

- Work with the Cowlitz-Clark Farm Bureau and Farm Services Agency to examine existing loan programs to determine gaps in serving Clark County farmers.
- Identify a strategy to resolve State lending and credit provisions.

- Determine an administrative strategy for administering a loan program.
- Work with the Cowlitz-Clark Farm Bureau and Farm Services Agency to design program goals and policies and potential start-up funding options.
- Design application procedures, policy criteria for evaluating loans, and underwriting criteria.
- Establish an outreach program to market the loan fund to new and existing farmers.
- Create a loan committee including individuals with small business, farming, and financial expertise.

**D. Develop a cost-sharing program to help farmers meet environmental regulatory requirements.**

Farmers must comply with a variety of environmental regulations designed to preserve water quality and soil conditions. The regulations may attempt to achieve important public benefits, but they can also be costly to farmers.

The committee recommends that the county consider establishing a grant or low interest loan program that could help fund projects for which significant environmental benefits would result including but not limited to water quality, water quantity, habitat, and erosion control.

**Next Steps**

- Work with the Cowlitz-Clark Farm Bureau, WSU Extension, Clark Conservation Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service to identify sources of funds available to farmers and determine the gaps or limitations in available funding to respond to regulatory requirements.
- Determine organizational structure and funding options for operating the program.
- Develop program goals and guidelines
- Develop evaluation criteria and an application process.

**E. Agriculture Cooperatives**

Farmers around the country have joined together to form associations or cooperatives to purchase equipment and supplies and also to develop food processing and distribution facilities. The Tillamook Creamery Association is a well-known northwest example. Local processing and distribution facilities reduce production costs and may expand the market areas within which local agricultural products may be sold, increasing profits.

A partnership with the Clark County Economic Development Council and/or other entities to recruit and/or maintain local processing and distribution facilities for farm products could be a great help to local farmers. Developing a base of information about the regional and national use of farmers' cooperatives and associations may be a good first step.

#### **Next Steps**

- Inventory food processing and distribution facilities within the Vancouver, WA/Portland OR area to determine if there are gaps in services to local agricultural producers.
- Identify coop and association models around the country, develop a database of information and Identify alternatives for supporting local producers.
- Identify the organizational structure for promoting and administering a preferred cooperative association.

#### **F. Funding**

## **VI. Barrier: Insufficient Level of Technical Support Available to Local Farmers**

Both existing and new farmers state that they need more technical assistance and education in order to operate their farm in a cost effective and efficient fashion. As the Clark County farming community has decreased in size during the last few decades, there are simply fewer resources for a farmer to call upon. Traditional sources of technical assistance have been reduced and committee members indicate that for certain types of assistance they historically accessed locally, they now have to access via Oregon State University in Corvallis, OR or through the Washington State University facilities in Mt. Vernon.

Current support from resource agencies include:

#### **Washington State University Extension Service (WSU Extension)**

**FTEs:** 3.0 FTE, but duties are dispersed and do not focus solely on farm support

There are two faculty positions. One is director of the Clark County Office. The second is a horticultural advisor. The director does not work with technical production issues, rather more in promotion, marketing, and general support for farming. This ranges somewhere in the neighborhood of 0.2 to 0.3 FTE although it can be variable depending on opportunity (It is expected that faculty generate external funds such as grants where possible to support programming and special projects). Remaining time is spent primarily on the water quality side of land management and on administrative responsibilities

The horticultural advisor primarily works with nurseries and christmas tree growers, but also works with food producers. This is approximately 0.5 to 0.6 FTE. The horticultural advisor also leads the WSU Master Gardener program.

There is a program coordinator for the small acreage program. Funding for this program usually means at least 0.75 FTE of the programming targets small acreage land users, whether they farm or not, centered around best land management practices promoting water quality (since clean water fees fund this part of the program). Perhaps 0.15 FTE (variable) of this position works under the Clark County director on farmer related education, such as promoting local farms, the harvest celebration and the business planning course for farmers WSU extension started in the spring of 2008 and will repeat in 2009.

For the 2009-2010 biennium one additional position is proposed for dedication to sustainable agriculture production centered around the 78th street site and the guiding principles for the site. This would be jointly funded (half and half) by WSU and Clark County. However, current county budget constraints may preclude creation of this position in the coming biennium.

**Staff offices:** Offices are located at the Center for Agriculture, Science and Environmental Education (CASEE Center), 149<sup>th</sup> St., Brush Prairie.

**Resources:** There are no dedicated funding sources for farming support other than the FTEs outlined. General operating support comes out of funding provided by Clark County as part of a longstanding partnership with WSU Extension through an Memorandum of Agreement (MOA). Faculty generate external funds (such as grants) where possible to support programming and special projects.

**Staffing and budget decisions:** The Director of the Clark county office proposes and manages the budget allocation from Clark County. However, Washington State University monies, most of which are in the form of faculty salaries, are allocated by the Dean of Agriculture at the WSU main campus in Pullman. All grants coming into the office are managed by the faculty originating the grant.

The director makes staffing decisions using local dollars and grants following WSU policies for hiring, including Human Resources review and approval as necessary. The director may propose positions for WSU funding (such as the joint sustainable agriculture faculty proposed for 2009-10), but the Dean would make the ultimate decision to use WSU funding for such a position.

### **Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS)**

**FTE:** 1.0 FTE is assigned to Clark County

This is a Resource Conservationist position that works with Clark County agricultural producers enrolled in one or more US Department of Agriculture (USDA) programs. Eligible producers can apply for a number of USDA programs. One of the more applicable to Clark County is the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP). Priority resource concerns addressed by the program include

- Surface and ground water quality and quantity concerns associated with non-point source pollutants
- Reduction in soil erosion and sedimentation
- Air quality concerns relating to PM <10 and odors
- Protection of "at-risk-species" habitat
- Range and forestland health
- Carbon sequestration

The 2008 Farm Bill establishes other programs in the following areas:

- Agricultural Management Assistance Program
- Cooperative Conservation Partnership Initiative
- Conservation of Private Grazing Land Program
- Conservation Stewardship Program
- Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program
- Grassland Reserve Program
- Healthy Forest Reserve Program
- Socially Disadvantaged Ranchers Beginning Farmers
- Watershed Rehabilitation Program
- Wetlands Reserve Program
- Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program

**Staff office** is located at the Center for Agriculture, Science and Environmental Education (CASEE Center), 149<sup>th</sup> St., Brush Prairie.

**Resources:** Currently, the Southwest Washington Local Working Group has designated a separate funding pool for the Lower Columbia Watershed that includes Clark and portions of Cowlitz and Wahkiakum Counties. This pool is an overall percentage of the allocation for the greater Southwest Washington team. At this time, NRCS has not received a program allocation for FY 2009.

**Staffing and budget decisions:** Staffing decisions are made at the NRCS State Office level. Budget allocation comes from the NRCS National Office in Washington DC.

### **Clark Conservation District (Clark CD)**

**FTE:** 2.2 FTE are assigned to Clark County.

1.0 FTE provides technical assistance and farm planning (USDA Certified) to landowners, mainly livestock because of its relation to water quality funding;

0.5 FTE is dedicated to soil education, presentations, and GIS work;

0.5 FTE provides technical assistance, usually habitat related, permit and ordinance assistance, and financial assistance management;

0.2 FTE Professional Engineer services, largely focused on improving fish passage through culvert replacement.

**Staff offices:** Offices are located at the Center for Agriculture, Science and Environmental Education (CASEE Center), 149<sup>th</sup> St., Brush Prairie.

**Resources:** The Clark Conservation District is currently grant funded; usually acquiring grants for water quality or fish habitat projects on private land. The level of available technical and financial assistance is variable, and limiting, according to grant opportunities. Agricultural operations are priority for receiving District assistance.

In order to stabilize funding, the District is requesting that the Board of County Commissioners assess a levy pursuant to RCW 89.08. The levy rate is proposed at \$5.00 per parcel per year plus \$0.10 per acre for parcels over 1 acre in size within the District boundary. It is estimated the levy could generate approximately \$723,000 in the initial year to support District programs.

**Staffing and budget decisions:** The work of Clark Conservation District is directed by the District Board of Supervisors; five local volunteers that represent residents in the implementation of District programs, developed in direct response to local needs. Clark CD was formed in 1942 to assist landowners with their agricultural operations, and locally lead the USDA Soil Conservation Service (now known as the Natural Resource Conservation Service) programs. Clark Conservation District is a special district of state government, under RCW 89.08, that administers programs to conserve natural resources.

### **Farm Services Agency (FSA)**

**FTE:** 3.0 FTE serving agricultural producers operating in Clark, Cowlitz, Skamania, and Wahkiakum Counties.

The County Executive Director is responsible for administration, outreach, conservation programs, disaster programs and crop insurance programs.

The Program Technician administers loan deficiencies (price support) programs, the direct and counter cyclical program; eligibility programs and farm records.

The Farm Loan Officer is responsible for beginning farmer loans, direct loans and guaranteed loans for farm ownership, operating loans, disaster loans, socially disadvantaged farmer and rancher loans and youth loans for 4-H and other projects.

**Staff offices:** Offices of the Executive Director and Program Technician are located at the Center for Agriculture, Science and Environmental Education (CASEE Center), 149<sup>th</sup> St., Brush Prairie. The Farm Loan Officer is based out of Lewis County, in the Chehalis FSA office.

**Resources:** The Lower Columbia Farm Services Agency is funded by the US Department of Agriculture. At this time, FSA has not received a program allocation for FY 2009.

**Staffing and budget decisions:** Budget and program procedures are written at the National level in Washington, DC. At the County office level, FSA is governed by a Committee of local area agricultural producers. These producers are elected by their peers in the counties where they farm. They in turn hire the Director for each county or area office. The program technician is hired by the County Executive Director. The Farm Loan Officer is hired at the National level.

**A. Continue to work with the cooperative extension service, NRCS, FSA and Clark Conservation District to make sure Clark County farmers have locally-based dedicated agents for horticulture and livestock.**

The Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee recommends that the county champion the maintenance and enhancement of locally-based technical resources at the state and national level.

The technical assistance needs of farmers are varied. For example, many farmers would like more information about the most efficient, environmentally sensitive farming practices. There is considerable interest in learning more about organic farming. Some farmers have expressed a need for assistance in developing new products (What will grow here? How can it be marketed?). Others have suggested that assistance in developing new markets and marketing strategies (such as community supported agriculture (CSA) or subscription farming) would be extremely helpful. Some farmers are interested in more information about specific technical issues, such as composting practices and reuse of the compost, the most efficient ways to use water, or the feasibility of certain types of food processing. For potential new farmers, assistance with bookkeeping, model budgets, tax preparation and accounting, and startup marketing strategies would be very useful.

**Next Steps**

- Clark County, the Cowlitz-Clark Farm Bureau and other agricultural interests should strongly encourage the USDA, State of Washington and Washington State University to retain a commitment to assisting commercial agriculture in Clark County.
- Clark County, NRCS, WSU Extension, Clark CD the farm bureau and other agricultural interests should develop a coordinated work program that responds to priority needs of Clark County farmers.

**B. Establish position(s) within Clark County to serve as a friend of the farmer or “farmbudsperson” to help farmers receive more efficient service from Clark County.**

For several years, the Clark County Community Development Department has funded an “ombudsperson” position. Primary responsibilities of this position have included developing and maintaining effective working relationships with potentially affected stakeholders within neighborhoods and the development community, responding to public complaints and inquiries requesting assistance or project information and mediating disputes among stakeholders. The position has the authority to convene responsible staff needed to accomplish the above and is also a primary liaison responding to media inquiries regarding potentially contentious issues.

The Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee suggests that a similar position created to support commercial farming, community supported agriculture and subscription farming would be a great service to the local farm community. The committee sees this position serving in a community liaison and problem solving role to help farmers find solutions to many of the challenges they are facing in Clark County. Responsibilities could include clarifying and strengthening the right to farm ordinance, mediating disputes between farmers and neighbors, providing education about and assistance in addressing permit requirements for farm structures and farming activities.

The position may also provide a primary point of coordination for community marketing efforts that are discussed below.

The Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee is also strongly supportive of efforts to establish a center for Community Agriculture at the former Washington State University Agricultural Experiment Station off of 78<sup>th</sup> St. in Vancouver. The committee believes the Center could take a lead role in supporting the production and distribution of fresh food, educating residents to grow, purchase, prepare and consume local nutritious foods supporting, mentoring and educating current and future farmers. The site could be designated a demonstration farm and testing site for research and technical assistance on high intensity urban fringe farming.

### **Next Steps**

- Develop program goals, job descriptions and policies to guide the implementation of the strategy.
- Identify organizational options for managing the farmbudsperson program.
- Identify staff resources and budget resources to implement farmbudsperson.
- Develop a coordinated approach with other county outreach and public education programs.

### **C. Fund an endowment that would provide grants to conduct specific research, technical assistance and education programs that would benefit farmers.**

As mentioned above, the resources dedicated to technical assistance and education programs for local farmers are very limited. State and federal funds to conduct research and education have been reduced in recent years. Farm resource agencies have few resources to conduct needed research and farmer education programs. The county could provide assistance in establishing an endowment fund and revolving loan fund that would be financially supported by local farmers through a new or existing local community foundation. The farmbudsperson position could advocate for funding at the state and federal level and also develop and coordinate grant applications to take advantage of state, federal and private foundation grants to establish the endowment and to augment the resources of the revolving loan fund.

### **Next Steps**

- Initiate discussions with adjacent counties to determine their level of interest in participating in endowment funding and allocation.
- Establish goals for the program, funding guidelines, grant request and allocation process, and program evaluation methods.
- Develop financial guidelines, including investment policies, for sustaining the endowment over time.

- Develop a strategy for managing and monitoring the endowment.

#### D. Funding

## VII. Barrier: Need for Better Marketing and Promotion

Most Clark County farms are family-run operations. Many farmers do not have the time or resources to develop marketing outlets or promotional programs. Much of the marketing and promotional activities that do occur are on a small scale and independent from one another. Competition among farmers, particularly new farmers working to establish their livelihood, encourages these independent efforts.

Public education programs are also important. As the population continues to grow, and the number of farms continues to decline, fewer area residents have a direct link to our region's agricultural heritage. Local residents may enjoy the open space benefits of farmland, but few have an understanding of the importance of Clark County farms to the local economy. There is also the continual need to educate consumers about the benefits and delights of local agricultural products. Again, these issues are not unique to Clark County. Small farmers in urbanizing counties around the country are facing similar challenges.

Initial priorities for the farmbudsperson could include development of a "*Clark County Fresh*" or "*Lower Columbia River Fresh*" logo and marketing campaign, prepare a regular farm report distributed to local electronic and print media outlets that may educate citizens about the farm community in Clark County, promote seasonally-oriented direct purchase opportunities of agricultural products and special agriculture-based events.

#### A. Create a "Clark County Fresh" logo and marketing efforts.

Recent studies have shown that direct food sales from producers to consumers via farmers markets and farm stands/stores, community supported agriculture, and organically grown produce, often grown on smaller acreage, are among the strongest agricultural trends in metropolitan areas in the US.<sup>6</sup> One means of marketing local products to capitalize on these trends is to develop a label that identifies a product as locally produced. It encourages local consumers to buy food grown in their own community.

#### Next Steps

- Develop an organizational strategy for implementation of the program.

---

<sup>6</sup> Meter, Ken. Finding Food in Clark County, Growing our Local Economy, keynote presentation, at the Clark County Food System Summit, January 2008.

- Develop a long-term funding plan for ongoing operation of the program.
- Develop job description(s) for program staff

**B. Assist in establishing permanent sites for local farmers' markets.**

While farmers' markets are perceived as temporary uses, they typically are open at least one day a week for all or most of the growing season between April and October. Often times a market may have a lease or other arrangement with a property owner to locate on a site for a season, but year to year it may be necessary to relocate to new sites. To be fully functional a farmers' market requires electricity, water, sewer, waste disposal, police and fire and other public services. Establishing permanent sites with available services could be helpful and , week to week, consumers would know where their local or favorite market is located.

To support farmers markets, the county could develop long term leases for markets on county land, acquire sites specifically for that purpose, or provide assistance in negotiating provision of services and leases on other public and private land.

**Next Steps**

- Identify those farmers' markets that may have significant uncertainty about their locations.
- Identify city-county or state-owned land that could be used as alternatives.
- Assist the market organizers to negotiate for the use of publicly-owned land.

**C. Work with local farmers to create an independent farm marketing association.**

Often small farmers operate quite independently from one another. Like many small business enterprises, there can be considerable competition among independent farmers. However, as the number of farmers has diminished over time, those that remain have searched for new ways of doing business. Many farmers realize that their profitability can be enhanced by acting as a group rather than independently. Farmers around the country have joined together to form associations or cooperatives to acquire supplies, purchase insurance, market and sell their products.

Strategies that can increase the effectiveness of marketing and promotion efforts may include working with electronic and print media outlets to develop a regular "farm report." that may educate citizens about the farm community in Clark County, promote seasonally-oriented direct purchase opportunities of agricultural products and special agriculture-based events. A farm tour program to let consumers get to know local producers and see their facilities could reinforce a buy local movement. Developing and disseminating information on community supported agriculture and other local subscription-based consumer options would also be a welcome service.

The Vancouver Food Cooperative (VFC) is a local example of a potential cooperative marketing opportunity. It is a not-for-profit business working to open a cooperative grocery store in

Vancouver, Washington. It has developed programs to put consumers in direct contact with local producers and hopes to develop a retail outlet supporting local producers in the near future. Anyone may shop in a cooperative market, but it is run by the members. You become a member by purchasing shares in the cooperative. It is the membership base that provides the revenue to capitalize, develop and maintain the cooperative.

### **Next Steps**

- Conduct outreach to potential sponsors of a farm tour program. This may build on WSU Extension's Harvest Fair and other farm tour events.
- Assess the depth of interest on the part of local farmers to develop an independent marketing association.
- Develop a more detailed description and potential budget for the creation of an independent marketing association.
- Initiate discussions with officials and farmers from adjacent counties to determine the level of interest in working cooperatively on a marketing effort.

### **D. Funding**

## **VIII. Barrier: Regulatory Requirements**

Farmers face a more challenging regulatory environment than most businesses. Many are located in sensitive areas, like floodways and flood plains, because that land has the richest soil. That land is also highly regulated. Farmers must comply with a number of health regulations because they are growing, and/or processing food. Many farmers use chemicals that are regulated by health and safety standards. Dairy and livestock farms produce a by-product, manure, that is considered a threat to water quality. And farmers, like other businesses, must comply with building codes, labor laws, and other general purpose regulations.

A number of farmers have stated that the combination of environmental, health, and building regulations are costly, can discourage efficient farming practices, and make it difficult to attract the next generation of farmers. While many of the regulations are beyond the control of local government, County building and health regulations were mentioned often as ones that should be examined for their impacts on local farmers. It was also suggested that County regulations are often adopted without sufficient consideration given to the impacts on local farmers and the agricultural industry. The Agriculture Commission provides a good vehicle for that discussion and review.

- A. Review building and health codes for regulatory reform opportunities related to agricultural structures, food preparation and processing.**

The International Building Code defines an agricultural structure as *“a structure designed and constructed to house farm implements, hay, grain, poultry, livestock or other horticultural products. This structure should not be a place of human habitation or a place of employment where agricultural products are processed, treated, or packaged, nor shall it be a place used by the public.”* Farm related structures meeting this definition are considered Group U structures by the International Building Code. Appendix C of the Code specifically deals with agricultural buildings. Depending on the height and area of the building, different structural standards apply.

The Clark County Code exempts agricultural structures from building permit requirements. However, the Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee pointed out that several small scale structures used to support their farms through direct marketing fall under provisions relating to food processing, packaging and places used by the public and are, therefore not exempt from building and health code requirements. An example is year round farm markets. Because it is year round, snow bearing structural requirements may be required. Some may be used solely to sell products grown on the farm. Some may include the sale of value added products such as jams and jellies, relishes and the like. Some may include kitchens to serve home-grown products to patrons. The latter two examples have both building and health code implications.

While the standards address life, safety and health issues, they can add significantly to the cost of an important market outlet for local farmers. The building official has some flexibility to review applicable standards on a case-by-case basis and make “common sense” decisions, but the committee recommends a more deliberate and comprehensive review of standards for accessory farm uses.

### **Next Steps**

- Complete an analysis of the frequency with which farm-related structures and uses have required building and other land use and health permitting processes and what component of structure and/or use triggered the need for a permit.
- Conduct an analysis of the length of time it takes to secure building and other permits for agricultural-related structures, when required.
- Consider strategies for reducing building and other permits and related fees for agricultural structures and uses.

### **B. Allow greater flexibility with regard to farming related commercial uses.**

As with building and health code standards, the Agriculture Preservation Advisory Committee felt a review of allowed uses that could support direct marketing efforts of local agricultural producers is advised. Both the range of allowed uses and site development standards should be reviewed. Following is a summary of agriculture related commercial uses allowed in rural zoning districts.

In the Forest and Agricultural zones, roadside stands not exceeding 300 square feet in area, exclusively used for the sale of agricultural products grown in the affected area and set back at least 20 feet from the abutting right of way or property line are permitted outright. In the other Rural Zones, the stand is limited to 200 square feet in area.

Commercial nurseries predominantly marketing locally produced plants and associated landscaping materials are allowed in all rural zones after review and approval of the responsible official, except in the Agriculture/Wildlife zone where a conditional use permit is required.

Equestrian activities including rodeos, boarding, training and stabling are allowed outright in the Agriculture 20, Forest Resource 80 and Forest Resource 40 zones. These are prohibited in the Agriculture/Wildlife zone. Riding stables are allowed subject to conditional use permit in all other rural zones.

#### **Next Steps**

- Identify additional ways in which the zoning code could be amended to preserve the integrity of the farmland while allowing greater flexibility to farmers in developing commercial uses that support agricultural production.
- Conduct public meetings on potential amendments to the zoning code.
- Draft code language to reflect recommended amendments.

#### **C. Allow temporary and permanent housing for farm workers.**

Local agricultural producers are highly dependent on transient labor. The Clark County Code defines transient labor, or seasonal labor, as any person who performs forestry- or agricultural-related seasonal or temporary labor not exceeding nine months in duration.

While temporary dwellings are allowed in rural zones subject to the provisions of Section 40.260.210, the regulations primarily address hardship situations caused by health and aging concerns.

Members of the committee also pointed out that many agricultural employees are year-round residents, and are expected to find housing within the available permanent housing market.

#### **Next Steps**

- Prepare policy guidelines and eligibility criteria for housing for transient workers.

#### **D. Funding**

## **IX. Barrier: Population Growth and Conflicts With Farmers**

The region's dramatic population growth has created conflicts between many suburban and rural residents and their farming neighbors. As housing and commercial development spreads into the rural areas, many residential homes are now in close proximity to local farms.

Complaints about farm smells, noise, dust, or traffic, or conflicts between domestic and farm animals are commonplace. Some farmers find they no longer have the community support they once enjoyed, making it more difficult to market products and to pursue farming activities. It can also take a significant amount of a farmer's time, and possibly money, to defend against the most aggressive complaints.

#### **A. Revise the county's right-to-farm ordinance.**

Right-to-Farm laws have been used around the country to assist farmers in managing the growing number of conflicts with their new rural and suburban neighbors. Most Right-to-Farm laws have two purposes:

1. To favor agricultural land uses above others in agricultural areas.
2. To discourage non-farming neighbors from filing nuisance complaints against farmers.<sup>7</sup>

The County has a generic right to farm/log ordinance in Title 9 of the Clark County Code. However, prescriptive development standards to buffer structures in rural residential districts (R-5, R-10 and R-20) from agriculturally zoned land are included in Title 40 Section 210.

The Advisory committee feels a consolidated freestanding right to farm/log ordinance would be a more effective tool. Further, most Right-to-Farm legislation in the state has been used to require some form of public notification to rural residents that potential conflicts with farms could occur. The county uses the following standard condition of approval on rural subdivisions:

*"Land Near Agricultural, Forest or Mineral Resources: Land owners and residents are hereby notified that this plat is located within 500 feet of lands zoned agriculture-wildlife (AG-WL), agriculture (AG-20), forest (FR-40, FR-80), or surface mining (S), or in current use under Revised Code of Washington (RCW) Chapter 84.34. Therefore, the subject property is within or near designated agricultural land, forest land or mineral resource land (as applicable) on which a variety of commercial activities may occur that are not compatible with residential development for certain periods of limited duration. Potential discomforts or inconveniences may include, but are not limited to: noise, odors, fumes, dust, smoke, insects, operation of machinery (including aircraft) during any twenty-four (24) hour period, storage;"*

The committee is dubious that use of the standard condition actually succeeds in alerting the rural homebuyers of these potential nuisances originating from farming operations in the rural area. Strengthening disclosure requirements is recommended. Such legislation would also send a clear signal to all citizens about the importance of agriculture in the rural zone.

#### **Next Steps**

- Draft revisions to the right to farm/forest code that clearly designates agriculture and forest production as preferred uses in rural zones, strengthens public disclosure requirements and consolidates right to farm/forest legislation into one comprehensive document.

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. King County.

**B. Institute a buffer zoning policy to preclude land use conflicts brought about by encroaching urbanization.**

An example of buffer zoning the committee discussed is that within urban growth areas, particularly at the edges with rural land, Industrial, Light Industrial, Employment and Mixed Use land uses and zoning districts will be under intense pressure by speculators and the development community to "flip" to commercial and urban residential uses. Industrial and employment uses typically have a much slower absorption rate and longer term investment pay-back than commercial and residential uses. But industrial and employment uses are inherently more compatible with agriculture and serve as important "buffer" uses that need to be maintained within urban growth boundaries that abut important agricultural uses just outside of the urban growth areas. If buffer lands inside urban growth areas convert to quicker pay-back uses through the annual comprehensive plan review process or the periodic comprehensive growth management plan review, a domino effect would result, creating stronger justification for conversion of existing agriculture uses outside of current ugb's to urban uses through future periodic comprehensive growth management plan reviews.

**Next Steps**

- Designate agricultural production districts as described in section III.
- Inventory urban uses adjacent to agricultural production districts.
- Identify potential buffer zoning opportunities and develop policies relating to buffer zoning.

**C. Funding**

## **X. Conclusion**