

A Fresh Look at Pierce County Agriculture

Stakeholder Interviews

SUMMARY OF RESULTS Rev. 6/21/16

Introduction

Pierce County is taking an in-depth look at the current viability and future prospects for local agriculture. How are local agricultural producers faring, and what can be done to boost their competitiveness? What is needed to protect prime farmland?

The Washington State Growth Management Act requires counties to designate Agricultural Resource Lands (ARL) which “have long-term significance for the commercial production of food or other agricultural products”. For 2016, the Pierce County Council authorized funding for a study of agriculture and ARL “*conducting an evaluation and providing a report on agricultural land in Pierce County that has long-term significance for the commercial production of food or other agricultural products.*”

An independent consultant team led by Barney & Worth, Inc. is conducting the new study of Pierce County agriculture and the ARL designation process. Members of the team bring extensive agricultural, scientific, legal, and economic expertise to the project. The consultant team is analyzing the current condition of Pierce County agriculture and evaluating the effectiveness of the County’s zoning regulations for protecting commercially viable agricultural lands. The County’s current ARL criteria will be revisited, with consideration given to alternatives. A series of technical reports will illuminate various aspects of farmland protections.

Stakeholder Interviews

In the early stages of the evaluation, the consultant team conducted a series of interviews with a cross-section of persons involved in the local agriculture sector: landowners, large/medium/small farmers and producers across the county, land conservation groups, agricultural and farmers market organizations, and taxing districts. Interviews were conducted in-person and by telephone with more than 25 persons. (A list of participants is attached.)

Participants were asked to share their perceptions about Pierce County agriculture, along with their vision and suggestions for the future. Advice was sought on ways to protect agricultural land, and specific to ARL designation. The observations, insights and suggestions provided by the individuals who participated will contribute to subsequent phases of the evaluation. This report reflects the advice, feelings and attitudes of the individuals interviewed. It is not intended to provide a statistically valid profile of community opinion as a whole.

Highlights

The following presents a summary of key points offered by stakeholders who were contacted during the interview process.

1. **There's near-consensus support for protecting Pierce County's best farmland and sustaining the economic viability of local agriculture.** Agriculture still represents an important share of Pierce County's economy, with \$90 million to \$100 million in annual sales – worthy of the County's best efforts to assure its future. Many observers think time is running out to save the best, most productive farmland: "I'm glad the County is taking this seriously!"

Strengths of Pierce County Agriculture

- Good quality soils
- \$90 to \$100 million per year in sales
- Affluent, growing market area: 2 million people live within 30 miles
- Diversified crops and products
- Ecology-minded, sustainable producers
- Strong "buy local" and "eat local" trend
- Increased direct market channels: farmers markets, CSAs, restaurants

2. **There is little shared understanding of ARL and how it works, and no agreement on how ARL designation criteria should change.** Beyond those three letters – ARL – details of the program aren't well known even within the farming community. Stakeholders say the revised criteria should be "science-based" and designate only "true ARL acres" – but offer few details.
3. **On balance, most stakeholders think the amount of ARL land designated today is too little or about right.** While some participants don't want to see additional acreage set aside, none hope for a reduction in the current total.
4. **The vastly different growing conditions and types of farmland /ranchland across the county make it difficult to find a single solution for ARL.** Today, local agriculture "is more than row crops" – wineries, animals, aquaculture, etc. – with many crops and products not solely tied to the productivity of soils. Observers wonder whether ARL criteria might be rewritten to respect these differences.
5. **Other farmland protections (beyond ARL) are broadly supported and thought to be equally or more important than ARL.** Most agree that a robust ag program in Pierce County is more important than setting aside ARL farmland. "These incentives need to be taken together"; "ARL doesn't stand alone." Tax incentives, purchase/transfer of development rights, conservation easements, right-to-farm statutes, farmers markets and other direct market channels, agri-tourism, and direct assistance to farmers are among the tools widely acclaimed by participants. If the right ag support programs are in place, productive farmland can continue to be productive with/without the ARL designation.

6. **Some farmers ask “is it too late”?** The right time for steps to protect Pierce County farmland was 20 years ago, some of the multi-generation farmers say. There’s skepticism the trend toward fewer, smaller farms can be reversed. And with many new farmers relying on a second job, the question of profitability is being raised. Local observers would like to see farm incomes rise, with the hope of attracting and retaining more farmers.
7. **Stakeholders are looking forward to an independent, expert evaluation that points the way to needed improvements in Pierce County’s program to protect farmland.** Participants see this as an educational process that will shed new light on the topic, alleviate controversy, and allow Pierce County to move on.
8. **One need identified is for a reliable financial analysis and forecast for impacts on the taxing districts impacted by agricultural exemptions.** Some observers are aware that school districts are concerned, but remain skeptical that taxing districts are truly impacted by the ARL designation. While these observers understand the districts’ worries about the erosion of their tax bases when already operating in a precarious environment, they also believe farms are not a major consumer of public services and “farmers still pay taxes.” It’s still unclear to most observers whether the ARL zone accounts for a greater farm tax break than the state’s current use exemption.
9. **Stakeholders want to stay involved – to “be at the table” – when decisions are made on changing the ARL designation criteria and/or program.** Even those who say they have no direct connection to the ARL question ask to be kept informed, and most say they would be willing to attend a meeting on this subject.

Pierce County ARL Designation Stakeholder Interviews Rev. 6/21/16

Landowners

Carolyn Lake, Goodstein Law Group
Helen McGovern and Anika Moran, Emergency Food Network
Ben DeGoede, Windmill Garden
Pete and George DeVries
Becky Weed, Harlow Cattle Company

Active Farmers/Producers

Janice Bryant, Kaukiki Farm
*Tim Richter, Richter's Produce
Roger Knutson, Knutson Farms/Valley Flowers
*Holly Foster, Zestful Gardens
*Jake Sterino, Sterino Farms
Burton (BJ) Haugen, Haugen Dairy
Clay Thornburg, Rainier View Winery
Barb Schoos, aquaculture

Land Conservation Groups

Robin Fay, PCC Farmland Trust
Amy Moreno-Sills, Futurewise, Four Elements Farm
*Dan Hulse, Pierce Tilth Association, Tahoma Farms and Terra Organics

Agricultural/Farmers Market Organizations

Brian Bodah, WSU Pierce County Extension Director
Ryan Mello, Pierce Conservation District
Chrissy Cooley, Agriculture Community of Interest Coordinator, Puyallup Watershed Initiative
Kathleen Rose, Gig Harbor Waterfront Farmers Market, Rose Orchards
Patty Villa, Orting Farmers Market
Greg Lynn, King-Pierce Farm Bureau
Rawley Johnson, Early Bird Farm

Taxation Districts

Tom Seigel, Bethel School District superintendent
Krestin Bahr, Eatonville School District superintendent
Janel Keating, White River School District superintendent
Chief Ryan Baskett, Graham Fire District #21
Chief Bob Vellias, South Pierce Fire District #17

* Farmers Advisory Council member