

TO: Bill Vetter, Pierce County Council Performance Audit Committee
FROM: Barney & Worth, Inc.
DATE: September 7, 2016 (Revised)
SUBJECT: *A Fresh Look at Pierce County Agriculture*
Technical Memorandum #9 – Other Approaches to Protect Agricultural Land

Introduction

A multi-disciplinary team led by Barney & Worth, Inc. is taking *A Fresh Look at Pierce County Agriculture*. Members of the team bring extensive agricultural, scientific, legal, and economic expertise to the project.

The Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) requires counties to designate Agricultural Resource Lands (ARL), which “have long-term significance for the commercial production of food or other agricultural products.” Pierce County places a high priority on protecting commercially viable agricultural lands, and has established these criteria for ARL parcels:

- Located in rural area of County (outside UGA)
- Five acres or greater
- Contain at least 50% “prime farmland” soils
- Grass/legume production yield of 3.5 tons per acre or greater
- 50% of abutting parcels larger than 1 acre
- Landowners may request the designation

The consultant team is analyzing the current condition of Pierce County’s agriculture sector and evaluating the effectiveness of the County’s zoning regulations for protecting agricultural lands. The County’s current ARL criteria will be revisited, with consideration given to alternatives. A series of technical memoranda are being prepared to illuminate different aspects of farmland protections.

This technical memorandum reviews the methods beyond ARL zoning for protecting farmland. Many of these protections have already been introduced and are in place in Pierce County.

Highlights

Earlier phases of this comprehensive study have concluded that ARL zoning alone will not be sufficient to protect Pierce County’s best farmland and assure the local ag sector’s ongoing commercial viability. Fortunately a portfolio of complementary programs already exists to support that purpose (see box). A recent survey confirms all of these protections are supported by a solid majority of stakeholders – some by more than 75%. (Rural/agricultural zoning and public land purchases weren’t tested in the survey.)



Farmland Protections

Rural/agricultural zoning
“Right to Farm” statutes
Purchase/transfer of development rights (PDR/TDR)
Land trusts/conservation easements
Farmers markets and other direct market channels
Agri-tourism
Property tax incentives
Incentives and training for beginning farmers
Low interest loans for farmland and equipment
Estate tax exemption
Public land purchases

Pierce County government recognizes the ag sector’s continuing importance to the area’s economy – contributing an estimated \$90-\$100 million per year. In response, the County has maintained an active and well-coordinated farming support program housed within the Department of Land Services (PALS). This program provides:

- Information and tools to help get started in farming
- Resources for agricultural producers: on certifications, conservation, farm management and production.
- Business and marketing tools and assistance.
- A library of planning documents, maps, reports, and manuals.
- Recommendations for regulatory streamlining.

Meanwhile, the County Executive’s Office has also set regularly scheduled farm tours that expose the County’s elected leaders and top managers to the realities of contemporary local farming.

What more can be done? Clallam County – perhaps the only county in the region that is currently gaining acres being farmed – is taking another approach. Clallam County has adopted a *Conservation Strategy*, a set of policies to help ensure that ag land is preserved. With the abundant array of programs already in place for farmland protections, Pierce County might be well served by following Clallam’s example and strategically searching out gaps that remain after ARL zoning and other protections are fully considered.

Other Farmland Protections

Preserving the most productive farmland is the underlying goal of the Growth Management Act’s provisions for designating agricultural resource lands. Other related public benefits to be gained from ARL designation:



- Sustaining agriculture as a viable economic sector
- Preserving rural amenities/ecosystems
- Containing urban growth in designated areas

Protecting farmland enjoys broad support from farmers and rural landowners, federal, state and local policymakers, and also from the public. As a result, the programs in Washington state to protect farmland have expanded well beyond ARL designation and now include a number of measures already in place in Pierce County:

- Farm and Agricultural Tax Program (RCW 84.34)
- Farmland trusts (particularly active in Pierce County)
- “Right-to-Farm” statutes protecting standard farming practices
- Purchase and transfer of development rights
- Conservation easements
- Incentives and training for new farmers
- Low interest loans to purchase farmland/equipment
- Estate tax exemptions for farms and farmland

The next sections present an overview of the various available farmland protections beyond the ARL zoning designation.

Rural/Agricultural Zoning

ARL zoning was introduced under Washington’s Growth Management Act to protect the best, most productive farmland and prevent its conversion for other uses. There are also provisions built into Pierce County’s other agricultural zones that offer similar protections.

Permitted uses in the ARL zone include:

- Agriculture: crop production; animal production, boarding and slaughtering; agricultural services; agriculture supplies sales; agritourism; aquaculture, hatchery, fish processing; forestry
- Residential (single family homes, within density limits)
- Utilities
- Public Park

Not all Community Plan Areas (CPAs) contain ARL land. Within the CPAs the uses allowed on ARL generally conform to the uses in the ARL zone outside of CPAs. However there are some noteworthy differences:

- Civic uses
 - Gig Harbor Peninsula conditionally allows: Community & cultural services, Day Care, Education, Public safety, and Transportation uses in addition to public parks.
- Utilities
 - Sewage collection. Five CPAs allow some form of sewage collection
 - Maintenance facilities. Two CPAs allow public or private maintenance facilities as a conditional or permitted use



- Commercial
 - Lodging. Alderton-McMillen allows limited lodging facilities
 - Food related products: Alderton-McMillen and Key Peninsula allow these uses outright or conditionally.

Because the County differentiates between uses allowed on ARL lands outside of Community Plan areas and among CPAs, there is an opportunity to further refine ARL designation and ARL uses on a CPA and non-CPA basis.

Land in Pierce County specifically zoned for agriculture that is not zoned ARL is designated Rural Farm (RF). This classification is intended to protect agricultural lands that may or may not have soils that qualify as Agricultural Resource Lands (ARL). The Rural Farm classification reflects the properties that have historically been used for agricultural activities or zoned agriculture that have not been converted to more intensive and incompatible uses or that are currently being used for agricultural activities (which may include non-commercial agricultural or farming activities). PCC 18A.10.090.B.2.g

The ARL zone is applied:

- County-wide
- Upper Nisqually Community Plan Area (CPA)
- Graham CPA
- Mid-County CPA
- Key Peninsula CPA
- Alderton-McMillin CPA
- Anderson-Ketron Island CPA

The Rural Farm zone is applied only within Community Plan Areas:

- Graham CPA
- Key Peninsula CPA
- Alderton-McMillin CPA
- Anderson-Ketron Island CPA
- But NOT applied outside of CPAs

The RF zone offers similar resource use opportunities to the ARL zones. This is especially evident in the Anderson-Ketron CPA, where the uses allowed in RF and ARL are identical.

Agricultural uses, what Pierce County classifies as Resource Uses, are allowed in both Urban and Rural zoning districts. Many agriculture related uses are allowed in urban zones and rural residential zones, underscoring that the County widely accepts agricultural activity.

Right-to-Farm Laws

Washington’s Right-to-Farm Act (RCW 7.48.300-.320) brings certainty for farms to conduct their operations alongside residential development. Under this Act, farming practices may continue if:

1. They are consistent with good agricultural practices
2. The agricultural practice precedes non-agricultural development
3. There’s no substantial impact on public health and safety



Every state in the U.S. has similar laws enacted since 1970 to protect farms and prevent urban encroachment in farm country. The laws typically do not single out protection for new farms, but do cover new uses on existing farms and substitution of new crops (an attractive feature).

Right-to-Farm statutes in Washington and other states don't prevent complaints, but do provide effective protection for farms in their normal conduct of business. Nuisance suits are deterred because farmers who prevail are allowed to recover attorney fees.

Property Tax Incentives

Current Use Classification. Among the farmland protections that offer the most attractive incentives for farmland owners are property tax incentives. These do not exempt farm owners from property tax, but result in eligible property owners paying significantly less tax *as long as their land stays in active production*. Washington State's Open Space Taxation Act (RCW 84.34), enacted in 1970, allows open space, farm and agricultural, and timber land to be valued for property tax purposes based on their *current use* rather than their prospective highest and best use (for example, if converted from farmland to residential development).

Current use valuation is predicated on owner applications pursuant to Washington State Department of Revenue criteria. Application for Current Use valuation of farm and agricultural land may be made by the property owner or vendee, and submitted to the Pierce County Assessor's office.

Farms are eligible for the current use exemption if they are:

- 20 acres or more, devoted primarily to agricultural production; or
- 5 acres or more, with an annual income of \$300 per acre for 3 of the past 5 years; or
- 5 acres or more with an investment in production of \$200 per acre for 3 of the 5 proceeding years; or
- Less than 5 acres with an annual income of \$1,000 or more per year over 3 of the most recent 5 calendar years.

Current use valued land continues in its classification until a request for removal is made by the owner, the use of land no longer complies with the above requirements, a sale or transfer is made to an owner that causes land to be exempt from property taxes, or the ownership changes and the new owner does not sign a Notice of Continuance. Additional tax, interest, and penalties apply if the land is removed in a manner not in compliance with statutory exceptions.

In 2015, 25,157 acres of agricultural land in Pierce County received the Current Use designation, with about one-third of that acreage zoned ARL.

Other Property Tax Exemptions. An additional benefit of being enrolled in the agricultural or forest land Current Use taxation program is the land is also exempt from local improvement district (LID) assessments or other assessments for the construction of sewers, water supply and distribution systems, road construction or improvements. In theory, farm and ranch land does not need these urban facilities and services and Current Use certified properties do not have to pay for them as long as the land remains in the Current Use taxation program.



Some eligible Pierce County farmers take advantage of another property tax incentive program for current Forest Use, also under Washington's Open Space Taxation Act – (RCW 84.34). Eligible applicants must use either the Current Use farm exemption or Forest exemption – but not both.

Land Trusts

Land trusts are non-profit organizations whose mission is to acquire land for purposes of conservation, preservation of open space, farmland protection, etc., The land trusts employ a variety of tools. Land acquisition is through outright purchase and also through the purchase of conservation easements, which place restrictions on the land's future development. The ultimate objective is to stop the trend toward disappearing farmland and keep this ag land in production.

Land trusts currently involved with farmland protection in Pierce County are: American Farmland Trust, PCC Farmland Trust, Forterra and the Great Harbor Conservancy. In addition to local acquisition of farmland and conservation easements by some of the land trusts, these organizations are deeply committed to protecting the state's best farm properties and promoting best practices in the stewardship of agricultural lands. The land trusts also conduct policy analysis, research and education that contributes to policymaking on agriculture related topics.

Conservation Easements

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and land trust or government agency that limits the use of some or all of the property to natural resource related use such as agriculture and habitat protections. Landowners retain the right to own and use their land, sell it or pass it on to heirs.

Conservation easements can be temporary or permanent, and are legally recorded. Funding and other incentives usually require that an easement be permanent. The easement is binding on the current owner and future purchasers of the land. Conservation easements may also place other restrictions, such as limiting the size of a home allowed on the property to prevent the property's conversion to a rural estate.

Funds to purchase conservation easements come from a variety of sources: federal, state, local, private and non-profit. The National Resource Conservation Service (NCRS) of the U.S. Department of Agriculture administers a federal grant program that awards funding to states, local governments, tribes, land trusts and other non-profit groups, to acquire development rights on farmland or ranchland.

Marketing Assistance

One of the secrets to success (or survival) for Pierce County farmers in recent decades has been their ability to find or develop new markets. And that will continue to be an imperative in the coming years. With major food processors departing and consumer preferences shifting, local farmers have become increasingly reliant on finding alternative channels to market their products. Today, a significantly higher percentage of local products is being consumed locally (within the Puget Sound region).

The new market channels include farmers markets and other direct market sales (through farmstands, CSAs, institutional sales, etc.) and wholesalers specializing in "locally grown". Also some statewide



commodity commission programs, such as the Washington Blueberry Commission, support Pierce County farmers. New marketing tools have become available to promote local agriculture, including the Puget Sound Fresh product logo, online farm finder tool, and print farm guide, as well as the WSU Small Farms Team online farm finder, and the LocalHarvest.org online tool.

The Agriculture Community of Interest is also focused on strengthening markets for locally grown food and a USDA grant has been secured to produce videos to promote Pierce County's farmers markets.

Farmers markets have become one of the mainstays of Pierce County's farm economy. There are now more than 100 farmers markets across the Puget Sound, with 13 active markets in Pierce County. Farmers markets, along with subscriber sponsored CSAs (community supporter agriculture) and farmstands, enable farmers to sell their products at retail prices without paying any broker commissions. Sales can focus on the fresh product available at that moment, rather than those ordered by a grocery chain or a broker.

The local agricultural community is also aware of the value of festivals, (e.g., lavender festival, garlic festival) and other agri-tourism opportunities. Agriculturally-themed events are growing in attendance and are increasing awareness of urban neighbors to the presence and value of local farmers and their products. Pumpkin patches, corn mazes, u-pick berries, and other similar attractions have become popular family activities. On-farm weddings and dinners, farm stays and camps are also potential sources of income for local farmers.

Purchase/Transfer of Development Rights

One way to preserve farmland is to purchase and/or transfer the development rights for the most threatened working farmland. While sometimes costly and complex to accomplish, this approach is proven very useful in Pierce County.

The County works closely with partners including land trusts, state and federal funding sources and landowners to either directly purchase and remove development rights on farmland or allow for a market exchange that transfers development rights from farmland to land owners who want added density in cities where high density development is allowed. Required under state laws, this effort has been ongoing for nearly a decade and continues to gather strength.

The most common approach to date in the county is the outright purchase of development rights. Using this approach, conservation easements are recorded with the property title that strictly prohibit future development of these lands. As long as the prohibitions are enforced, the land is protected in perpetuity. Pierce County has limited local public funding available to be matched with other government and private funding. PCC Farmland Trust and Forterra are two land trusts currently dedicated to land conservancy and are key partners with the County. In addition, the broader agricultural community is involved in developing a long range strategy to identify and target threatened farmland areas.

In 2007, Pierce County adopted legislation that established a transferable development rights (TDR) program. However, purchase of development rights (PDR) was the first focus when the TDR program became operational in 2011-2012.



An element of the TDR program allows for private party exchange of development rights, facilitated by the County to certify the rights for exchange and oversee placement of the conservation easements. The exchange occurs between farmland owners in “sending areas” who sell these rights to buyers in “receiving areas” that want additional density beyond what zoning allows. However, until recently, the recession has constrained real estate development and reduced developer purchase interest. The County has also been working to reduce the complexity of rules governing the TDR program. The revived real estate market is showing positive signs that private party TDR is becoming more feasible.

To date, the Pierce County PDR/TDR program and partner land trusts have protected approximately 550 acres of prime agricultural land. Approximately 100 additional acres have been secured by PCC Farmland Trust without the County TDR/PDR program but with Conservation Futures funding. The land trusts and the County expect an additional 500 acres will be secured by the end of 2017.

The County/land trust/agricultural community partnership is also working to secure additional funding to expand this program. One important source of support is the Washington Department of Ecology’s *Floodplains by Design* program. A consortium of agricultural interests and the County secured \$500,000 in funding for agricultural easements through this program in 2015 State Capital Budget. This funding will likely soon result in further high priority farmland protection in the Puyallup Valley. Land trusts report that this tool could become very important for protecting water basin areas near Puyallup and Orting.

A long-term goal calls for 6,000 farmland acres to be voluntarily protected over the next 10 years via removal of development rights. This would greatly strengthen farmland protection. Pierce County would be joining its neighbors, as Thurston County has protected nearly 2,695 acres and King County has protected nearly 13,200 acres of farmland through agricultural easements.

Financial Assistance for New Farmers

Farming costs money – to purchase productive land, machinery, buildings, labor and other inputs. To start a large commercial farm, a new farmer must have access to hundreds of thousands of dollars in capital. Small farms can begin with less capital, but undercapitalization is a major cause of failure.

With the average age of farm operators increasing steadily – currently around 60 years – there’s an urgency to make this transition to the next generation of farmers. In recent years, new sources of capital and credit have become available to farm and sustain new agricultural operations. The U.S. Department of Agriculture offers a comprehensive portfolio of loans and other financial services. Loans are available to farmers and ranchers for land acquisition and improvements, equipment and other working capital requirements. Terms and conditions are customized to farmers’ needs.

There are some grant programs available directly to farmers, farm cooperatives, and marketing associations to promote or develop new agricultural production or marketing practices. For instance, the USDA’s Value-Added Producer Grant Program helps agricultural producers enter into value-added activities related to the processing and/or marketing of bio-based, value-added products. The USDA’s Sustainable Agriculture and Research Grant Program funds producers to conduct on-site experiments that can improve their operations and the environment and can be shared with other producers.



Pierce County is a supporter of FarmLink that helps match people who would like to become farmers, with farmers and landowners interested in selling, leasing or transitioning their properties. FarmLink also provides training and on-on-one assistance for new farmers.

Pierce County doesn't offer financial assistance to agricultural producers, but acts as a clearinghouse to refer farmers looking to find sources of credit and other financial resources.

Finding Financial Assistance

Resources available in Pierce County include:

- Farm Service Agency
- Northwest Agriculture Business Center
- Northwest Farm Credit Services
- Tilth Producers of Washington
- U.S. Small Business Administration
- Whole Foods

Irrigation and Drainage

Surveys have revealed that access to sufficient water is increasingly a challenge for Pierce County farmers. With a favorable climate, good soils, and adequate rainfall in most years, it isn't necessary for every farmer to irrigate crops. The 2012 Census of Agriculture estimated just over 4,400 acres were being irrigated out of around 50,000 acres currently farmed countywide.

Some land and some crops benefit from irrigation. However, much of the water in Pierce County is previously allocated, with little available to meet new demands. One solution that has been proposed is to form an agricultural water district or irrigation district to address irrigation needs area-wide rather than parcel-by-parcel. A district could explore new approaches and potential water sources, and promote highly efficient irrigation practices.

In some agricultural areas, drainage needs might be handled in a similar manner. A drainage district could be a mechanism enabling a cooperative, area-wide approach to flood prevention and other related problems.

Cooperative Services, Equipment, Labor

Sharing equipment, labor, marketing, transport and other services is a longstanding tradition in U.S. agriculture. Some of these arrangements are informal, but a standard formal mechanism is the farm cooperative (co-op).



A local example is the USDA-capable mobile slaughter unit purchased by the Pierce Conservation District and operated by Puget Sound Processing, LLC. The unit is used to supply local meat to local consumers with USDA certification, and has also been used to train local youth who are interested in agriculture as a way of life in how to properly prepare and process meat products. The Pierce Conservation District also owns and leases a mobile poultry processing unit, manure spreaders, and other equipment.

The closure of commercial processing facilities in Pierce County has stimulated discussions in the farming community about additional shared services. However, the wide diversity of local crops and agricultural products may inhibit the cooperative opportunities to some degree.

Technical Assistance

Success starts with management skill and knowledge. An agricultural producer's knowledge and business management ability are crucial for success. Young farmers who are from a multi-generational farm family gain a great deal of knowledge from being "inside" the business. For others, this knowledge must be acquired from study and practical experience. Many decisions made in the first year or two of the business have a great impact on success or failure:

- Are the farm soils well suited to produce the volume and quality of crops or livestock to be grown?
- Will the selected markets provide reasonable prices and sufficient income?
- Is there sufficient operating capital to sustain the business, after purchasing land and equipment and making building upgrades and other improvements?
- Especially in a small business, are all the needed skills in place, from knowledge to produce and handle the products, manage hired labor and other operational aspects of the business and execute the right marketing decisions?
- Agriculture is full of uncertainty and risk – from weather that can result in large crop losses to wide price fluctuations within one season or year-to-year. Does the operator have the financial reserves and fortitude to withstand such unforeseen circumstances?

Educational opportunities for farmers are offered by Pierce County, the Cooperative Extension Services and many other organizations. Recent workshops have included these topics: on-farm drainage and crop selection, manure management to protect water quality, farm-to-table markets, agritourism and developing successful farm internships. The WSU Pierce County Extension Office, supported through a partnership with Pierce County, recently hired an agricultural specialist and hosts various educational programs. This includes Cultivating Success courses, which are designed to make starting and maintaining a farm business easier. The WSU Puyallup Research & Extension Center has a long history of hosting farmer education programs, including no-till vegetable production workshops, poultry processing workshops, strawberry field days, organic farm walks and field days, and so on.

The Agriculture Community of Interest (AgCOI) is an active leadership group that addresses farmer needs and issues to improve farm viability. AgCOI has created a farm liaison position to help coordinate with the agricultural community and schools. This position is coordinated with WSU Extension, Pierce Conservation District, three agencies of Pierce County government (Pierce County Agriculture Program, Surface Water Management and the Health Department) and the local office of the National Resource



Conservation Service (NRCS, USDA). This position will provide a central information exchange for members of the farming community and direct them to the appropriate agencies. The goal is to actively identify problems and proactively support existing farms while also encouraging new farmers.

Technical assistance programs of agencies such as the USDA NRCS and Pierce Conservation District have proven to be vital for Pierce County farmers. NRCS programs available to Pierce County farmers are quite comprehensive. Three broad technical/financial assistance program areas are in place to: 1) Construct or improve water management or irrigation structures; 2) Improve resource conditions such as soil quality, water quality, water quantity, and energy; and 3) Implement conservation practices or activities such as conservation planning that address natural resource concerns.

The USDA NRCS funds and manages the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), which is a financial assistance program that has supported local farmers in constructing “high tunnels, fencing, efficient irrigation systems, and so on”. The promotion of high tunnel systems has been particularly popular with local farmers. These are covered structures with polyethylene, polycarbonate, plastics, or fabrics that protect crops from sun, wind, excessive rainfall, or cold to extend the growing season in an environmentally safe manner. These systems can enable farmers to improve soil and water quality while increasing production and meeting extended season market demand compared to open field production.

Regulatory Assistance

Government regulations can unintentionally place an unnecessary or unfair burden on agricultural producers (nuisance protection, building codes, health codes, etc.). State and local agencies must remain vigilant to avoid these circumstances and also recognize and value the broader set of ecosystem and societal benefits that agriculture provides to a region (groundwater recharge and floodwater protection, wildlife corridors, etc.).

Among the types of assistance requested most often in surveys of local farmers and ranchers is streamlined regulations and regulatory assistance. Pierce County’s farm program in Planning and Land Services (PALS) is working on several initiatives to relax permit requirements, speed up review times, waive fees or assist farmers in complying. PALS’ current and recent initiatives to save time and money for agricultural operators include:

1. Enact a Building Permit Exemption for agriculture accessory structures 600 square feet or less. Eliminates building permit fee. (Other permits/permit fees may be required.)
2. Make available a standardized engineered base plan for compost bins and manure bins. This is a cooperative effort with Pierce Conservation District. Eliminates engineering review fees. Expand the use of standardized base plans to other common farms structures such as pole barns.
3. Expand allowed agritourism uses to include wedding venues, breweries and wineries. Must have an active farm to qualify for agritourism, and agritourism is the secondary use not the primary use. Current agritourism regulations may be found in Pierce County Code Chapter 18A.33.260.
4. Amend Pierce County Code Chapter 18A.70.040 (B) L to provide allowances in the floodway for agriculture uses and structures when in compliance with standards.



Habitat Restoration and Conservation

Conserving and restoring wildlife habitat is a priority under federal farm policy. The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) supports plantings that enhance habitat and land and water conservation. The landowner receives an annual rental payment for their planted land over 10-15 years under this voluntary program. Eligible projects with the highest environmental benefit are given top priority. 1.4 million acres in Washington State were enrolled in the program in 2013 – with total rental payments exceeding \$13 million. Virtually none of this land is in Pierce County.

Another habitat restoration/conservation program is the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) of the NCRS. This voluntary program funds agricultural practices that enhance habitat and land and water conservation on public, private and tribal agricultural lands. CSP contracts in Washington totaled \$2.3 million on 125,000 acres of crop, range and pasture land in 2014.

Public Purchase of Farmland

Another approach for protecting farmland is for public agencies – including county governments – to purchase high quality farmland sites or acquire development rights. In the Puget Sound area, King County voters approved bond funds, backed by countywide property tax revenues, to acquire development rights and protect 12,600 acres of private farmland. King County is continuing to purchase development rights on private agricultural lands through its farmland preservation program.

The Real Estate Excise Tax (REET) is another potential source of funds authorized for counties under RCW 82.46.070. If approved by voters, counties can enact a tax on the sale of real property at up to one percent of the sales price. The proceeds can be used to acquire property (or easements) on agricultural land, open space, habitat or recreation areas. These tax dollars can also be used to maintain the properties.

To date, only San Juan County has used this statute to purchase farmland. Pierce County does use a REET to support parks construction and other projects – but not farmland purchases. The Washington Department of Revenue estimates the County could raise around \$5.3 million annually with a .1 percent tax.

To assist in setting priorities for investing limited public dollars in farmland, one approach focuses on identifying high quality farmland through various rating systems, including the Land Evaluation and Site Analysis (LESA) method, that measures farm size, land quality, soil production, water availability, conservation value, current land use and proximity to urban areas. These scoring systems aim to pinpoint the very best, most productive farmland in order to set priorities that ensure the protection of these parcels.

Stakeholders' Views

AS a part of this project, a survey was conducted in 2016 to discern the priorities and preferences of key stakeholders – farmers, rural landowners, taxing districts, agricultural organizations and other interested parties. The survey was widely publicized to interested parties. The survey questions tested participants'



responses and views on the consultant team's preliminary recommendations on revise ARL criteria published in July. A total of 208 survey responses were received, and 184 participants weighed in on the question of their support for methods beyond ARL zoning for protecting farmland and sustaining commercial agriculture in Pierce County.

The results confirm all of the other methods to protect prime farmland beyond ARL designation tested in the survey are supported by a wide margin (60% to 83%) of respondents! The most popular are property tax incentives (83%), farmers markets and other direct market channels (82%), low interest loans to purchase farmland/equipment (82%) and land trusts/conservation easements (79%).

One participant's comment sums up the views of many: "It takes a broad spectrum of programs to keep farmland intact."

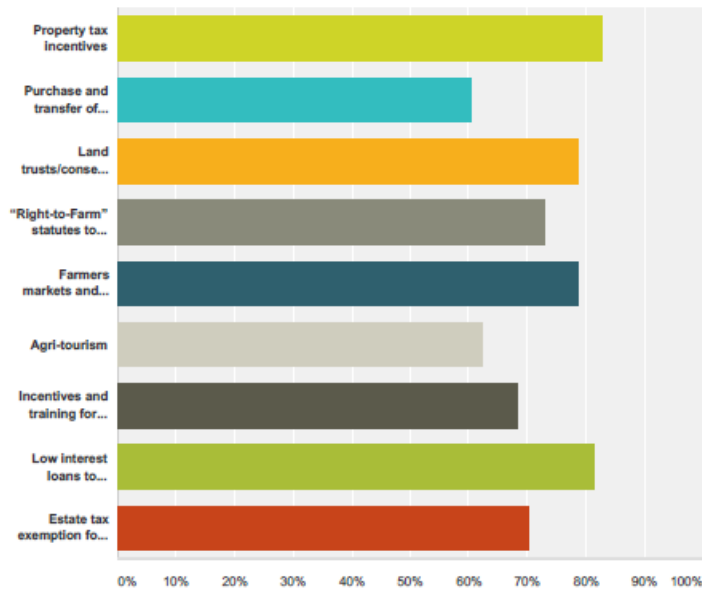
Additional protections suggested by survey respondents:

- Help farmers comply with regulations; streamline regulations; regulatory relief at local-state-federal levels.
- Loosen restrictions on agri-tourism for lodging and food services.
- Implement flood control and drainage improvements.
- Address water/irrigation shortages. Form a watershed irrigation district to acquire and share water rights.
- Provide incentives for soil improvement:
 - Soil carbon sequestration, environmental enhancements
 - Create a system to nurture and grow farmers.



Q8 There are other ways beyond the ARL designation to further protect prime farmland and sustain commercial agriculture in Pierce County. Which options do you support? (Check any)

Answered: 184 Skipped: 29



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