

Initial Citizen Committee Recommendations

Goal Statement II. Protect Natural Resource Lands, Aquatic Resources and Industries (agriculture, forestry, fish and shellfish)

For nearly everyone in Skagit County, working farms are a large part of what defines their sense of place. Working forests, too, have a long tradition in Skagit County and help to anchor most upriver communities. Fishing and shellfish harvesting have been practiced here for millenia. Working farms and forests and healthy rivers and bays also provide a wide array of tangible benefits to the county and county residents. These include:

- direct economic benefits, such as farm and forestry income and tax revenues;
- indirect economic benefits, through tourism, recreation and other activities;
- sustaining traditional ways of life;
- providing fresh local food, open space, wildlife habitat, clean water, and other environmental services; and
- buffering natural areas from urban and rural sprawl.

To protect natural resource lands and industries, the Citizen Committee recommends:

- 1. Skagit County should strive for no net loss of acreage and total agricultural productivity potential from land zoned for agriculture (Ag-NRL) in Skagit County over coming generations with a goal to preserve agriculture and food production.**
 - a) Vested development rights and already approved ecological restoration projects will lead to some losses of existing Ag-NRL land. To strive for “no net loss” of Ag-NRL in the aggregate, the County should initiate the identification of lands for possible addition to Ag-NRL in the near future, and create a plan for rezoning lands to achieve no net loss over time. Lands to consider for replacement of lost Ag-NRL land are those that have high quality agricultural soils and/or display active agriculture use and are located within a reasonable proximity to existing farm operations (primarily Rural Resource-NRL and Rural Reserve); with top priority given to parcels that are 40 acres or greater with current agricultural use. Affected landowners would be compensated for reduced development potential through purchase of lost development rights. Lands that are not recommended as replacement lands include forested lands that would require clearing, especially in the vicinity of wetlands and streams.
 - b) If sea level increases begin to cause significant salinity and drainage impacts to farmland in the Delta such that the costs of those impacts become economically unsustainable for dike and drainage districts and landowners, then develop a proactive plan for returning affected farmland to tidal salt marsh or wetland in areas where the Dike District and landowners deem the costs to be economically unsustainable. Replace the lost farmland under the same “no net loss” policy as above.

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2. Urban Growth Areas (UGAs) should not expand into agricultural lands

This recommendation would restrict UGA expansions into Ag-NRL and lands that may potentially be added to Ag-NRL under 1a). It is anticipated that increasing population within existing UGAs will, in the long term, preserve these lands for agriculture.

3. Maintain, strengthen, and enforce County regulations to protect agriculture

Skagit County already has some of the nation’s strongest regulations to protect agriculture. The County should continue to set national precedents with its policies and strictly enforce them. Specifically, we recommend the following actions.

- a) Within Ag-NRL:
 - i. Maintain and enforce the current 40-acre minimum lot size;
 - ii. Maintain and enforce current rules restricting land uses to only agriculture and accessory uses, with new residences allowed only when landowners can document three years of continuous farming;
 - iii. Maintain the maximum development footprint of 1-acre, located on the parcel edge near a road, for any new residential development lands zoned Ag-NRL
- b) County regulations should also support the location of a centralized Agricultural Industrial Park where agricultural industrial uses and processing facilities can be located.
- c) County roads that are regularly used by farm vehicles should be designated “country roads,” which cannot be widened or modified to accommodate greater non-farm, motorized traffic.

4. Maintain, strengthen, and expand non-regulatory programs to support agriculture

- a) Double funding for the Farmland Legacy Program, which purchases development rights through voluntary sales that protect private property rights, from a variety of potential sources, provided that this would not preclude restoration in the middle Skagit River of Ag-NRL lands not actually being farmed.
- b) The County should move forward and implement a county-wide Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program. The program would be interjurisdictional, with development rights being transferred from agricultural and other priority conservation lands to appropriate locations within urban areas. Urban areas that receive greater density should also receive additional resources to provide adequate infrastructure and amenities to support it. As part of program implementation, a TDR expert should be consulted to evaluate the local situation and develop strategies that consider local obstacles and opportunities. It is crucial that the TDR program be designed to complement rather than undercut the successful Farmland Legacy Program.
- c) Support continued operation and maintenance of the dike and drainage system consistent with current requirements and agreements, including the Tidegate Fish Initiative.

5. Manage stormwater effectively to protect fish, shellfish, and agriculture

Stormwater from developed areas has profound impacts on salmon habitat, by changing the hydrology and water quality of streams; on shellfish beds, by introducing pollutants that can lead to harvest restrictions to protect human health; and on agriculture, by creating or aggravating drainage problems and by leaving behind pollutants that are taken up by farm soils or crops.

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Road projects and urban and rural development should bear the full cost of mitigating these impacts. Stormwater management must, at a minimum, include managing water quantity (e.g., not giving drainage districts more water than they can handle) and water quality (runoff must meet water quality standards per NPDES regulation).

6. Encourage local/regional efforts to support natural resource industries and the ecosystem, forged by those with the greatest on-the-ground knowledge of how to meet the needs of both

The Citizen Committee does not believe that we in Skagit County must choose between farms and fish. Both are crucial to the heritage of this place. We who live here must find solutions that allow both to flourish into the future.

- a) We support local initiatives to conserve farms and fish together, such as the Tidegate Fish Initiative, which authorizes the conversion of 2,700 acres of delta farmland to salmon habitat in return for regulatory certainty necessary to operate and maintain the dike and drainage system.
- b) We support voluntary programs that allow farmers and foresters to generate additional revenue streams while enhancing sustainability (e.g., certification of forests or farms for sustainable practices, foresters tapping emerging carbon markets that provide an economic incentive to extend harvest rotations, or farmers tapping markets or incentives for clean water by planting filter strips along streams to generate supplemental income to keep their farm operations economically viable). We strongly encourage environmental services that landowners can provide on a rotation basis or which otherwise do not take working farm or forest land out of permanent production. An example is The Nature Conservancy's Farming for Wildlife program, which is working with three farms on the Skagit Delta to experiment with flooding, mowing, and grazing during crop rotations.
- c) Agriculture, particularly food production, should be the primary and preferred use on designated agricultural lands (Ag-NRL). When habitat conservation and restoration projects are proposed on Ag-NRL land, they should be developed and implemented in a collaborative and cooperative manner, involving all affected stakeholders, with the goal of achieving multiple positive outcomes and benefits, including advancement of ecological, agricultural, and, where possible, flood management goals (examples include the Tidegate Fish Initiative and the Fisher Slough restoration project).

7. Seek state, federal or international designation for Skagit Valley as a Cultural and Natural Heritage Site:

The Skagit Valley has some of the state's and world's most productive agricultural soils, an ideal climate for sustainable agriculture, and remains the most intact agricultural landscape in Western Washington. Moreover, Skagit Valley is just as worthy of recognition as an outstanding natural area, as the largest watershed in Puget Sound, supporting all five native species of Pacific salmon and an enormous diversity of wildlife and habitats. The Skagit Valley and its marine shoreline also support a rich human history and heritage, beginning with the Native American communities, through later settlement by Euro-Americans and the immigrants who have come since. Skagit Valley should be nationally and internationally known for the variety and quality of its farm products, fish and

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shellfish, the sustainable practices of those who live and work here, and the continued majesty of its landscape.

To strengthen this recognition and protect this heritage, Skagit County should consider seeking state, federal or international designation of the Skagit Valley as a cultural and natural heritage site. This would increase protections from development beyond those offered by the Growth Management Act, generate additional support for the protection of our agricultural and other natural resource lands and environmental resources, , and secure additional financial resources to assist with those goals. We are hopeful that this designation would also increase the level of certainty for young farmers, fish and shellfish harvesters, and foresters -that their land will remain viable for sustainable commercial agriculture and other resource production throughout their lives.

An example of a federal designation with some parallels can be found on neighboring Whidbey Island where Ebey’s Landing has been designated as a National Historical Reserve. Ebey’s Landing is the nation’s first historical reserve, created in 1978 to protect a rural working landscape and community on Central Whidbey Island. It is a 17,500 acre reserve managed by a 9-member Trust Board and includes 18 working farms, 400 historical structures, native prairies, 2 state parks, miles of shoreline, a network of trails and the second oldest town in Washington State. A Skagit heritage designation should not focus on freezing history, but should recognize the dynamic nature of both our ecosystem and resource industries.

8. Develop and Implement a Skagit Food System Strategy

Skagit County should appoint a Skagit Food Policy Council in the Fall of 2011 to develop specific strategies and county policy recommendations by the Spring of 2012. The Council would then work to implement a Skagit Food System Strategy, help to access additional resources, facilitate communication throughout the local food system and provide ongoing policy advice.

Similar to the Regional Food System Strategy being developed by Metro Vancouver, the Skagit Food System Strategy would tie together local producers, processors, purveyors, and consumers. Among other goals, the Skagit Food System Strategy would:

- enhance the sustainability of the Skagit Valley’s diverse agricultural system, providing policies that work with the various stakeholders to provide economic viability, ecological integrity and social justice;
- increase local food distribution and consumption through retailers, restaurants, institutional consumers like school districts, hospitals, and jails, as well as farmers markets;
- educate students and the general public about the value of the Skagit Food System and how it works;
- encourage value-added programs, from the development of farm products to agri-tourism; and,
- collaborate regionally to encourage trade outside Skagit County, the “grocery basket” of western Washington.

9. Maintain existing zoning protections for forestry

- a) We support existing zoning densities for forest-NRL lands and recommend against increases to higher rural densities.

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- b) We support the existing prohibition of UGA expansions into industrial forest (IF-NRL) lands, and restrictions against UGA expansions into secondary forest (SF-NRL) and rural resource forest (RRc-NRL) lands unless there is no alternative.

10. Reform the Conservation and Reserve Development (CaRD) program, particularly on Natural Resource Lands

We believe CaRD density bonuses are not being implemented in ways that protect the public's interest in the ecological and commercial value of intact forests and agricultural and forest lands, particularly in the County's Rural Resource and Rural Reserve zones, where CaRD density bonuses are granted. At a minimum, current requirements for clustering developments allowed through CaRD bonuses along parcel edges near roads must be strictly enforced. However, the County should consider options to transfer the additional development allowed through CaRDs to strategic locations that would minimize impacts on forestry, agricultural lands, and the ecosystem. The County should also consider setting stricter limits on the amount of clearing allowed for new development in forest zones.