



# Press Release

**For Immediate Release: December 21, 2011**

Ryan Walters, Skagit County Prosecutor's Office

[ryanw@co.skagit.wa.us](mailto:ryanw@co.skagit.wa.us) · 360-419-3444

---

## **Board of County Commissioners enrolls County in Voluntary Stewardship Program for protection of streams in agricultural areas**

SKAGIT COUNTY – On Monday, December 19, 2011, the Board of Skagit County Commissioners adopted an ordinance to enroll the County in the state's new "Voluntary Stewardship Program" (VSP) created by the Legislature earlier this year.

The ordinance enrolls the entirety of unincorporated Skagit County in the VSP, which will make the County eligible for state and federal funding to encourage and assist agricultural landowners to be good stewards of their property. "I really believe that moving forward with this program and rewarding landowners who are voluntarily being good stewards of their property will get us to where we need to be faster than regulations," Commissioner Sharon Dillon said.

The County's Ag Advisory Board and the County Planning Commission voted earlier this year to support enrollment. The County received letters of support from environmental and agricultural organizations, including the State Department of Ecology, Futurewise, and Western Washington Agricultural Association.

Washington counties are required to designate and protect "critical areas," such as streams. While some other counties protect critical areas using mandatory buffers along streams where agriculture is not allowed, Skagit County's "Critical Areas Ordinance for Ongoing Agriculture" (the "Ag-CAO"), instead requires farmers to "not harm or degrade" critical areas, and comply with specific measures to avoid harm to streams. Although Skagit County has spent years and millions of dollars defending its ordinance, in 2007 the state Supreme Court ruled the County's approach was not compliant with state law. Although the Court held that Skagit County need only "protect" and not "enhance" critical areas, it also confirmed that the County's ordinance lacked important details to ensure it could effectively protect critical areas.

For the last four years, agricultural, environmental, and tribal representatives have worked with the state to develop the VSP as a new approach to critical areas protection on agricultural lands. Under the state law that created the VSP, a county that enrolls in the VSP need not update its regulations for compliance with prior state law. If the voluntary program ends up not sufficiently protecting critical areas, however, the County may have to leave the program and establish new regulations to ensure protection.

"The Legislature and the stakeholders put a lot of time into developing this program," County Commissioner Ron Wesen said. "We are going to have to set goals, do a lot of hard work, and be ready to make adjustments, but it is always a better first approach to work with private landowners through incentives."

The ordinance also nominates the Samish and Skagit watersheds as statewide priority watersheds. If confirmed by the State Conservation Commission, these two watersheds will be eligible for more funding than other enrolled watersheds in the state.

While the ordinance makes minor changes to Skagit County's Ag-CAO, the Ag-CAO is still in effect. Farmers must still comply with the Ag-CAO's Watercourse Protection Measures, which restrict livestock access to streams and require farmers to manage pastureland to keep enough vegetative cover to avoid contributing sediment, among other requirements.

For more information, please visit [www.skagitcounty.net/agcao](http://www.skagitcounty.net/agcao).

###