

RURAL PROFILE

INTRODUCTION

This section provides documentation supporting the goals and policies in the Rural Element. It summarizes current conditions, describes the character of Skagit County's rural area, and provides background information on the rural land use designations. The Natural Resource Conservation Element Profile describes the County's designated Natural Resource Lands, while the Land Use Profile discusses Urban Growth Areas, Open Space areas, Public Uses, and other general land use matters.

RURAL CHARACTER

About 80,000 acres in Skagit County fall under one of the rural area designations. These lands are outside of the Urban Growth Areas and the designated Natural Resource Lands (Agriculture-NRL, Industrial and Secondary Forest-NRL, and Rural Resource-NRL). Table 2-1 on the following page shows the acreage of the various rural land use designations.

Skagit County's rural area is characterized by: large areas of relatively undeveloped land, in which natural features and vegetation predominate over the built environment; scattered unincorporated rural communities and villages; isolated rural businesses and industries; and regionally important recreation areas. The rural area land use designations provide a variety of living environments at lower than urban densities which are compatible with farming, fishing and timber management. Rural areas preserve historic and cultural structures and landscapes, retain open spaces, protect designated Natural Resource Lands and identified critical areas, and minimize service demands and costs on County government.

RURAL GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

In 2000, the population of the rural area was estimated to be 34,000 (including the small number of residents living on designated Natural Resource Lands). This was about one-third of the total County population. By 2025, the rural population is expected to be about 43,000, or less than 30 percent of the total. The rate of growth in the rural area should be lower than the urban rate. The Countywide Planning Policies state that over the 20-year planning period, no more than 20 percent of the County's growth should locate in the rural area. During the period 1995-2004, the rural population increased by about 500 persons per year. As the County and cities' Comprehensive Plan policies and development regulations are implemented, this level of rural growth relative to urban growth is expected to decline. In addition, limitations on water rights and measures to protect critical areas and resource lands may tend to further restrict rural residential development.

Table 1 – Comprehensive Plan Land Use Designations and Acreage* (Source: Skagit County Mapping Services; **acreages not yet updated for 2005 GMA Update**)

LAND USE DESIGNATIONS	ACREAGE
RURAL LANDS	
Rural Village Residential (RV)	2,922
Rural Intermediate (RI)	8,297
Rural Reserve (RRv)	70,110
Subtotal	81,317
RURAL COMMERCIAL/INDUSTRIAL LANDS	
Rural Business (RB)	157
Rural Freeway Service (RFS)	28
Rural Village Commercial (RVC)	18
Natural Resource Industrial (NRI)	229
Small-Scale Recreation & Tourism (SRT)	67
Rural Center (RC)	19
Rural Marine Industrial (RMI)	62
Cottage Industry/Small-Scale Business (CSB)	29
Subtotal	621
TOTAL	81,938

Acreage figures are derived based on the best information and technology available. Accuracy may vary depending on the source of the information, changes in political boundaries or hydrological features, or the methodology used to map and calculate a particular land use.

The Rural area goals, policies, and land use designation criteria are included in the Rural Chapter, the companion document to the Rural Profile. The land use designations for the Rural Area allow for a variety of residential densities and rural- and natural resource-related businesses while protecting rural character. Several of these designations implement the Growth Management Act's allowance of "limited areas of more intensive rural development," or LAMIRDs, based on 1997 amendments to the Act. LAMIRDs allow greater development than is generally allowed in the rural area, provided that certain limitations are maintained to retain rural character and prevent sprawl. One category of LAMIRD recognizes areas that were already for the most part developed in 1990, when the Growth Management Act was adopted. These existing residential, commercial, or industrial areas primarily allow infill development, and must be contained within logical outer boundaries to prevent sprawl. Two other types of commercial LAMIRDs – small scale recreation and tourism uses, and isolated small scale businesses – may allow new development provided that developed is contained and consistent with the surrounding rural character.

The residential land use designations in the Rural Area are:

- Rural Intermediate (RI);
- Rural Village Residential (RVR); and
- Rural Reserve (RRv).

All lands designated Rural Intermediate and Rural Village Residential are considered to be part of a LAMIRD that was predominantly developed by 1990 and contained by a logical outer boundary consisting of the “built environment.” The Rural Village Residential and Rural Intermediate designations reflect areas that were for the most part already developed or platted at land use densities of 1 residence per 2.5 acres, or greater, when the Growth Management Act was implemented. The Comprehensive Plan’s Rural Village Residential and Rural Intermediate designation criteria closely follow the GMA LAMIRD provisions because Skagit County was considering its 1997 Comprehensive Plan at the same time that the state legislature was developing the ESB 6094 amendments to the Growth Management Act that institutionalized the LAMIRD concept. Skagit County carefully considered the existing built environment and logical outer boundaries to its RVR and RI designations when it first mapped these areas through the 1997 Comprehensive Plan.

Some think of the LAMIRD concept as being limited to specific areas such as Similk Beach, which was designated a LAMIRD in 2002 to address a problem of failing septic systems. Skagit County has clarified through the 2005 GMA Update that many of its rural designations fall into one of the three categories of LAMIRD under GMA.

In contrast to Rural Village Residential and Rural Intermediate, the Rural Reserve designation covers those portions of the rural area that were not already developed at higher densities in 1990. The Growth Management Hearings Boards have generally said that rural area densities must be one residence per five acres or lower – equating to lot sizes of five acres or larger – unless the area is designated a LAMIRD. Land designated Rural Reserve may be developed at one residence per 10 acres, or two residences per 10 acres through a Conservation and Reserve Development (CaRD), a technique for allowing development while preserving open space that is discussed in greater detail in the Land Use Chapter and Profile.

The Comprehensive Plan’s land use designations are implemented by regulations specific to each zone as found in the Skagit County zoning code and other development regulations.

COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL USES OUTSIDE OF UGAS

In developing its rural commercial and industrial designations 1998 - 2000, Skagit County undertook an extensive review of existing commercial and industrial uses and zoning in the rural area. The County combined this information with an analysis of the commercial, industrial, and natural resource industrial uses allowed in the rural area under the Growth Management Act, to develop the following rural commercial and industrial land use designations:

- Rural Village Commercial (RVC)
- Rural Center (RC)
- Rural Freeway Service (RFS)
- Small Scale Recreation and Tourism (SRT)

- Small Scale Business (SSB)
- Rural Business (RB)
- Natural Resource Industrial (NRI)
- Rural Marine Industrial (RMI)

Virtually all of these rural commercial or industrial designations may be categorized as a type of LAMIRD allowed under GMA. These designations are shown on the Comprehensive Plan/Zoning Map to indicate an existing use in the rural area meeting the appropriate land use designation criteria. In some cases, new rural commercial or industrial uses may be designated on the map following the map amendment process described in the Community Plans and Implementation Element. Comprehensive Plan amendment applications for new rural commercial or industrial designations require the submittal of a specific business plan consistent with the designation criteria that will be initiated within two years of the property being redesignated. This is to avoid speculation in rural commercial/industrial land and to ensure that the County focuses its review efforts on real development proposals.

Following is a brief description of the various rural commercial and industrial land use designations. Greater detail is provided in the goals, policies, and designation criteria contained in the Rural Chapter. In some cases, detailed information has been removed from the designation policies and added to the Profile as a way to maintain the legislative history behind certain land use decisions.

Rural Village Commercial

Rural Village Commercial districts are intended to serve as the major centers of rural commercial activity in the County unincorporated area. A Rural Village Commercial district is identified for each of the 10 Rural Villages in the County (Alger, Bay View, Big Lake, Clear Lake, Conway, Edison, Lake Cavanaugh, Lake McMurray, Marblemount and Rockport). Rural Village Commercial districts may be expanded through the annual Comprehensive Plan amendment cycle or through a community plan, provided that the district remains within the boundaries of the Rural Village itself. Rural Village Commercial districts are the top priority location under the Comprehensive Plan for new commercial development in the rural area. Rural Village Commercial districts existing within Rural Villages, which are pre-existing LAMIRDS surrounded by logical outer boundaries as allowed by RCW 36.70A.070(5)(d)(i) and (iv).

Rural Center

Rural Centers are clusters of small-scale commercial uses at selected locations in the unincorporated portion of the County. In some cases they include public uses such as a fire hall or post office. Typically they are located at crossroads of County roads, state routes, or major arterials. They are smaller in size and intensity than Rural Villages, but like their larger counterparts above, Rural Centers are intended to help meet existing and future commercial needs at existing areas of commercial activity. Rural Centers are pre-existing LAMIRDS

surrounded by logical outer boundaries as allowed by RCW 36.70A.070(5)(d)(i) and (iv).

Rural Freeway Service

Rural Freeway Service (RFS) areas were designated at portions of four Interstate 5 freeway interchanges in the rural area that had existing commercial development (or development commitments) as of 1990. They qualify as pre-existing LAMIRDs surrounded by logical outer boundaries as allowed by RCW 36.70A.070(5)(d)(i) and (iv). The County conducted extensive research in 1998 – 2001 to establish and verify that the properties currently designated RFS meet the GMA and Comprehensive Plan LAMIRD requirements. Each RFS-designated area underwent close scrutiny by the Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board following appeals of those designations. Because the RFS designation recognizes areas that had existing commercial development or development commitments in 1990, Skagit County does not expect that new RFS areas will be designated.

Small Scale Recreation and Tourism

The Small-Scale Recreation and Tourism designation is intended to foster economic development and diversification that is recreational or tourist-related, that relies on a rural location and setting, and that incorporates the scenic and natural features of the land. The SRT designation is consistent with the type of LAMIRD authorized by RCW 36.70A.070(5)(d)(ii).

Natural Resource Industrial

The Natural Resource Industrial (NRI) designation is intended to support the production of agricultural, forest, and aquatic products by allowing processing facilities, limited direct resource sales, and limited natural resource support services. Examples of typical NRI uses include saw mills, agricultural or forest industry equipment maintenance, agricultural processing plants, and seafood processing and on-site sales. Mineral processing activities are generally guided by separate policies found in the Land Natural Resources Element of the Comprehensive Plan. The NRI designation provides a location for natural resource processing and support services that does not remove designated natural resource lands from production. The NRI designation may qualify as a LAMIRD under RCW 36.70A.070(5)(d)(i), if the site has been in industrial use since 1990, or under RCW 36.70A.070(5)(d)(iii), if the use is new.

Rural Marine Industrial

The Rural Marine Industrial (RMI) designation is intended to recognize existing rural marine industrial facilities, to permit expansion of existing rural marine industrial activities that are water or shoreline dependent, and to provide for limited changes of use. The term “rural marine industrial facilities” includes harbors, marinas, docks, moorages, and other existing or permitted facilities that support and enable marine industry and commerce.

Because Skagit County has significant navigable waters, and a long and continuing history of

marine related commerce and industry, a rural marine industrial designation is an essential component of Skagit County's comprehensive land use plan and its rural and natural resource-based economy.

Despite the abundance of navigable waters in Skagit County, marine access is very limited, particularly outside of Urban Growth Areas. Due to the state's Shoreline Management Act, the siting of new marine industrial facilities would be difficult. The Rural Marine Industrial designation seeks to utilize to best advantage those existing locations in the rural area with a history of marine industrial activity or regulatory approval, and with continuing use of the property for marine industrial purposes.

The RMI-designated properties were reviewed under, and found to comply with, the GMA criteria for limited industrial areas of more intensive rural development as authorized by RCW 36.70A.070(5)(d)(i).

Small Scale Business

The Small-Scale Business (SSB) designation allows small-scale commercial or industrial activities involving the provision of services or fabrication or production of goods, primarily for clients and markets outside of the immediate rural area. The SSB designation may be applied to existing or new businesses, whereas the Rural Business designation applies only to businesses that were established as of June 1, 1997. The name of the designation was changed during the 2005 GMA Update from Cottage Industry/Small Scale Business to avoid any confusion with Home Based Business. A SSB may be substantially larger, and requires a designation on the Comprehensive Plan/Zoning map, whereas Home Based Business does not. The SSB designation is a type of LAMIRD authorized by RCW 36.70A.070(5)(d)(iii).

Rural Business

The Rural Business designation is intended to acknowledge certain significant uses in the rural area that were in existence as of June 1, 1997, when the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan was adopted, that do not match any of the other commercial and industrial Comprehensive Plan designations. The Rural Business (RB) designation provides reasonable expansion and change of use opportunities for these pre-existing rural uses. The designation is consistent with the Growth Management Act's allowance for "the intensification of development on lots containing isolated nonresidential uses" (RCW 36.70A.070(5)(d)(iii)). The Rural Business designation may not be appropriate for all pre-existing commercial uses in the rural area, if the use is more consistent continuing to operate under a special use permit, or if the granting of a commercial designation might jeopardize the appropriate use of surrounding Natural Resource Lands.

MASTER PLANNED RESORTS

Master planned resorts are self-contained and fully integrated planned unit developments, in

settings of significant natural amenities, providing short-term visitor accommodations including a range of indoor or outdoor recreational facilities and visitor services. Master planned resorts are larger in scale, and involve greater potential impacts on the surrounding area, than uses permitted under the Small-Scale Recreation and Tourism designation. Master planned resorts may constitute urban growth outside of urban growth areas as limited by RCW 36.70A.360 and RCW 36.70A.362. Designation of Master Planned Resorts requires amending the Comprehensive Plan and Zoning Maps, prior to, or concurrent with an application for master plan review. The comprehensive plan amendment process should evaluate all the probable significant adverse environmental impacts from the entire proposal, even if the proposal is to be developed in phases, and these impacts shall be considered in determining whether any particular location is suitable for a Master Planned Resort.