



SKAGIT COUNTY VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

BIENNIAL REPORT

2023-2025

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Introduction

This report for fiscal years (FY) 2023-2025 documents the status and accomplishments of [Skagit County’s Voluntary Stewardship Program \(VSP\) Work Plan](#), which was approved by the [Washington State Conservation Commission \(WSCC\)](#) in June 2017. This report documents implementation efforts that have occurred between July 1, 2023, and June 30, 2025. The Skagit County VSP [Watershed Advisory Group](#) (Work Group), developed this report to provide a periodic review of the effectiveness and accomplishments of the County’s Work Plan in meeting the purpose and intent of VSP (Revised Code of Washington [RCW] 36.70A.700(2)).

Requirements

Each two-year report must provide the status of plans and accomplishments of the work plan. The Washington State Conservation Commission released Policy Advisory #05-18 to outline content reporting requirements under the Voluntary Stewardship Program.

Table 1 provides the location in this report where information on the status and progress towards meeting the intent of VSP can be found. The numbers in the left column correspond with the elements found in [VSP Policy Advisory 05-18](#).

Table 1. Summary of Progress towards meeting VSP requirements

#	VSP Requirement	Biennial Report Location
1	The protection and enhancement of critical areas within the area where agricultural activities are conducted;	Section 2 summarizes Best Management Practices implemented by various technical providers. Figure 2 shows how many Best Management Practices were implemented in each watershed.
2	The maintenance and improvement of the long-term viability of agriculture;	Sections 2 & 5 describe how Skagit technical providers are implementing Best Management Practices for long-term agricultural health.
3	Reducing the conversion of farmland to other uses;	Table 5 summarizes the efforts of Skagit Farmland Legacy easements and acres protected within the 2023-2025 biennium.
4	The maximization of the use of voluntary incentive programs to encourage good riparian and ecosystem stewardship as an alternative to historic approaches used to protect critical areas;	Section 1 summarizes outreach methods used to maximize voluntary stewardship. Section 2 summarizes Best Management Practices implemented by technical providers.
5	The leveraging of existing resources by relying upon existing work and plans in counties and local watersheds, as well as existing state and federal programs to the maximum extent practicable to achieve program goals;	Section 2 provides an overview of the existing resources the Skagit VSP leverages. Work Plan describes available resources that are available to utilize.
6	Ongoing efforts to encourage and foster a spirit of cooperation and partnership among county, tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests to better assure the program success;	Section 1 summarizes outreach methods used to maximize voluntary stewardship and highlights partnership projects. Section 6 discusses how Skagit County works with other local technical providers to ensure program success.
7	Ongoing efforts to improve compliance with other laws designed to protect water quality and fish habitat; and	Section 3 uses SCMP data trends to indicate water quality in VSP watersheds.
8	A description of efforts showing how relying upon voluntary stewardship practices as the primary method of protecting critical areas and does not require the cessation of agricultural activities.	Section 2 summarizes projects implemented by various technical providers and how stewardship activities did not require cessation of agriculture.

Acknowledgements

The Watershed Group is made up of 9 local landowners and partner organizations (Table 2). The group is tasked with advising the VSP Coordinator on how best to implement the program in Skagit County. This group meets bi-monthly to make recommendations and offer advice on how best to implement the [Skagit County VSP Work Plan](#).

Meetings are open to the public and all interested Skagitonians are encouraged to attend. The minutes and meeting schedule can be found [here](#).

Table 2. Current Roster of VSP Membership

Name	Term Expiration
Bill Dewey	12/31/2026
Brian Lipscomb	12/31/2026
Emmett Wild	12/31/2026
Jeff McGowan	12/31/2025
Mikala Staples Hughes	12/31/2025
Shannon Rupert	12/31/2026
Terry Sapp	12/31/2026
Maggie Taylor	12/31/2026
Vacant	6/10/2025

Biennial Report

1. Outreach

Skagit County staff continued public outreach efforts through production of materials, presentations, events, and workshops. Educational materials were distributed at local events and through social media via the Skagit County Clean Water channels. The VSP Coordinator also took part in workshops and presented various topics. An important item to note, during the 2023-2025 biennium the VSP Coordinator position was only filled from September 2023- November 2024 and February 2025 on, making it difficult to attend all desired events; however, attending these events are a priority for the upcoming years.

Table 3. Events attended by the Coordinator.

Date	Event	Topic	# of people
1/27/24	WSU Country Living Expo	Agricultural BMPs	~100
2/9/24	Skagit Agricultural Summit	VSP Highlights	~40
5/28/24	Skagit/Whatcom Riparian Workshop	VSP Monitoring	~35
8/24/24	WWAA Farm Fest	Water Quality	~50
9/7/24	Skagit Farmers Market	Salmon Habitat	~50
10/6/24	Festival of Family Farms	Agricultural BMPs	~50
5/23/25	NW Region Envirothon	Participant	N/A

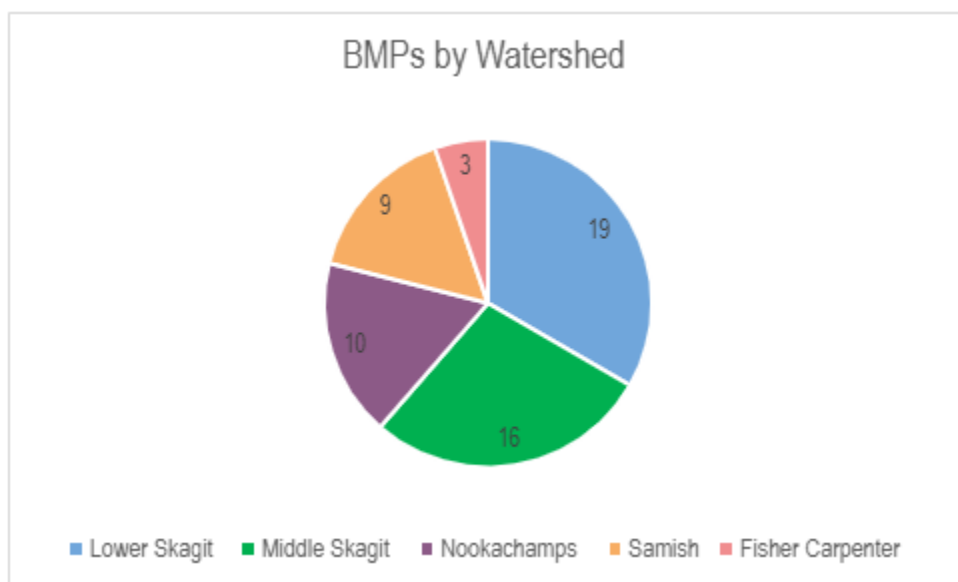
In an effort to improve education on best management practices, the coordinator produced an agricultural survey and post card to send in a mailing. Half the VSP watersheds received the direct mailer in a post card format (Figure 1) and the other as a flyer, success and response of each format will be tracked. The information collected from these surveys will help develop a public facing “share your stewardship” dashboard to improve public outreach.

Figure 1. Share your stewardship postcard mailer.



As a whole, natural resource organizations in the Skagit are well known and have many years of experience and success in their outreach efforts. It is apparent that their outreach has encouraged participation in conservation practices, especially where agricultural activities are conducted. With just the VSP funding, one can see a pattern of high participation in agricultural heavy watersheds (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Location of Best Management Practices funded by VSP during the 2023-2025 biennium.



2. Conservation Practices

Skagit County achieves its VSP protection and enhancement goals through working with local technical providers that recommend and implement Best Management Practices (BMPs) for agricultural producers. Implementation is financed through a wide variety of funding sources. Benchmarks and metrics for achieving protection and enhancement goals are defined in the Skagit County VSP [Work Plan](#).

Historic approaches to protect Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservational Areas (FWHCAs) in Skagit County on [Ag-NRL](#) and [RR-NRL](#) relied on protective land-use designations such as RCW 36.70A.060 and S.C.C. 14.24, while protection of adjoining watercourses consisted of the no further harm or degradation policy. Since the introduction of VSP, programs have

continued to successfully implement protection of these critical areas through purchases and easements, voluntary stewardship, technical assistance, and education.

Projects implemented over the last biennium had agricultural viability benefits that included producing habitat for beneficial species, protecting against bank erosion, promoting soil health, and minimizing nutrient runoff (Table 4). The projects included protections for all five critical areas: wetlands, habitat conservation areas, critical aquifer recharge areas, geologically hazardous areas, and frequently flooded areas.

Table 4. Number of best management practices funded by VSP during the 2023-2025 biennium.

Best Management Practice	#
Herbaceous Weed Control	16
Riparian Management Zone	13
Cover Crop	11
Fence	4
Waste Storage Facility	3
Heavy Use Area	3
Large Woody Debris	2
Waste Transfer Slab	1
Watering Facility	1
Waste Separation Facility	1
Hedgerow	1
Livestock Pipeline	1
Livestock Crossing	1

The 2023-2025 biennium brought many VSP funded projects to the Skagit. Most involved not only protection, but also enhancement. Several Technical Providers worked together with the Watershed Advisory Group to implement projects to help Skagit meet its goals and benchmarks. Below are a few highlights:

Enhancement Project Highlight

The [Natural Resource Stewardship Program's](#) (NRSP) restoration project located along Walker Creek, a tributary to Nookachamps Creek, removed a 3.5-acre monoculture of invasive vegetation (particularly Himalayan blackberry and knotweed as seen to the right in the photo below) and replaced it with a riparian management zone full of native trees and shrubs. The zone encompasses an average width of 100 feet along 1,700 ft of stream. Along with weed maintenance and planting, a fence was also installed so the landowner could continue their livestock grazing adjacent to the planting area. They hope to see an improvement in water quality on site for the protection and enhancement of downstream saltwater shellfish habitat in Skagit Bay, while continuing to farm and use the land.



Agricultural Project Highlight

The [Skagit Conservation District](#) (SCD) farm planning team worked with Skagit County's Natural Resource Stewardship Program to implement a pasture management plan, livestock fence, riparian management zone, and an innovative watering system on a local farm. Located in the middle Skagit, this landowner was interested in improving their pasture yield and stabilizing their riverbank. This last spring, after waiting for the right weather window, SCD Farm Planners applied organic matter using a manure spreader for optimal amounts and absorption. They then used a pasture harrow to break up the manure and help level the soils. Finally, they used a No-Till Drill, which is available for Skagit landowners to rent at a low cost, to plant a selected grass seed mix to reduce soil erosion and conserve moisture for future livestock grazing.



Protection Project Highlight

The [Farmland Legacy Program](#) continued to work with local farmers to purchase and protect farmland under easements. An excerpt from the most recent [Annual Report](#) reads, “Sedro-Woolley Brothers Keith and Mark Houser grew up on their family dairy farm near Hart Slough in Sedro-Woolley along with their three siblings and parents Ray and Winnie Houser. A dairy since the 1950s, the protected property is now leased by Skagit Valley Farm’s operation to grow a variety of row crops. The forest and wetlands on Hart Island remain intact as part of the Houser’s land stewardship. With the homestead farmland now permanently protected, they continue to steward the soil. ‘We make sure a cover crop is planted every winter; in case it floods. Just like our dad taught us,’ said Keith Houser, part of the Houser family co-ownership.”



3. Monitoring

Skagit County Voluntary Stewardship Program Monitoring Plan

Consultant Anchor QEA created the Skagit VSP Monitoring Plan in December of 2024. This monitoring plan builds on the “Monitoring, Reporting, and Adaptive Management” section of the Work Plan. A focus for 2025 and 2026 will be the initial integration of the monitoring plan into the regular function of Skagit VSP, with a focus on adaptively managing the plan as work moves forward.

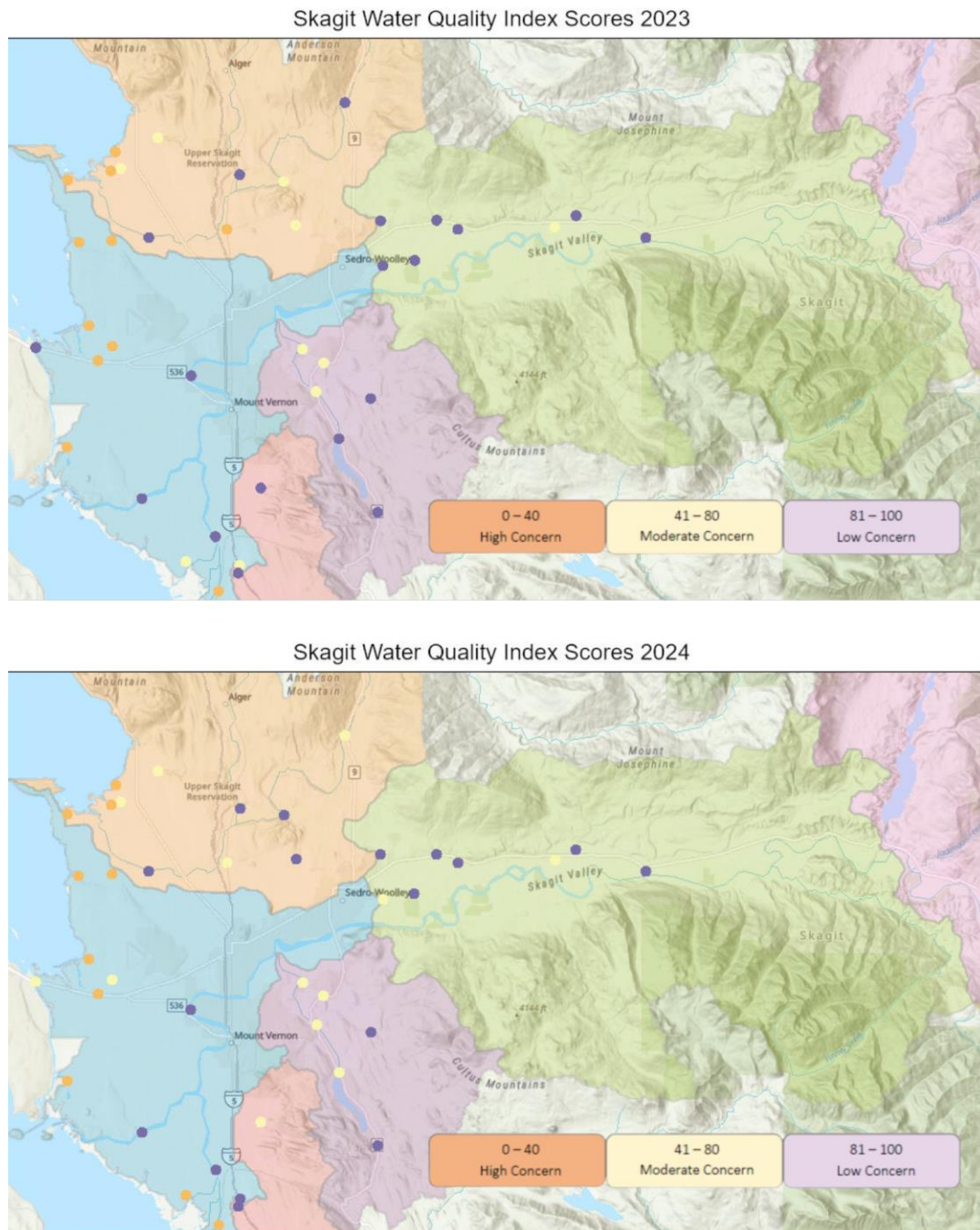
Skagit County Pollution Identification Correction Program

The Skagit County Pollution Identification Correction program identifies water quality pollution from non-compliant properties throughout the county. These properties are contacted by the County, notified of the issue, instructed as to what needs to be corrected to be compliant, and given the contact information of the SCD if they wish to create a farm plan to correct the problems on the property that are non-compliant with the current [Ag-CAO](#). In all cases, VSP and NRSP participation is highly desired and encouraged if the owner is interested in any of the incentives offered that are above and beyond the baseline compliance with the Ag-CAO.

Skagit County Water Quality Monitoring Program

The Skagit County Water Quality Monitoring Program (SCMP) samples water at 40 sites throughout the county that fall under N, S, and F DNR water types. These sites were selected to monitor water quality trends both within and outside agricultural zones (Figure 3). The SCMP monitors dissolved oxygen, conductivity, salinity, temperature, pH, turbidity, and fecal coliform (FC) bacteria. These sites have been sampled every two weeks from 2003 until the present day. All aggregated data and summary trends analyses can be found in the [SCMP annual reports](#) that are released each year. These water quality trends typically show both improvements and deteriorations of water quality in all stream types across the county.

Figure 3. Water Quality Index scores are assigned to SCMP sites to categorize them into levels of concern for the 2023 and 2024 water years.



4. Adaptive Management

There was no adaptive management completed during this biennium. The Work Group and the Coordinator plan to discuss potential updates to the Work Plan and as needed, the Monitoring Plan, during the next biennium, see more in Program Status 2025-2027.

5. Ag Viability

Many of the conservation practices implemented this funding round protected critical areas, while improving agricultural sustainability. As Technical Providers continue their outreach efforts and word of mouth spreads, we expect this to result in even more interest in Skagit VSP by the agricultural community. The Farmland Legacy Program also continues to ignite interest in farmers throughout Skagit County (Table 5).

Table 5. Farmland Legacy Program Easements and Acres 2023-2025.

Year	Easements	Acres
2023	6	421
2024	9	458
2025	3	161 (as of 6/30/25)

By offering voluntary stewardship, the VSP was able to provide resources to producers for protecting critical areas without discontinuing agricultural activities or converting their land to other uses. A great example of this can be found in the *Agricultural Project Highlight* where both the Skagit Conservation District and the Natural Resource Stewardship Program worked with a landowner to improve their pastures, install new fence for cattle, plant a riparian management zone, and implement the use of solar panel waterers.

6. Spirit of Cooperation

These efforts to encourage and foster a spirit of cooperation and partnership in the valley are numerous and ongoing. Skagit County programs that partner with Tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests include the Clean Samish Initiative (CSI), the Clean Water Program, the Conservation Futures Program, the Agricultural Advisory Board, and the Natural Resources Stewardship Program. The County also participates in many

regional programs that advance VSP goals, such Interlocal Agreements with area Tribes on mutually beneficial restoration or planning projects, participating in Skagit TMDL proceedings, as well as Interlocal Agreements with Drainage, Diking and Irrigation Districts.

Through the Skagit Conservation District, Skagit Fisheries Enhancement Group, Skagit Land Trust, and the Natural Resource Stewardship Program, Skagit County VSP has successfully funded over 40 projects this biennium. These organizations work to support VSP goals and benchmarks and ultimately implement these projects to keep the program running.

In addition to the normal capital funding, the last year of the biennium, Skagit was awarded an additional \$1 million to allocate through the Skagit VSP program. Thanks to Senator Muzzall, our Board of County Commissioners, and supporters of the Skagit VSP program for these additional project funds.

Program Status 2025-2027

The Work Group will develop priorities through the budget for the 2025-2027 biennium. The following are anticipated ongoing and future activities:

- Continue to pursue additional funding and partnerships.
- Create a general voluntary stewardship outreach campaign.
- Increase landowner engagement in voluntary programs, specifically in Upper Skagit and Sauk watersheds.
- Create a public facing “share your stewardship” dashboard to improve public outreach.
- Actively maintain a project development list.
- Implement and adaptively manage both Skagit VSP Work Plan and Monitoring Plan.