



# Skagit County Agricultural Advisory Board

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1800 Continental Place • Mount Vernon, Washington 98273  
<https://www.skagitcounty.net/Departments/NRAgAdvisory>

Skagit County Planning Commission and PDS Staff  
1800 Continental Place  
Mount Vernon, WA 98273

June 16, 2025

## **RE: Agritourism Remand Questions**

Dear Skagit County Planning Commission and PDS Staff:

The Skagit County Agricultural Advisory Board (AAB) has been working on this review of agritourism for nearly 10 years and has held positions on agritourism since its inception. In this timeframe, we have researched agritourism around the country and other parts of the world to discover how working agriculture coexists with agritourism. The AAB has worked hard to understand the Washington State Growth Management Act and applicable state laws to ensure any changes proposed would not run foul to state law. With this research, numerous meetings with the Skagit County Planning Department, Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, Western Washington Agricultural Association, Friends of Skagit County, the Skagit County Planning Commission and other agricultural interests and with a vision to keep Skagit County's agricultural lands working, County Staff brought us a definition of agritourism to fit our findings based on a definition from Marion County, Oregon as follows:

*A common, farm-based, commercial activity serving the public that promotes agriculture, is directly related to onsite agricultural production, is incidental and subordinate to the working farm operation, and is operated by the owner or operator of the farm or family members. Celebratory gatherings, weddings, parties or similar uses that cause the property to act as an event center or that take place in structures specifically designed for such events are not agritourism.*

This agritourism definition follows the main idea that soil-dependent agricultural production is the primary function of Ag-NRL lands in Skagit County and agritourism activities shall be subordinate to the primary activities. This idea has been expressed with the phrase 'Big A, little t' meaning agriculture comes first with tourism activities supporting.

Ag-NRL are our County's natural resource lands, lands that cannot be replicated anywhere else, with the primary function of these working lands to produce agricultural products. Skagit County soils are ranked in the top 2% globally and combined with our mild marine climate supports nearly 80 crops of commercial significance. Vegetables, seed crops, livestock, berries, grains and many more crops are grown to feed our neighbors in Skagit County and around the world. A network of agricultural support businesses flourishes in Skagit County which in turn supports farmers across Northwest Washington.

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Counties around Western Washington that have not protected their agricultural lands with the same earnest as Skagit County have seen farmland paved over and support business disappear. Skagit County farmers feel this encroachment and understand how quickly the whole system can fail. Skagit County's aggressive protection of agricultural lands has kept the agricultural economy strong and changes to the system must continue to protect agriculture first.

Activities that do not rely on agriculture but can benefit from existing near agriculture should be considered a commercial venture and not allowed under agritourism. Rather, they should be rigorously examined under the special use process to ensure agricultural lands are protected and agricultural activities are not negatively impacted.

Other proposed changes to the County Code were in support of the definition and emphasize in code that agricultural lands and buildings should be used primarily in support of growing crops and raising livestock.

The AAB sent the above agritourism definition along with supporting code change suggestions to the Skagit County Planning Commission who ultimately sent the proposal to the Board of County Commissioners. After consideration, the Board of County Commissioners decided to remand the proposal back to the Planning Commission and, with the help of the AAB, answer some questions about the proposed code language. The AAB's responses to the remand questions follow, with the BoCC question first followed by a response by the AAB.

1. Whether additional detail is required to describe and regulate agritourism uses other than those considered accessory uses pursuant to SCC

#### 14.16.400(2)(b);

SCC 14.16.400(2)(b) refers to agricultural accessory use. The AAB has proposed limited code changes regarding accessory uses on ag lands, believing that existing rules were largely sufficient and compliant with GMA law. The AAB holds that most agritourism activities are appropriate and allowed when they are connected to agriculture and subordinate to agriculture on the property. The subsection already allows for (3) *Farm animal or horticultural viewing by the public*, for example the Tulip Festival and (4) *U-pick sales to the public* which allow many agritourism activities rooted in agriculture. Activities that do not rely on onsite agriculture or products grown and raised onsite are not an appropriate agricultural accessory use.

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The AAB recommends changing in section (7) *Activities associated with tourism which promote local agriculture...*, the word tourism to agritourism to tie this section back to the previously stated agritourism definition. Tourism is too broad of a term for the agricultural zone and the change will narrow the focus of the section to agritourism activities.

2. Whether the Proposed Agritourism Code Amendments afford adequate and equitable opportunity to participate in the annual Skagit Valley Tulip Festival;

Production of tulips, flowers and ornamental crops in Skagit County is an important local industry and public participation through the Tulip Festival and other organized events should be encouraged, including on-farm activities by producers. Agritourism activities based on a soil dependent agricultural enterprise will not have a conflict with agritourism rules. Chapter 14.04.020 defines Agricultural Accessory Use and the two subsections (3) *Farm animal or horticultural viewing by the public* and (4) *U-pick sales to the public* protects Skagit Valley Tulip Festival activities that are agritourism while curtailing commercial activities without a tie to agriculture on agricultural lands.

A well-structured Special Use event permit would clarify and self-regulate events and activities according to the vision of producers and organizers that fall outside of agritourism rules. The permit can clarify GMA and SEPA requirements.

3. Whether Skagit Ag-NRL lands east of the pipeline crossing should be considered and regulated differently than the diked and drained portion of the Skagit below the pipeline crossing (Edit: And/or should there be exceptions for small lots?)

The AAB, in addition to many agricultural groups, hold that all Ag-NRL lands as well as lands used for agriculture in Skagit County as designated in county code and maps, be controlled under the same rules regardless of where they fall in the county. The AAB also holds that Ag-NRL lands regardless of size should be treated the same. New and small farmers have repeatedly told the AAB that parcels less than 5 acres are ideal for truck farms. Protecting these agricultural lands for agricultural production is key to allowing new farmers to enter the industry and become the next generation of Skagit County farmers. As lands outside the Ag-NRL

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are evaluated, agritourism rules have the potential to be softened to allow more activities while protecting the prime resource lands in Ag-NRL.

4. Whether the temporary use standards are sufficient detailed; and

The AAB and Planning Commission proposal augments the details for use of temporary use permits. Temporary use permits have long existed in code and some agritourism venues have used them, establishing a precedent and template. The current code defines temporary events as an Administrative Special Use defined as *'commercial use of a property for any musical, cultural, or social event held either indoors or out of doors'*. A system of permits for commercial and non-agricultural activities is necessary to avoid an 'anything goes' attitude on ag lands, leading to a degradation of agricultural viability in Skagit County. Temporary use standards should clearly reflect size limitations; number of people, size of lot (GMA calls for less than 1 acre), number of events (the agritourism proposal limited temporary use to 12 annually) and any other limitations in the definition and on the applications. When the connection to agriculture is limited, the activity should require a temporary use permit to ensure that operations not tied to agriculture are aware of the temporary use of their enterprise.

5. Whether and to what extent the Proposed Agritourism Code amendments and existing code are consistent with the decision ultimately rendered in the matter of King County v. Friends of Sammamish Valley and other state-level action related to agritourism.

The Supreme Court ruling follows a long history involving contentious commercial uses of ag lands in King County. The decision appears to clearly support existing GMA law that non-agricultural, commercial activities on ag lands shall be restricted in favor of agriculture as the primary purpose in ag zones. The ruling highlights a numerical measure of proportion of product for sale that is not produced on-site, especially regarding adult beverages, and imposes size limits on operations. The AAB believes that such judicial action in Skagit County should be avoided by following GMA, SEPA, and now the Supreme Court requirements favoring thoughtful preservation of ag lands for agriculture.

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The Skagit County Agricultural Advisory Board feels Skagit County can maintain its position as an agricultural production powerhouse in Western Washington as well as welcoming neighbors to enjoy what preserving agricultural lands looks like, giving them a tie to agriculture and their food. This will only be possible by maintaining and enforcing rules to protect farms and farmland in Skagit County while maintaining control of the periphery uses occurring on the land.

Thank you for considering our recommendations and please reach out to us for questions and/or clarifications.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Hughes". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Michael Hughes  
Chair, Agricultural Advisory Board

cc.

Skagit County Commissioner Ron Wesen

Skagit County Commissioner Lisa Janicki

Skagit County Commissioner Peter Browning

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