

County approaches to farmland protection

Zoning is the basis for efforts by four dissimilar counties in Washington State to protect their remaining farmland

By Frederick Steiner, Richard Dunford, and Lori Koler

IN the past decade, the conversion of farmland to nonfarm uses emerged as a major planning issue in the United States and Canada (1, 2, 3). As in other American states and Canadian provinces, there has been much discussion in Washington State about the loss of farmland and

what should be done about it. In recent years, four disparate counties in the state—Clark, Skagit, Whitman, and Yakima—have enacted farmland protection programs. While the four counties all use zoning as a foundation, their programs are quite dissimilar.

Some background

Each county's distinctive characteristics played a crucial role in the formation of the farmland protection program. Clark County is part of the second largest metropolitan area (Portland, Oregon) in the Pacific Northwest. Agriculture is in a state of transition. Relatively large commercial dairy farms are being fragmented and shifted to small-scale agricultural uses,

such as vineyards and nurseries. Dairying and other farm enterprises remain strong in the more remote regions of the county, but 10- to 20-acre (4- to 8.1-hectare) ranchettes predominant in the more accessible areas in the southern part of the county. The changing character of agriculture is directly attributable to the tremendous population growth in Clark County during the past decade. Most of this growth has occurred on high-quality farmland in unincorporated areas.

Skagit County, about an hour north of Seattle, is an important producer of vegetables, berries, and dairy products. While containing a variety of terrain, farming is confined to the rich soils in the river valleys and floodplains. A significant portion of this farmland has been lost in recent years to interstate highway construction and annexations by many small cities and towns. Simultaneously, several processing plants have closed in the county, with a negative impact on agricultural production.

Almost all of the unincorporated land in Whitman County is used for farming. Average farm size is about 1,000 acres (405 hectares) and increasing. Whitman County is one of the largest producers of small grain in the United States. With less than 50,000 people, the population density of the county is just one-third of the state average. Relatively slow growth has resulted in little demand for farmland for residential uses. Whitman County thus remains agriculturally oriented. However, farmland has been lost or threatened by such

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federal projects as dams on the Snake River and pumped storage facilities.

Agriculture in Yakima County is extremely diverse. There are fruit crops; vegetable crops; specialty crops, such as hops and mint; and dairying. Most fruit and vegetable crops are processed and packed locally for shipping. Yakima County, which contains the sixth largest city in the state, has experienced steady population growth. Relatively large amounts of farmland have been developed. Construction of an interstate highway has also contributed to farmland losses.

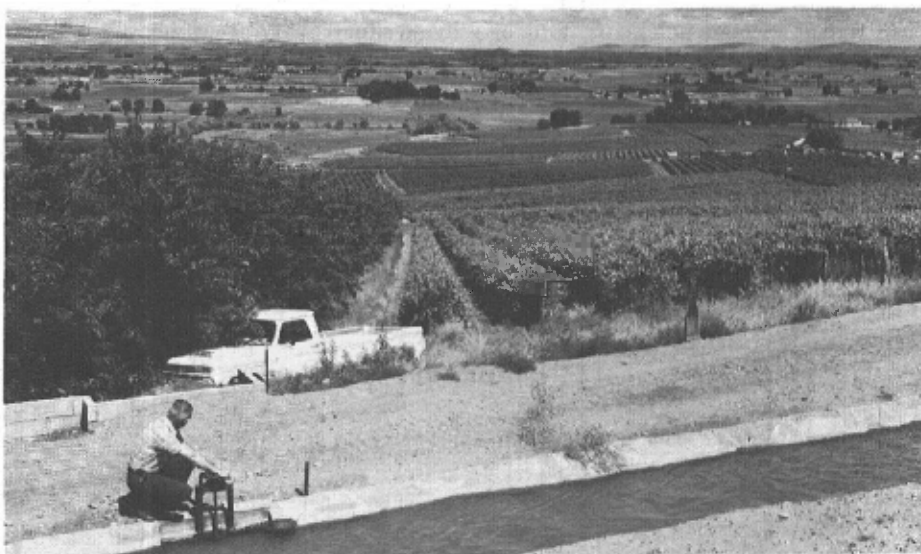
Land use policy approaches

Despite the differences in these counties, all have pursued the same goal—the protection of their remaining farmland. But their approaches to this goal differ significantly. For example, the farmland protection program in Clark County relies on two approaches: concentration of growth and development in a specific area and clustering of housing in agricultural zones. Key provisions in the urban growth area

Urban growth pressures are minimal in Whitman County (top), a largely rural area in the heart of the Palouse. Highway construction as well as urban development have claimed farmland in Yakima County (right), which features a diverse agricultural industry, including cherries and Concord grapes. In Skagit County (below), just north of Seattle, a variety of development forces have claimed much farmland in recent years.



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include increased density provisions, a utility extension policy limiting further expansion of water and sewer lines from the largest city in the county, and better capital improvement programming. The second implementation measure designed to protect farmland is a 20-acre minimum lot size in agricultural and forest zones. Within these zones a cluster-housing provision permits one housing unit for every five acres with a minimum parcel size of an acre and a half. A covenant is placed on the deed for the remainder of the land to hold it in farm or forest use.

Skagit County's farmland protection program relies on development restrictions in two agricultural zones: agricultural districts and agricultural reserves. The agricultural district requires a minimum lot size of 1/16 of a section of land or more, or 40 acres (gross area) or more with a minimum lot width of 200 feet (61 meters). The agricultural reserve zone requires a minimum lot size of 1/32 section of land or more, or 20 acres (gross area) or more with a minimum lot width of 200 feet. If a retiring farmer sells his or her land, he or she

can keep the house, but a new house cannot be built on the property without a special variance. This program is administered through a one-step permit system. A hearing examiner reviews zoning variances, special-use permits, plats, and so forth.

Whitman County's efforts to protect farmland rely on an agricultural zone, performance standards for rural housing, and the prohibition of subdivision and light commercial development outside existing cities and special unincorporated areas. The county's agricultural zone covers the entire county with two conditional uses for housing, and provisions for heavy commercial uses not suited for existing built-up areas. The first conditional use is directed toward those individuals who seek a rural-living situation. For rural housing a set of performance standards must be met before a conditional use is granted. These include certain environmental criteria—geologic features, soils, floodplains, and vegetation (4). There are also health standards for on-site sewage disposal and water supply, a minimum frontage on an improved county

road of 200 feet, and conditions concerning the site's past agricultural use and potential for agriculture. A three-person team—the county planner, the district conservationist from the Soil Conservation Service, and the county health official—make an on-site evaluation of all proposed rural housing sites to evaluate the sites with respect to these criteria.

The second conditional use for housing in Whitman County attempts to protect the agricultural economy. To maintain a successful farm in Whitman County, it is often necessary to provide housing for people working on the farm. As a result, a lot may be created for an additional housing unit if the inhabitant earns more than half of his or her income from farming and the house is dedicated to farm use for 10 years.

Yakima County's program is based on several zoning districts that are designed to protect farmland while encouraging growth in or adjacent to built-up areas. The exclusive agricultural and general agricultural zones have 40-acre and 20-acre minimums, respectively. Each also includes a small-lot provision for additional

Rural zoning in Yakima County, Washington

	Exclusive Agricultural	General Agricultural	General Rural	Rural Residential	Rural Settlement	Forest Residential
Purpose	Preserve and maintain agricultural land.	Preserve and maintain agricultural land.	Protect and maintain the openness and rural character of outlying areas.	1. A transitional area between suburbia and agricultural areas. 2. Encourage infilling and containment of areas already subdivided, lost to agriculture.	Allow a mixture of residential, commercial and light industrial uses in existing unincorporated communities.	Low density residential development in forested areas where considerable commitment to such use has already occurred.
Minimum lot size/density	40-acre minimum.	20-acre minimum.	Health District Standards down to ½ acre minimum. One acre lot size average must be maintained. Maximum of 4 lots from any existing parcel may be created while in the GR zone.	Health District Standards down to ½ acre minimum.	Health District Standards 2-5 du/acre.	Health District Standards; only one-half of an existing parcel could be subdivided.
Small lot provisions	1. One small lot (½-2 acres in size) for existing parcels 40 acres or less in size. 2. One small lot per each 40 acres of area for parcels greater than 40 acres in size.	1. One small lot (½-2 acres in size) for existing parcels 20 acres or less in size. 2. One small lot per each 20 acres of area for parcels greater than 20 acres in size.				
Location	Productive agricultural areas.	Productive agricultural areas.	Marginal farming areas. Transition areas. Rangeland. Rocky ridges.	Near cities and towns.	Unincorporated rural communities.	Near the towns of Nile and Tampo.
Result	Large acreages maintained. Limited number of small nonfarm parcels allowed.	Large acreages maintained. Limited number of small nonfarm parcels allowed.	A wide range of parcel sizes and rural homesites allowed. Mixture of farming and rural residential development.	Infilling of already established rural residential areas.	Promotes a "small town" status and land use pattern.	Recreational home development in mountain areas.

housing. A general rural zone allows for rural housing on lots averaging one acre in size in marginal farming areas. Two other zones, the rural residential and rural settlement zones, encourage housing in or near existing settlements. Yakima County has also worked with the cities to identify future service areas. Suburban zones are located contiguous to a town or utility district. These zones are located in areas lacking productive agricultural soils or where subdivision and development activity has occurred to such a degree as to prevent large-scale farming. A zoning adjustor is responsible for reviewing special-use permits and variances.

An evaluation

All four counties use agricultural zoning to protect their farmland. The Clark County approach allows the most residential dwellings in the agricultural zone, while the Whitman County approach allows no nonfarm residences in the agricultural zone except on the very poorest soils adjacent to roads. Between these two extremes, Skagit and Yakima Counties set large minimum lot sizes for building residences in farm areas. Predominantly agricultural areas have the largest minimum lot size requirement. Transition zones around cities and towns have the smallest lot size requirement.

The approaches taken in these counties reflect their different agricultural, socioeconomic, and political conditions and circumstances. For example, Clark County has experienced rapid growth in recent years, particularly in unincorporated areas. Consequently, the county is growth-oriented. Citizens and governmental officials want to encourage continued growth. As one cost of this growth, they are willing to accept the recent changes in the nature of agriculture in the county—the shift from large-scale, traditional farms to small-scale, specialty farms and “hobby” farms. However, the county is trying to direct growth away from designated agricultural and forest land. This is being accomplished partially through a capital improvement program that directs public improvement within established urban growth boundaries. The county is in transition, from being a rural, agriculturally oriented area to being a suburban, industrially oriented area.

Skagit and Yakima Counties face a different set of circumstances than Clark County. In these counties, agriculture is still viewed as the predominant economic activity. Both have lost some farmland near their cities and towns, but they have



Yakima County orchard in winter. The county's varied agricultural crops include apples, peaches, pears, cherries, grapes, mint, hops, hay, and grain.

not experienced the tremendous growth pressures found in Clark County. Minimum lot sizes of 40 acres and 20 acres permit a viable farm for many of the crops grown in the two counties. Thus, rural residential opportunities are provided while commercial agriculture is retained.

Whitman County is even more agriculturally oriented than Skagit or Yakima Counties. The economics of small grain farming necessitate large, contiguous blocks of farmland. Citizens and governmental officials recognize the need to limit scattered residential housing in the agricultural areas of the county. By prohibiting subdivisions that are not adjacent to the cities and by limiting rural residences to certain areas (nonfarm areas adjacent to roads) contiguous rather than scattered growth is encouraged.

Zoning cannot be regarded as a panacea in any of the four counties. Zoning is notoriously vulnerable to local political changes. As growth pressures build or as new governmental officials take office, the existing agricultural zoning program may be weakened or changed. For example, the widespread granting of rezones and variances can seriously hamper the effectiveness of such a program. Even if the integrity of the zoning program is upheld, farmland may be lost through annexation. Co-

operation between city and county officials is thus necessary to prevent one entity from subverting the efforts of another.

The comparison of farmland protection programs in these four counties clearly demonstrates the importance of socioeconomic, ecological, and political factors. Among these factors are the role of agriculture in the local economy, growth urbanization pressures, economic conditions, the availability of nonfarm sites for rural residences, the suitability of the area for various agricultural uses, and the political influence of rural versus urban people. To be accepted, farmland protection programs must strike some balance between the costs and benefits of keeping land in farm uses. Tradeoffs between farm and nonfarm land uses in rural areas must be acknowledged. Depending on local circumstances, this tradeoff may result in more restrictive policies with respect to nonfarm land uses in some counties than in others.

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