

Chapter III

Farmland Conservation

Across the United States, farmland is being lost to development and conversion to other land uses. American Farmland Trust (AFT) reports that 31 million acres of agricultural land nationally were lost to development between 1992 and 2012. Such losses are usually irreversible. AFT also reports that development disproportionately affects agricultural lands—more than 70 percent of urban development takes place on agricultural land.¹ These trends are reflected in Snohomish County as well. For example, the USDA Census of Agriculture reported that land in farming in Snohomish County shrank from 70,863 acres in 2012 to 63,671 acres in 2007.² These numbers don't represent the additional impact of losing larger farms to smaller, often non-commercial, farming uses. Pressures on the agricultural land base are increasing as the population of the county rises—Everett is among the fastest growing cities in Washington State—a population that could be fed by locally grown food if it was available.³

In order to protect our local farms, a group of partner organizations and stakeholders have created a collaborative approach to farmland conservation in Snohomish County. Led by PCC Farmland Trust, the **Snohomish Farmland Conservation Working Group** also includes the Snohomish Conservation District, Snohomish County, Forterra, The Nature Conservancy, and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. These organizations are committed to the preservation of farmland for agriculture through increasing the number of voluntary transactions (easements and fee acquisitions)

What is a Conservation Easement?

Agricultural conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements that prevent any future development from occurring on a property by extinguishing development rights. At the time the easement is put in place, the farmer is compensated for the value of the development rights. Easements allow for agriculture and agricultural accessory uses as well as compatible activities such as habitat restoration, recreation, and education. Easements are powerful tools for:

- Protecting priority agricultural resource lands;
- Protecting farms suited for long-term viability due to soils and access to water and markets; and
- Assisting landowners with achieving their goals of honoring a farm legacy while supporting business investments or succession plans.



Farms to Condos

“Snohomish county is beating its plowshares into condos. Once, our living came from the land. Now, we crowd into compact developments, shop at big box stores and work in urban environments. Arable land is disappearing.”

Bill Pierce, Soaring Swallow Farm, Photovoice 2017

on priority Snohomish County farmlands. In addition, the group is supported by organizations (including Ducks Unlimited) and farmers (including members from the SLS agriculture caucus) who are critical to implementation of the Farmland Conservation Strategy that was developed by the Working Group.

The purposes of the Strategy are to:

- Develop a roadmap for farmland conservation that supports an integrated multi-benefit landscape approach
- Provide priority information to efforts such as the Snohomish Agriculture Resilience Plan and the Sustainable Lands Strategy reach scale plans
- Better coordinate the partners involved in farmland conservation to maximize opportunities
- Develop a landscape-scale funding strategy
- Create goals and metrics for the key agricultural areas in Snohomish County
- Increase the rate of farmland protection

A key component of the Strategy is **coordination**. Strategic partnerships are instrumental in increasing the pace of farmland conservation in Snohomish County. The Working Group has agreed to establish regular and ongoing communication that allows them to organize outreach efforts to priority parcel landowners and to share timely opportunities with one another. This will encourage partners to identify who the most appropriate lead organization is for both landowner outreach and individual transactions. Coordination helps maximize limited resources and lessen duplication of efforts; reduce confusion and frustration within the farming community; increase the extent of outreach and focus more strategically; and provide a consistent message to achieve multi-benefit efforts.

The Farmland Conservation Working Group participates in **multi-benefit planning**, specifically the Sustainable Lands Strategy (SLS) effort. As many of Snohomish County’s prime working lands and large available blocks of farmland are in lowlands and floodplains, the Working Group recognizes the need to work with partners in SLS to develop a balanced multi-benefit approach to floodplain management. In areas of the floodplain where priorities overlap, the Working Group commits to working collaboratively with other floodplain interests and landowners on projects that protect the landowner’s future flexibility in determining the best use of the land.

The Strategy also includes **priority mapping**. PCC Farmland Trust, with input from local partners and farmers, developed an analysis and accompanying map to identify and prioritize farmland for conservation. A suitability analysis, or prioritization, ranks properties relative to one another based on a set of criteria that includes metrics that describe the quality of farmland and proximate development threats. Both the criteria and resultant maps were reviewed and approved by farmers on the Steering Committee for the Agriculture Resilience Plan with the expectation that this map would be a working document that is updated and re-prioritized with forthcoming information on potential climate impacts to flooding, groundwater levels, and saltwater intrusion. The resulting GIS data and maps can be used as a decision support tool to assist the Farmland Conservation Working Group in identifying farmland conservation opportunities and

conducting community outreach throughout Snohomish County. Figure III-1 shows high priority agricultural areas identified in the priority mapping. Table III-1 shows the acreage of agriculture in Snohomish County in each priority tier for protection.

Table III-1. Farmland Prioritization Acreage

PRIORITY RESULTS	ACREAGE
Very high	15,421
High	25,453
Medium	26,282
Low	34,164
Very low	6,832
Total	108,152

The highest priority farmland for protection (ranked Very High and High in the mapping effort) equals a total of approximately 40,000 acres. In the short-term, the Farmland Conservation Working Group has identified a **ten-year voluntary conservation goal of 15,000 acres**. Voluntary conservation includes purchase of agricultural conservation easements or acquisition of the land from willing sellers with an accompanying conservation easement. This short-term acreage goal represents the highest priority lands identified as most suitable for current funding sources. It is important to note that the 15,000-acre goal is a short-term goal and does not represent the full amount of farmland conservation needed to ensure market stability, food security, and the maintenance of critical farming infrastructure. While these lands are suitable for current funding sources, it is not possible to fund the purchase of conservation easements on this volume of land with current funding sources alone within a ten-year period. Achieving this goal will require success in both leveraging current funding sources and in working with decision makers to create new sources of funding.

Existing funding sources for farmland protection include the NRCS Agricultural Conservation Easement Program, the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, Snohomish County Conservation Futures, Floodplains by Design, and the local Transfer of Development Rights program. Potential new funding sources include:

Stillaguamish Valley Preservation Initiative

The Stillaguamish Valley Protection Initiative (SVPI) is a focus area effort nested in the overall Snohomish Farmland Conservation Strategy. The main focus of this initiative is to protect farmland and the benefits that the open space associated with farmland provides for local food production, flood storage capacity, water infiltration, and wildlife habitat. The urgency of protecting these lands from development is a shared priority for both agriculture and salmon recovery interests, particularly in the face of forecasted population growth in Snohomish County. Partners in this initiative and the SLS advocate for flexible easements in the valley that prioritize agricultural use but also recognize the value of habitat restoration if conditions change such that farming is no longer viable or if restoration would create a greater public benefit.

- **Private foundations.** Foundations currently fund groups that facilitate voluntary transactions but are not currently paying for easements.
- **Local Transfer of Development Rights.** While a Snohomish County Transfer of Development Rights program exists, improvements that could make it more successful include the adoption of additional receiving areas, reduction of the enrollment fee, and creation of a bank.
- **Regional Transfer of Development Rights.** A regional program exists for Transfer of Development Rights to the South Lake Union area of Seattle. The program is set up to use King County credits first, but the majority of King County credits have been purchased. The program could be used to purchase development rights from Snohomish County farms.

- **Bond.** A bond could be passed to provide funding for protection of agricultural land. This approach has been used in King County.
- **Real Estate Excise Tax 3.** This tax, which would require County Council and public vote, could raise up to \$41 million per year through property sales.
- **Conservation Futures.** The rate for this local tax could be increased by the County Council.



“You never forget visiting a farm. Whether it’s picking fruit, selecting a family pumpkin, or planting a tree. It’s honest work and it connects us with our core values and shared heritage.”

Nichlos Pate, Raising Cane Ranch, Photovoice 2017

1 American Farmland Trust, 2018. Farms Under Threat: The State of America’s Farmland. May 9, 2018. <https://www.farmland.org/initiatives/farms-under-threat>

2 United States Department of Agriculture, 2012. Table 8. Farms, Land in Farms, Value of Land and Buildings, and Land Use: 2012 and 2007. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2012/Full_Report/Volume_1_Chapter_2_County_Level/Washington/st53_2_008_008.pdf

3 Catchpole, D., 2017. Everett was the 9th fastest growing city in the state last year. Everett Herald. <https://www.heraldnet.com/news/everett-was-the-9th-fastest-growing-city-in-the-state-last-year/>

Snohomish County Farmland Conservation Priorities

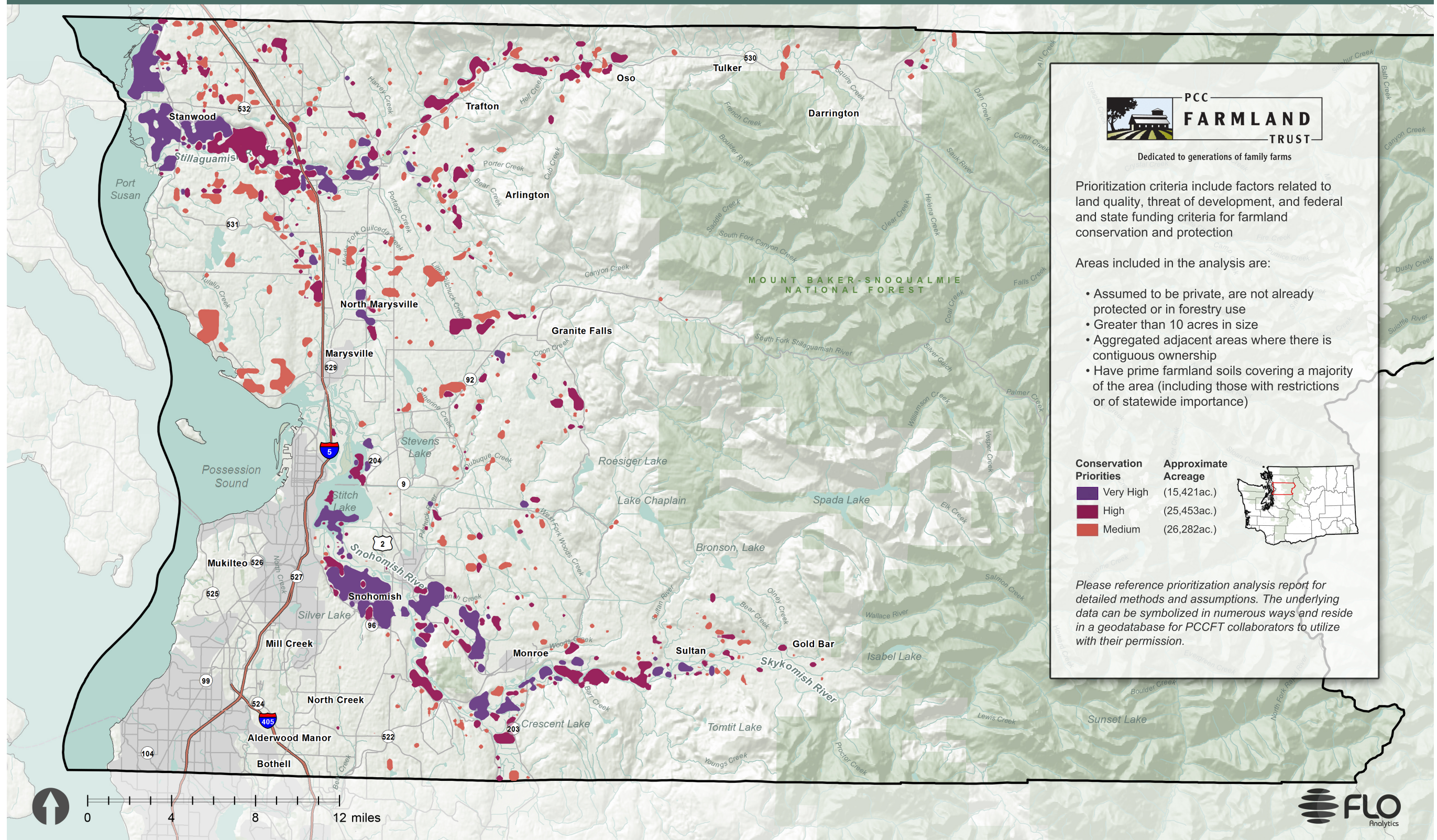


Figure III-1. Snohomish County Farmland Conservation Priorities

