

WASHINGTON STATE'S VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM



"This bill outlines a positive pathway for counties; farmers; environmental stakeholders; and federal, state, and tribal governments to collaborate on improving our state's sensitive ecosystems, while preserving our working agricultural lands."

*~Governor
Christine Gregoire,
June 2011*

In 2007, the Washington State Legislature adopted Substitute Senate Bill 5248 for the purpose of "resolving, harmonizing, and advancing commonly held goals for environmental protection and agricultural viability." SSB 5248 (extended in the 2010 session via SSB 6520) established a three-year moratorium on amendments to county critical areas ordinances with respect to agricultural activities. The Legislature directed The William D. Ruckelshaus Center to convene the chief participants to the long-standing conflict to work on solutions. The Center established the Agriculture and Critical Areas Committee to carry out this mandate.

Governor Gregoire and Legislative leaders from both parties asked the Committee to develop a set of recommendations that would be "fiscally responsive, innovative, and practical," using regulation only "as a last resort if desired outcomes are not achieved through voluntary programs." After three years of discussion, the Committee developed a voluntary-based stewardship program that meets these criteria. In 2011, the Voluntary Stewardship Program (ESHB 1886) passed the Washington State Legislature and was signed into law by the Governor. Washington's 39 counties had until January 22, 2012 to decide whether to participate in the new program, or to continue under existing law. Twenty-eight counties decided to participate.



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Principles of the Voluntary Stewardship Program:

1. Build on existing work in local watersheds.
2. Emphasize voluntary stewardship first.
3. Protect critical areas from further degradation, and implement additional action where voluntary measures fall short.
4. Set priorities for voluntary actions to restore and enhance critical areas.
5. Enforce existing state laws for water quality and habitat.
6. Work together to find funding.

Major Elements of the Voluntary Stewardship Program

The stewardship program is a new approach for counties to participate in a watershed-based, collaborative stewardship planning process that uses incentives to promote agricultural and environmental stewardship. Counties participating in the program are eligible for funding for base stewardship program operations and may nominate specific watersheds as priority watersheds for additional incentives and project funding. Counties not participating in the program will proceed with the update requirements of the Growth Management Act.

The stewardship program **builds on existing programs** for preserving agriculture and protecting critical areas, including salmon recovery, watershed planning, and agricultural land conservation. It provides focus and direction for stewardship actions related to agriculture, and relies on local watershed groups to set the direction for making effective use of existing programs and resources. Local people know their watersheds best and are the ones who must commit to doing the work.

Watershed work plans will be developed to set goals and benchmarks for protection and enhancement of critical areas and will undergo a technical review and approval process. Watershed groups will seek input from farmers, tribes, local environmental groups, agencies and other involved parties, and will develop goals for participation of agricultural operators, as well as provide technical assistance to farmers.

Conservation districts or other qualified technical assistance organizations will provide **technical assistance to agricultural landowners and operators** in developing individual farm stewardship plans.

Voluntary incentives for landowners are emphasized for all program phases. The stewardship program maximizes flexibility for individuals and watersheds to achieve their goals.



Checkpoints are built into the program to ensure that protection of critical areas is achieved. Stewardship programs will be evaluated at three, five and ten years, and counties will be required to proceed with additional actions if benchmarks to protect critical areas are not achieved in local watersheds through voluntary efforts. Potential consequences and actions for counties in this situation include review and possible amendments to critical areas ordinances, or the county may choose to adopt an alternative plan for protecting critical areas subject to state agency approval.

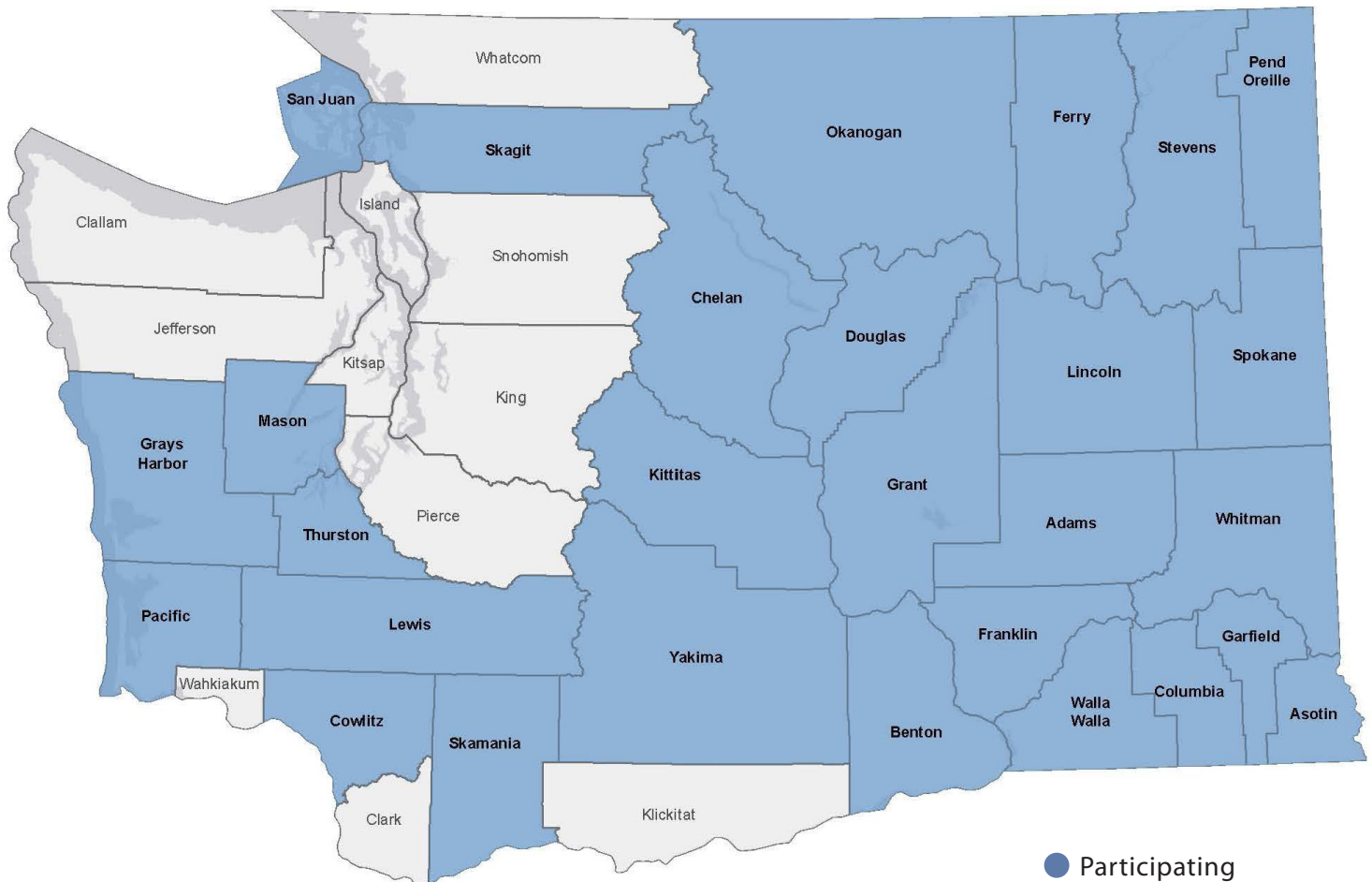
The Washington State Conservation Commission provides administrative oversight for the Voluntary Stewardship Program, with guidance from a statewide Advisory Committee comprised of the four original caucuses (counties, tribes, agricultural and environmental organizations). A review panel comprised of state agencies will assist local watersheds in the development and implementation of voluntary measures to protect and enhance critical areas. This review panel is tasked with reviewing and recommending approval of local watershed plans. Enforcement of state and federal water quality regulations by the Department of Ecology is considered an integral part of the program.

Implementation of the Voluntary Stewardship Program is dependent upon funding. Given the state and federal budget climate, funding remains a major challenge facing the Conservation Commission and parties to the agreement as they work to implement the program. A committee has been established to identify and obtain funding for program operations, enforcement of existing water quality regulations, and incentives and technical expertise to help farmers put stewardship actions on the ground.

Washington State also has an opportunity to demonstrate a cooperative solution to a national problem. Conflict between agriculture and the environment is not unique to Washington, and federal agencies and elected officials are looking for solutions. The Voluntary Stewardship Program's ability to make progress on this issue will have a wide audience, and potential funding sources could expand with successful implementation at early stages.



COUNTIES PARTICIPATING IN THE VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM



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