

Thurston County Agricultural Protection

TOTAL	REGULATION	DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS	TAX RELIEF	ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
56	19	20	5	12
of 130 points	of 66 points	of 38 points	of 10 points	of 16 points

FACTS ABOUT THURSTON COUNTY AGRICULTURE

- » Land in Farms in 2007: 68,247 acres¹
- » Farmland Loss or Gain From 1950-2007: -102,393 acres (-60.0%)²
- » Farmland Loss or Gain From 1997-2007: +1,906 acres (+2.9%)³
- » Principal Crops: Sod, poultry and eggs⁴
- » Number of Farms: 1,288⁵
- » Average Size of Farm: 63 acres⁶
- » Average Market Value of Products Sold Per Acre: \$1,462⁷

DISCUSSION OF SCORING

Regulation:

Thurston County scored 19 out of 66 points for their regulation policy. All of Thurston County’s rural zones allow for agricultural production, including Rural Residential (RR 1/5), Rural Residential/Resource (RRR 1/5), Rural (R 1/20), and C Rural (R 1/10).⁸

Based on our estimations, most agricultural land is classified as RRR 1/5, which allows one dwelling unit for every five acres.⁹ Farmland in this zone is on smaller property sizes, dispersed among residential properties, and allows for many residential uses. Generally, agriculture in rural residential zones is poorly protected from developmental pressures. With large areas of farmland within the RRR 1/5 zone, the County is apt to experience increased conversion to non-farm uses in the future.

In 2004, Interim Ordinance No. 13222 issued a moratorium on the size of housing clusters and repealed density bonuses in RRR 1/5 zones (under county code, RRR 1/5 parcels could increase their density by up to 65 percent¹⁰). Recognizing the risks to rural land, the Board of County Commissioners established a Cluster Development Taskforce. As of June 2010, the Board also placed a moratorium prohibiting any new planned rural residential development.¹¹

In addition to rural zoning, the County has two agriculture districts—Long Term Agriculture District (LTA) and Nisqually Agricultural District (NA). The LTA Districts are located mostly in the southern portion of the county, in small isolated pockets

surrounded by RRR 1/5.¹² The LTA districts have a maximum density of one dwelling unit per 20 acres, and only allows for uses related to agricultural production.¹³ The NA District is located by the Nisqually River and mostly surrounded by RR 1/5.¹⁴ The zone has a maximum density of 1 dwelling unit per 40 acres and only allows uses related to agriculture.¹⁵ Combined, these zones encompass 20 percent of the total acreage of farmland in Thurston County.¹⁶

Property Rights:

Thurston County earned 20 of a possible 38 points in this category. The County has a Transfer of Development Rights (TDR) program, started in 1996.¹⁷ Transactions in these programs have centered in the Chehalis Agriculture Area, preserving roughly 200 acres of farmland in the LTA district.¹⁸ The County has purchased development rights on farmland in LTA and NA districts around the Nisqually River, totaling approximately 950 acres.¹⁹ The County is currently writing an ordinance for the establishment of a PDR program, which will be available in the fall of 2011.²⁰

Thurston County implemented a conservation futures tax (CFT) in 1989, the first county in the state to do so.²¹ Of the 3,678 acres to be conserved by the funds, a vast majority is in parks and open space. The 950 acres of development rights purchased by the County have been funded through CFT dollars.²²

Tax Incentives:

Thurston County earned 5 out of 10 possible points for having roughly 51 percent of their agricultural acreage enrolled in their Current Use Assessment program.²³

Economic Development:

Thurston County scored 12 out of 16 points in this section of the scorecard. In terms of agricultural marketing, the Thurston County Resource Stewardship Department is sponsoring an agritourism project, and currently working on a draft ordinance to develop an Agritourism Overlay District in southern Thurston County. This district will allow more accessory uses and simpler permitting for things that support farming like agritourism, farm bakeries, agriculture-related experiences, tours, and festivals with temporary accommodations for tourists.²⁴²⁵ This will serve to strengthen the agricultural economy and promote local agriculture.

The County also has an Agricultural Advisory Committee, which advises the County Commissioners and Planning Commissioners on issues related to agriculture, with seven of 11 members representing the agricultural community.²⁶ Thurston County also has a Working Lands Strategic Plan that was drafted in 2010, which details strengths and opportunities for the County's agricultural lands and recommendations for their long-term preservation.²⁷

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Thurston County has become far more committed to farmland protection in the past few years. The Planning Department and the Board of County Commissioners have been proactive in providing greater economic opportunities for farmers and buying development rights on farmland. AFT recommends that Thurston County take the following actions to ensure continued protection of farmland:

Using the Rural 20 and Rural 10 zones to a greater extent:

Thurston County Code creates Rural 20 and Rural 10 zones, but zoning maps show little use of these designations. Rural lands in the southern portion of the County are split mostly between LTA and Rural Residential/Resource 1/5 lands, which create isolated islands of farmland among rural residential communities. To better buffer LTA lands from development pressures, the County should target rural areas with large lot sizes and rezone them to Rural 10 and Rural 20 lands.

Increasing the conservation futures tax rate:

In the Conservation Futures Program 2010 Annual Report, Thurston County taxpayers paid 3.85-cents per \$1,000 dollars assessed value.²⁸ The county should raise their conservation futures tax to the 6.25-cents per \$1,000 dollars of assessed value as allowed by RCW 84.34.230. The additional funding should be applied specifically to farmland purchases.

Creating an ombudsman position as a liaison to the agricultural community:

Thurston County has already demonstrated support for this idea, as the County aims to create a Working Lands Advocate in their Working Lands Strategic Plan. This position should be a priority to the County, which will serve as a liaison to the agricultural community. This staff person will be able to hear and act on farmers' need and be a knowledgeable reference for questions regarding the long-term retention of farmland.

1 South of the Sound Community Farm Land Trust identified 68,247 acres of farmland in their Thurston County Farmland Inventory in 2009. We believe this number to be more accurate than the 80,617 reported by the 2007 Census of Agriculture. 2 The 1950 Census of Agriculture reported 170,640 acres of farmland. 3 The 1997 Census of Agriculture reported 66,341 acres of farmland. 4 2007 Census of Agriculture County Profile. 5 Ibid, see note 4. 6 Ibid, see note 4. 7 Ibid, see note 4. 8 Thurston County Code 20.09, A, B, C- Primary uses. 9 Thurston County Official Zoning Map: www.co.thurston.wa.us/.../areas/maps.../CountyZone_10Oct2010_parcels.pdf. 10 County Code 20.30A.060. 11 Thurston County Planning Development Cluster Development: http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/planning/prrd/prrd_home.htm. 12 Ibid, see note 11. 13 County Code 20.08A.040 (Design standards) and 20.54 (Special Uses). 14 Ibid, see note 9. 15 Ibid, see note 13. 16 Conversation with Thurston County GIS department. 17 Cascade Land Conservancy's report "TDR in Washington State: Overview, Benefits, and Challenges". 18 Thurston Transfer of Development Rights and Purchase of Development Rights Map: http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/planning/workingland/docs/TDR-PDR_Map.pdf. 19 Ibid, see note 18. 20 For more information, visit in <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/planning/pdr/default.html>. 21 Conservation Futures Program 2010 Annual Report. 22 Ibid, see note 21. 23 South of the Puget Sound Inventory Report, March 2009. 24 Email correspondence with the Planning Department. 25 <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/permitting/agriculture/agriculture-tourism.html>. 26 Agricultural Advisory Committee: <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/permitting/agriculture/agriculture-committee.html>. 27 Working Lands Strategic Plan: <http://www.co.thurston.wa.us/permitting/agriculture/docs/Working-Lands-Strategic-Plan-2-11-10.pdf>. 28 Conservation Futures Program 2010 Annual Report.