



WASHINGTON STATE  
UNIVERSITY  
EXTENSION



## VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

### BY THE NUMBERS

- On May 16, 2011, Governor Gregoire signed ESHB 1886, creating the Voluntary Stewardship Program.
- 28 of 39 Washington counties participate.
- Washington's 2013-15 state budget included \$246,000 to implement VSP in Thurston and Chelan Counties. \$1 million was set aside to be used statewide if federal funds were received for the program.
- The federal Farm Bill designated \$100 million specifically for programs like VSP.
- Chelan and Thurston Counties have begun implementation of the VSP.
- In 2015, the Washington Legislature provided full funding for VSP at \$7.6 million, allowing all counties that opted in to move forward with implementation of the program.

### 2016

### ISSUE

In 2007, Washington's governor and legislature — along with agricultural, tribal, environmental, and local government representatives — asked the William D. Ruckelshaus Center to assist in resolving long-standing conflict over the protection and enhancement of environmentally "critical areas" on agricultural lands under Washington's Growth Management Act. This conflict, more than a decade old, had spawned lawsuits, appeals, legislative battles, and a voter initiative. The parties involved reached a compromise for a moratorium on counties adopting amendments to critical areas ordinances with respect to agricultural activities while participating stakeholders developed recommendations. The legislature directed the center to convene the chief participants in the long-standing conflict to work on solutions that ensure protection of environmentally sensitive areas in ways that support the preservation of farmlands and a strong farm economy.

### RESPONSE

The center established the Agriculture and Critical Areas Committee, comprised of four caucuses (tribal and county governments, and agricultural and environmental interests), to meet this mandate. Recognizing that communication is key to building solutions, the center held a total of 61 meetings of the combined caucuses, not including individual caucus meetings, meetings with agency staff, and individual discussions. There were 29 full meetings of the committee, three committee retreats, and 32 workgroup meetings. Faculty from UW and WSU and staff of the center initiated fact finding on topics specified by the legislature.

After university fact finding and three years of discussion/negotiation, the committee reached agreement on a framework for a voluntary-based stewardship program. The parties turned the agreement into legislation, which was signed into law by Governor Christine Gregoire in May 2011, creating the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP). Twenty-eight of Washington's 39 counties elected to participate.

The Washington State Conservation Commission and parties to the agreement asked the center to continue its involvement, believing the center's neutrality, experience with these issues/parties, and expertise in collaborative processes would continue to be helpful as the agencies and parties began early implementation. With support from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) and the Conservation Commission, the center remained involved, providing facilitation, consultation, strategic planning, and program and evaluation design, to help ensure a successful program launch and build capacity among those implementing the program.



COUNTIES OPTING-IN TO THE VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM



## QUOTES

*"The process took a long time, he said, but "the time spent was well worth it. . . . After a while people really began to listen to one another. – Ron Shultz, WSCC*

*"I want to thank the Ruckelshaus Center staff and board for allowing us to have three and a half years of very tough, determined negotiations to get to this point." - Jay Gordon, Washington Dairy Federation*

*"I think it represents a good piece of middle ground (that) . . . will help keep agriculture viable, keep the counties out of court and provide some solid, incentive-based environmental practices that should benefit everybody." - Jack, Washington Cattlemen's Association*

## IMPACTS

The Conservation Commission has successfully taken over VSP project tasks and coordination responsibilities, and there are two counties now moving forward to implement VSP. Involved state agency directors and staff, and federal agency directors are showing commitment to implementing the VSP and have defined roles and responsibilities. The Technical Panel, comprised of the Commission, Department of Commerce, Department of Agriculture, Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Department of Ecology, was established, as was the Statewide Advisory Committee, which is comprised of agricultural, environmental, county, and tribal representatives. Both are working actively to implement the program. Washington's 2013-15 state budget included funding for Thurston and Chelan Counties to implement VSP. The recently-passed federal Farm Bill includes \$100 million specifically designed to provide funding to support programs like VSP in a handful of states. The NFWF grant also provided funding to support the American Farmland Trust's (AFT) Pioneers in Conservation Program, which includes on-the-ground projects in three watersheds (the Snoqualmie River in King County, the Wenatchee River in Chelan County, and the Skokomish River in Mason County) that serve as pilots for the type of work that will occur on farmland across Washington under the VSP.

The Voluntary Stewardship Program is a new approach for Washington counties to participate in a watershed-based, collaborative planning process that uses incentives to promote agricultural and environmental stewardship. The collaborative work of the parties has been an important demonstration of the positive impact that the center can have in bringing groups together to reach consensus. The long-term impact of this process could include significant changes in how environmentally critical areas are managed on agricultural land, and will be applicable to many similar challenges, where top-down regulation is less likely to be effective than a locally driven, incentive-focused approach. Through VSP, Washington has an opportunity to demonstrate a cooperative solution to a national problem. Conflict between agriculture and the environment is not unique to Washington. Federal agencies and elected officials are looking for solutions across the country. VSP's ability to make progress has a wide audience.