

Agricultural Viability Toolkit

The intent of this document is to provide VSP workgroups with tools to individually define what agricultural viability is, and identify ways to improve ag viability, in their county and community.

One Suggested Definition¹

Agricultural viability can be defined as the ability of a farmer or group of farmers to:

- productively farm on a given piece of land or in a specific area,
- maintain an economically viable farm business,
- keep the land in agriculture long-term, and
- steward the land so it will remain productive into the future.

SWOT Analysis

One useful tool for work groups to consider in analyzing ways to meet the statutory mandate of maintaining and enhancing agricultural viability is a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. An analysis of each Ag specific sector may be beneficial to facilitate this process. After your workgroup has talked about the unique characteristics of agriculture in your county, a SWOT analysis can help identify opportunities to capitalize on strengths and improve or eliminate weaknesses and threats to Ag viability in your county. As a framework for this assessment, VSP work groups may also want to consider the five general areas described below (and any other areas or issues added to the list by your group):

- 1. A stable and secure base of agricultural land and water resources**
- 2. Shared agricultural production and market infrastructures and services**
- 3. Technical support to promote agricultural viability and conservation**
- 4. Education, training and succession planning**
- 5. A welcoming business environment**

1. A stable and secure base of agricultural land and water resources

For agriculture to thrive in Washington State, adequate land and water resources must be available for agricultural uses. Urbanization, real estate markets, and increasing land values put increasing pressure on rural agricultural lands. The preservation of farm land available for agricultural uses is done through the promotion of various farmland preservation tools and programs including, agricultural conservation easements, estate planning, succession planning, new and innovative farming opportunities, and a commitment to enhancing agricultural zoning. Farmland protection programs play a vital part to keep agricultural lands in production. In addition, programs that promote agricultural access to water supplies, a stable and fair legal system to protect water rights, and provisions to secure water and improve water right reliability during times of drought are important components of a productive

¹ This definition was originally found in the “Farming in the Floodplain Project: Existing Conditions Report”, August 2016, Environmental Science Associates.

agricultural land base. Water needs to be available in sufficient quantities and at the right times in order to ensure viable agriculture in Washington.

2. Shared agricultural production and farm-to-market infrastructures and services

In order for agriculture to remain viable in Washington State, the infrastructure that supports it must be in place and well maintained. Agricultural irrigation and drainage districts, utilities, processing facilities, transportation and port systems, and market access systems must remain accessible and affordable to the agricultural community. This includes the work of commodity commissions and other programs in developing and promoting local and export agricultural market opportunities, as well as programs to reduce trade barriers and support Ag-friendly trade agreements. Agricultural operators also require readily available access to accurate and timely information to meet ongoing changes in the marketplace. In addition, agricultural equipment and supplies need to be available to the local agricultural producer.

3. Technical support to promote agricultural viability and conservation

Many conservation practices, as set out by the Natural Resource Conservation Service and others, are supportive of agricultural viability. Through technical assistance provided by local conservation districts, WSU Extension and similar programs, farmers should be encouraged to institute conservation practices to ensure the continued capability of their land to produce crops and to conserve natural resources. Balance should be sought between conservation enhancement programs and the ability of a landowner to choose the use of their land. The need to protect sensitive critical areas should be balanced against the farmer's need to be economically viable, and solutions sought should promote both improved conservation and Ag viability.

4. Education, research and succession planning

Federal, state and local research and educational efforts that support agricultural viability should be fostered and encouraged. Sustaining a healthy state university and community college system, for instance, supports innovative crop research and development of technologies and production efficiencies Washington growers can implement. Producers can also benefit from access to governmental and nongovernmental programs that help producers with farm bill issues, business and financial planning, access to capital, value-added processing, product development, specialty crop issues and marketing.

In addition, an effort should be made to coordinate the education of the general public and newly elected policy-makers. In counties with significant urbanization pressures, particular emphasis on farm-to-table outreach, agri-tourism and fairs should be considered. This will help demonstrate the importance and value of agriculture in Washington, as well as the interconnectivity between agricultural viability and the overall quality of urban and rural life.

The average age of an agricultural operator in Washington State is nearly 60 years old. Estate and Succession planning is imperative to furthering the viability of agricultural operations in Washington. Promoting and supporting efforts like local farm-focused estate planning workshops can be a benefit to not only an aging generation of farm owners, but to new and beginning farmers as well. Newer farmers -

those at the beginning of their career that are seeking farming opportunities - can meet older landowners in an atmosphere where all parties are learning about planning challenges and how to overcome them.

When new and younger operators do get involved in agriculture, for them to be viable in their operations they must be educated on the technical and economic aspects of farm operations and practices as well as on governmental programs, permitting, and procedures that may affect their operation. Labor apprenticeships such as those implemented by the State of Washington are a method for growers to secure seasonal labor and help train the next generation of farmers.

5. A welcoming business environment

To maintain agricultural viability, state and local governments should promote a stable and welcoming business environment, and should look for opportunities to partner with the agricultural community on efforts and incentives to improve both agricultural viability and the natural environment. Farm operators understand the need for reasonable regulation, but regulation must also take into account the economics of running a viable agricultural operation. Agricultural operators deal with low margins and other economic factors including cost of production that can make viability precarious for them. To reduce time and cost impacts, governmental regulations and permit processes affecting agricultural producers should be predictable, affordable and not overly burdensome. Property taxes, zoning ordinances, nutrient management regulations, and air and water quality regulations should be enacted with viable agriculture in mind.