



2025 LEGISLATIVE REPORT

The Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP)

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Washington State Conservation Commission

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This report is available on the Voluntary Stewardship Program's website at:

<https://www.vsp.wa.gov/>

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Executive Summary

The Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) provides counties the opportunity to address Washington's Growth Management Act (GMA) requirements for critical areas on agricultural lands through voluntary, rather than regulatory, measures. VSP is administered at the state level by the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC). The purpose of this report is to fulfill RCW 36.70A.740 which requires SCC to report to the legislature every two years whether watersheds participating in VSP have received adequate funding to establish and implement the program.

In consultation with VSP's Statewide Advisory Committee (SAC) and the three Technical Panel (TP) state agencies (Department of Ecology, Washington State Department of Agriculture, and Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife), SCC finds that counties and state partners have received adequate funding to maintain the program and historic levels of project implementation. However, the three TP agencies report that the ongoing financial support provided to their agencies to cover staff time is inadequate to fully pay for agency participation. Additionally, current funding levels for VSP will not be adequate to address rising costs associated with inflation, increased demand for landowner participation, and the costs to fully implement monitoring plans. Finally, VSP funding is inadequate to fully implement activities identified in local work plans.

Section 1: Background

VSP and the Growth Management Act

In 1990, the Washington State Legislature adopted the Growth Management Act (GMA) requiring counties to develop regulations that ensure the conservation of agricultural, forest, and mineral resource lands and to protect critical areas. The GMA defines five critical areas for protection: fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas, frequently flooded areas, geologically hazardous areas, wetlands, and critical aquifer recharge areas.

In 2011 the legislature amended the GMA and established the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP). VSP allows enrolled counties to implement incentive-based and voluntary measures to protect critical areas on lands used for agricultural activities. As of July 2025, 28 counties have opted into VSP, with all watersheds in those counties participating in the program. The remaining eleven continue to use development regulations to protect critical areas. The legislature directed the Washington State Conservation Commission (SCC) to administer funding and programmatic oversight to VSP counties starting in 2015. This report is submitted in response to the statutory requirement to summarize the adequacy of funding for the program and includes additional details about SCC's and the participating counties' ongoing implementation efforts.

Approach to Protection of Critical Areas

VSP provides an alternative approach for counties to protect critical areas on lands used for agricultural activities. The program focuses on watershed-scale protection of critical areas on or near lands where agricultural activities are taking place and uses a collaborative stewardship planning process that relies on incentive-based practices for protecting and enhancing those critical areas. The program aims to support viable local agricultural industries and encourage cooperation among diverse stakeholders.

VSP Administration

VSP is administered by SCC with guidance from the Statewide Advisory Committee (SAC) and the state agencies that sit on the Technical Panel (TP) – the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA), Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW), and Department of Ecology (Ecology).

The membership of the SAC is defined in RCW 36.70A.745, which identifies two representatives from county governments, two from agricultural organizations, and two from environmental organizations. In conjunction with the governor's office, SCC also invites participation of two representatives of tribal governments. All SAC member terms are two-year terms.

Table 1. State Advisory Committee Membership

All SAC member terms are two-year terms.

Representing	Member	Organization/Government
County	Ron Wesen, Commissioner	Skagit County
County	LaDon Linde, Commissioner	Yakima County
Agriculture	Dan Wood, Executive Director	Washington State Dairy Federation
Agriculture	John Stuhlmiller, Executive Director	Washington State Water Resources Association
Environmental	Brian Muegge, Farm Program Manager	Salmon-Safe
Environmental	<i>VACANT - Recruitment is ongoing for a second representative.</i>	
Tribal	David Troutt, Natural Resources Director	Nisqually Indian Tribe
Tribal	<i>VACANT - Recruitment is ongoing for a second representative.</i>	

SCC contracts with county governments to administer VSP. Of the VSP counties, 26 out of 28 pass funding through to a local conservation district for them to facilitate the local work group and implement the adopted work plan. Where this arrangement is in place, SCC helps manage and administer relationships between the contractual partner (the county) and the implementation partner (the district) to meet program requirements as necessary. SCC continues to develop and refine multiple activities and resources to assist counties and their local work groups with the creation, implementation, reporting, and monitoring of VSP work plans.

Reporting

Each VSP county has ongoing reporting requirements established in statute. They include the two-year status report and the five-year review and evaluation report.

Two-year Status Reports

The first reporting requirement is the two-year status report. RCW 36.70A.720(1)(i) states that in implementing the work plan, the watershed group must “provide a written report of the status of plans and accomplishments to the county and to the commission.”

This status report provides each county with a forum for updating the public on the progress made during each biennium through implementation. These reports aim to provide a snapshot of what’s been done during each biennium.

The two-year report is due to the county and to SCC “within sixty days after the end of each biennium...” per statute (RCW 36.70A.720(1)(j)). All VSP counties are expected to submit their reports by August 30 of each odd-numbered year.

Five-year Review and Evaluation Report

The second reporting requirement is the five-year review and evaluation report. During implementation of the work plan, RCW 36.70A.720(2)(b)(i) requires “the watershed group must report to the director and the county on whether it has met the work plan’s protection and enhancement goals and benchmarks.”

The five-year review and evaluation report is reviewed and evaluated by SCC, in conjunction with the TP and the SAC where the county work groups review and evaluate that they are (or are not) meeting their goals and benchmarks. A county that is not meeting its goals and benchmarks may fail out of VSP and be required to revert to critical areas regulations for agricultural activities.

SCC provides a reporting template that counties are required to use for their submissions. This template was redesigned in the 2023-25 biennium to simplify data entries for counties and improve the review process.

Monitoring in VSP

Monitoring is an essential component of VSP. Effective monitoring is required to determine whether counties are meeting their goals and benchmarks defined in their county’s VSP work plan. While these goals and benchmarks encompass a variety of themes – such as stakeholder participation, implementation of conservation practices, and critical area functions and values – effective, accurate, and actionable monitoring is a unifying keystone between all themes within VSP.

VSP Monitoring Guide

The purpose of VSP is to protect critical areas while maintaining agricultural viability at the watershed scale. Monitoring at the watershed scale is unique to VSP and has created its own set of challenges. As a result, SCC created a [Monitoring Guide](#) for VSP to assist counties with the unique challenges that VSP presents in monitoring. This guide helped counties create their monitoring plans in the 2023-25 biennium.

Adaptive Management of Work Plans

SCC’s executive director may require counties undertake adaptive management to remain in the program.

Program Highlights

- At the end of the 2023-25 biennium, 27 out of 28 VSP counties have approved work plans. Wahkiakum County recently opted into VSP and must have an approved work plan in place by April 15, 2028.

- All 27 counties with approved work plans submitted two-year reports by the statutory deadline of August 30, 2023. Two-year reports are required by statute to provide an update to the county and SCC on the status of the county's plans and accomplishments.
- Beginning in 2019 and through 2021, all 27 counties with approved work plans submitted their first five-year reports to the SCC. These reports were reviewed and evaluated by the TP, SAC, and SCC staff.
 - Thurston County and Chelan County are the two pilot counties that received funding two years before the other 25 initial counties. Each submitted their second five-year report in July 2024 and provided additional supplemental information in December 2025, as requested by the TP. Both counties were found to be meeting their respective protection goals and benchmarks by SCC in April 2025.
 - The remaining 25 counties will submit their second five-year reports (sometimes referred to as 10-year reports) in the current biennium.
- SCC received \$3,000,000 in capital funding for VSP in the 2023-25 budget, marking the second biennium in which capital funding was allocated to VSP. SCC made those funds available to counties on a competitive basis to fund the most impactful cost-share projects.

Section 2: VSP Funding

In 2015, the legislature provided funding that allowed all 27 counties that initially opted in to VSP to move forward with the program. That funding was appropriated to SCC to administer and support counties in the development of work groups and work plans to guide incentive-based strategies and local goals and benchmarks for watershed stewardship. Funding for VSP administration comes from the Public Works Assistance account.

As part of its budget packages for subsequent biennia (from July 1, 2017, to the present), SCC requested increases in funding to support county implementation and state agency administrative costs as the counties transitioned from planning to implementation. Biennium funding for participating counties has ranged from \$220,000 to \$240,000 between the 2017-19 biennium and the 2023-25 biennium.

At the outset of the program, each of the four state agencies on the TP also received \$120,000 per agency per fiscal year for the period from July 1, 2015, to June 30, 2017, to support the planning and implementation phases of the VSP. WDFW, Ecology, and WSDA have each received \$95,000 to \$100,000 per fiscal year since 2019.

2023-25 Biennium Budget

For the 2023-25 biennium (July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2025), SCC received a total of \$10,332,000 in operating funds for VSP. This included \$1,420,000 for monitoring, \$8,533,000 for implementation and administration, and \$379,000 for counties to opt-in to VSP.

Funding Allocations

SCC allocates VSP operating funds in four ways:

1. Equivalent allocations of operating funds to each of the 27 VSP counties with accepted work plans.
2. Funding for the state agencies (WSDA, Ecology, and WDFW) to staff the TP.
3. Funding for WDFW's efforts related to High Resolution Change Detection (HRCDD).
4. SCC administration of VSP.

Allocations for Each VSP County

Operating funds are equally allocated to each of the 27 VSP counties with accepted work plans. For the period from July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2025, each county received \$240,000 for general program operation and administration, for a total of \$6,480,000. This was a 1% increase from the 2021-23 biennium.

Allocations are required to go directly to each VSP county, and each county decides how it will utilize its funds for administration. Each county has a contract with SCC which includes deliverables and statutory obligations that the county must meet. SCC recommends that each county's operating funds support staff time at each county or at a county's designated VSP lead organization.

Monitoring Support

SCC sought and received an increase in VSP operating funds from the legislature to support monitoring after the biennium that ended on June 30, 2023. This was in response to statewide performance around data collection and monitoring activities after the last five-year reporting period concluded (2020-2021), and in consultation with VSP stakeholders, including county technical service providers. For the period of July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2025, the legislature allocated \$1,420,000 to SCC for monitoring, and SCC provided \$47,000 to each VSP county to support VSP monitoring activities, including writing a monitoring plan.

Opt-in Funding

In 2023, the legislature passed [SSB 5353](#) which reopened enrollment of VSP to the twelve counties not currently enrolled. Funding of \$379,000 was provided to support up to four non-VSP counties that may wish to begin the process to opt-in to VSP. These funds were not used in the 2023-25 biennium and returned to the Office of Financial Management, although Wahkiakum County did opt in near the end of the biennium (the county's initial contract with SCC was not fully executed until July 2025).

The 2025-2027 budget includes \$366,000 per fiscal year for counties that may opt in during the biennium. Wahkiakum County will receive \$240,000 of that funding.

Non VSP counties continue to actively investigate the potential to opt into the program as of 2025. Maintaining a pool of funding for counties to potentially opt in at any time during the biennium is critical to avoid reductions in operating funds to participating counties.

State Agency Administration

WSDA, WDFW, and Ecology each received \$200,000 for the period of July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2025, with WDFW receiving an additional \$250,000 for its High-Resolution Change Detection (HRCDD) program for twelve VSP counties.

Each TP agency determines how it will allocate funding, but allocations are generally used for staffing, including preparation for and review of the required five-year reports, regional meeting attendance, travel, county work group participation, and interaction, communication, and outreach to VSP stakeholders.

Section 3: Adequacy of Funding

Adequacy of Operating Funds to Counties and Agencies

RCW 36.70A.740(4) requires SCC to report on the adequacy of funding that has been made available to establish and implement the program. SCC consults with the SAC and TP to make this determination. Additionally, RCW 36.70A.740(1)(b) requires SCC to consult with state agencies to determine whether the agencies themselves have received adequate funding to support the program in participating watersheds.

Counties are required to submit regular reports for review and evaluation to SCC detailing their outcomes in relation to their adopted work plans. As the program matures and more resources and tools are developed to support monitoring, data collection, and reporting, the workload increases for counties, SCC, and the TP agencies. Additionally, the availability of and access to new tools and data resources frequently incurs additional costs for all parties.

County Establishment & Implementation

County staffing costs

Counties continue to struggle with staffing costs and the expenses of new equipment and materials needed to operate programs in line with statutory requirements for monitoring and reporting. The additional \$47,000 provided specifically for monitoring to each county did support the creation of monitoring plans for each county. Many counties reported insufficient funding for monitoring beyond the creation of the plans. According to RCW 36.70A.720(1), monitoring efforts are expected to be maintained and adaptively managed as new information and tools become available. Ongoing reviews and updates to monitoring practices and plans will continue to pull funds away from other program activities required by statute.

Outreach and Engagement

Counties have developed outreach and engagement strategies to bring more cooperators into VSP with creative approaches for keeping implementation rates of best management practices (BMPs) at or exceeding historical levels. The continued deployment of these BMPs on enough farms to meet work plan goals and benchmarks has become more difficult with the increase in costs of labor, materials, cultural resource reviews, and permits (where applicable).

Implementation rates of BMPs are also being impacted by the increased difficulty faced by producers attempting to access federal funds that have been historically available through United States Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service programs like the Conservation Reserve Program, the Conservation Stewardship Program, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program, the Regional Conservation Partnership Program, and Conservation Innovation Grants. It has been reported to SCC that current operating funding levels have been adequate for maintaining program staffing in most locations, but not sufficient to establish and monitor all the BMPs necessary to achieve work plan goals and benchmarks, including associated outreach and implementation efforts.

Increased costs

Chart 1 below shows the buying power of \$100,000 from 2021 to now. By the end of the 2023-25 biennium, each dollar spent by a county on VSP had approximately 84% of the purchasing power as at the start of the previous biennium (2021-23). Assuming a 2.5% inflation rate into 2026, that comparison continues declining to 82%.

These changes to the value of each dollar provided to counties do not account for the additional requirements implemented around the creation, maintenance, and updating of the monitoring plans submitted by all counties in 2024. As more projects are implemented that connect to the monitoring and reporting requirements of VSP, the workload increases and demand for staff time grows.

Table 2. Value of \$100,000 Adjust for Inflation 2021-2025

Year	\$100,000 Equivalent, in 2021 Dollars
2021	\$100,000
2022	\$97,192
2023	\$94,598
2024	\$90,858
2025	\$84,126
2026 (projected)	\$82,074 (assuming 2.5% inflation rate)

Source: SmartAsset.com Inflation Calculator, accessed 8-20-25 (www.smartasset.com/investing/inflation-calculator)

The \$47,000 allocation slated for monitoring that was provided to each county during the 2023-25 biennium helped offset the costs to write comprehensive monitoring plans. Many counties were able to use the leftover portion of these funds for monitoring activities. To match this allocation in the 2025-27 biennium, SCC increased the operating funding allocation to each county by \$50,000, to a total of \$290,000, for all operating expenses, including staff time, data collection and monitoring, reporting, and community outreach aimed at future project development to meet county work plan goals and benchmarks.

Agency Needs

The three TP agencies report that the ongoing financial support provided to cover staff time committed to VSP is inadequate. Agencies report that as the program has grown and begun incorporating more requirements for monitoring and data collection and analysis by counties, their staff workload has increased. For the last three biennia, each agency has been provided with \$95,000 to \$100,000 per fiscal year to support staff time. This does not account for any increases in staff salaries for expert-level support from each agency, nor does it cover the increased workloads associated with providing greater support to all 28 counties.

The current funding levels for each agency only cover portions of the time allocated to VSP by each agency's TP coordinator, which is the staff-level professional tasked with providing regular

technical support to counties and working closely with SCC's VSP staff. TP members from each agency, who function as the official agency representative to VSP in all matters related to statutory requirements, have between 0-3% of their respective time covered by the current allocation to their agency through SCC contracts in the last three biennia.

All three TP agencies report that their support to VSP and participating counties would be greatly enhanced if more funding were available to provide more monitoring and data collection tools and resources to counties. This includes support for local and regional staff that work directly with counties and landowners, more monitoring sites and staff to collect, interpret and share the data, and more diverse expertise to help counties evaluate all five critical areas regulated under GMA.

Adequacy of Capital Funds for Project Implementation and Achieving Work Plan Goals and Benchmarks

With the initial \$3,000,000 dollars in capital funding provided to VSP in fiscal year 2022, the program began funding projects through cost-share arrangements with landowners. Approximately half of the original \$3,000,000 was reappropriated to be spent on capital projects during the 2023-25 biennium. The 2023-25 capital budget for VSP included \$3,000,000 for distribution to participating counties, and an additional \$1,000,000 in capital funds were allocated specifically to Skagit County. The reappropriated funds from fiscal year 2022 and the \$4,000,000 for the 2023-25 biennium were subsequently awarded to capital projects in 19 counties (see Appendix A).

Hundreds of project proposals were submitted to the VSP capital program during the 2023-25 biennium for the limited capital dollars. VSP capital funds were awarded on a competitive basis to those projects that ranked highest across six scoring criteria. Counties must connect their proposed projects to critical area protection and/or enhancement goals and benchmarks that are part of their respective work plans. Each proposed project must be approved by a county's VSP work group before they are submitted for consideration.

The connection of these capital projects to county work plans makes them a valuable component of counties' efforts to meet their goals and benchmarks in accordance with statute. Counties have expressed a strong preference for VSP capital funds due to the great flexibility they provide cooperators in their communities. VSP staff from SCC, counties, and conservation districts believe that VSP capital expenditures could easily be doubled or tripled from current funding rates based on the demand for cost-share projects and the increasing costs of many of the BMPs that help counties meet their work plan goals and benchmarks.

Appendix A – Capital-Funded Project Summary

A summary of projects funded with capital funds between July 1, 2023, and June 30, 2025.

County/District	# Projects Funded	Total Awarded, by county/district
Asotin	7	\$70,431.88
Chelan	5	\$160,642.18
Columbia Basin*	13	\$879,431.00
Cowlitz	1	\$15,000.00
Douglas	2	\$30,955.50
Garfield	3	\$35,790.90
Grays Harbor	9	\$421,858.25
Lewis	4	\$245,368.86
Mason	22	\$319,798.80
North Yakima	2	\$48,428.00
Okanogan	1	\$19,576.29
Pacific	19	\$422,293.00
Pend Oreille	1	\$4,800.00
San Juan	7	\$119,824.29
Skagit**	64	\$903,459.96
Spokane	2	\$75,000.00
Thurston	15	\$361,315.84
Walla Walla	18	\$98,267.50
Whitman	1	\$25,000.00

* Columbia Basin Conservation District projects located in both Adams and Grant counties.

** Skagit projects include county and conservation district projects, using the special \$1M allocation in the 2023-25 biennium.

Appendix B – VSP County Map

Twenty-eight counties currently participate in VSP.

