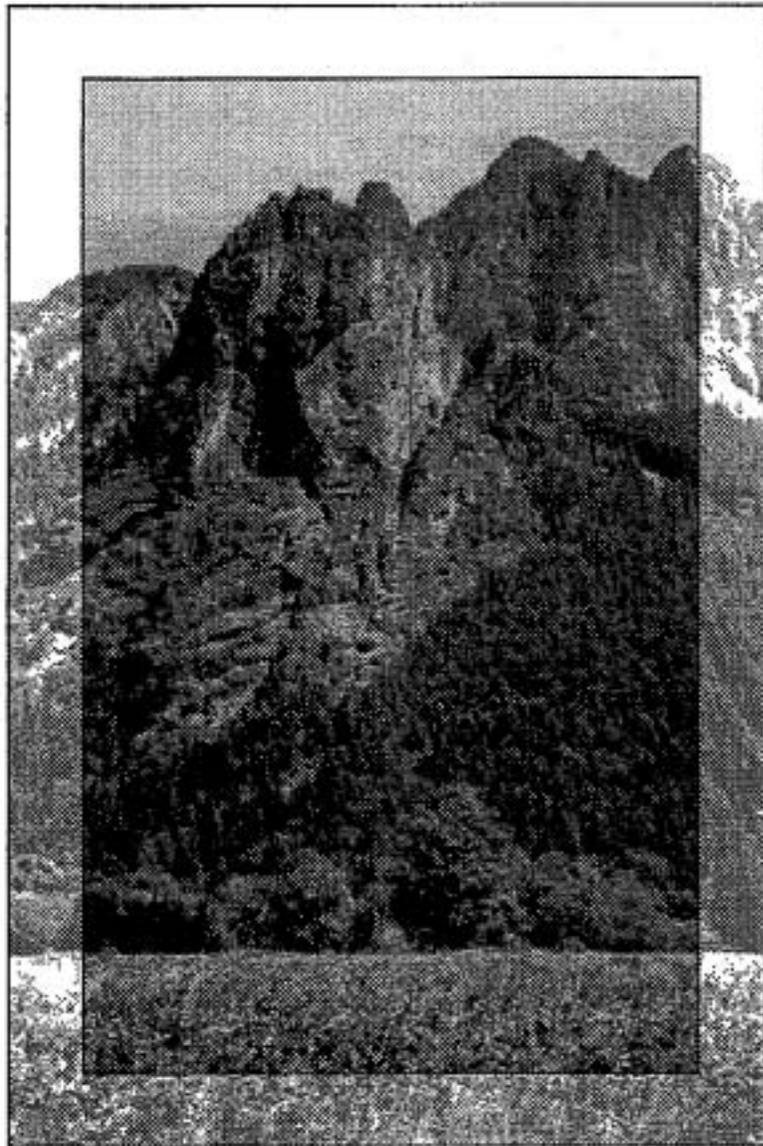


# Executive Summary



## Chapter One





# Farm & Forest

## *A Strategy for Preserving the Working Landscapes of Rural King County*

### Chapter 1

### Executive Summary

King County is known throughout the nation as one of America's most livable places.

In large measure this reputation is based on the spectacular quality of our natural environment—the abundance of scenic vistas, the access to Puget Sound, and the nearby wonders of the Cascade and Olympic mountains. More than anything else, it is the natural environment that gives King County its unique character and appeal.

In the past two decades however, the citizens of King County have awakened to the fact that the natural features so central to our quality of life are threatened by the impact of population growth and by our seeming inability to accommodate that growth without sacrificing natural lands. Since 1960, the population of King County has increased by more than one third. During that same period, our use of land for development increased at nearly three times that rate, causing urban sprawl to spill over into areas that were once verdant forests and productive farmlands.

In recognition of the dangers posed by these trends, the people of King County have taken action to preserve a legacy of green for future generations. Beginning in the late 1970s with the Farmlands Bond Issue, King County developed a number of major initiatives to preserve natural lands. In 1989, the voters approved a \$117 million bond issue to preserve open space lands, and in 1993 issued \$60 million in additional bonds to preserve more open space and protect the county's waterways. These pioneering efforts have preserved many important resources, but they have not yet stemmed the tide. Between 1987 and 1992, land in

agricultural production within the county declined by 22 percent, and the county lost forest land at an average rate of two square miles per year.

In recognition of the urgent need to address these trends, the King County government initiated the Arts and Natural Resources Initiative and commissioned a search for additional strategies to preserve the farms and forests of rural King County. This Farm & Forest report summarizes the findings and recommendations of that study.

## Methodology

The "Farm and Forest" study was carried out during the summer and fall of 1995 by a consultant team<sup>1</sup> in cooperation with the King County Agriculture Commission, citizen advisory committees representing farming and forestry interests, a task force of County staff, and hundreds of citizens who attended public meetings and responded to mailed questionnaires.

The study focused on "rural farm and forest study areas" which had been identified during the preparation of King County's 1994 Comprehensive Plan. These study areas included approximately 61,000 acres of forest lands and 6,000 acres of farmland within the rural zone.

The consultant team conducted tours of all the study areas by both land and air, conducted nearly 40 interviews of key leaders, held four public meetings and nearly two dozen meetings of the citizen advisory committees, and distributed project newsletters to every property owner within the study areas. This outreach effort was coupled with a review of the available geographic information system (GIS) data regarding the study areas, and a search of the literature for preservation strategies that had been successfully implemented elsewhere in North America.

## Summary of Major Findings

1. The consultant team found that, with a few very minor exceptions, the rural farm and forest areas identified by the County staff were consistent with the criteria established in the Comprehensive Plan for "areas where farming and forestry should be encouraged through incentives and additional zoning protection."<sup>2</sup> (Those areas that did not meet the criteria were recommended for deletion from further study.)
2. The study areas are comprised of diverse land types which contribute to the quality of King County in many different ways. For example, certain of the rural forest study areas have limited value for commercial timber harvest but provide important buffers between urban areas and the agricultural production districts; others

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<sup>1</sup> Following the Table of Contents is a list of the Farm & Forest study team members.

<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 2 for a list of the criteria

are critical wildlife or fish habitat; and still others support highly productive timber harvest. (Chapter 4 provides a detailed examination of the "landscapes" of King County and the value of the various study areas.)

3. Although farming and forestry within the rural zone are not as prominent in the economy of King County as they once were, they are still significant contributors to the viability of our community. The value of King County's annual agricultural production is valued at nearly \$85 million; the forests of the rural zone account for 25 percent of King County's total timber production.
4. The citizens who are (or hope to be) engaged in farming and forestry in King County reflect widely diverse interests ranging from major dairy farmers to organic farmers engaged in intensive cultivation of a few acres, and large forest product companies to small wood-lot owners.
5. The disappearance of farms and forests within the county can be traced to a complex set of barriers which include:

### **Barriers to farming:**

- A. The high cost of land
- B. Low profitability of farming
- C. Insufficient technical support
- D. The need for better marketing and promotion
- E. Regulatory requirements
- F. Population growth and the conflict with farming activity

### **Barriers to forestry:**

- A. Conflicts with surrounding population growth and urbanization
  - B. Uncertainty over future regulations
  - C. Overlapping regulations
  - D. The burden of estate tax
  - E. Lack of technical assistance
  - F. Smaller financial return from forestry than from conversion
6. The team found a deep sense of disenfranchisement from county government on the part of many of the rural residents of King County. This feeling is based in part on the perception that "those in the County Courthouse don't really understand or value farming or forestry."
  7. Among the citizens who participated in the study, there is far greater support for a strategy based on incentives to preserve farms and forests than for additional zoning changes.

Based on these findings, the team and its advisory committees reviewed a wide range of potential preservation strategies reflecting the experience of other communities throughout North America and recent work here in Washington state, and developed recommendations and a package of strategies tailored to the needs of King County.

## General Recommendations

1. The consultant team recommends that King County pursue a preservation strategy based on incentives to protect both the *land base* and the *practice* of farming and forestry.
2. The Rural Farm and Forest Study Areas (identified during the preparation of the Comprehensive Plan) are worthy of preservation and should be considered the focal point for the preservation incentive strategy, although certain of the incentives can and should be applied to farm and forest landowners outside these areas as resources permit.
3. This strategy should include a monitoring program to measure the effectiveness of the incentive programs during a five-year implementation period. Should the incentives fail to achieve the County's goals for preservation, additional regulatory measures should be considered.
4. As an essential first step in implementing the incentive strategy, King County must rebuild a relationship of trust with the farming and forestry communities. To this end, the team strongly recommends that King County:
  - A. Strengthen the role of the King County Agriculture Commission and use it regularly to review the impact of proposed County regulations and initiatives on farming and farm communities;
  - B. Establish a "Rural Forestry Commission" to play a similar role in the interests of forestry;
  - C. Establish at least three "farmbudsman" and three "friends of the forests" to serve as advocates, problem-solvers, and interpreters of the County's regulations and policies to farmers and foresters.

## Recommendations Specific to Farming

The team recommends that King County implement incentive programs to address the specific barriers that discourage agriculture in the county. The following is a sample of some of the incentives recommended by the consultant team and endorsed by the Agriculture Commission. (For a more complete list of recommendations, please see Chapter 5 in the full report.)

- 1. To address the high cost of land, the team recommends that King County:**
  - A. Acquire additional development rights for key farmlands. As an initial step, allocate \$3 million (including \$1.6 million from the Natural Resources Initiative bond and \$1.4 million from the Farmland Preservation Program), to purchase development rights for unprotected parcels within the Agricultural Production Districts of the lower Green River Valley, the Enumclaw Plateau, and the southern portion of the Snoqualmie Valley.
  - B. Include farmland preservation as an element of future open space bond issues.
  - C. Use County land to create a farm-lease program to assist new farmers who have insufficient resources to obtain land.
  - D. Establish a "Farm Link" program to match retiring farmers with younger people who wish to farm. To this end, the team recommends that King County allocate \$300,000 as seed funding for the first three years of the program.
  
- 2. To address the low profitability of farming, the team recommends that King County:**
  - A. Allow greater flexibility for farmers to pursue commercial activity on their lands if that activity is directly related to farming.
  - B. Enhance the existing current use taxation programs to afford additional protection to farmers.
  - C. Develop a cost sharing mechanism to help farmers comply with environmental requirements.

- D. Assist farm families in securing health care coverage through the Washington Basic Health Plan.
- 3. To address the need for additional technical assistance, the team recommends that King County:**
- A. Allocate \$400,000 in Arts and Natural Resources Initiative funding to create an endowment fund to provide grants for specific research projects and educational programs that would aid local farmers.
  - B. Work with the Cooperative Extension Service, local community colleges and existing vocational training programs to create training programs for new farmers.
  - C. Establish a revolving loan fund to assist farmers.
- 4. To address the need for better marketing and promotion, the team recommends that King County:**
- A. Work with local farmers to create an independent farm marketing association.
  - B. Assist in securing permanent sites for farmer's markets throughout the county.
- 5. To address the impact of regulatory requirements on farming, the team recommends that King County:**
- A. Amend County codes to allow temporary housing for farm workers.
  - B. Pursue an expedited permit process and reduced fees for permits to construct or renovate farm structures.
- 6. To address the impact of conflicts between population growth and farming activity, the team recommends that King County:**  
Adopt countywide Right-to-Farm legislation.

## Recommendations Specific to Forests

The team recommends that King County pursue a comprehensive strategy to address the specific barriers that discourage the preservation of rural forests and the practice of forestry. The following elements should be included in that strategy:

1. **To reduce the interference of urbanization with good forestry practices, the team recommends that King County:**  
Adopt a "Right-to-Forest Law" similar to that developed in Snohomish County.
2. **To reduce the danger that uncertainty about future regulations will encourage premature harvest and the conversion of forest lands, the team recommends that King County:**  
Support the Timber, Fish and Wildlife process to develop a Forestry Commitment Program. Such a program would provide regulatory certainty in exchange for a property owner's commitment to retain his or her land in forest and practice sound forest management.
3. **To reduce the impact of overlapping regulations, the team recommends that King County:**  
Take an active role in seeking to streamline the implementation of local and state regulatory practices.
4. **To ease the burden of estate and other taxes that make it difficult for some families to remain in forestry, the team recommends that King County:**
  - A. Provide information on potential methods to reduce the impact of estate taxes and support pending legislation to modify the federal estate tax.
  - B. Enhance the effectiveness of the existing current use taxation programs in preserving forest lands.
5. **To address the lack of technical assistance to help farm foresters with problems unique to the rural area, the team recommends that King County:**
  - A. Sponsor specific research activities on issues of importance to local foresters.

- B. Work with the Cooperative Extension Service, community colleges, and area high schools to develop formal training programs in the latest and most environmentally sound practices.
  - C. Provide reforestation assistance to landowners who sign to Forestry Commitment Agreements.
  - D. Implement an extensive outreach program to farm foresters, lifestyle foresters and owners of small parcels which are likely to be converted, to create an education program on best management practices for forestry and on the permit process.
6. **To address the fact that forestry yields smaller returns than conversion in many areas of the rural zone, the team recommends that King County:**
- A. Create a Forest Conservation Incentive Program to enable landowners to realize a property's residential value without converting. The program would have three major components:
    - 1) A Clustered Homestead Program that would allow landowners to realize the residential development potential of their land on a small portion of the property in exchange for signing a Forestry Commitment Agreement to permanently retain the remainder in forest,
    - 2) A Transfer of Development Rights Program to encourage property owners to transfer development off-site to areas in or adjacent to the urban growth areas,
  - B. Dedicate Arts and Natural Resources Initiative funds to the creation of a pilot program to preserve forest lands through:
    - 1) acquisition
    - 2) land exchanges
    - 3) the biosolids program
    - 4) mitigation banking
    - 5) transfer of development rights

## Recommended Allocations

To initiate the preservation strategies, the consultant team and the advisory committees recommend that the Arts and Natural Resources funding be allocated as follows:

<b><i>Farm Preservation Strategies</i></b>	<b><i>Total \$4.4 million</i></b>
<i>(includes \$1.4 million from the Farmland Preservation Program)</i>	
<b><i>Acquisition of Development Rights</i></b>	<b><i>\$3.0 million</i></b>
<b><i>Program Development:</i></b>	
<i>Farm Link Program</i>	<i>\$0.3 million</i>
<i>Agricultural Research Endowment</i>	<i>\$0.4 million</i>
<i>Farmers' Marketing Association (start-up)</i>	<i>\$0.4 million</i>
<i>Revolving loan fund for small farmers</i>	<i>\$0.3 million</i>
<b><i>Forest Preservation Strategies</i></b>	<b><i>Total \$3.0 million</i></b>
<i>Pilot Program</i>	<i>\$2.5 million</i>
<i>Program Development</i>	<i>\$0.5 million</i>

## Monitoring and Evaluation

The success of the recommended strategies must be carefully monitored by the County to assure that these strategies are achieving the desired results. Based on the advice of the advisory committees and the comments received from citizens, the team has designed a strategy that relies on incentives and existing regulations rather than additional zoning actions. Should this approach fall short of achieving the objectives of preserving the land base for farming and forestry, the County must consider other action.

Therefore, the team recommends that the status of the farm and forest districts be monitored annually, on a schedule that coincides with the development of amendments to the Comprehensive Plan. Monitoring should include data on the accomplishments of the various programs recommended in this report, including the number of acres acquired, the number of acres operating under Forestry Commitment Agreements, the number of new farmers entering the Farm Link program, and other measures of the strategy's impact. The annual report should also include data on the number of acres lost to conversion, and any other negative developments which may warrant the attention of the elected officials. In the event the County determines that the strategies are failing to adequately protect the farm and forest land base, and the practices of farming and forestry, additional measures should be initiated.

The consultant team recommends that annual monitoring begin in 1996, with reports to the King County Agriculture Commission, the newly created Forestry Commission, and to elected officials on the key indicators described above. However the team also recommends that, barring an unforeseen emergency, no additional regulatory action be taken until the five-year implementation plan has been completed, so that the impact of the incentive strategies can be fully tested. The decision to take additional regulatory action should be made by the elected officials on the basis of an agreed-upon "trigger" if the incentive strategies fail to slow the rate of conversion of rural farm and forest lands below an agreed-upon level established by the County. The "trigger" should be based on a two-year period in order to account for an anomaly in a given year.

The consultant team, the advisory committees, and the overwhelming majority of citizens who have participated in this effort firmly believe in the concepts that form the basis for this report. We believe that a comprehensive incentive strategy of the kind proposed in this report holds the best promise for preserving the rural farms and forests that are so crucial to the future of our region.