Mason County's Voluntary Stewardship Program

2023-2025 Biennial Report

In compliance with RCW 36.70A.720, the Mason County VSP Work Group developed a Work Plan with the support of Mason Conservation District Staff that received approval on June, 19, 2018. The purpose of this report is to satisfy the requirements of Section (1)(j) wherein a status report of the plan and accomplishments is due to the County and the Washington Conservation Commission within 60 days after the end of each biennium. For Mason County, the end of the fourth biennia is June 30, 2025 and the Biennial Report is due no later than August 30, 2025.

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MASON COUNTY'S VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

2023-2025 BIENNIAL REPORT

Status of Plan and Accomplishments

The Work Plan has been implemented throughout this biennial reporting period. Work group membership has slightly increased towards the end of the biennium and attendance at regular meetings has become more regular on a two-month cycle. Work Group meetings have continued to be hosted in a hybrid fashion post COVID-19 Pandemic to allow for the most accessibility to both workgroup members and the public.

The Work Group must also "conduct periodic evaluations, institute adaptive management, and provide a written report of the status of plans and accomplishments to the county and to the Commission" within sixty days after the end of the state of Washington's biennium.[1] This Biennial Report is in compliance with that requirement and includes a summary of how the Work Plan's implementation is affecting each of the following:[2]

1. The protection and enhancement of critical areas within the area where agricultural activities are conducted.

2. The maintenance and improvement of the long-term viability of agriculture.

3. Reducing the conversion of farmland to other uses.

4. The maximization of the use of voluntary incentive programs to encourage good riparian and ecosystem stewardship as an alternative to historic approaches used to protect critical areas.

5. The leveraging of existing resources by relying upon existing work and plans in counties and local watersheds, as well as existing state and federal programs to the maximum extent practicable to achieve program goals.

6. Ongoing efforts to encourage and foster a spirit of cooperation and partnership among county, tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests to better assure the program success.

7. Ongoing efforts to improve compliance with other laws designed to protect water quality and fish habitat; and

[1] RCW 36.70A.720(1)(j)
[2] Summarized from RCW 36.70A.700(2)

8. A description of efforts showing how relying upon voluntary stewardship practices as the primary method of protecting critical areas and does not require the cessation of agricultural activities.

1. The Protection and Enhancement of Critical Areas within the Area Where Agricultural Activities Are Conducted

The Work Plan has moved completely into its implementation phase and is now in ongoing adaptive management. Outreach efforts continue, and some have proven more successful than others, relying on past lessons in Mason County outreach has shown drastic improvement in outreach toward the last biennium, but responses have slowed this biennium.

Analysis and comparisons of new and old data allowed District staff to begin monitoring efforts. The results of this work were included in the 2020 5 Year Report to illustrate if, and how, the Plan's protection and enhancement goals were being met. The 5 Year Report and its review process exposed gaps in data as well as in the district's data gathering techniques. The district, as the technical service provider to Mason County's Work Group, has adaptively managed both its implementation and effectiveness monitoring, working closely with state agency partner staff to design a watershed fit effectiveness monitoring strategy and district implementation monitoring strategy. An effectiveness monitoring plan was adopted in July 2024 and is still being adaptively managed as lessons are learned. District and partner implementation monitoring has become a high priority to capture all voluntary efforts in the county's watersheds.

The following is a brief breakdown of the Work Plan's goals and benchmarks, and their achievement status. Because VSP reports data on a watershed level, and not parcel by parcel, the goals and benchmarks data is reported for each Hydrologic Unit Code level 12 (HUC12) and broken down by critical areas (Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas, wetlands, Fish and Wildlife Habitat, Frequently Flooded Areas, and Geologically Hazardous Areas). In the interest of keeping this report succinct and digestible, this section is a summary of all critical areas within all the HUC12 as they relate to the goals and benchmarks.

Goal 1 – Protect Critical Area Functions and Values on Agricultural Lands at a Watershed Level as They Existed as of July 22, 2011

Benchmark – Maintain BMP Implementation

This benchmark has been met based on the results of adaptive management of implementation monitoring, a collection of practice implementation can be analyzed and reviewed by staff regularly. Mason Conservation District maintains a landowner database of

agricultural operators served and the services provided. Ongoing efforts to maintain and improve this data collection and analysis are still underway with plans to move to a more robust customer relationship management software . Files are currently maintained through a combination of Smartsheet and ArcGIS pro geodatabase. Natural Resources Conservation Service also applies Best Management Practices (BMPs), or conservation practices, in Mason County. We were able to receive 2020-2024 NRCS practice implementation data before the 5-year report, however we will note that a year of practices will be missing from that data source. Total practices reported in the approved Work Plan have been adaptively managed to include a more accurate baseline count, and reported implementation from the last 5-year report was updated.

Benchmark – Maintain Baseline Acreage of Agriculture and Critical Area Interface

This benchmark has been met, and no adaptive management is necessary or proposed at this time. Utilizing a Geographic Information System (GIS) Geoprocessing Intersect tool, the district was able to provide the total acreage of agriculture activities occurring in the County's critical areas for both 2011, 2019, and 2024; then make a comparison of those totals revealing that the baseline of agricultural activities has been maintained and exceeded in some areas. Utilizing Washington's Department of Fish and Wildlife High Resolution Change Detection, land cover changes were also documented. The overall changes noted were minimal and do not warrant adaptive management. These changes were generally the result of mapped parcel expansions to include transportation Right of Way's and parcel boundary adjustments, infill of existing agricultural operations on a single parcel or with a single property owner, expanded agricultural operations, converted lands into agricultural use, and addition of existing activities not previously recorded or mapped. Outreach and on the ground verification have enabled more lesser-known agricultural activities to be identified and recorded for reporting and analysis.

Goal 2 – Enhance Critical Area Function and Values through Voluntary, Incentive Based Measures

Benchmark – 5% Annual Increase of BMP Implementation (Based on Averaged Annual Implementation over 5-Year Period of Each BMP throughout the County)

This benchmark has been met, and no adaptive management is recommended. The district has updated landowner files into a new tracking system to more accurately reflect implementation efforts. BMP numbers as of the date of the approved Work Plan were revised for updating and validation purposes. Additionally, new BMP data has been made available from NRCS that will be reflected in pre and post 2011 BMP totals; this will also affect protection and enhancement benchmarks. The district will continue to update the landowner tracking system to obtain more accurate reporting of implemented BMPs and assess if a 5%

increase is reasonable to show enhancement, especially alongside changing effectiveness monitoring efforts.

Benchmark – Reduce Agricultural and Critical Areas Interface to Less Than 2011 Baseline by Maintaining and Reconfiguring Agricultural Activities Away from Those Areas and Utilizing BMPs

This benchmark has been met, and no adaptive management is being proposed at this time. Reductions in the baseline were reviewed using WDFW's High Resolution Change Detection land cover data and found that most changes were less than ½ acre. Also noted were increases in interface that were the result of mapped parcel expansions to include transportation ROWs and parcel boundary adjustment, and infill of existing agricultural operation on a single parcel or under single ownership. Mason County also updated their FIRMs (Flood Insurance Rating Maps) between 2011 and 2019, and existing agricultural properties not previously classified in flood areas in 2011 were re-designated in the update and now counted in 2019. On going data collection and analysis will inform any adaptive management to this benchmark.

2. The Maintenance and Improvement of the Long-Term Viability of Agriculture

The VSP Work Plan has three Goals, the first two address critical area protection and critical area enhancement where agriculture is occurring, with specific benchmarks to measure the Work Plan's success. The third goal looks at the Plan's ability to also maintain the long-term viability of those agricultural operations while simultaneously increasing activity where feasible. The following goal and benchmarks describe the success of these efforts thus far.

Goal 3 – Ensure the Viability of Agriculture and Reduce the Conversion of Agricultural Land into Other Uses

Benchmark – Maintain Baseline Acreage of Agricultural Activity

This benchmark has been met, and no adaptive management is necessary or proposed at this time. Agricultural acreage in Mason County has been maintained and even increased throughout the region in varying percentages. While some specific places were found to have decreased when data was collected, the overall acres within each HUC12 have been maintained.

Benchmark – Maintain 2011 Annual Average Baseline of 7.5 Completed Farm Plans

This benchmark has been met through adaptive management following the 5-year report. The district maintains a landowner database of agricultural operators served and the

services provided. The original totals for Farm Plans showed an average of 7.5 plans per year in 2011. The district will continue to update the landowner tracking system to obtain more accurate reporting of Farm Plans on eligible properties. Adaptive management for the 2025-2030 reporting period is being considered regarding the limitations on eligible cooperators for this metric.

3. Reducing the Conversion of Farmland to Other Uses

As stated in Goal 3 noted in the previous section, the VSP not only looks at the amount of agricultural acreage over time but also endeavors to keep what exists as working farmland into the future. Encouraging agricultural operators to maintain a current farm plan is one way of putting a strategy in place that considers the property's physical characteristics and potential challenges and provides conservation practices that if implemented can keep the farm viable. Tallying agricultural acreages over the monitoring period revealed that while farm locations may be changing, the overall amount of farmland remains consistent. Outreach and education on the benefits of having a plan has become a priority under VSP and an area in need of more effort. To support the idea of agricultural viability in mason county we have also been recording year-on-year economic data to show a "quality" of agricultural activities alongside the quantity of acres.

4. The Maximization of the Use of Voluntary Incentive Programs to Encourage Good Riparian and Ecosystem Stewardship as an Alternative to Historic Approaches Used to Protect Critical Areas

The VSP Work Plan contains three goals which have been discussed previously in this report. There is a fourth component, however, to the Program that could be considered another goal and is evaluated utilizing some of the benchmarks under the primary goals. Protection of critical areas, enhancement of critical areas, and maintenance of viable farm activities are the three legs of the program, but without participation by the farming community, one or more of those legs will fail. Participation is the fourth component of the program and it's a common thread running through all three of the Plan's goals. The following benchmarks, found in Goals 1 and 2 of the Work Plan, are intended to measure levels of voluntary participation by agricultural operators in Mason County.

Benchmark – Maintain 7.5 completed farm plans (Individual Stewardship Plans) per year

This benchmark has been discussed in earlier sections as being met. After recalculating the number of actual farm plans and incorporating VSP ISP's and plan

addendum through adaptive management the district has succeeded in meeting this benchmark. The district will continue to update its landowner database and better project participation goals, as well as consider adaptive management of these benchmarks in the future to account for the limited factor of cooperator availability.

Benchmark – Maintain outreach to all operators annually

This benchmark has no metrics for monitoring. However, there is a list of accomplishments the district has made during implementation of the Work Plan that would indicate this benchmark has been met up to this point. These include:

- Regular site visits and technical assistance to local agricultural operations
- 0ver 1000 VSP returnable flyers mailed out to Agricultural operators countywide.
- 2000 VSP survey post-cards to priority outreach areas seeking engagement from small family farms on critical areas.
- Promotion of VSP at multiple county annual events.
- Regular Social Media campaigns.
- Participant signage and stickers.
- Increasing cost share rates for VSP participants from 75% to 90%, as well as district base cost share rates from 75% to 80% for incentive for participation.
- Ongoing communications with County officials.
- Permanent outreach signage at public agricultural hot spots and business centers.
- Partnership with local tractor club's no-till seed drill rental program.
- Partnership with local tribal farm community engagement events.

Benchmark – Return rate of 15 ISP checklists per year

An ISP, or Individual Stewardship Plan, is VSP's title for farm plan, the ISP Checklist referring to the online survey. It is a plan generally prepared by a conservation district that describes a farm's physical characteristics as well as crops and livestock, together with any resource concerns or challenges. The plan gives the cooperator a strategy to follow that will allow them to maximize use of the land as a viable farm while protecting the resources on or around it. An ISP checklist, or survey, is a way for the District to inventory individuals with or without current Farm Plans who would like to learn more about the types of conservation practices that would benefit their property and operation. From the survey, the District can begin outreach and obtain eventual participation. A return rate of 15 surveys was an educated guess made by the District since there was no historical reference from which to make a prediction.

This metric continues to prove challenging to meet year on year. With only 1 returned in 2022. However, towards the end of the biennium new outreach strategies have increased this metric which may prove viable in the long term with 14 ISP's returned in the last three months of the biennium. Recently, surveys were completed online from the district's website. The District uses ISP checklist completion as a metric for VSP participation for incentives like

increased cost share rates for BMP implementation projects. Adaptive management of the survey collection process partnered with farm program staff to perform an ISP checklist on behalf of cooperators during technical assistance site visits and initial communication. Even with these changes increasing the consistency of ISP survey return rate; Adaptive management may still be the key to ensuring completion in the future, to account for the limitation of available participants.

Benchmark – Increase annual number of Farm Plans (Individual Stewardship Plans) to 16

The original benchmark discussed earlier was to maintain a baseline of 7.5 farm plans per year. This was met and the district is working toward further increasing annual farm plans. To increase the annual number of plans to 16 was an optimistic projection that the number of farm plans would more than double under the program's new promotion. However, more than 24 completed last biennium, 6 off the enhancement benchmark, and with new partnership and community engagement 44 farm plans have been completed or updated with cooperators during the 2023-2025 biennium meeting and exceeding enhancement benchmarks. The workgroup is in support of celebrating more than double the baseline as an enhancement goal with plans to reduce this number to a data-informed metric considering the limiting factor of available participants over time.

Benchmark – Increase annual operator participation levels by 50%
Benchmark – Return rate of 23 ISP checklists per year

As previously discussed, there are no specific metrics for measuring levels of participation other than by the number of farm plans created and the number of surveys received. The baseline for both farm plans and surveys were miscalculated and over projected, leaving those benchmarks as well as those listed in this section as unmet. Having seen this pattern unfold since the initial 5-year report and subsequent biennia reports adaptive management of the survey collection process partnered with farm program staff to perform an ISP checklist on behalf of cooperators during technical assistance site visits and initial communication. Even with these changes increasing the consistency of ISP survey return rate; Adaptive management may still be the key to ensuring completion in the future, to account for the limitation of available participants. The work group is working on adaptively managing this benchmark for enhancement regarding participation.

5. The Leveraging of Existing Resources by Relying Upon Existing Work and Plans in Counties and Local Watersheds, As Well As Existing State and Federal

Programs to the Maximum Extent Practicable to Achieve Program Goals

The Work Plan includes a regulatory backstop for geographically hazardous areas and frequently flooded areas leaving the County's resource regulations in place and fully enforceable for those critical areas where agricultural activities occur. The district continued to collect data for each of these critical areas so they could be monitored for overall protection and to determine if enforcement measures are necessary. Protection and enhancement goals have been applied to geologically hazardous areas and frequently flooded areas, and the overall success of regulatory backstops in those areas can be found in conclusions drawn in earlier sections. The district also coordinates with existing conservation and stewardship programs such as WRIA 14 Lead Entity, Priority Watershed group, Salmon Enhancement Group, SRF, CREP, Sustainable Farms and Fields and others to coordinate protection and enhancement projects and monitoring efforts. As monitoring efforts continue with partners such as Mason County department of health, and Washington department of health, measurable outcomes of quality and quantity of Critical Aquifer recharge areas seem to be another critical area in Mason that can be baseline protected with existing regulatory backstops, leaving promotion of BMPs in an enhancement direction. The work group is discussing the inclusion of this adaptive management strategy.

6. Ongoing Efforts to Encourage and Foster a Spirit of Cooperation and Partnership among County, Tribal, Environmental, and Agricultural Interests to Better Assure the Program Success

District Staff and Work Group members participate in a variety of different organizations and associations that afford additional opportunities to share information about VSP to the public as well as other agencies equally interested in both agricultural and resource protection. Many of these organizations have tribal participation. While the tribes in Mason County have maintained their position to not participate in VSP, information is still shared with each Tribe and lines of communication remain open for discussion.

7. Ongoing Efforts to Improve Compliance with Other Laws Designed to Protect Water Quality and Fish Habitat

The District's continued partnership with County officials facilitates the exchange of information necessary to inform property owners of the flexibility of VSP and the regulatory backstops that remain in place. Additionally, the District serving as a Technical Assistance provider ensures that every effort will be made to recommend responsible practices for

resource protection. The District has historically and consistently collaborated efforts and interests with other resource protection agencies to share data and monitor for compliance and protection, maintaining it's a solid role protecting water quality and fish habitat. Conversations with County code officials have been started in coordinating a landowner to county to district referral strategy for Critical Area Ordinances and permitting.

8. A Description of Efforts Showing How Relying Upon Voluntary Stewardship Practices As the Primary Method of Protecting Critical Areas and Does Not Require the Cessation of Agricultural Activities

Through the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP), a practical and effective approach to protecting critical areas while keeping agricultural operations viable and active becomes available to cooperators. Rather than relying on regulatory mandates or halting agricultural use, the VSP allows landowners to continue working their land while receiving technical assistance and guidance tailored to their goals and their landscape. Each interaction is an opportunity to provide resources designed to help landowners implement practices that both support their agricultural operations and protect natural resources. Participation rates and adoption of best practices serve as indicators that landowners are engaged and that voluntary approaches can meet conservation goals without requiring them to stop farming. The VSP framework shows that agriculture and environmental protection are not mutually exclusive. When landowners gain knowledge about conservation practices and how they apply to their specific landscape, they become more confident and capable stewards of their land. This understanding empowers them to make informed decisions that support both their agricultural goals and natural resource protection. Just as importantly, knowledgeable landowners often share their experiences with neighbors, creating a ripple effect of stewardship throughout the community. This peer-to-peer exchange builds trust, spreads practical solutions, and strengthens the collective effort to care for the land.

If you have any questions or comments regarding this report, please reach out to the implementation staff at Mason Conservation District. Thank you.

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