

Voluntary Stewardship Program Work Plan Conceptual Framework

The Mason County Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) will accomplish three goals:

- * Protect critical area functions and values on agricultural lands at a watershed scale as they existed as of July 22, 2011**
- * Encourage the implementation of voluntary actions that enhance critical areas on agricultural lands**
- * Enhance the viability of agriculture and reduce the conversion of farmland to other uses**

The Mason County VSP Work Group will implement these goals through a four-track VSP Work Plan emphasizing provision of Technical Assistance and development of Individual Stewardship Plans, Program Outreach, Program Monitoring, evaluation and Adaptive Management.

Track 1: Individual Stewardship Plans

The core element of the Mason County VSP will be the Individual Stewardship Plan developed for agricultural operators through the Mason Conservation District. An “agricultural operator” under the VSP Work Plan is any person or entity engaging in a broad range agricultural activities that meets the definition under RCW 90.58.065.

The Individual Stewardship Plan begins as a standardized document that the Conservation District personalizes for each agricultural operation. It informs the land owner/manager

which critical areas exist on the property, identifies conservation practices to enhance their function and value, documents any agricultural viability issues, and identifies potential resources for addressing critical area enhancements and agricultural viability.

Figure 1 shows the flow of this process.

- 1 Conservation District promotes the VSP countywide with emphasis on targeted critical areas & known agricultural operators - focus begins with Individual Stewardship Plans**
- 2 Agricultural operator agrees to the preparation of an Individual Stewardship Plan**
- 3 Individual Stewardship Plans identify agricultural viability & critical area issues; lays out approach for addressing viability needs & voluntary enhancements using National Resources Conservation Service Conservation Practices (or Best Management Practices)**
- 4 Agricultural operator partially or fully implements individual Stewardship Plan with/without external resources or Conservation District assistance**
- 5 Conservation District periodically visits agricultural operator to update and/or evaluate implementation progress with the individual Stewardship Plan**

Specific elements of the Individual Stewardship Plan track potentially could include:

*** Agricultural operator “enrolls” in program by agreeing to complete an Individual Stewardship Plan**

*** Farm Stewardship Plan confidentiality**

▶ **Conservation District keeps list of who has an Individual Stewardship Plan**

▶ **Data reporting by conservation district is at an aggregate, watershed-scale level**

*** Individual Stewardship Plan content & structure**

▶ **Structured with a set format that can change over time and be adjusted as appropriate**

▶ **Standardized format to aid in data reporting, but can be personalized with aerials, property plans (examples from other counties)**

▶ **Relies on standard NRCS Best Management Practices that will maintain and enhance critical areas; other practices may be included if appropriate**

▶ **While encouraging full implementation of NRCS conservation practices, individual Stewardship Plans allow for partial or phased implementation**

- ▶ **Individual Stewardship Plans encourage conservation practices that increase productivity and profitability of agricultural operations as well as providing critical area protection or enhancement**
- ▶ **Identifies issues related to the viability of the operator or the farm.**

*** Conservation District Technical Assistance to agricultural operators through individual Stewardship Plans**

- ▶ **Assists agricultural operators in enrolling as a “VSP Participant” by completing a Stewardship Plan**
- ▶ **Identify critical areas on agricultural operation**
- ▶ **Provides technical and financial assistance to agricultural operators in implementing Best Management Practices**
- ▶ **Keeps list of VSP participants; periodic visits to assess progress/collect aggregate data for monitoring program**
- ▶ **Facilitates connections between agricultural operators and other programs to implement conservation practices and agricultural viability actions**

*** Conservation district facilitates working relationships & partnerships with other agencies/ organizations to leverage resources for enhancement projects or find alternative funding resources**

Track 2: VSP Work Plan Outreach

The success of the Individual Stewardship Plan approach depends on the Conservation District effectively promoting the program and active participation by agricultural operators. Potential elements of the approach include:

- * The VSP Work Group will become the “face” of the VSP effort in the county**
- * VSP outreach and promotion implemented by Conservation District**
 - ▶ Disseminates information about VSP to agricultural operators – literature, website, presentations**
 - ▶ Direct marketing to agricultural operators in targeted watersheds for specific critical area enhancement efforts**
 - ▶ Works with community organizations and suppliers associated with small or noncommercial agricultural operators to encourage enrollment (i.e., feed stores, Farm Bureau, horse groups, etc.)**
 - ▶ Prepares and distributes newsletters (mail/electronic) on agricultural issues, programs, etc.**
 - ▶ Design and facilitate annual VSP meetings, including farm tours**

*** Incentives & Recognition Program for VSP Participants**

- ▶ **Agricultural operator can opt to receive newsletters and emails from the Conservation District that inform about program and funding opportunities for viability and critical area enhancement projects**
- ▶ **Agricultural operators receive “VSP Conservation Steward” recognition for completing an individual Stewardship Plan – operator provided with a sign they can install on site that identifies participation in VSP**
- ▶ **Annual competition for “VSP Steward of the Year” award (may have different categories, i.e., cropland, livestock, small farm, most progress, etc.)**

*** Enrolled participants promoting VSP through Agricultural Mentorship Program**

- ▶ **Create a list of enrolled VSP participants who will be willing to share knowledge with other agricultural operators one-on-one**

Track 3: Monitoring VSP Progress

The VSP Work Group, aided by the Conservation District and Mason County, will monitor the progress of the Work Plan in achieving the three goals. The Work Group, the Conservation District, and the County each play a specific role in this process. Figure 2 presents an overview of this process generally flows.

Figure 2: VSP Monitoring Process

- 1 Conservation District creates a database for collecting aggregate data on a watershed scale from individual Stewardship Plan – data collected anonymously to protect individual confidentiality**
- 2 Conservation District periodically visits agricultural operators with Individual Stewardship Plans to assess progress & collect data**
- 3 VSP Work Group meets on regular basis to ensure Work Plan is implemented & to engage agricultural community**
- 4 VSP Work Group convenes to review & analyze data provided by the Conservation District– makes changes to Work Plan when necessary to maintain minimum 2011 baseline**

The Work Plan will identify specific indicators for measuring critical area protection and enhancement and agricultural viability. The indicators will be used to evaluate and adapt the Work Plan to ensure achieving the three goals. Specific roles include:

*** Conservation District**

- ▶ **Periodically visit enrolled VSP agricultural operators to collect aggregate data from Stewardship Plans on a watershed scale**
- ▶ **Compiles aggregate data into format that allows the Work Group to analyze trends and evaluate efficacy of the Farm Stewardship Plans and marketing efforts**
- ▶ **Monitors implementation efforts by NRCS, FSA, other agencies, NGOs, & includes in aggregate reporting**
- ▶ **Monitors 2011 baseline indicators every three years itemized in Work Plan**

*** Work Group**

- ▶ **Regularly evaluates data being collected by the Conservation District**
- ▶ **Engages with Work Group in reviewing county plans and regulations that may affect agricultural viability, including conversion of agricultural land to other uses due to changes in county and state plans and regulations**

- ▶ **Make regular alterations to the Work Plan to ensure goals and benchmarks are on target**

Track 4: Adaptive Management

A concerted effort will be necessary to keep the Mason County VSP Work Plan viable. The following parties will accomplish specific tasks:

*** Conservation district**

- ▶ **Main entity for facilitating the long-term workings of the Work Group by serving as “staff” to the Work Group**
- ▶ **Work closely with the members and chair to recruit and maintain membership on the Work Group**
- ▶ **Coordinate relationships between Work Group, Washington State Conservation Commission, and County**

*** County**

- ▶ **May serve as a conduit for Washington State Conservation Commission funding**

*** Work Group**

- ▶ **Establishes a regular board with by-laws and other procedures**

- ▶ **Establishes committees consisting of mix of board members and enrolled VSP participants**
- ▶ **Works in close association with other agriculturally-related organizations and agencies to provide benefits to enrolled VSP participants**
- ▶ **Review county plans and regulations that may affect agricultural viability, including conversion of agricultural land to other uses due to changes in county and state plans and regulations**