Whitman County Voluntary Stewardship Program Overview and Checklist

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Voluntary Stewardship Program Overview

The Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) is a non-regulatory, and incentive-based approach to protecting critical areas on agricultural lands, while maintaining agricultural viability. Land used for non-agricultural purposes are regulated under the County's Critical Areas Ordinance.

VSP is allowed under a 2011 amendment to the Growth Management Act, with the intent to protect and voluntarily enhance critical areas in areas where agricultural activities are conducted, while maintaining and enhancing the long-term viability of agriculture. VSP allows farmers and ranchers to continue agricultural practices without regulation under Whitman County's Critical Areas Ordinance. By promoting voluntary stewardship strategies and practices, VSP provides an alternative to traditional approaches to critical areas protection, such as protection buffers.

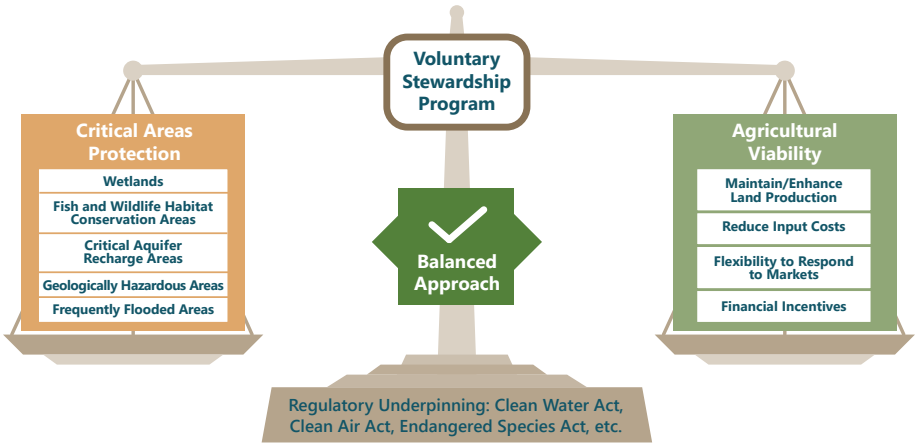
VSP is intended to balance critical areas protection and agricultural viability at the County level through voluntary actions by agricultural producers, as illustrated in Figure 1. VSP is not a replacement for compliance with other laws and regulations, but participation in the program can often help agricultural producers comply with these requirements.

Critical Areas per RCW 36.70A.020(5) include:

- Wetlands
- Fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas
- Areas with a critical recharging effect on aquifers used for potable water
- Geologically hazardous areas
- Frequently flooded areas

Ditching on agricultural land may continue without any permitting from the County outside of floodplains. If the drainage is also in a FEMA 100-year floodplain, then the landowner will need to apply for a County floodplain development permit.

Figure 1
Balanced Approach of Critical Areas Protection and Agricultural Viability



VSP Work Plan Background and Purpose

The guiding document for the VSP is the Work Plan. The Whitman County VSP Work Plan (Work Plan) was developed by the Whitman County VSP Work Group, convened by the County and comprised of agricultural producers, local government elected officials and staff, agency representatives, and interest groups. This document provides an overview of VSP Work Plan and a VSP Checklist. The Work Plan includes detailed information intended to fulfill the state requirements outlined under the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 36.70A.720(1), which includes several elements, including protection and enhancement goals, measurable benchmarks, and an implementation, reporting, and tracking framework. See below for description of the VSP Work Plan Organization.

One of the main goals of the Work Plan is to identify stewardship strategies and practices that are implemented under existing programs or voluntarily implemented through producer funded practices and identify future goals and benchmarks for continued protection and enhancement of the County's critical area functions and values.

Failure of the Work Plan in meeting protection goals will trigger a regulatory approach to protecting critical areas under the GMA, such as applying buffers and setbacks along streams or wetlands. Additionally, the regulatory approach for protecting critical areas on agricultural lands would not have the equally important VSP goal of maintaining and enhancing agricultural viability. Neither would it necessarily encourage outreach or technical assistance for agricultural operators. Therefore, producer participation is encouraged, through implementing conversation practices, to help ensure the success of VSP.

Whitman County VSP Work Plan Organization

Detailed information outlining the background, existing conditions, goals and benchmarks, and implementation is found in the Whitman County VSP Work Plan. See below for an overview of what is included in the Work Plan:

- **Introduction:** Background on VSP regulation and how it applies to the County.
- **Regional Setting:** Overview of County conditions, including description of critical areas and associated key functions.
- **Baseline Conditions:** Description of county-wide critical areas presence and functions and values as of 2011 (effective date of VSP; see Frequently Asked Questions).
- **Protection and Enhancement Strategies:** Description of currently implemented stewardship strategies and practices that protect and enhance critical areas functions and values.
- **Goals, Benchmarks, and Adaptive Management:** Description of VSP goals for each critical area, measurable benchmarks, and indicators and methods for adaptive management.
- **Implementation:** Detailed plan outlining implementation of VSP actions by the VSP Coordinator and Work Group.
- **Appendices:** Additional detailed information referenced by the above sections.

Work Plan Implementation

Agricultural producers manage private lands and resources within Washington State and Whitman County. Agricultural producers are continually improving agricultural practices, applying new science and technology, and implementing stewardship strategies and practices that reduce agricultural impacts on critical areas, while maintaining and increasing the viability of farms and the larger Whitman County agricultural economy.

Work Plan implementation is expected to continue largely through producer-funded activities, existing programs and organizations that provide technical support to producers. Many producers are already implementing conservation actions throughout the County that are protecting critical areas and supporting agricultural viability. VSP aims to:

1. Better identify and document producer-funded and other stewardship strategies and practices implemented since 2011.
2. Increase agricultural producer participation in implementing stewardship strategies and practices.

Stewardship Strategies and Practices:

Examples of practices that protect critical area function and value and promoting agricultural viability include:

- Crop rotations
- No- and reduced till
- Direct seed
- Prescribed grazing

See the VSP Checklist for additional examples of voluntary stewardship strategies and practices and resources for additional information and potential incentive funding.

To meet the goals of the Work Plan, VSP implementation will include agricultural producer participation and outreach, technical assistance, program performance tracking and reporting, and adaptive management. Commodity groups, Conservation Districts, and others can help in performing these responsibilities.

VSP Checklist

The VSP Checklist is a helpful tool to help assess how the VSP could apply to individual agricultural producers. It includes additional examples of stewardship strategies and practices that protect and enhance critical areas and promote agricultural viability.

Participation in Programs

Private, federal, state, and local government programs and opportunities are available to support producers in addressing agricultural and resource concerns. See the VSP Checklist for additional resources and technical assistance available to agricultural producers on a voluntary basis. Participation in a government-funded program is <u>not required</u> to be a VSP participant.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are critical areas?

Critical areas perform key functions that enhance our environment (e.g., water quality and fish and wildlife habitat) and provide protection from hazards (e.g., flood, erosion, or landslide hazards). Critical areas that are specifically defined and managed under the Growth Management Act include wetlands, fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas, critical aquifer recharge areas, geologically hazardous areas, and frequently flooded areas.

The four primary functions provided by the County's critical areas include:

- **Water quality function** through filtration and retention of fine sediments, excessive nutrients, and other pollutants, as well as temperature regulation through canopy shade
- **Hydrology** through the delivery, movement, and storage of water
- **Soil function** through the preservation of soil and the quality of the underground living ecosystem, which preserves plants, animals, and human life
- **Habitat** through the natural environments in which a species or populations can live

Are there critical areas on my land?

Critical areas are designated through the County Critical Areas Ordinance. Each critical area has specific characteristics used for identification. Additionally, critical areas maps can be used to help identify where critical areas may occur; however, presence of critical areas is determined on an individual site basis.

Critical Areas

Wetlands

Areas inundated or saturated by surface water or groundwater for at least part of the growing season and which support vegetation adapted for life in saturated soil conditions.

Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas

Lands and waters that provide habitat to support fish and wildlife species throughout their life stages.

Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas

Areas that have a critical recharging effect on aquifers used for drinking water, including aquifers vulnerable to contamination or that could reduce supply by reducing recharge rates and water availability.

Geologically Hazardous Areas

Areas susceptible to erosion, sliding, and other geological events. In Whitman County, geologic hazards related to agricultural activities are primarily associated with erosion.

Frequently Flooded Areas

Include 100-year floodplains and floodways, and often include the low-lying areas adjacent to rivers and lakes that are prone to inundation during heavy rains and snowmelt.

What is meant by "Baseline Conditions?"

The effective date of the VSP legislation is July 22, 2011. This date identifies the baseline for protecting critical areas functions and maintaining agricultural viability that will be compared to when determining the success of the Work Plan during implementation.

What does it mean to "Protect and Enhance Critical Areas?"

VSP requires creation of measurable benchmarks that will protect and enhance critical area functions and values through voluntary actions by agricultural producers while maintaining agricultural viability.

- **Protection:** Prevention of the degradation of functions and values of baseline conditions.
- **Enhancement:** Improvement of the processes, structure, and functions of baseline conditions for ecosystems and habitats associated with critical areas.

What are the differences between VSP and the Critical Areas Ordinance?

VSP is a non-regulatory and incentive-based approach that balances the protection of critical areas on agricultural lands while promoting agricultural viability. VSP is allowed under the GMA as an alternative to traditional approaches to critical areas protection required under the County's Critical Areas Ordinance, such as protection buffers. See the comparison chart between VSP and Critical Areas Ordinance requirements in the table below.

What does it mean to "Maintain Agricultural Viability?"

To receive approval, the Work Plan must protect critical areas while maintaining and enhancing agricultural viability (RCW 36.70A.725). Agricultural viability in the County can include regional and individual agricultural elements:

- **At a regional level,** agricultural viability is the regional support system sustaining production and providing the services, conditions, land base, and infrastructure for individual farms and ranches to succeed.
- **At a farm or ranch level,** agricultural viability rests mostly on the productivity of the land and the ability of the operator to balance input costs with sales and market conditions. In the County, a main farm-level agricultural viability concern is land productivity, which can be impacted by soil erosion and soil quality (moisture and nutrient management).

Balancing critical areas protection while maintaining agricultural viability means protection activities have to be conducted in a manner that keeps land in production, provides producers with the flexibility to implement stewardship strategies and practices that fit with their business goals, and provides certainty for future business decisions.

Critical Areas Ordinance	VSP
Protective regulatory provisions, such as buffers, and enforcement	Voluntary participation in stewardship strategies and practices and plans
Preserve functions and values of the natural environment, or safeguard the public from hazards to health and safety (WAC 365-196-830)	Prevent degradation of critical area functions and values existing as of July 22, 2011 (RCW 36.70A.703(8))
Site-by-site basis	Collective, watershed-scale
Watershed scale monitoring and site-by-site enforcement	Watershed-scale monitoring to demonstrate that objective benchmarks of critical area protection are met for areas of intersect with each of the five critical area types. Progress reports every 5 years

How will critical areas be protected if VSP fails in my County?

Failure of the VSP Work Plan will trigger a regulatory approach to critical areas protection under the Growth Management Act, which includes mandated regulation on critical areas, such as buffers and setbacks. Additionally, regulation of critical areas on agricultural lands through the Growth Management Act does not take agricultural viability into account and does not encourage outreach or technical assistance for agricultural operators. Therefore, agricultural operators are encouraged to participate in the program to ensure VSP succeeds.

What does participation look like?

VSP participation includes tracking stewardship strategies and practices that protect and enhance critical areas functions and values at a farm and ranch level through the VSP Checklist. There are many ways that agricultural producers can get involved, either through existing Conservation District, Natural Resources Conservation Service, or other publicly-funded programs, or through self-funded improvements. Participation in the VSP is voluntary, meaning that agricultural landowners and operators (commercial and noncommercial) are not required to participate. However, many producers already implement stewardship strategies and practices that protect and enhance critical areas through government- or self- funded practices. These practices can be recorded anonymously as part of the VSP to ensure success of the Work Plan. Voluntary participation, anonymity, and privacy are all key principles that will be maintained during the reporting process. Agricultural producers who choose to participate are free to withdraw at any time without penalty (RCW 36.70A.760).

Is there funding to support VSP?

The VSP received statewide funding for the 2015 – 2017 biennium. Currently, there is a request to the state legislature for additional funding for the 2017 – 2019 biennium; however, future funding is contingent on additional appropriations by the state. Other funding sources, such as local conservation district funding, federal funding through farm bills or other programs, and private funding, can also be used to support VSP protection and enhancement goals.

How do I get involved in VSP?

To participate in VSP, complete the attached VSP checklist and share your checklist findings with the VSP Coordinator. Additionally, to increase involvement in VSP consider reaching out to your commodity group representative and share ideas on new practices. If you have any questions or would like more information on how to get involved contact the VSP Coordinator or your local conservation district.

Whitman County VSP Checklist

This VSP checklist is intended to help each farmers and ranchers contribute to the goals and benchmarks of the Whitman County VSP Work Plan. Many farmers and ranchers in the County are already conducting stewardship strategies and practices that promote agricultural viability while also providing protections to critical area functions. **Working together, farmers and ranchers can use volunteer efforts to avoid additional regulatory controls.**

The VSP checklist intends to:

- Identify and document existing stewardship strategies and practices you have implemented since 2011 (effective date of VSP), either through existing publicly funded programs or voluntarily implemented through producer-funded practices.
- Identify opportunities to:
  - Maintain or improving existing stewardship strategies and practices.
  - Implement additional stewardship strategies and practices on your land and connect you with technical service providers for implementing these practices.
- Encourage high producer participation, through implementation of voluntary stewardship strategies and practices to help ensure the success of VSP. Failure for the County to meet protection and associated participation goals will trigger the traditional regulatory approach to critical area protection under the County's Critical Areas Ordinance process.

Stewardship Strategies and Practices on Your Farm or Ranch

Stewardship strategies and practices are broadly defined as any practice, that when implemented, further protects critical areas directly or indirectly, and maintains or improves agricultural viability whether or not they meet a Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) conservation practice or another standard.

This checklist can assist in documenting all stewardship strategies and practices currently being implemented by producers in the County and identify additional stewardship strategies and practices that might apply to your property. Because stewardship strategies and practices may fall under multiple categories, please include each implemented practice **only once**.

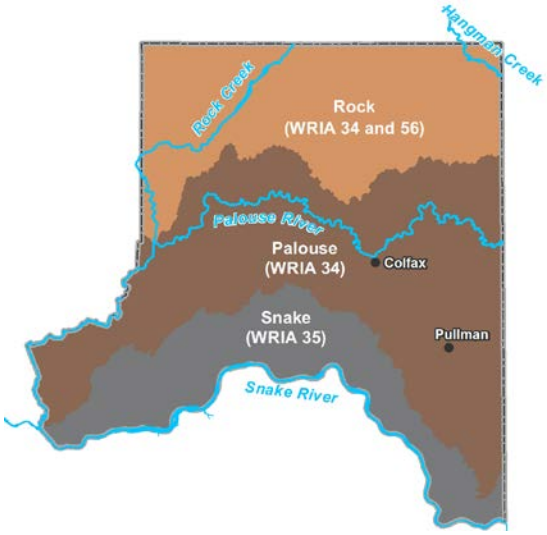
Privacy Note:
Stewardship strategies and practices documented through a local government agency, such as the organization that supports the VSP Coordinator or a Conservation District, are generally exempt from disclosure under the state Public Records Act. At the same time, the VSP Work Group requires some level of substantive information to be able to monitor ongoing program effectiveness in meeting VSP requirements and goals and benchmarks, and to support the Work Group's finding that aggregate baseline critical area conditions are being protected.

Information collected by producers using this checklist will be used to quantify, at the County-level, stewardship measures that have been implemented, as well as associated critical area protections and enhancements, and agricultural viability benefits.

General Location (voluntary information):

If you are inclined to share, what area is your farm or ranch located within?

- ☐ Rock
- ☐ Palouse
- ☐ Snake



Land Management and Agricultural Viability:

What types of land management or agricultural viability concerns do you have on your property?	
☐ Soil composition (organic matter)	☐ Yield/fertility
☐ Soil loss (erosion)	☐ Reduce inputs (e.g., pesticides or fertilizers)
☐ Moisture management	☐ Other(s) Please list
☐ Weed management	
☐ Pollinator/beneficial organism management	

Erosion

Rill-induced erosion is a major concern in the County. Residue- and till-management strategies are common practices applied by producers in the County to reduce erosion and manage soil moisture content.

Grassed Waterway

Grassed waterways can help prevent gully formations, reduce erosion, support soil moisture content, and protect water quality.

What stewardship strategies and practices are being implemented on your farm or ranch?

Stewardship Strategies and Practices Examples	I do this	I'm interested in this	Does not apply	Not interested	Average units/year (acres/feet/other)
Residue and Tillage Management					
Mulch Till	○	○	○	○	
Reduced Till	○	○	○	○	
No Till/Direct Seed	○	○	○	○	
Precision Agriculture	○	○	○	○	
Other(s): _____	○	○	○	○	
Chemical and Nutrient Management					
Integrated Pest Management	○	○	○	○	
Nutrient Management	○	○	○	○	
Other(s): _____	○	○	○	○	
Water and Filtration Management					
Grassed Waterways	○	○	○	○	
Filter Strips	○	○	○	○	
Other(s): _____	○	○	○	○	
Range Management					
Prescribed Grazing	○	○	○	○	
Range Planting	○	○	○	○	
Stock Watering Facilities/Wells	○	○	○	○	
Other(s): _____	○	○	○	○	
Soil Management					
Conservation Crop Rotation	○	○	○	○	
Cover Crop	○	○	○	○	
Mulch	○	○	○	○	
Other(s): _____	○	○	○	○	
Habitat Management					
Conservation Cover	○	○	○	○	
Herbaceous Weed Control	○	○	○	○	
Tree/Shrub Establishment	○	○	○	○	
Hedgerow	○	○	○	○	
Riparian Planting	○	○	○	○	
Maintenance of Native Vegetation	○	○	○	○	
Stream Habitat Improvement and Management	○	○	○	○	
Streambank and Shoreline Protection	○	○	○	○	
Fencing	○	○	○	○	
Other(s): _____	○	○	○	○	

Additional Information and Assistance

If you have questions or would like more information on how to get involved, contact the VSP coordinator or visit the website at http://www.whitmancounty.org/Page.aspx?pn=Planning+Division. Critical areas exist throughout the County. You can direct questions about the presence of critical areas on your property to the Whitman County VSP Coordinator by using the contact information below. You can also visit the VSP website for critical area maps for Whitman County.

Whitman County VSP Coordinator Technical Assistance Provider: *Contact information TBD*

Conservation Districts:

- Palouse Conservation District: https://www.palousecd.org/
- Whitman Conservation District: http://www.whitmancd.org/
- Palouse-Rock Lake Conservation District: http://www.prlcd.org/
- Pine Creek Conservation District: (509) 285-5122

Other Local Resources:

- Whitman County Cattlemen's Association: http://wcca-wa.org/
- Whitman County Farm Bureau: http://wsfb.com/whitman-county-farm-bureau/
- Washington Association of Wheat Growers: http://www.wawg.org/
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service:
    - http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome
    - https://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app
- Washington State University Extension: http://extension.wsu.edu/

Additional Self-Assessment Resources:

- Ecology's Clean Water and Livestock Operations: Assessing Risks to Water Quality: https://fortress.wa.gov/ecy/publications/documents/1510020.pdf
- WSU Water Quality Risk Assessment Tool for Grazing Areas: *<post to Whitman Website and include link>*

Whitman County

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Prepared by Anchor QEA, LLC for the Whitman County Work Group

Funded by the Washington State Conservation Commission

Whitman County VSP Coordinator Contact info