

# Grant County Voluntary Stewardship Program Overview and Checklist



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# Voluntary Stewardship Program Overview

**VSP is a non-regulatory, incentive-based approach to protecting critical areas on agricultural lands, while maintaining agriculture viability.** VSP allows farmers and ranchers to continue agricultural practices without regulation under Grant County's Critical Areas Ordinance by promoting voluntary stewardship strategies and practices by producers that protect critical areas and maintain and enhance agricultural viability.

VSP is allowed under a recent change in the Growth Management Act and 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

Under VSP, critical areas on lands where agricultural activities are conducted are managed under this voluntary program. Lands used for non agricultural purposes are regulated under Grant County's Critical Areas Ordinance.

**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 Grant County VSP Work Plan (Work Plan) was developed by the Grant County VSP Work Group, which was convened by the County, and comprises 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, such as 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.

## Grant County VSP Work Plan Organization

Detailed information outlining the background, existing conditions, goals and benchmarks, and implementation is found in the Grant 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 conservation practices that protect and enhance critical areas functions and values.
- **Goals and Benchmarks:** Description of VSP goals for each critical area and detailed methods for determining measurable benchmarks.
- **Implementation:** Detailed plan outlining implementation of VSP actions by the VSP Coordinator and Work Group.
- **Appendices:** Additional detailed information referenced by the above sections.

## Stewardship Strategies and Practices:

Examples of practices that protect critical area functions and values and promoting agricultural viability include:

- Irrigation water management
- Direct seed
- Cover crops
- Prescribed grazing

See the VSP Checklist for additional examples of voluntary stewardship 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.

# Work Plan Implementation

Agricultural producers manage private lands and resources within Washington State and Grant 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 ranches and the larger Grant 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 conservation practices implemented since 2011.
2. Increase agricultural producer participation in implementing conservation practices.

## VSP Checklist

The VSP Checklist is a helpful tool to help assess how the VSP could support individual agricultural producers. It includes additional examples of stewardship 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 not required 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 Grant County, geologic hazards related to agricultural activities are primarily associated with erosion.



### Frequently Flooded Areas

Includes 100-year floodplains and floodways, and often includes 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.

Critical Areas Ordinance	VSP
Protective regulatory provisions, such as buffers, and enforcement	Voluntary participation in stewardship 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

Source: Chelan County VSP Work Plan

## 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.

## 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 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 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 at the Grant County Conservation District.



# Grant County VSP Checklist

## How can the VSP support operations on your farm or ranch?

The Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) allows farmers and ranchers to have more flexibility than Grant County's traditional critical area regulations by promoting voluntary stewardship strategies and practices by producers that protect critical areas and maintain and enhance agricultural viability. This VSP checklist is intended to help each producer to voluntarily contribute to the goals and benchmarks of the Grant County VSP Work Plan. **Working together, farmers and ranchers can use volunteer efforts to avoid additional regulatory controls.**

## The main objectives of the VSP checklist are to:

- Identify and document existing stewardship practices you have implemented since 2011 (effective date of VSP)
- Identify opportunities to:
  - Maintain or improve existing stewardship practices
  - Implement additional stewardship practices on your land and connect you with technical service providers for implementing these practices
- Encourage high producer participation, through implementation of voluntary stewardship practices, to help ensure the success of VSP. **Failure of 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 Practices on Your Farm or Ranch

Stewardship practices are broadly defined as any practice, which 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 other standards.

Stewardship practices may fall under multiple categories; please include each implemented practice **only once**.

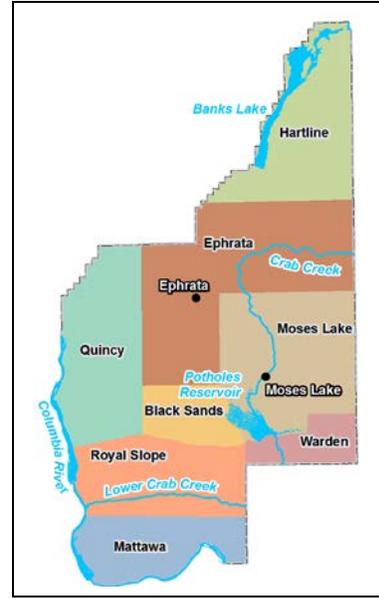
**Privacy Note:** Stewardship strategies and practices documented through a local government agency, such as the organization that supports the VSP Coordinator or a Conservation District, are generally exempt from disclosure under the state Public Records Act. At the same time, the VSP Work Group requires 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?

- |                                      |                                      |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Black Sands | <input type="checkbox"/> Moses Lake  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ephrata     | <input type="checkbox"/> Quincy      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Hartline    | <input type="checkbox"/> Royal Slope |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Mattawa     | <input type="checkbox"/> Warden      |



## Land Management and Agricultural Viability

**What types of land management or agricultural viability concerns do you have on your property?**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Soil composition (organic matter)         | <input type="checkbox"/> Yield/fertility                                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Soil loss (erosion)                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Reduce inputs (e.g., pesticides or fertilizers) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Moisture management                       | <input type="checkbox"/> Other(s) – please list:                         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Weed management                           |  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pollinator/beneficial organism management |  |

### Managing Erosion



Wind- and water-induced erosion is a major concern in the County. Residue- and till-management strategies are common practices applied by producers that are beneficial and cost-effective methods of reducing soil erosion.

### Irrigation Water Management



Much of the County is irrigated through the Columbia Basin Project. Irrigation water management can conserve water by managing the amount, frequency, and rate of water application to have the greatest efficiency and beneficial effects to soil and water quality.

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

Key Stewardship Practices Examples	I do this	I'm interested in this	Does not apply	Not interested	Average units/year (acres/feet/other)
<b>Residue and Tillage Management</b>					
Mulch Till	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Reduced Till	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
No Till/Direct Seed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other(s): _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Chemical and Nutrient Management</b>					
Pest Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Nutrient Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other(s): _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Water and Filtration Management</b>					
Irrigation Water Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Sprinkler System	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Grassed Waterways	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Filter Strips	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other(s): _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Range Management</b>					
Prescribed Grazing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Range Planting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Stock Watering Facilities/Wells	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other(s): _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Soil Management</b>					
Cover Crop	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Conservation Crop Rotation	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Polyacrylamides	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other(s): _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
<b>Habitat Management</b>					
Conservation Cover	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Stream Habitat Improvement and Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Riparian Herbaceous Cover	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Tree/Shrub Establishment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Restoration of Rare and Declining Habitats	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Upland Wildlife Habitat Management	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Corner Habitat Protection and Enhancement	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Fence	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Other(s): _____	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

## **Additional Information and Assistance**

If you have any questions or would like more information on how to get involved, contact the VSP Coordinator or visit the VSP website at <http://www.columbiabasin cds.org/vsp>. Critical areas exist throughout the County. You can direct questions about the presence of critical areas on your property or any questions on how to get involved to the Grant County VSP Coordinator.

### **Grant County VSP Coordinator:**

Marie Lotz  
Grant County Conservation District  
1107 South Juniper Drive  
Moses Lake, Washington 98837  
509-765-9618

### **Other Resources:**

- Washington Cattlemen's Association: <http://www.washingtoncattlemen.org/>
- Washington Association of Wheat Growers: <http://www.wawg.org/>
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service: <http://www.usda.gov/wps/portal/usda/usdahome>
- Washington State University Extension: <http://extension.wsu.edu/>



## **Grant County**

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

Funded by the Washington State  
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## **Grant County VSP Coordinator**

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