

Appendix A-3

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 Development Regulations. 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 by surface water or groundwater for at least part of the growing season and 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.



Geologically Hazardous Areas

Areas susceptible to erosion, sliding, and other geological events. Geologic hazards related to agricultural activities are primarily associated with erosion from summer wildfires.



Frequently Flooded Areas

Includes 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 the comparison for 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 Development Regulations?

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 Growth Management Act as an alternative to traditional approaches to critical areas protection required under the County’s Development Regulations, such as protection buffers. See the comparison chart between VSP and Development Regulations requirements in the table below.

Development Regulations	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

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 conservation 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 conservation 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. Producers do not have to be part of a federal program to be involved in VSP. 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 conservation 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 2017 to 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 Pend Oreille County Conservation District.

