

King County Agriculture Sector Study

March 1, 2026



King County

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II. Ordinance Text

The executive shall transmit a report providing recommendations to strengthen the county's commitment to sustainable farm-to-plate pipeline, advance equity, and support the agricultural sector in unincorporated King County as the agricultural sector complies with the hourly minimum wage rate as required by this ordinance.

The executive shall consult with the community to inform the report. The community shall include, but not be limited to, the following:

- A. Representatives from King County farming organizations which shall include, but not be limited to, the following:
 - a. King County agriculture commission;
 - b. SnoValley Tilth;
 - c. Snoqualmie Valley Preservation Alliance;
 - d. Sammamish Valley Alliance; and
 - e. Snoqualmie Valley Farmers Cooperative;
- B. Small-farm owners and small-farm employees in the following Agricultural Production Districts in King County:
 - a. Sammamish River;
 - b. Snoqualmie River;
 - c. Lower Green River;
 - d. Upper Green River; and
 - e. Enumclaw Plateau;
- C. Representatives from the King Conversation District; and
- D. The chair of the local services and land use committee, or its successor, or designee.

The recommendations to address the impacts shall consider, but not be limited to, the following:

- A. Capital programs to acquire land, access farm equipment, and develop housing for farm workers such as:
 - a. connecting farmers with affordable farmland to lower acquisition costs and build farmland equity through ownership; for example, the Agrarian Trust and more specifically the Vermont Agrarian Commons;
 - b. establishing a farm equipment access program to provide affordable leasing of farm equipment purchased by the county; and
 - c. developing housing facilities using county resources to provide workforce, congregate, and pallet housing for farm workers in proximity to their place of work;
- B. Transportation programs to provide mobility for farm workers such as:
 - a. providing vouchers that can be used for local and regional transportation providers operating in areas with access to agricultural jobs;
 - b. establishing shuttles, similar to the Metro transit department's Trailhead Direct; and;
 - c. subsidies for easier access to the Metro transit department's Vanpool and Vanshare programs, similar to the Metro transit department services provided to Snoqualmie Casino employees; and
- C. Other programs to support the agricultural sector in unincorporated King County such as:

- a. establishing health care programs for farm workers;
- b. providing fee waivers for farmers market booths;
- c. supporting farm worker recruitment and retention;
- d. supporting the retention of existing farm owners;
- e. developing internship and apprenticeship programs for the youth, underrepresented communities in the agricultural sector, and historically underserved communities in the agricultural sector;
- f. providing grants to food banks to purchase surplus food from local farms;
- g. expanding the county's Local Food Initiative; and
- h. developing a multimedia, multichannel public awareness campaign on the necessity of supporting county farmers and their products and educating the public on the quality and cost of producing farm products.

The executive shall electronically file the report and any proposed ordinance to implement the recommendations identified in the report no later than June 30, 2025, with the clerk of the council, who shall retain an electronic copy and provide an electronic copy to all councilmembers, the council chief of staff, and the lead staff for the transportation, economy, and environment committee, or its successor.¹

III. Executive Summary

The King County Agriculture Sector Study was developed pursuant to Ordinance 19762. It examines structural challenges facing the county's agricultural sector and identify practical strategies to support long-term farm viability, equity, and resilience. The study synthesizes existing data, stakeholder input, and prior County initiatives to present recommendations grounded in current conditions facing farmers and farmworkers. Its purpose is to inform County investments, policies, and programs that strengthen agricultural viability, improve access to land, housing, labor, infrastructure, and markets, and advance an equitable and resilient local food system across King County.

Agriculture in King County

Agriculture remains an important contributor to King County's economy, landscape, and community well-being. While the dairy industry has declined significantly from its historic scale, the county now supports a diverse mix of farms producing vegetables, berries, tree fruit, nursery crops, and livestock. Farming is concentrated in rural and semi-rural areas such as the Snoqualmie Valley, Enumclaw Plateau, and portions of the Sammamish and Green River valleys, with operations ranging from small family farms to larger specialty producers. Of the county's 1,604 farms, 94 percent are family-owned, with an average farm size of 29 acres. Approximately 26 percent of farm businesses employ hired labor, underscoring the importance of both family and farmworker contributions to local food production.

¹ Ordinance 19762, Section 16, Department of Natural Resources and Parks
[King County - File #: 2023-0310](#)
(an extension to file the report was granted until March 1, 2026)

Farmers are nearly evenly split by gender, and the average farmer age is 58.2 years, raising concerns about succession and long-term continuity.²

Farmers in King County face a combination of structural and operational challenges. High land values, increasing operating costs, and fragmented farmland limit entry and expansion. Regulatory complexity and permitting requirements add time and cost burdens, particularly for small and diversified farms. Climate-related pressures, including flooding and extreme weather, threaten both land and infrastructure. Workforce stability is constrained by limited affordable housing options and high regional living costs, especially for seasonal and immigrant workers. Infrastructure gaps—such as insufficient cold storage, processing facilities, and distribution networks—limit access to wholesale and institutional markets. At the same time, demand for locally produced food remains strong, presenting opportunities to improve farm viability, strengthen supply chains, and enhance community resilience if structural barriers can be addressed.

Study Methodology

The study was led by the King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks Director’s Office and supported by four consultant teams:

- **Farmland Access**, led by American Farmland Trust, focused on improving access to affordable farmland, preventing farmland loss, and supporting intergenerational farm transitions. See Appendix A for full report.
- **Farm Viability**, led by Agritecture, examined strategies to reduce operating costs, improve profitability, and expand market access. See Appendix B for full report.
- **Affordable Housing**, led by BERK Consulting, analyzed housing availability for farmers and farmworkers and identified barriers and models for housing development. See Appendix C for full report.
- **Transportation, Healthcare, and Workforce Development**, led by Headwater People Consulting, explored strategies to improve mobility, healthcare access, and workforce pipelines. See Appendices E, F and G for full reports.

Each consultant team used mixed methods including partner interviews, surveys, and consultations with farmers, farm businesses, agricultural organizations, and public agencies. The study also incorporated input from the County’s ongoing Local Food Initiative and prior reports to inform the recommendations. Engagement included broad representation across farm types, geographies, and communities, ensuring that both small-scale and underserved farmers were included in the analysis.

² “2022 Census of Agriculture County Profile for King County, Washington.” USDA-NASS, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Washington/cp53033.pdf

Recommendations

Farmland Access

To improve secure and affordable access to farmland for existing, new, and underserved farmers, the study identifies the following recommendations:

1. **Targeted Land Linking and Succession Planning:** King County could proactively connect landowners interested in leasing or selling farmland with farmers seeking land by partnering with nonprofit organizations experienced in landowner outreach, succession planning, and one-on-one land linking support. Technical assistance could be provided to both landowners and farmers to reduce barriers, streamline transitions, and mitigate speculative pressures. This approach prioritizes relationship-driven pathways to farmland access rather than open-market competition.
2. **Restrictive Covenants for Long-Term Affordability:** In addition to conservation easements, King County could explore the use of restrictive covenants to help maintain long-term farmland affordability. These covenants could enable the County to establish resale price caps or affordability terms, ensuring land remains accessible to farmers across multiple ownership cycles. Mechanisms for periodic review and amendment could be included to preserve flexibility and long-term effectiveness.
3. **Buy Protect Sell (BPS) Projects:** King County could acquire farmland at risk of conversion, apply permanent protections, and then sell or lease the land at an affordable price to qualified farmers. Where feasible, the County could offer long-term leasing as a “patient pathway” to ownership, allowing farmers to build financial and operational capacity before purchasing land. This approach could help stabilize farmland markets while providing technical and capital support to new farm owners.
4. **Expansion of Farmland Leasing Programs:** The County could expand the availability of agricultural land for long-term lease, including additional publicly owned parcels. Lease structures could include renewal options to support operational stability, and the County could explore shared-use models that allow multiple farmers to self-organize on a single parcel. These approaches could reduce administrative burdens while encouraging collaborative land stewardship.
5. **Program Evaluation and Coordination:** King County could review existing farmland programs to ensure they effectively support long-term, secure, and affordable access for a diverse range of farm types. Improved coordination among farmland protection, leasing, and access initiatives could reduce duplication and enhance program effectiveness. Dedicated staffing could help guide farmers and landowners through available programs and pathways.

Farm Equipment Access

To support the development and use of equipment sharing programs for small and mid-sized farms, the study identifies the following recommendations:

1. **Prioritize High-Impact Equipment:** King County could prioritize shared equipment investments that significantly reduce labor demands or improve efficiency in labor-intensive activities such as

harvesting, washing, packing, and post-harvest handling. Equipment selection could be guided by demonstrated economic impact and relevance across multiple farm types.

2. **Ensure Convenience and Reliability:** Equipment access programs could be designed to ensure equipment is consistently available, easy to reserve, and operational during critical production windows. Programs that are overly complex, unreliable, or difficult to access could be avoided to maximize farmer participation.
3. **Address Transportation and Geographic Barriers:** To improve access across the county, King County could explore delivery services, mobile equipment units, or multiple storage locations to reduce travel time and logistical burdens for farmers, particularly in geographically dispersed areas.
4. **Pilot Programs in High-Density Farming Areas:** Equipment-sharing programs could be piloted in areas with high concentrations of farms, such as the Snoqualmie Valley, to reduce logistical complexity, test demand, and refine operations before broader expansion.
5. **Use Farmer-Driven Equipment Selection:** Equipment purchases could be guided by direct farmer input to ensure compatibility with existing infrastructure, power sources, scale of operations, and operator skill levels.
6. **Explore Service-Based Models:** Where specialized skills, liability concerns, or timing constraints limit shared ownership, the County could explore service-based approaches such as custom harvesting, soil treatment, or equipment operation provided by trained operators.
7. **Leverage Partnerships and Institutional Support:** Partnerships with the Conservation District, cooperatives, tool libraries, universities, and equipment manufacturers could help reduce costs, provide training, and support program implementation.
8. **Plan for Long-Term Operations and Maintenance:** Equipment programs could include clear plans and budgets for staffing, training, maintenance, storage, insurance, and repairs to ensure long-term sustainability.
9. **Manage Risk Through Training and Agreements:** Required user training, standardized use agreements, and clear liability protocols could help protect both farmers and the County while supporting safe equipment use.
10. **Track Outcomes and Program Effectiveness:** King County could collect data on equipment use, labor savings, and farm outcomes to evaluate program performance and guide future improvements.

Farmer and Farmworker Housing

To expand affordable, safe, and accessible housing for farm operators and farmworkers, the study identifies the following recommendations:

1. **Conduct Regular Housing Needs Assessments:** King County could conduct periodic assessments to quantify farmworker labor needs, demographics, housing conditions, and cost burdens, helping to identify gaps and inform targeted solutions.
2. **Support Development of Off-Farm Housing Near Agricultural Areas:** The County could partner with nonprofit housing developers and agricultural organizations to evaluate site feasibility, zoning, incentives, and market conditions for affordable housing located near farm employment centers.
3. **Reduce Barriers to On-Farm Housing Development:** Streamlined permitting processes, a single-point navigator, pre-approved plan sets, fee reductions, and zoning flexibility could help facilitate the development of permanent and temporary on-farm housing.

4. **Expand Options for Temporary and Seasonal Housing:** King County could review zoning and code barriers that limit seasonal housing options, including wheeled units, and provide clear guidance on allowable locations, storage, and utility hookups outside flood-prone areas.
5. **Improve Access to Capital for Housing Development:** The County could leverage financing programs to support deed-restricted farmworker housing, pairing affordability covenants with grants, loans, or other financial assistance.
6. **Preserve Existing Farmworker Housing Stock:** Elevation, flood mitigation, and climate resilience programs could prioritize farmworker and farm-related housing to prevent unnecessary displacement or loss of existing units.

Transportation and Mobility

To ensure reliable, affordable, and equitable transportation access for farmworkers, the study identifies the following recommendations:

1. **Increase Outreach and Program Awareness:** King County could develop multilingual outreach and marketing efforts to inform farmworkers about existing transportation options such as vanpool, vanshare, shuttle services, and transit vouchers.
2. **Improve Coordination with Public Transit Providers:** Engagement with Metro, agricultural organizations, and Agricultural Production Districts (APDs) could help align transit routes, schedules, and voucher programs with farm employment patterns and seasonal needs.
3. **Support Community-Based Mobility Hubs:** County investments could support APD-based mobility hubs that assist with scheduling, route coordination, and transportation service management at the local level.
4. **Pilot and Evaluate Targeted Transportation Programs:** Targeted pilot programs in each APD could test seasonally adjusted shuttle services, vanshare networks, and voucher models, with data collected to assess scalability and effectiveness.

Workforce Development, Recruitment, and Retention

To support a skilled, stable, and equitable agricultural workforce, the study identifies the following recommendations:

1. **Strengthen Recruitment and Retention Programs:** Workforce programs could address not only employment needs but also transportation, healthcare access, and culturally responsive services that influence worker retention.
2. **Expand Paid Internships and Apprenticeships:** King County could support paid agricultural internships and apprenticeships for youth and historically underserved populations by contributing to wages and technical assistance.
3. **Integrate Workforce Support with Farm Succession Planning:** Programs could connect workforce development with farm owner retention, succession planning, peer learning, and business management support.
4. **Coordinate Across County Programs and Sectors:** Workforce initiatives could be aligned with housing, transportation, public health, and economic development efforts to address interconnected barriers.
5. **Evaluate Outcomes and Adapt Programs Over Time:** Data on participation, retention, and farm continuity could be collected to assess effectiveness and guide ongoing program refinement.

Healthcare Access

To reduce healthcare cost burdens and improve access to care for farmers and farmworkers, the study identifies the following recommendations:

1. **Establish a Healthcare Relief Fund:** King County could explore a relief fund to help offset insurance premiums and out-of-pocket healthcare costs for eligible farm households.
2. **Expand Mobile and On-Farm Healthcare Services:** Coordinated mobile services could provide preventive screenings, chronic condition management, and basic healthcare directly at or near farms.
3. **Increase Access to Mental Health Support:** Peer-based programs, culturally responsive education, and expanded counseling access could help address stress, isolation, and mental health needs within the agricultural community.
4. **Provide Insurance Navigation and Enrollment Support:** Targeted assistance could help farmers and farmworkers understand coverage options, enroll in available programs, and optimize subsidies, particularly for immigrant and underserved populations.
5. **Advance Policy Advocacy for Affordable Care:** The County could support advocacy efforts aimed at expanding state and federal healthcare affordability programs relevant to agricultural workers.

Farm-to-Community Programs: Grants to Food Banks to Purchase Surplus Food from Local Farms

To strengthen the local food system and support farmers while addressing hunger, King County could build on existing investments in farm-to-community programs that connect local farms with food banks and other hunger relief organizations.

1. **Establish a County-Level Baseline for Purchasing:** King County could create a predictable funding floor for farm-to-community programs by coordinating existing County resources. This baseline could allow hunger relief organizations to enter into longer-term purchasing agreements with farmers, improving income stability and reducing reliance on short-term grants.
2. **Protect and Coordinate State and Federal Funding:** The County could continue to support state and federal programs, such as the Washington State Farm to Food Pantry and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)-aligned procurement. Coordinating these resources could help stabilize purchasing and complement County and community-based investments.
3. **Invest in Infrastructure and Staffing:** King County could support cold storage, transportation, logistics, and skilled staff for farm-to-community partners. Resources could explicitly fund coordination across the value chain as a core function for program effectiveness.
4. **Expand Successful Community Models:** The County could grow programs like Growing for Good through multi-year seed funding, outreach to additional retail partners, and public awareness efforts. Opportunities to match community donations with County resources could accelerate growth while maintaining local control.
5. **Support Evaluation and Learning:** King County could implement shared data systems to track impacts on farmer income, food access, and community outcomes. This would enable continuous learning and align farm-to-community investments with broader County goals on equity, health, and economic resilience.

Expanding the County's Local Food Initiative

To strengthen King County's local food system, the County could build on existing investments in the Local Food Initiative (LFI) to support equitable access, farm viability, and coordinated food systems. The LFI provides a framework for aligning County resources, community partnerships, and technical assistance to advance key priority actions across the food system.

1. **Coordinate and Sustain Funding for Implementation:** King County could prioritize coordinated, long-term funding to support implementation of LFI priority actions. This could include aligning County funding sources, pursuing external grants, and leveraging public-private partnerships to provide stable resources for initiatives such as farm-to-community purchasing, incentive and voucher programs, and market and distribution coordination.
2. **Invest in Priority Actions to Drive Early Impact:** The County could focus early investments on LFI-identified priority actions to demonstrate progress and build momentum. Targeted support for areas such as farmland access, value chain coordination, and climate-smart production could deliver measurable benefits and lay the groundwork for broader implementation of the full set of priorities.
3. **Strengthen Coordination, Governance, and Accountability:** King County could enhance coordination among County departments, the King Conservation District, the Food System Advisory Council, and community partners. Clear roles, shared performance measures, and regular reporting could support accountability and enable adaptive management over time.
4. **Support Capacity Building and Technical Assistance:** The County could invest in capacity building and technical assistance for farmers, food businesses, and community organizations engaged in LFI priority actions. Special attention could be given to small-scale and historically underserved participants to ensure equitable access to resources and opportunities.

Public Awareness and Education

To increase public understanding of local agriculture and strengthen community support for farmers, the study identifies the following recommendations:

1. **Leverage Existing Communication Platforms:** King County could partner with established platforms such as Eat Local First to amplify local farm stories and messaging.
2. **Develop a County-Aligned Storytelling Campaign:** A coordinated campaign could highlight farmers, products, and production realities using consistent, values-based messaging.
3. **Expand Multichannel Outreach and Partnerships:** Outreach efforts could be designed for social media, schools, grocery stores, and other community partners to reach diverse audiences.
4. **Coordinate Messaging Regionally:** Aligning communication efforts across jurisdictions could reduce fragmentation and strengthen regional recognition of local agriculture.
5. **Connect Awareness Efforts to Broader County Goals:** Public education initiatives could explicitly link local agriculture to equity, climate resilience, and farm viability, with evaluation metrics used to guide ongoing improvements.

IV. Background

Department Overview: The King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks (DNRP) works to support sustainable, livable communities and a clean, healthy natural environment. Its mission is to foster environmental stewardship and strengthen communities by providing regional parks, protecting the region’s water, air, land, and natural habitats, and reducing, safely disposing of, and creating resources from wastewater and solid waste.

Within DNRP, the Local Food Initiative Program aims to build a resilient and sustainable local food system that expands economic opportunities for local farms and food businesses while increasing access to healthy, affordable food for all King County residents.³

DNRP’s Agriculture, Forestry, and Incentives Program is dedicated to preserving agricultural soils, supporting farmers and consumers, and protecting natural resources. This program includes several key initiatives, such as the Farmland Preservation Program, the Livestock Program, which provides technical assistance and financial support for environmentally sound livestock management. The program also offers services for farmland owners, supports farmers markets, and provides resources for individuals and businesses interested in participating in the local food system.

Key Historical Conditions: King County’s agricultural sector has long been an important part of the local economy, even as urbanization and development pressures have increased. Historically, the county supported a vibrant dairy industry, which remains present today but at a much smaller scale. Over time, a diverse mix of farms has developed, including vegetable, berry, tree fruit, nursery, and livestock operations, reflecting the county’s adaptable and resilient farm sector.

Farming in King County is concentrated in rural and semi-rural areas such as the Snoqualmie Valley, Enumclaw Plateau, and parts of the Sammamish and Green River valleys. The types of farming vary across these regions: the Snoqualmie Valley supports a mix of berries, vegetables, and livestock; the Enumclaw Plateau includes livestock, hay, and forage crops; and the Green River Valley focuses on nursery and specialty crops. Farms range from small family-run operations to larger specialty farms, with an average size of 29 acres. Of the county’s 1,604 farms, 94 percent are family-owned, and over 3,000 farm businesses operate actively, with about 26 percent employing hired labor. Farmers are nearly evenly split by gender—52 percent male and 48 percent female—with an average age of 58.2 years.⁴

Direct sales of farm products contribute roughly \$103 million annually, highlighting the historical importance of local markets, community-supported agriculture programs, and farm-to-table initiatives.⁵ Overall, King County agriculture reflects a diverse and resilient sector, maintaining a mix of traditional and specialty farming while sustaining rural land uses and providing fresh local food to communities across the county.

³ [King County Local Food Initiative](#)

⁴ “2022 Census of Agriculture County Profile for King County, Washington.” USDA-NASS, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Washington/cp53033.pdf

⁵ Ibid.

Key Current Conditions: Agriculture in King County today exists in a place of striking contrasts. While farms benefit from proximity to one of the nation’s fastest-growing metropolitan areas—providing access to major markets and a population that values local food—they also face some of the highest land and operating costs in the country. This juxtaposition creates both opportunities and significant challenges for farmers.

Land access remains one of the most persistent hurdles. Urban development pressures have driven farmland values beyond what most farm businesses can support, making expansion—and even basic security—difficult for many operators. Even protected farmland can be financially inaccessible to new and beginning farmers. Consequently, younger farmers face barriers to entry, established farmers struggle with succession planning, and the county’s agricultural land base is increasingly fragmented. Nevertheless, King County’s long-standing commitment to farmland preservation, combined with tools for land leasing, community ownership, and public-private partnerships, provides avenues for more equitable and strategic land access.

Rising operational costs—including labor, fuel, and regulatory compliance—erode thin profit margins, particularly for small- and mid-sized farms that rely heavily on direct-to-consumer markets. Infrastructure gaps, such as limited access to cold storage, processing facilities, and distribution networks, further constrain growth and make it difficult for farmers to reach wholesale or institutional buyers. Public investments in food system infrastructure, growing institutional interest in local procurement, and collaborative models for shared facilities, however, present opportunities to strengthen local supply chains.

Regulatory complexity adds another layer of challenge. Farmers navigate multiple local, state, and federal requirements, which can be confusing or duplicative—particularly for diversified or innovative operations. Improved coordination, farmer-centered permitting guidance, and clearer pathways for emerging practices could reduce barriers while maintaining environmental protections.

Environmental pressures are intensifying with climate change. Shifting weather patterns, longer droughts, and frequent flooding—particularly in areas like the Snoqualmie Valley—threaten crops, planting schedules, and farm infrastructure. These conditions reinforce the importance of regenerative and climate-smart practices, including soil health investments, improved water management, habitat restoration, and climate-adaptive infrastructure, which many King County producers are already adopting.

Workforce challenges also strain the sector. High housing costs, long commutes, and limited farmworker housing options make it difficult to maintain a stable labor force, particularly for labor-intensive crops. Expanding workforce development programs and housing solutions are increasingly recognized as essential to sustaining the agricultural economy.

Despite these challenges, demand for local food continues to grow. Consumers, institutions, and corporate buyers seek sustainably produced, culturally relevant, and regionally sourced products. This demand, coupled with King County’s diverse producer base and strong conservation ethic, presents opportunities to expand economic viability, strengthen local food systems, and enhance community resilience.

Report Methodology: The King County Agriculture Sector Study was led by the King County Department of Natural Resources and Parks (DNRP) Director’s Office, pursuant to the requirements and topical focus areas outlined in Ordinance 19762. The study was designed to examine structural challenges facing the agricultural sector and identify practical, evidence-based strategies to support long-term farm viability, equity, and resilience.⁶

To support this work, the DNRP Director’s Office engaged four consultant teams, each selected for expertise in a specific issue area identified in the ordinance. This multi-consultant approach enabled in-depth analysis, extensive partner engagement, and the incorporation of best practices from other regions across the United States. The four studies focused on the following areas:

- **Farmland Access**, led by [American Farmland Trust](#), examining strategies to improve access to affordable farmland, address farmland loss, and support intergenerational farm transitions.⁷
- **Farm Viability**, led by [Agritecture](#), evaluating approaches to reduce operating costs, strengthen markets, and expand sales channels.⁸
- **Affordable Housing**, led by [BERK Consulting](#), analyzing the availability of housing for farmers and farmworkers and identifying models to overcome housing barriers.⁹
- **Transportation, Healthcare, and Workforce Development**, led by [Headwater People Consulting](#), exploring strategies to improve transportation¹⁰, workforce development¹¹, and healthcare access¹², for the agricultural sector.

Each consultant team used a mixed-methods approach, including interviews, surveys, meetings, and targeted consultations with farmers, farm businesses, agricultural organizations, and public agencies across the county. Partner organizations and farms were introduced to the teams through the DNRP Director’s Office to ensure broad representation across farm types, geographies, and communities. Organizations contributing to the studies included SnoValley Tilth, Vashon Island Growers Association, Viva Farms, Snoqualmie Valley Preservation Alliance, Wakulima USA, Harvest Against Hunger, Carnation Farms, Black Farmers Collective, Hmong Farmers Cooperative, Northwest Agriculture Business Center, King-Pierce Farm Bureau, Business Impact Northwest, Washington State University Extension, the King Conservation District, and the King County Agriculture Team, in addition to dozens of individual farmers.

In parallel with the consultant work, King County was updating its Local Food Initiative, which included extensive outreach to the agricultural sector. Insights from this process—including input from farmers,

⁶ [Ordinance 19762, Section 16, p. 23.](#)

⁷ American Farmland Trust’s full report can be found in Appendix A and is cited throughout this report as: “*King County Agricultural Sector Study: Land Access*”.

⁸ Agritecture’s full report can be found in Appendix B and is cited throughout this report as “*Increasing Farm Viability in King County*”.

⁹ Berk Consulting’s full report can be found in Appendix C and is cited throughout this report as “*Strategies for Addressing Farmworker Housing Needs*”.

¹⁰ Headwater People’s full report on transportation can be found in Appendix D and is cited throughout this report as “*King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Transportation Report*”.

¹¹ Headwater People’s full report on workforce development can be found in Appendix E and is cited throughout this report as “*King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Workforce Development Report*”.

¹² Headwater People’s full report on health care access can be found in Appendix F and is cited throughout this report as “*King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Health Care Report*”.

farm organizations, and community partners—helped inform the analyses, findings, and recommendations of the Agriculture Sector Study.

The report draws primarily from the findings and recommendations of the four consultant studies, which are included as Appendices B through E. These studies leveraged numerous previous County reports, research, and outreach efforts to inform their analyses. All sources are cited extensively in the consultant reports. Rather than reproducing technical analyses in full, DNRP synthesized the work into an integrated report aligned with Ordinance 19762’s substantive issues.

Where applicable, statutory and legal frameworks provided the foundation for the analyses, including references to relevant state and local codes governing land use, agricultural operations, and workforce standards (see citations and hyperlinks in the report).

To ensure clarity and consistency, each topic area is addressed through a common framework:

1. **Background on the Issue**, summarizing historical and current conditions, trends, and relevant data.
2. **Identification of Barriers and Challenges**, highlighting economic, operational, structural, and equity-related obstacles, informed by community input.
3. **Recommendations**, presenting actionable strategies that respond directly to identified challenges and advance the County’s goals of supporting sustainable, equitable, and resilient agricultural operations. Recommendations include potential partnerships, funding mechanisms, and implementation models, where appropriate.

This methodology ensures that the Agriculture Sector Study reflects rigorous analysis, extensive partner engagement, integration of related County initiatives, and actionable guidance responsive to the full scope of issues identified by the Council.

V. Report Requirements

A. Farmland Access

This section responds directly to the Ordinance 19762 requirement to develop recommendations to address the impacts on connecting farmers with affordable farmland, lowering acquisition costs, and building farmland equity through ownership. The analysis below examines the current conditions shaping farmland access in King County, identifies key economic, structural, and equity-related barriers, reviews lessons from existing local and national models, and presents recommendations for how the County could strengthen pathways to secure, affordable, and equitable farmland access for current and future generations of farmers.

Background

Farmland access has long been one of the most pressing challenges facing King County’s agricultural sector. Although agriculture occupies only about 3 percent of the county’s total land base, it plays an outsized role in shaping the region’s food systems, cultural identity, and rural economies. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) 2022 Census of Agriculture, King County is home to 1,604

farms stewarding 46,261 acres. The average farm size is 29 acres, with nearly half under 9 acres, reflecting the county’s predominance of small-scale, diversified operations.¹³

Since 1979, King County has invested heavily in farmland protection through the Farmland Preservation Program (FPP). The FPP has permanently protected more than 16,400 acres—about 35 percent of the county’s remaining farmland—through agricultural conservation easements.¹⁴ Complementary initiatives, such as the Farmland Leasing Program, which makes 200 acres available to 60 farm businesses, and Conservation Futures grants, which enable nonprofit acquisition for education and incubation, have further expanded opportunities for new and beginning farmers. Despite these efforts, farmland access remains a complex problem, characterized by interlocking economic, demographic, and structural challenges.

Land prices are a major driver of this issue. High-quality farmland in King County can sell for more than \$50,000 per acre—10 times the national average and 13 times the state average.¹⁵ This makes ownership financially out of reach for most young and beginning farmers. Surveys confirm this reality: 83 percent of King County farmers identified affordable access to land as a top challenge in American Farmland Trust’s Puget Sound Agricultural Viability Survey.¹⁶

Demographic trends compound the problem. Nearly 40 percent of King County producers are over age 65, raising concerns about succession and generational transfer. Without proactive planning, much of the county’s farmland risks conversion to non-agricultural uses.¹⁷

To guide readers through this complex issue, farmland access in King County can be understood through four categories that most directly shape outcomes:

- (1) increasing the supply of land available,
- (2) reducing the cost of acquiring land,
- (3) increasing access to capital to acquire farmland, and
- (4) identifying collective and community land tenure models.

Barriers and Challenges

The barriers to farmland access in King County are multifaceted. Economically, escalating land values driven by development pressure and speculative investment have priced out many working farmers. Operationally, short-term leases limit stability and discourage investment in soil health or infrastructure, while land-linking programs face mismatches between seekers and available parcels. Structurally, an

¹³ “2022 Census of Agriculture County Profile for King County, Washington.” USDA-NASS, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Washington/cp53033.pdf

¹⁴ [King County Farmland Preservation Program](#)

¹⁵ “2025 Farm Real Estate Value by State.” USDA-NASS, August 1, 2025.

https://www.nass.usda.gov/Charts_and_Maps/graphics/farm_value_map.pdf

¹⁶ “Puget Sound Agricultural Viability Farm Survey Results.” American Farmland Trust, June 2025.

https://farmland.org/files/psp-overview_final.pdf

¹⁷ “2022 Census of Agriculture County Profile for King County, Washington.” USDA-NASS, https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Washington/cp53033.pdf

aging farmer population without succession planning threatens continuity of farmland use, with nearly two-fifths of producers nearing retirement age. Equity concerns further complicate the picture, as beginning, immigrant, and socially disadvantaged farmers face disproportionate barriers to ownership and tenure, often lacking family land connections or generational wealth to compete in the market.

Increasing the Supply of Land Available

Expanding the supply of farmland accessible to new farmers is critical. Across the country, states have experimented with Beginning Farmer Tax Credit (BFTC) programs to incentivize landowners to lease or sell land to new farmers. Nebraska's "Next Gen" program, launched in 1999, pioneered this approach, and similar programs have since been adopted in Iowa, Minnesota, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, and Ohio.¹⁸ These programs have successfully facilitated multiyear rental agreements, but research shows that only about 5 percent of these arrangements ultimately led to sales. Moreover, they have disproportionately served commodity grain farms, raising questions about their relevance in King County's diversified agricultural landscape.¹⁹

Because Washington lacks an income tax, King County would need to adapt the model to property or excise tax incentives. Pennsylvania's exemption from realty transfer tax for protected farmland transferred to beginning farmers offers a promising example that could be tailored to King County's Real Estate Excise Tax framework.²⁰

Other tools have proven less relevant locally. The USDA's Transition Incentives Program (TIP), which provides rental payments for Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands transferred to beginning farmers, has been concentrated in Eastern Washington. CRP lands are often environmentally sensitive and better suited for grazing than crop production, making TIP a poor fit for King County.²¹

Rights of First Refusal (ROFR) policies, however, show promise. San Francisco's Community Opportunity to Purchase Act (COPA) and Massachusetts' Chapter 61A demonstrate how ROFR can preserve affordability by giving nonprofits or municipalities the first chance to purchase land before it is converted. Adapting such a tool to farmland in King County would require amending Washington's Open Space Taxation Act, a politically challenging but potentially transformative step.

Buy Protect Sell (BPS) models also offer a pathway. Under these plans, conservation entities purchase farmland at risk, protect it with easements, and resell it at agricultural value. Sonoma County's Ag + Open Space Program and The Conservation Fund's Farms Fund illustrate how BPS can bridge retiring farmers and new entrants.²² Washington's Farm Protection and Affordability Investment fund (Farm

¹⁸ [Nebraska NextGen Program](#)

¹⁹ "King County Agricultural Sector Study: Land Access", American Farmland Trust, p. 6 (See Appendix A).

²⁰ Ibid. at 7.

²¹ Ibid at 7.

²² Ibid at 9.

PAI) and Farmland Protection and Land Access (FPLA) programs already support BPS, enabling protection of six farms totaling 700 acres since 2022.²³

Succession planning and land linking are equally critical. Nearly 40 percent of King County producers are over 65, underscoring the urgency of succession planning. The Washington Farmland Trust’s Farm to Farmer program connects seekers with landowners, but listings are scarce.²⁴ Massachusetts’ New Entry program demonstrated how leveraging current use taxation can recruit landowners, a model King County could replicate.²⁵

Finally, public lands leasing represents a significant opportunity. King County currently leases 200 acres to 60 farm businesses, averaging 3 acres per lease. In contrast, Boulder County, Colorado, leases 26,000 acres to 55 producers, averaging 200 acres per lease.²⁶ Expanding King County’s leasing program could dramatically increase access, particularly if leases are structured for collective tenure or longer terms that encourage investment.

Reducing the Cost of Acquiring Land

High land prices remain the single greatest barrier to ownership in King County. Even parcels protected by conservation easements often sell at values far above what working farmers can afford, because easements typically reduce development potential but do not directly address affordability.

To counter this, conservation easements with affordability provisions are emerging as a critical tool. These provisions can include resale price limitations, qualified farmer requirements, ROFRs, and options to purchase at agricultural value (OPAV). Vermont and Maine have successfully used OPAV to ensure farmland remains in agricultural use, preventing speculative resale and keeping prices tied to farm income potential rather than development value.²⁷

In Washington, the State Conservation Commission’s 2024 report confirmed that several of these mechanisms are legally valid under state law, including home size restrictions, qualified farmer requirements, and ROFRs.²⁸ King County could integrate these provisions into its existing FPP to ensure that land protected with public dollars remains affordable for future generations of farmers.

Restrictive covenants provide another flexible legal tool. Unlike easements, which are permanent and tied to conservation values, covenants can be tailored to affordability goals and applied to parcels that may not qualify for traditional easements. For example, covenants could require that farmland be resold

²³ **Farmland Protection & Affordability Investment (FarmPAI) Program** – Administered by the Washington State Housing Finance Commission, FarmPAI is a revolving loan program that supports the protection of at-risk farmland to keep it in agricultural production while improving land access and affordability for beginning and historically underserved farmers and ranchers. [WSHFC Farm PAI Program](#).

²⁴ Washington Farmland Trust, [Farm to Farmer Program](#).

²⁵ “*King County Agricultural Sector Study: Land Access*”, American Farmland Trust, p. 9 (See Appendix A).

²⁶ [Boulder County, Colorado, Agricultural Leases](#).

²⁷ “*King County Agricultural Sector Study: Land Access*”, American Farmland Trust, p. 14 (See Appendix A).

²⁸ “Agricultural Easement Affordability Analysis.” Washington State Conservation Commission, June 28, 2024. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/5faf8a950cdaa224e61edad9/67354317d69719a35a12ea4c_NEWS%20-%20OFP%20-%20Memorandum%20to%20WSCC%20Affordability%20Mechanism%20Analysis%20-%2006.28.24.pdf

only to qualified farmers or cap resale prices at agricultural value. Periodic review and amendment of covenant terms would allow the County to adapt to changing market conditions while maintaining affordability. Together, easements with affordability provisions and restrictive covenants could create a layered approach to reducing acquisition costs and stabilizing farmland markets.

Increasing Access to Capital

Even when affordable land is available, farmers often lack the capital to acquire it. Traditional financing options are often inaccessible to beginning farmers, who may lack collateral, credit history, or generational wealth. To address this, King County can build on several existing tools.

FarmPAI loans, administered by the Washington State Housing Finance Commission, provide low-interest financing to land trusts for protecting farmland and facilitating access for underserved farmers. When paired with the FPLA program, FarmPAI has enabled six farm transitions since 2022.²⁹ Expanding these programs would allow more nonprofits and land trusts to intervene in the market, acquire farmland, and transfer it to new farmers at affordable rates.

Conservation Futures grants are another critical resource. These grants allow nonprofits to purchase farmland for education, training, and incubation.³⁰ For example, nonprofits have used Conservation Futures funding to acquire land for immigrant farmer training programs, providing secure tenure and pathways to ownership. Scaling up this funding could expand opportunities for historically underserved farmers who face disproportionate barriers to capital.

At the federal level, programs such as USDA's Agricultural Conservation Easement Program—Agricultural Land Easements (ACEP ALE) provide matching funds for easement purchases tied to land access.³¹ While competitive, ACEP ALE offers critical leverage for local conservation efforts. King County could strengthen partnerships with land trusts to maximize federal funding opportunities.

Finally, the County could explore patient capital models, where land is purchased and leased to farmers until they are financially prepared to buy. This approach, used in Buy Protect Sell projects, allows farmers to build equity and capacity over time, reducing the up-front capital burden. By combining local, state, and federal resources with innovative financing models, King County can expand access to capital and create more pathways to ownership.

Collective and Community Land Tenure Models

Alternative tenure models diversify pathways to land access and can be particularly effective for farmers who face systemic barriers to ownership. These models emphasize shared stewardship, equity, and long-term affordability.

The Agrarian Trust's Vermont Agrarian Commons provides a compelling example. In this model, community-owned land trusts hold title to farmland and lease it to farmers under secure, long-term

²⁹ [Farm Protection and Affordability Investment \(Farm PAI\)](#), Washington State Housing Finance Commission.

³⁰ [King County Conservation Futures Program](#)

³¹ [USDA Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements](#)

agreements. Farmers gain equity through improvements and infrastructure, while the land itself remains permanently affordable.³² This structure ensures that farmland is treated as a community resource rather than a speculative asset. King County could pilot similar commons structures in partnership with local nonprofits and community organizations.

Community Land Trusts (CLTs), widely used in housing, can also be adapted to farmland. CLTs separate land ownership from farm business ownership, stabilizing affordability by keeping land in trust while allowing farmers to own improvements. Long-term ground leases provide security and equity building opportunities. CLTs have proven effective in preventing displacement in housing markets and could serve similar functions in farmland access.

Public lands leasing for collective tenure offers another pathway. County parcels could be leased to cooperatives or shared farming entities, enabling collective infrastructure such as irrigation systems, storage facilities, and marketing hubs. This approach reduces administrative burdens for the County while fostering collaboration among farmers. Boulder County, Colorado's leasing program demonstrates how large-scale public leasing can support diverse farm operations.³³ King County could adapt this model to emphasize collective stewardship and equity.

By supporting commons, CLTs, and collective leasing, King County can create tenure models that go beyond individual ownership, ensuring that farmland remains accessible, affordable, and equitably managed for generations to come.

Recommendations

Land access in King County remains one of the most significant barriers to agricultural viability. High land values, limited inventory, and structural inequities disproportionately affect young, beginning, and historically underserved farmers. While the County has built a strong foundation through the FPP, Farmland Leasing Program, and Conservation Futures investments, these tools alone cannot resolve the scale of the challenge. To advance progress in the near term, the following five recommendations are proposed.

1. **Invest in targeted land linking and succession planning.** King County could proactively identify landowners who may be open to leasing or selling farmland and connect them with farmers seeking land. This can be achieved by leveraging internal datasets, such as current use taxation records, and state resources, including the Washington State Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Land Use map, to flag underutilized parcels, lands at risk of losing tax status, or properties with owners nearing transition. Partnering with nonprofits that have experience in landowner outreach, succession planning, and one-on-one land linking support can help facilitate these connections. Technical assistance for both landowners and farmers can reduce barriers, streamline transitions, and decrease speculative pressures on the market. This approach increases the amount of farmland entering the market through relationship-driven pathways rather than open market competition.
2. **Explore the use of restrictive covenants to maintain long-term affordability.** As land costs continue to rise, conservation easements alone may not ensure affordability for working

³² "King County Agricultural Sector Study: Land Access", American Farmland Trust, p. 29 (See Appendix A).

³³ [Boulder County, Colorado, Agricultural Leases.](#)

farmers. Restrictive covenants offer a flexible legal tool to protect affordability without creating ambiguity. By using restrictive covenants alongside conservation easements, the County can enforce resale price caps or affordability terms while preserving the legal integrity of both instruments. These covenants can be applied to parcels where affordability is a priority, including lands that might not otherwise qualify for a traditional easement. Establishing mechanisms for periodic review and amendment of affordability provisions can help ensure long-term effectiveness and adaptability.

3. **Pursue Buy Protect Sell (BPS) projects.** BPS initiatives provide a mechanism for permanently protecting farmland while creating a pathway to land ownership for new and underserved farmers. King County can utilize existing funding sources, including Conservation Futures and FarmPAI, to acquire at-risk farmland, implement permanent protections, and subsequently sell the land at an affordable price to qualified farmers. The County could also consider purchasing land in fee, leasing it to incoming farmers as a “patient pathway” to ownership, and transitioning the property once the farmers are prepared to take on the purchase. This approach allows the County to stabilize farmland markets, ensure long-term stewardship, and support incoming farmers with capital and technical resources until they are ready to assume ownership.
4. **Expand King County’s Farmland Leasing Program.** Secure, long-term leases can be as effective as ownership, particularly when paired with opportunities to build equity. The County should expand its agricultural landholdings available for lease by acquiring new parcels or activating additional publicly owned lands, in partnership with municipalities, that are suitable for farming. Long-term leases with renewal options can incentivize land stewardship and provide the stability needed for farm investment. Additionally, exploring Common Interest Community models could allow groups of farmers to self-organize on shared parcels, reducing administrative burdens for County staff and fostering collaborative land stewardship.³⁴
5. **Evaluate and clarify program intent to ensure long-term, secure, and affordable land access.** King County serves a range of farmers with varying goals and scales, from urban nonprofits focused on food sovereignty to commercial producers supplying wholesale markets. The County should review its farmland programs to ensure they are intentionally designed to support long-term, secure, and affordable land access for the farmers they aim to serve. Coordinating across farmland protection, leasing, and access programs will enhance synergy and reduce duplication. Adequate staff capacity should be in place to guide farmers and landowners in navigating available tools, helping them select the pathway that best meets their operational and business needs.

Addressing land access is not only about protecting farmland—it is about investing in the future of farming, strengthening local food systems, and building community resilience. By implementing these five recommendations in a coordinated and intentional manner—and by expanding the supply of land, reducing acquisition costs, increasing access to capital, and supporting collective tenure models—King County can expand supply, reduce barriers, and support the success of current and future generations of farmers while maintaining its position as a national leader in equitable farmland access and agricultural viability.

³⁴ “Washington State’s Limited Cooperative Association Statute.” JD SUPRA, July 8, 2019. <https://www.jdsupra.com/legalnews/washington-state-s-limited-cooperative-38864/>

B. Farm Equipment Access

This section responds directly to the Ordinance 19762 requirement to evaluate and develop recommendations for establishing a farm equipment access program to provide affordable leasing of farm equipment purchased by the County. The analysis below examines the potential role of equipment sharing programs in King County, identifies key barriers to implementation, reviews lessons from existing local and national models, and presents recommendations for how the County could pursue this strategy effectively.

Background

Access to appropriate farm equipment is a critical component of farm viability in King County, particularly for small- and mid-scale operations that dominate the region’s agricultural landscape. High equipment costs, rising labor expenses, and limited access to capital constrain many farmers’ ability to purchase specialized or labor-saving equipment outright. Equipment sharing programs (ESPs) have emerged nationally and locally as a potential strategy to reduce operating costs, improve labor efficiency, and expand access to tools that would otherwise be financially out of reach.³⁵

Well-designed ESPs can support farm viability in several ways. Shared equipment can substitute for paid labor by enabling mechanization of tasks that would otherwise require significant hand labor. For many King County farms, labor represents the single largest operating expense, and even modest efficiencies can have an outsized impact on profitability. Equipment access can also improve the productivity of existing labor by streamlining harvesting, bed preparation, and material handling, allowing farm workers to accomplish more within constrained labor markets and rising wage environments.³⁶

In addition, ESPs can enable farms to scale production—expanding acreage, lengthening the production season, or increasing harvest capacity—without requiring major capital investment. Access to specialized or high-capacity equipment allows farms to respond to market opportunities that would otherwise be inaccessible. Beyond direct economic benefits, equipment sharing can reduce risk by allowing farmers to experiment with new tools or technologies before committing to purchase, a function that is particularly valuable for beginning farmers and those testing new crops or practices. At a system level, sharing increases utilization of existing equipment, improving overall efficiency without requiring additional resource-intensive manufacturing.³⁷

At the same time, ESPs are complex to design and operate. Their effectiveness depends on alignment with farmer needs, geographic context, staffing capacity, and clearly defined program goals. Experience from King County and across the country demonstrates that equipment access alone is insufficient; convenience, reliability, and ongoing operational support are central to program success.

Barriers and Challenges

³⁵ “*Increasing Farm Viability in King County*”, *Agriitecture*, p. 9 (see Appendix B).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Despite their potential benefits, ESPs face significant economic, operational, structural, and logistical challenges.

Convenience and reliability consistently emerge as the most important determinants of farmer participation. If equipment is not conveniently located, or if farmers cannot rely on it being available and functional during time-sensitive windows, such as planting or harvest, participation declines rapidly.

Transport is a persistent barrier, as many farms lack appropriate trailers, vehicles, or time to move equipment. Centralized storage locations can become obstacles rather than assets when transportation needs are not explicitly addressed.

Storage and security pose additional challenges. Equipment theft, vandalism, and weather-related damage increase maintenance costs and staff time. ESPs require secure, covered storage and clear protocols for inspection, cleaning, and repair, all of which demand staffing capacity and operational funding. These costs are often underestimated during program launch.

Mismatch between equipment and farm resources further limits utilization. Farmers may not have tractors of sufficient size, compatible hydraulics, or adequate operator experience to use certain tools effectively. When equipment does not align with local conditions or farmer capacity, frustration increases and utilization declines.

Finally, ESPs require ongoing administration, training, insurance, and liability management. Without dedicated staff time, clear rules, and data collection systems, programs struggle to demonstrate impact or justify continued public investment. These operational demands represent a significant barrier for public agencies considering direct ownership and leasing models.

Review of Existing Programs and Models

King County and Regional Examples

Within King County, the King Conservation District operates a small ESP primarily aligned with conservation goals, offering tools such as manure and lime spreaders, seed drills, and poultry processing equipment. The program is used regularly and supports conservation practice adoption, but it primarily serves homesteaders rather than commercial farms and does not substantially address labor efficiency or farm profitability. Key challenges include storage security, transport barriers, mismatches between equipment and farm, and limited staff capacity.³⁸

The Vashon Tool Lending Library demonstrates the viability of a volunteer-run, community-based lending model with high utilization driven by a centralized location and strong community engagement. While most tools are geared toward homeowners rather than commercial agriculture, the model highlights the importance of geographic concentration, ease of access, and community ownership—elements that could inform small-scale agricultural tool sharing in farm-dense areas.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid at 11.

³⁹ Ibid at 13.

The Snohomish Co-op poultry processing unit illustrates strong demand for shared, specialized infrastructure. Its success is driven by convenience, central location, and integration with existing services. At the same time, the program highlights operational challenges related to cleanliness, maintenance, and tight turnaround times, underscoring the staffing burden associated with shared food processing equipment.⁴⁰

National Models

Nationally, a range of models offers additional insight. HarvestPort, an online peer-to-peer equipment sharing platform, demonstrated how a marketplace approach can increase utilization of existing equipment and reduce the need for public ownership, though liability and transport remained persistent challenges.⁴¹

A conservation district-facilitated soil steamer program in Maine illustrated the value of sharing high-cost, limited-use equipment among geographically clustered farmers, while also demonstrating the difficulty of achieving full cost recovery through rental fees alone.⁴²

Farmer-owned models, such as an LLC formed by Aronia Berry Growers in Iowa, showed how shared harvesting equipment can dramatically reduce labor costs but require substantial coordination, governance capacity, and time investment from participants. Equipment cooperatives in North Carolina demonstrated the benefits of distributed storage and co-ownership, reducing infrastructure needs while increasing social connectivity among farmers.⁴³

Finally, the F3Local Lending Library in California provides an example of a well-funded, institutionally managed ESP focused on small farms and labor-saving technologies, including robotic equipment. Its emphasis on training, clear goals, and evaluation metrics offers important lessons, although long-term financial sustainability remains uncertain.⁴⁴

Recommendations

If King County chooses to pursue a farm equipment access program, the following recommendations are offered to guide program design and implementation:

1. **Center the program on labor savings and farm profitability.** Prioritize equipment and services that directly reduce labor costs or significantly improve labor efficiency, particularly for harvesting, post-harvest handling, and other labor-intensive activities. Access alone should not be the goal; measurable economic benefit to farms should be.
2. **Design for convenience and reliability first.** Ensure equipment is easy to access, consistently available, and fully operational during critical farming windows. Programs that are difficult to use or unreliable will see low participation, regardless of cost.

⁴⁰ Ibid at 15.

⁴¹ Ibid at 19.

⁴² Ibid at 20.

⁴³ Ibid at 22-23.

⁴⁴ Ibid at 24.

3. **Address transportation barriers explicitly.** Incorporate delivery services, mobile units, or geographically distributed storage locations. Avoid models that require farmers to independently haul large or specialized equipment long distances.
4. **Start with a geographically concentrated pilot.** Launch a pilot program in an area with a high density of farms—for example, Vashon Island—to reduce logistical challenges, test demand, and refine operations before expanding countywide.
5. **Select equipment through direct farmer input.** Base equipment purchases on farmer-identified needs and compatibility with existing farm infrastructure, including tractor size, power requirements, and operator skill level. Prioritize high-cost or limited-use equipment that individual farms cannot easily justify purchasing.
6. **Explore service-based and custom operator models.** Evaluate whether providing services, such as custom harvesting or soil treatment, may be more effective than equipment lending alone where technical skill, liability, or timing constraints are significant.
7. **Leverage partnerships and existing institutions.** Build on the capacity of conservation districts, cooperatives, tool libraries, research institutions, and nonprofit organizations. Partnerships with equipment dealers, manufacturers, or universities may reduce costs and support training and evaluation.
8. **Plan for long-term operations and staffing.** Budget for ongoing staff time to manage scheduling, training, maintenance, storage, insurance, and repairs. Avoid launching programs without a clear plan for operational sustainability beyond initial grant funding.
9. **Require training and establish clear risk management protocols.** Implement mandatory user training, standardized use agreements, and clear liability structures to protect both farmers and the County while reducing wear, damage, and misuse.
10. **Build in evaluation from the outset.** Collect data on usage, labor savings, cost reduction, and farm outcomes to assess program effectiveness and inform future scaling or adaptation. Clear performance metrics will be essential for accountability and continued public investment.

C. Farmer and Farmworker Housing

This section responds directly to the Ordinance 19762 requirement to evaluate and develop recommendations for developing housing facilities using County resources to provide workforce, congregate, and pallet housing for farmworkers in proximity to their place of work.

Background

King County is experiencing a sustained housing crisis, with the greatest impacts falling on households with low incomes. Even with recent increases to the minimum wage, workers earning low wages struggle to find affordable housing near their places of employment.⁴⁵ This challenge is particularly acute for farmworkers, who often labor on the outskirts of metropolitan regions where housing options are most limited. As a result, many farmers and farmworkers endure long commutes and high transportation costs. These conditions diminish quality of life, reduce farm businesses' ability to attract and retain workers, and undermine the economic sustainability of local food systems.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ "Strategies for Addressing Farmworker Housing Needs", Berk Consulting, p.7 (See Appendix C)

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Maintaining a viable and vibrant agricultural economy in King County requires a stable and reliable workforce. Ensuring that farmworkers have access to safe and affordable housing is essential to this stability. While the County has invested heavily in affordable housing production, few initiatives have focused specifically on farmworker needs. In other parts of Washington where agriculture plays a larger role in the regional economy, farmworker housing has received more attention. The 2022 Washington Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment profiled conditions in 11 counties, none of which were in Central Puget Sound.⁴⁷ That study and others provide useful insights into how farmworker housing needs differ from those of other low-wage workers, but they do not address King County's unique conditions.

Several factors shape these local challenges. Rapid metropolitan growth has intensified competition for housing and driven up costs. Land use and zoning regulations, consistent with state law, limit housing production in rural unincorporated areas surrounding Agricultural Production Districts (APDs). Instead, County policies concentrate new housing in urban centers, which are typically far from agricultural areas. Neighboring cities and towns often have limited zoning capacity for new housing and are required to help maintain rural character, resulting in fewer lower-cost options, such as apartments. Floodplain regulations further restrict development, particularly on farms located in areas prone to flooding.⁴⁸

Together, these dynamics create a housing environment where farmworkers face disproportionate barriers to finding affordable, proximate housing.

Barriers and Challenges

Barriers to Meeting Farmworker Housing Needs

Farmworker housing in King County faces both general barriers common to affordable housing and specific challenges unique to agriculture.

One of the most significant obstacles is the lack of reliable data. There is limited information about farmworker demographics, housing arrangements, cost burdens, and geographic distribution. Without this data, it is difficult to design strategies that respond to actual needs.⁴⁹

Economic constraints compound the problem. Farming in King County is often a low-margin enterprise. In 2022, nearly three quarters of farms reported less than \$10,000 in gross sales. Only 6 percent earned more than \$100,000. With such limited revenues, few farms have the capital to invest in housing. Smaller farms further limit economies of scale: most farms are under 50 acres, and nearly half are under 10 acres. Building housing for a handful of workers is far more expensive per unit than constructing clustered or multi-unit housing.⁵⁰

Permitting complexity adds another layer of difficulty. Farmers must navigate requirements that vary depending on whether housing is permanent, temporary, or licensed by the Washington Department of Health (WADOH). Regulations are dispersed across multiple agencies, including King County Permitting,

⁴⁷ Washington State Department of Commerce, 2022. *Washington Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment*.

⁴⁸ Ibid at 7-8.

⁴⁹ Ibid at 17-22.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

Public Health, the Fire Marshal, and state departments. Timelines for review can exceed 65 days for building permits and 100 days for land-use permits, making seasonal housing impractical.

Regulatory barriers also limit options. Permanent housing is restricted by acreage-based formulas that allow one Agricultural Employee Dwelling Unit for every 20 acres, regardless of labor intensity. Temporary housing faces stringent water supply requirements, prohibiting the use of private wells, and must comply with building codes that often require permanent foundations even for seasonal structures.⁵¹

Zoning limitations are significant. Agricultural and Rural Area zones permit farmworker housing but at very low densities. Clustering of units is prohibited, preventing efficient site design and utility connections. Public utilities generally do not extend into rural areas, and sewer extensions are prohibited in APDs.⁵²

Floodplain restrictions further constrain development. Large portions of the Snoqualmie Valley, Sammamish Valley, and Lower Green River APDs lie within regulatory floodplains. New or expanded permanent housing is prohibited or must be elevated with zero-rise requirements. Temporary housing is limited and often prohibited during flood months (September 30 to March 1).⁵³

Finally, barriers extend into nearby communities. Adjacent cities often have limited zoned capacity and prioritize maintaining rural character. Affordable housing providers in King County do not specialize in farmworker housing, meaning farmworkers must compete with other low-income residents for scarce units. In contrast, counties such as Yakima or Skagit have organizations dedicated to farmworker housing, reflecting the larger role of agriculture in their economies.

Accessibility of Existing and Planned Housing to Farmworkers

Accessibility of housing is critical because most farmworkers in King County do not live on the farms where they work. Instead, they rely on housing in nearby communities or subsidized affordable housing developments. Examining accessibility helps answer a fundamental question: are farmworkers able to secure affordable homes within reasonable commuting distance of APDs? Without this lens, strategies risk focusing only on farm housing, which is limited by geography, regulation, and economics.

Accessibility encompasses three dimensions: proximity, affordability, and availability of units reserved or suitable for farmworkers. Even when housing exists near APDs, it may be unaffordable at farmworker wage levels, or it may be reserved for other populations. Planned housing projects may expand supply, but unless they explicitly prioritize farmworkers, the benefit is indirect.

Regional overview

- **Enumclaw Plateau APD:** This region is furthest from the urban core, but its proximity to Enumclaw, Black Diamond, and Buckley provides some commuting options. These cities and

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

their urban growth areas could host new off-farm housing, but the current supply is limited. Accessibility here is constrained more by scarcity than by affordability.

- **Lower Green River APD:** Surrounded by Kent and Auburn, this region has the greatest supply of nearby housing. Apartment buildings and affordable housing providers are present and rents are relatively lower compared to the rest of King County. However, they remain unaffordable for most farmworkers. Accessibility is higher here than in other APDs, but affordability gaps persist.
- **Sammamish River APD:** Located near Kirkland, Redmond, and Woodinville, this APD benefits from proximity to large suburban centers. Yet housing costs in this area are among the highest in King County, making affordability the dominant barrier. Accessibility is undermined by cost rather than supply.
- **Snoqualmie River APD:** Remote and characterized by scarce housing availability. Neighboring towns such as Duvall and Carnation have limited affordable options, forcing many farmworkers to commute long distances. Accessibility here is constrained by both scarcity and affordability.
- **Upper Green River APD:** Geographic isolation and limited road connectivity restrict the housing supply. While nearby urban areas like Black Diamond could add units, accessibility is currently low.
- **Vashon Island:** Accessible only by ferry, the island has sparse housing consistent with its rural designation. The town of Vashon has been upzoned for moderate-density housing, and some affordable units have been built. However, water supply constraints limit future development. Accessibility is constrained by infrastructure as well as affordability.

Market affordability and subsidized supply

Countywide, most housing is market rate and rents near APDs consume half or more of a farmworker's income, exceeding HUD's severe cost burden threshold. Subsidized affordable housing exists—nearly 66,000 units countywide—but distribution is uneven. More than half of units near agricultural areas are concentrated around the Lower Green River APD, leaving other regions underserved. Planned affordable housing projects near APDs have not indicated special consideration for farmworkers, meaning they will compete with other low-income households for units.⁵⁴

Accessibility analysis reveals a systemic mismatch: farmworkers are concentrated in rural and agricultural areas, but affordable housing production is concentrated in urban centers. Even where housing exists near APDs, affordability remains a barrier, and in remote regions the challenge is scarcity. Without dedicated prioritization, farmworkers are unlikely to benefit from planned projects.

Recommendations

1. **Increase knowledge of farmworker housing needs.** King County could regularly conduct a farmworker housing needs assessment integrated with the County's comprehensive planning cycle. The assessment would quantify labor needs by region, document demographics, and map current housing arrangements. It should identify cost burden, gaps, mismatches, and future demand. Regular updates would allow the County to monitor progress, target strategies

⁵⁴ Ibid at 14-18.

geographically, and provide actionable insights to cities, housing providers, and farm associations.

2. **Support off farm housing that prioritizes farmworkers.** The County could cultivate partnerships with nonprofit affordable housing developers and local farm associations to co-design projects aligned with regional farm needs. This includes identifying barriers to developing such housing in King County, crafting incentives that make projects feasible, and shaping the housing needs assessment to support market analyses for proposals. The County can help identify opportunity sites with favorable characteristics: proximity to APDs, outside floodplains, access to water/sewer, near services, and transportation connectivity. Outreach materials should articulate economic and community benefits, while engagement with cities should ensure zoning changes and comprehensive plans support new affordable housing near agricultural areas.
3. **Lower barriers to on-farm housing.** To make on-farm housing more feasible where appropriate, the County could clarify and expedite permitting. Establish a navigator program to provide a single point of contact coordinating across agencies, offer pre-application consultations, and connect farmers to funding sources. Publish clear, consolidated guidance for permanent farmworker housing, WADOH-licensed temporary housing, and non-WADOH temporary housing. Provide preapproved plan sets for common unit types to reduce design costs and review time. Reduce or waive permit and impact fees for farmworker housing where lawful. Explore zoning flexibility, such as allowing clustering of units in agricultural zones and revising Agricultural Employee Dwelling Units (AEDU) allowances to reflect farm operation type and labor intensity rather than acreage alone.
4. **Lower barriers to temporary farmworker housing.** Temporary housing is essential for seasonal labor but faces disproportionate regulatory hurdles. The County could review zoning barriers that prevent multiple wheeled units (RVs, park model homes) on a single parcel and consider pilot programs or code amendments to allow safe, code compliant temporary housing in Agricultural and Rural Area zones. Provide storage and off-season pads outside floodplains, with utility hookups, through County acquisition or leasing. Clarify occupancy duration limits for wheeled housing to align with farming seasons. Advocate with WADOH to review water supply requirements for licensed temporary housing, exploring cost effective alternatives that still meet health standards. Publish clear guidance for non-WADOH temporary housing and evaluate permitted building types to allow lower-cost structures proportionate to temporary use.
5. **Improve farmer access to capital for housing construction.** Leverage the Farmland Preservation Program to enable deed-restricted farmworker housing where compatible with agricultural preservation. Allow narrowly tailored development that maintains affordability over time and protects prime farmland through siting and size constraints. Complement easements with capital tools such as reimbursement or grants conditioned on long term affordability covenants. Explore additional approaches to bolster farm viability and capacity to invest, including strategies to reduce operating costs, grow markets, and diversify revenue. By pairing preservation with affordability requirements and providing capital support, the County can help farms create and retain safe, affordable units without degrading agricultural land.
6. **Preserve existing housing on farmland.** Enhance the Flood Buyout and Elevation Program to avoid unnecessary loss of rural housing stock. Prioritize elevation assistance for farmworker and farm-related residences before pursuing buyouts and clarify eligibility criteria. Streamline participation processes for farm owners and coordinate with state and federal programs to leverage funds for elevation and repair rather than relocation. Establish a safe housing fund to help offset elevation and retrofit costs and pair improvements with affordability covenants to

maintain long term access for farmworkers. This resilience-first approach protects households, preserves critical workforce housing, and aligns with floodplain safety mandates.

D. Transportation and Mobility

This section responds directly to the requirements of Ordinance 19762 to evaluate and develop transportation programs to provide mobility for farmworkers, including: providing vouchers that can be used for local and regional transportation providers operating in areas with access to agricultural jobs; establishing shuttle services, similar to the King County Metro Transit Department’s Trailhead Direct program; and providing subsidies to support easier access to the Metro Transit Department’s Vanpool and Vanshare programs, similar to Metro services currently provided to Snoqualmie Casino employees.

Consistent with other sections of the Agriculture Sector Study, the analysis below examines current transportation conditions affecting farmworkers in King County, identifies key geographic, economic, structural, and equity-related barriers, reviews lessons from existing local and national models, and presents recommendations for how the County could strengthen affordable, reliable, and equitable transportation options that support mobility across APDs.

Background

King County’s five APDs—Sammamish River, Snoqualmie River, Lower Green River, Upper Green River, and Enumclaw Plateau—play a critical role in sustaining local agriculture, food systems, and the regional economy. These areas protect farmland in an urbanizing county and produce a diverse mix of products, including organic fruits and vegetables, livestock, dairy, wine, and agritourism ventures. Beyond their economic contributions, APDs also foster community engagement and provide opportunities for education, recreation, and local food access.

The transportation and mobility section of the King County Agriculture Sector Study evaluates how farmers and farm workers access these lands, with a particular focus on commuting challenges, infrastructure gaps, and opportunities for improvement. This section presents a structured narrative: it assesses current transportation conditions for each APD, identifies gaps and constraints, reviews best practices from comparable regions, and concludes with actionable recommendations that could improve farm worker mobility. Reliable, affordable transportation is critical for the sustainability of King County’s agricultural workforce and the long-term viability of the APDs.

Farm workers face barriers related to geographic isolation, limited transit options, and variable schedules, often exacerbated by seasonal work patterns or secondary employment. Transportation access influences economic equity, labor retention, and operational efficiency for farms, while also shaping the ability of workers to access essential services, such as healthcare and education.

Understanding these challenges and identifying strategies to address them is essential to support a resilient and productive agricultural sector.

Barriers and Challenges to Farmworker Mobility

Transportation challenges for farmworkers in King County are driven by the spatial separation between agricultural employment areas and housing, limited public transit coverage in rural and agricultural areas, and work schedules that do not align with traditional commuter-oriented transit systems. Many APDs are located outside frequent transit corridors and, where it exists, service often requires multiple transfers, long travel times, or extensive walking to reach farm sites, creating persistent first- and last-mile gaps.⁵⁵

Reliance on private vehicles is common across all APDs but presents significant financial burdens for farmworkers, particularly those earning low wages or working seasonally. Costs associated with fuel, insurance, vehicle maintenance, and ownership reduce disposable income and can create instability when vehicles are unavailable or unreliable. Ride-share services, while present in some districts, are generally cost-prohibitive for daily commuting and inconsistent in more rural areas.⁵⁶

Seasonal labor demands and nonstandard work hours further complicate access. Early morning start times, late evening shifts, and peak harvest periods often fall outside transit service hours, reducing reliability and increasing the risk of absenteeism or worker turnover. Flooding, storms, and poor road conditions—particularly in the Snoqualmie River and Upper Green River APDs—can disrupt both private and public transportation, exacerbating existing challenges.⁵⁷

Finally, awareness and coordination barriers limit the effectiveness of existing transportation programs. While King County Metro’s Vanpool, Vanshare, and Metro Flex programs provide potential tools, many farmworkers and farm employers are unfamiliar with these options or face challenges navigating eligibility, enrollment, and cost-sharing requirements. Without targeted outreach, coordination, and adaptation to agricultural work patterns, these programs remain underutilized within the agricultural sector.

Current Conditions by Agricultural Production District

Sammamish River APD⁵⁸

The Sammamish River APD, located 15 to 20 miles from central Seattle, is home to small specialty crops, nurseries, livestock, and equestrian operations. Farms are small- to mid-scale and often rely on urban-based labor.

Private Transportation: Driving remains the primary mode, as public transit is slow and fragmented. Commutes from Seattle take 30 to 45 minutes by car but two to three hours via public transit. Costs for fuel, insurance, and vehicle maintenance add financial burdens.

⁵⁵ “*King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Transportation Report*”, Headwater People’s Consulting, p. 4-12. (See Appendix D)

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “*King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Transportation Report*”, Headwater People’s Consulting, p. 4-6.

Public Transit: Limited routes exist, including King County Metro DART 931 connecting Duvall, Woodinville, and Bothell during peak hours. Redmond Light Rail extensions improve regional connectivity, but last-mile gaps remain, requiring significant walking to reach farms.

Ride-Share: Uber, Lyft, and taxi options exist but are prohibitively expensive for daily commutes, with one-way trips from South Seattle costing \$60 to \$80.

Worker Needs: Farmers and farm workers report a need for flexible shuttle or demand-response services, improved connections to Redmond Light Rail, and organized vanpools or carpools to reduce commuting costs and improve reliability.

Snoqualmie River APD⁵⁹

Covering nearly 15,000 acres, the Snoqualmie River APD hosts more than 200 commercial farms, including dairies, nurseries, and row crops. Approximately 75 percent of farms are owner-operated, and 25 percent are leased, often to Hmong and Mien farmers.

Private Transportation: Private vehicles dominate due to dispersed settlements and rural roads. Flooding and poor road conditions create additional unpredictability. Commutes from Seattle or other urban centers range from 40 minutes to over an hour.

Public Transit: Options include Snoqualmie Valley Transportation fixed routes, King County Metro Route 208, and several DART routes connecting to Redmond and Bothell. Frequency is limited and transfers are required, reducing reliability for farm work schedules.

Ride-Share: Service availability and cost issues mirror those in Sammamish River.

Worker Needs: Community priorities include improved rural road maintenance, stronger transit connections to urban hubs, and last-mile solutions such as farm worker shuttles, carpools, or vanshare programs.

Lower Green River APD⁶⁰

Located near Kent and Auburn, the Lower Green River APD is relatively urban-adjacent, intersected by major highways.

Private Transportation: Road access is strong, with direct connections to State Route 167 and major arterials. Congestion is a consideration during peak commuting times.

Public Transit: Sound Transit Route 566 and King County Metro Route 150 provide access near the APD but do not reach farms directly, creating last-mile challenges.

⁵⁹ “King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Transportation Report”, Headwater People’s Consulting, p. 6-8.

⁶⁰ Ibid at 8-9.

Ride-Share: Available and moderately affordable relative to more rural districts.

Worker Needs: Improved first- and last-mile connections from Kent Station to farms, safer walking and biking infrastructure, and enhanced carpool, vanpool, or vanshare programs could make the area more accessible for agricultural workers.

Upper Green River APD⁶¹

This rural APD north of Enumclaw is primarily accessed via SE Green Valley Road.

Private Transportation: Private vehicles are essential, with seasonal commuting patterns common. Flooding and storms can impact rural road reliability.

Public Transit: No direct service exists; the nearest hubs are in Auburn. Metro Flex and vanpool options offer limited solutions for last-mile connectivity.

Ride-Share: Inconsistent and costly; mainly a backup option.

Worker Needs: Multi-mile solutions connecting Auburn or Enumclaw hubs to farms, flexible demand-response services, and improved rural road resilience are essential.

Enumclaw Plateau APD⁶²

The Enumclaw Plateau is characterized by dairy farms, livestock, and agritourism operations. It is the most remote APD, with limited housing and long commute distances.

Private Transportation: Driving is the only practical option. Commutes from Auburn or Kent range 25 to 40 minutes, while Seattle commutes may exceed one hour.

Public Transit: King County Metro DART 915 connects Enumclaw to Auburn Transit Center but does not reach most farms. Service hours do not align with early-morning or late-evening shifts.

Ride-Share: Limited coverage outside the city center; daily use is financially infeasible.

Worker Needs: Expansion of vanpools, vanshare programs, and seasonal shuttle services could improve access. Enhanced walking and biking infrastructure between transit hubs and farm corridors could provide additional safety and mobility options.

Best Practices

Farm worker mobility is most effectively addressed through a combination of transit services, community-based coordination, and worker-informed program design. Nationally, rural transportation

⁶¹ Ibid. at 9-10.

⁶² Ibid at 11-12.

challenges include limited infrastructure, dispersed populations, and financial constraints, which mirror the conditions in King County APDs.

CalVans (California): A self-sustaining agricultural vanpool program developed through direct engagement with farm employers and workers. It provides hundreds of vanpools tailored to the specific commuting patterns of agricultural workers.

Green Raiteros (California Central Valley): Provides free or discounted rides to farm workers using electric vehicles, managed by a central dispatcher and community-based coordinators. This model addresses last-mile access and shifting demand patterns efficiently.

King County Metro Programs: Existing programs such as vanpool, vanshare, and Metro Flex offer frameworks that could be adapted for the agricultural sector. Vanpools accommodate long-distance, group commuting, while vanshare addresses short last-mile connections. Metro Flex demonstrates the feasibility of on-demand, short-distance transportation in lower-density areas, highlighting the potential for localized, flexible service.

Lessons Learned: Best practices emphasize community partnerships, data-informed route planning, worker input, and flexible, demand-responsive services. Programs are most successful when they integrate subsidies or cost-sharing strategies to ensure affordability, particularly for low-wage and seasonal workers.

Recommendations

- 1. Strengthen Outreach, Marketing, and Awareness of Existing Programs.** King County could partner with APD-based organizations to inform farmers and workers about vanpool, vanshare, shuttle, and voucher programs. Multilingual outreach using peer networks, events, and demonstrations can increase participation, reduce reliance on private vehicles, and enhance labor stability. These initiatives could be timed to seasonal work schedules, ensuring relevance and accessibility.
Feasibility: Low-cost, scalable, and immediately actionable.
- 2. Build Direct Connectivity Between the Agriculture Sector and King County Metro.** Establish structured engagement between Metro, APD representatives, farm organizations, and workers to align transit services with agricultural employment patterns. This could include adjustments to routes and schedules, integration of transportation vouchers for low-income workers, and targeted programs for seasonal or early-shift commuters. By incorporating real-world farm work schedules into transit planning, King County could create equitable and reliable mobility solutions.
Feasibility: Moderate; leverages existing Metro infrastructure with interagency coordination.
- 3. Support Community Partners as Local Mobility Hubs.** King County could invest in APD-based organizations to coordinate vanpools, vanshare groups, shuttle operations, and voucher distribution. These hubs could manage scheduling, route planning, and communications, while responding to seasonal fluctuations and unforeseen disruptions, such as flooding or extreme weather. This approach ensures

transportation solutions are locally informed, equitable, and adaptable.

Feasibility: Moderate; uses existing nonprofit infrastructure and community trust.

4. Pilot APD-Specific Mobility Projects.

Targeted pilots in each APD could test seasonally adjusted shuttles, vanpool expansions with subsidies, and transportation voucher programs. Pilots could provide shuttles timed to harvest or dairy shifts, develop vanshare networks for last-mile access, and integrate worker feedback for service design. Data collected from these pilots could guide scalability, cost-effectiveness, and long-term integration with Metro and regional transit programs.

Feasibility: High for initial pilots, with potential for expansion if successful.

D. Workforce Development, Recruitment, and Retention

This section responds directly to the requirements of Ordinance 19762 to analyze agricultural labor and workforce development challenges and to develop recommendations related to farmworker recruitment and retention, retention of existing farm owners, and the development of internship and apprenticeship programs for youth, underrepresented communities in the agricultural sector, and historically underserved communities.

The section begins with an overview of labor and workforce development challenges facing King County agriculture, followed by context on how workforce development in agriculture differs from other sectors. It then summarizes relevant regional and national case studies that illustrate effective approaches to recruitment, retention, farm owner continuity, and workforce pipeline development. The section concludes with recommendations intended to inform County policy direction, program design, and future investment decisions.

Background: Labor and Workforce Development Challenges

Labor availability and workforce stability are among the most significant challenges facing King County's agricultural sector. Farmers across the county consistently identify difficulties recruiting and retaining workers as a primary constraint on farm operations, growth, and long-term viability. These challenges affect not only day-to-day production, but also the ability of farms to plan for the future, invest in their businesses, and transition operations to the next generation.

King County's agricultural sector depends on a stable, skilled, and supported workforce, yet farmers across the county consistently identify labor availability, recruitment, and retention as among their most pressing challenges. These challenges directly implicate the ordinance's requirements related to farmworker recruitment and retention, farm owner retention, and the development of internships and apprenticeships for youth, underrepresented communities, and historically underserved communities.

Agricultural labor challenges in King County are shaped by a combination of structural and regional factors. Farms operate in a high-cost region where wages in agriculture often struggle to compete with other sectors offering more predictable schedules, year-round employment, and fewer physical demands. At the same time, farmworkers face barriers to long-term employment stability due to limited

access to affordable housing near job sites, inadequate transportation options, inconsistent healthcare access, and limited opportunities for advancement within the agricultural sector.⁶³

Recruitment challenges are particularly acute during peak growing seasons, when farms rely on short-term and seasonal labor. Retention challenges persist year-round, as experienced workers often leave agriculture for more stable or better-paying employment. These dynamics increase training costs, reduce operational efficiency, and place additional strain on farm owners, many of whom already operate on narrow margins.⁶⁴

Workforce instability also affects farm owner retention. Aging farmers, first-generation farmers, and small- and mid-sized operations are especially vulnerable when workforce shortages compound other pressures, such as rising land costs, regulatory complexity, and climate-related disruptions. Without reliable labor, farm owners are more likely to reduce production, delay investments, or exit agriculture altogether, undermining the long-term viability of King County’s agricultural base.⁶⁵

Finally, the lack of structured entry points into agricultural careers limits the pipeline of future workers and farm owners. Youth, underrepresented communities, and historically underserved populations face barriers to accessing hands-on training, paid learning opportunities, and clear pathways into long-term agricultural employment or ownership. Addressing these gaps is central to meeting the ordinance’s requirements related to internships and apprenticeships.⁶⁶

Workforce Development Context

Workforce development in agriculture differs fundamentally from workforce development in other sectors. Farm work is physically demanding, highly skilled, and often seasonal, requiring experiential learning and on-the-job training rather than traditional classroom-based instruction. Many essential agricultural skills—such as crop management, livestock care, equipment operation, and food safety compliance—are developed over multiple seasons of hands-on experience.

Effective recruitment and retention strategies must account for these realities. Programs that focus solely on job placement without addressing working conditions, support services, or long-term career pathways are unlikely to succeed. Instead, workforce development in agriculture must integrate recruitment, retention, and advancement into a cohesive system.

For farmworkers, this means access to stable employment, supportive services, and opportunities to build skills and advancement. For farm owners, it means access to a reliable workforce and pathways to develop future managers, partners, or successors from within their labor force. Internship and apprenticeship programs are particularly important in this context, as they allow farms to train workers over time while providing participants with paid, structured learning opportunities.

⁶³ “*King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Workforce Development Report*”, Headwater People’s Consulting, p. 4-7. (See Appendix E).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The analysis also highlights the importance of equity-centered approaches. Immigrant, refugee, and Black, Indigenous, and people of color farmworkers and farmers are disproportionately represented in King County agriculture and often face additional barriers related to language access, immigration status, discrimination, and limited access to capital and technical assistance. Workforce programs that partner with trusted, community-based organizations are better positioned to reach and support these populations.

Existing workforce development systems—such as regional workforce boards and state employment programs—often do not align well with agricultural needs due to the sector’s seasonality, dispersed worksites, and reliance on small employers. As a result, agriculture has historically been underrepresented in workforce investment strategies, reinforcing the need for targeted, agriculture-specific approaches.

Case Studies and Key Takeaways⁶⁷

A review of regional and national workforce initiatives highlights practical approaches that address farmworker recruitment and retention, support farm owner continuity, and strengthen workforce pipelines through internships and apprenticeships. The case studies examined share a focus on reducing structural barriers, aligning workforce programs with the realities of agricultural work, and creating clear pathways for advancement.

Farmworker Recruitment and Retention

Effective recruitment and retention programs extend beyond job placement to address the conditions that influence whether workers remain in agriculture over time. Case studies demonstrate that programs integrating transportation assistance, housing support, healthcare access, and worker advocacy achieve higher retention rates and reduce turnover. Initiatives that provide coordinated transportation options to dispersed farm sites reduce absenteeism and expand the pool of available workers, while partnerships with health providers improve worker stability and productivity.

These examples underscore that retention is closely tied to access to basic services and predictable working conditions, not wages alone. Programs that address non-wage barriers improve labor stability while supporting worker well-being.

Internship and Apprenticeship Programs

Case studies of successful internship and apprenticeship models emphasize the importance of paid, structured, and multiseason learning opportunities. Programs that combine classroom instruction with on-farm training and mentorship allow participants to build skills progressively while contributing meaningfully to farm operations.

Programs that intentionally recruit youth and individuals from underrepresented and historically underserved communities are most effective when they partner with trusted community-based

⁶⁷ See Case Studies section of *“King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Workforce Development Report”*, p. 8-14.

organizations, provide stipends or wages, and reduce administrative burdens for host farms. These programs demonstrate how internships and apprenticeships can serve as entry points into long-term agricultural employment, management roles, or future farm ownership.

Farm Owner Retention and Succession

Several case studies address farm owner retention by linking workforce development with business continuity and succession planning. Programs that support gradual transitions of responsibility—from worker to crew lead, manager, or partner—help retain experienced farmers while preparing the next generation of farm operators.

Cooperative ownership models, shared equity approaches, and technical assistance focused on financial planning and governance reduce the risk of farm exit, particularly for small- and mid-sized operations. These models show that workforce strategies can directly support farm owner retention when advancement opportunities are intentionally designed.

Key Takeaways Informing Recommendations

Across all case studies, several consistent lessons emerge that directly inform the recommendations in this report:

- Recruitment and retention challenges are inseparable from housing, transportation, healthcare, and overall business viability.
- Paid internships and apprenticeships are essential for building an equitable and durable agricultural workforce pipeline.
- Programs are most successful when they minimize administrative and financial burdens on farms.
- Integrating workforce advancement with succession planning strengthens long-term farm viability and reduces farm exit.

Recommendations

The following recommendations respond directly to the workforce-related requirements of Ordinance 19762 and are intended to strengthen recruitment, retention, farm owner continuity, and workforce pipeline development.

1. **Recruitment and Retention Programs.** King County should continue to develop and support programs that improve farmworker recruitment and retention by addressing both employment conditions and non-wage barriers. This includes partnerships with community-based organizations to provide culturally responsive outreach, transportation solutions, and access to healthcare and other essential services. Programs should be designed to accommodate seasonal employment patterns while promoting longer-term worker stability.
2. **Internship and Apprenticeship Programs.** The County can play a convening and coordinating role in expanding paid internship and apprenticeship opportunities for youth, underrepresented communities, and historically underserved populations. This includes providing funding to offset wages or stipends, offering technical assistance to host farms, and reducing administrative

complexity. Aligning these programs with career pathways—from entry-level work to skilled positions and ownership—will strengthen their long-term impact.

3. **Farm Owner Retention and Succession.** To support the retention of existing farm owners, King County should invest in programs that help farmers manage workforce challenges while planning for succession. Business planning assistance, peer learning networks, and models that allow workers to transition into management or ownership roles can reduce the likelihood of farm exit. These efforts should be coordinated with farmland access and capital programs to maximize effectiveness.
4. **Cross-Sector Coordination and Implementation.** Workforce development for agriculture intersects with housing, transportation, public health, and economic development. Continued cross-departmental coordination will be essential to implementing effective recruitment, retention, and training programs.
5. **Evaluation and Continuous Improvement.** King County should invest in data collection and evaluation to track recruitment, retention, and advancement outcomes. Measuring participation, worker retention, and farm continuity will allow programs to evolve in response to changing conditions and emerging needs.

E. Health Care Access and Programs for Farm Workers and Farm Owners

This section responds to the requirements of Ordinance 19762 to evaluate healthcare access for agricultural workers and farm business owners and to develop recommendations related to establishing healthcare programs for farmworkers. Access to affordable and appropriate healthcare is a critical component of workforce stability, farm owner retention, and the long-term viability of King County’s agricultural sector.

The section begins with background and current conditions related to healthcare access in the agricultural sector, with a focus on insurance coverage and affordability. It then identifies and analyzes key structural barriers affecting farmworkers and farm owners, including gaps in insurance eligibility, high premium costs, seasonal and variable income, and challenges accessing care in practice. The section concludes with detailed recommendations for County action to reduce barriers, improve affordability, and strengthen healthcare access for the agricultural workforce.

Background and Current Conditions

Farmers and farmworkers in King County face significant and persistent challenges accessing affordable healthcare. Although the County has a robust network of hospitals, clinics, community health centers, and mobile health services, many agricultural workers remain uninsured or underinsured. Interviews conducted for this study consistently identified “health insurance cost and affordability” as the single greatest healthcare challenge affecting both farmworkers and farm business owners.⁶⁸

The structure of agricultural employment in King County contributes directly to these challenges. Most farms are small-scale operations that lack the financial capacity to offer employer-sponsored health insurance. As a result, farmworkers rarely receive health coverage as an employment benefit and farm

⁶⁸ “King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Health Care Report”, p. 12-13. (See Appendix F).

owners must secure coverage independently. Many farmers reported maintaining off-farm employment solely to access employer-sponsored insurance, even when their farm businesses are otherwise viable.

For those purchasing coverage through Washington Healthplanfinder, premiums, deductibles, and out-of-pocket costs are high relative to agricultural incomes. Marketplace insurance can consume 20 to 30 percent of annual income, particularly for older farmers or households that do not qualify for significant subsidies. When enhanced federal premium tax credits are reduced or expire, healthcare costs rise sharply, placing additional strain on farm finances.⁶⁹

Farmworkers and farm owners also experience healthcare challenges related to the physical and mental demands of agricultural work. Farming involves high rates of musculoskeletal injury, chronic strain, exposure to extreme weather, and elevated stress. Long workdays, early mornings, and seasonal peaks make it difficult to schedule appointments, particularly during growing and harvest seasons. While most APDs are within reasonable driving distance of healthcare facilities, cost, coverage gaps, and eligibility barriers—not geography—are the dominant constraints.⁷⁰

Community health centers, such as Sea Mar, HealthPoint, International Community Health Services, and others, play a critical role in providing safety-net care regardless of ability to pay or immigration status. Mobile clinics and telehealth services further expand access. However, these services cannot fully compensate for the lack of affordable, continuous insurance coverage for the agricultural workforce.

Key Issues and Barriers

Health Insurance Coverage Gaps and Affordability

Affordability is the central healthcare issue facing King County’s agricultural sector. Farm incomes are often low, variable, and seasonal, while healthcare costs are fixed and rising. Many farmers earn too much to qualify for Medicaid (Apple Health) but too little to afford marketplace premiums without subsidies. This creates a pronounced coverage gap for self-employed farmers and small business owners.

Premium subsidies under the Affordable Care Act are tied to federal poverty levels, which do not reflect the high cost of living in King County. Farmers frequently fall between 300 and 450 percent of the federal poverty level—well above Medicaid eligibility thresholds but still unable to absorb monthly premiums, deductibles, and cost-sharing requirements. Even with subsidies, annual healthcare costs can exceed 10 percent of household income.⁷¹

Enhanced federal premium tax credits introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic have temporarily reduced costs for many marketplace enrollees. However, these credits have expired further increasing premium costs for many farmers. At the same time, the Washington Office of the Insurance Commissioner has approved premium increases for 2026, with some plans increasing by more than 30

⁶⁹ “*King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Health Care Report*”, p. 10.

⁷⁰ *Ibid* at 12-13.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* at 12-13.

percent. Without intervention, these changes are expected to push many farmers and farmworkers out of coverage entirely.⁷²

Small Farm Employer Constraints

Most King County farms lack the scale or financial capacity to offer employer-sponsored insurance. While association plans and health reimbursement arrangements exist, they are often inaccessible to very small operations or farms with seasonal labor. For many farms, offering insurance would require diverting limited resources away from core business needs, threatening overall viability. As a result, healthcare access becomes an individual responsibility rather than a shared employment benefit, placing disproportionate burden on workers and owners alike.

Seasonal Income and Administrative Complexity

Agricultural income fluctuates widely year to year and within seasons, complicating eligibility determinations for subsidies and public programs. Farmers purchasing insurance through Washington Healthplanfinder must estimate annual income in advance and reconcile differences during tax filing. Several farmers reported unexpected repayment obligations when actual income exceeded estimates, creating financial risk and discouraging continued enrollment.

Immigration Status, Trust, and Access

A portion of King County's agricultural workforce includes immigrants and refugees. While Washington State policies allow access to Apple Health and marketplace coverage regardless of immigration status, fear, misinformation, and distrust—exacerbated by federal enforcement actions—continue to limit utilization. Many workers prefer care provided through trusted community organizations and familiar settings.

Scheduling and Practical Access to Care

Even when insurance and services are available, farmworkers and farm owners face practical barriers to accessing care. Long work hours, physically demanding labor, and seasonal time pressures make preventive care difficult. Injuries are often self-managed to avoid missed work, increasing long-term health risks. Mental health services face additional stigma and awareness barriers, despite elevated stress levels in the agricultural sector.

Recommendations

Despite these challenges, several opportunities exist to improve healthcare access for agricultural workers through targeted County action. King County has strong partnerships with community health providers, farm organizations, and regional health equity initiatives that can be leveraged to address both affordability and access.

⁷² Ibid.

1. **Establish a Farmer and Farmworker Healthcare Relief Fund.** King County could establish a dedicated healthcare relief fund to offset health insurance premiums and out-of-pocket medical costs for farmers and farmworkers who experience disproportionate cost burdens. Eligibility could be based on healthcare costs exceeding a defined percentage of household income, adjusted for King County’s cost of living. The fund could provide direct reimbursements or payments to insurance providers and should be administered in partnership with trusted organizations experienced in agricultural outreach. Models such as California’s Farmer Relief Fund demonstrate the feasibility and impact of targeted financial assistance. A tiered structure could prioritize those facing the highest cost burdens while remaining administratively manageable.
2. **Expand and Coordinate Mobile and On-Farm Health Services.** King County could fund farm organizations to coordinate mobile and on-farm health clinics in collaboration with community health providers. Services should focus on preventive screenings, chronic condition monitoring, mental health assessments, and health education, with scheduling aligned to agricultural calendars and off-season periods. Coordination through trusted agricultural organizations would increase participation, reduce stigma, and improve continuity of care. These efforts should complement—not replace—primary care and insurance coverage.
3. **Invest in Mental Health and Stress Support for Agricultural Workers.** The County could expand funding for mental health outreach and stress reduction programs tailored to agricultural workers. This includes peer-to-peer support, culturally responsive education, and connections to free or low-cost counseling services. Partnerships with programs such as the Western Regional Agricultural Stress Assistance Program and WSU Extension can support evidence-based approaches and ongoing evaluation.
4. **Strengthen Insurance Navigation and Outreach for Agricultural Communities.** King County could support targeted insurance navigation services for farmers and farmworkers, delivered through agricultural organizations and community health partners. These services should focus on enrollment assistance, income estimation, subsidy optimization, and education about available options, including Cascade Care plans and state-funded programs. Special attention should be given to outreach for immigrant and historically underserved communities, emphasizing confidentiality, language access, and trust-building.
5. **Advocate for Expanded State and Federal Affordability Measures.** King County could continue to advocate for expanded state premium assistance and the extension of enhanced federal premium tax credits beyond 2025. Healthcare affordability is a structural issue that cannot be fully resolved at the local level. County advocacy can help ensure that agricultural workers are recognized as a priority population in state and federal policy discussions.

Affordable healthcare is essential to the sustainability of King County’s agricultural sector, yet rising insurance costs, eligibility gaps, and practical access barriers continue to place significant strain on farmworkers and farm owners, contributing to workforce instability and farm exit. By pairing targeted financial relief with coordinated service delivery and continued policy advocacy, King County can reduce these barriers, support worker well-being, strengthen farm viability, and help ensure that agriculture remains a resilient and essential part of the County’s economy and food system.

F. Fee Waivers for Farmers Market Booths

This section responds to Ordinance 19762’s directive to consider “providing fee waivers for farmers market booths” as a means of supporting farmer participation in farmers markets. While the County does not have authority to waive vendor booth fees established by independent farmers market organizations, this section considers the potential impacts of fee waivers in concept, as well as the alternative of the County subsidizing or paying these fees on behalf of farmers. As discussed below, input from interested parties and available evidence suggest that neither approach is likely to be effective and could result in unintended consequences in King County.

Background

The 44 farmers markets in King County are managed by 31 independent organizations or municipalities; 70 percent are nonprofit organizations, while 19 percent are run by a government agency such as a city or Public Development Authority, and a smaller proportion (12 percent) are for-profit entities.⁷³ Regardless of how a farmers market is incorporated, vendor booth fees are a core source of revenue and used to pay for staffing, permits, marketing, infrastructure, and other operational expenses.

According to the Washington State Farmers Market Association (WSFMA), on average, farmers market organizations receive 49 percent of their annual revenue from vendor booth fees.⁷⁴ The unrestricted revenue from vendor fees is leveraged to raise the additional operating funds needed from community sponsorships, donations, and, occasionally, small grants for specific programs.

Vendor fees are charged in a variety of ways, as a flat fee or percentage of sales, or combination of both. In King County, farmers are charged flat fees from \$25 to \$50 per week for a 10’x10’ booth space. For a 23-week season, this would be \$575 to \$1,150.⁷⁵ The percentage of sales ranges from 6 to 7 percent for a 10’x10’ booth space. For every \$1,000 generated in sales, these fees would add up to between \$60 to \$70 per week.⁷⁶ In addition to providing retail space in King County, farmers markets also deliver thousands of shoppers to vendors in a concentration of time. The Renton Farmers Market, for example, generated over \$10,000 in vendor sales per hour of operation in 2025.

Many farmers markets charge lower vendor booth fees for farmers than they do for processors, prepared foods, or artisans. This is a common way farmers markets structure fees to support their farm vendors. In addition, farmers markets increase their vendor booth fees very rarely and typically fall behind inflation and their costs of doing business.⁷⁷

As WSFMA research continues to confirm, farmers greatly value well-managed farmers markets; farmers markets that attract shoppers; and high-quality products.⁷⁸ Therefore, investing in these areas is far

⁷³ “[WSFMA King County Farmers Market Report: 2024/2023](#)”, Washington State Farmers Market Association, December 2025.

⁷⁴ “[WSFMA Farmers Market Vendor Fees Report](#)”, Washington State Farmers Market Association, September 2025.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

more likely to lower farmers market's operating costs and benefit farm vendors' ability to grow their customer base and sales.

Waiving these fees for farmers may seem supportive, but it can undermine the financial sustainability of the very organizations that enable farmers to reach consumers. Reduced revenue could limit the farmers market's ability to manage and maintain the market(s), support vendor services, and provide community programs, ultimately harming farmers' market access rather than expanding it. This revenue model matches commercial leasing models, where fees from vendors and, in some cases, a percentage of their sales funds the operations of a retail location.

Even if the County were to subsidize farmers market booth fees directly, avoiding revenue impacts to market organizations, this approach remains problematic. Administering such a program would require new systems to determine eligibility, process payments across multiple independent markets, and ensure accountability, adding cost and complexity. More importantly, covering booth fees does not address the primary barriers farmers face—such as labor, transportation, production risk, and regulatory requirements—making this a less-effective use of public resources than broader investments in market infrastructure and farmer support.

Equity considerations also arise. Waivers would primarily benefit farmers who participate in farmers markets, leaving out producers who sell through other direct-to-consumer channels, such as community-supported agriculture programs and farm stands, or wholesale and institutional markets. This could create perceived or actual inequities among local producers and complicate administration for the County and market operators.

Recommendation

For these reasons, even if fee waivers were possible for farmers at farmers markets, they are not the most effective mechanisms for supporting direct-marketing farmers participation in farmers markets. Investing in high-capacity farmers markets that are well-managed and consistently attract shoppers, resulting in high sales, would result in more lasting impacts for farmers, in addition to helping markets to keep vendor booth fees at affordable rates.

G. Farm to Community: Grants to Food Banks to Purchase Surplus Food from Local Farms

This section responds directly to the requirement in Ordinance 19762 to evaluate and develop recommendations related to providing grants to food banks and hunger relief organizations (HROs) to purchase surplus food from local farms. The ordinance recognizes farm-to-community approaches as a strategy to strengthen farm viability while addressing persistent food insecurity across King County.

This section provides background on farm-to-community programs and their role in supporting both local farmers and HROs; examines the benefits, impacts, and structural challenges associated with these programs, with particular attention to funding models and operational sustainability; describes farm-to-community programs currently operating in King County; and concludes with recommendations for strengthening and scaling these efforts in a way that is durable, equitable, and aligned with County priorities.

Background: What Is Farm to Community?

Farm-to-community programs are a form of food assistance in which HROs—such as food banks, food pantries, and meal programs—use dedicated funding to purchase food directly from local farmers for distribution to people experiencing food insecurity. In most cases, these programs operate by providing grants or other public or philanthropic funding to HROs, which then use those funds to procure produce, dairy, meat, or other agricultural products from local farms at agreed-upon prices.

This approach differs from traditional hunger relief models that rely heavily on donated food or surplus commodity distribution. By enabling HROs to purchase food directly from farmers, farm-to-community programs provide greater control over food quality, nutritional value, cultural relevance, and supply consistency, while simultaneously creating a reliable market for local agricultural producers.

Farm-to-community programs are particularly important for supporting small- and medium-sized farms, including new and beginning farmers and farmers from historically underserved communities. These producers often face barriers accessing wholesale, institutional, or retail markets due to scale requirements, insurance and certification costs, pricing pressure, and administrative complexity. Farm-to-community purchasing can serve as a meaningful source of income for these farms by offering predictable demand, fair pricing, and, in some cases, up-front payments that help cover early season production costs.

For farmers, this model helps stabilize revenue, reduce exposure to market volatility, and support long-term farm viability. For HROs, it improves access to fresh, high-quality, and locally appropriate food for the communities they serve.⁷⁹ At the community level, farm-to-community programs keep food dollars circulating within the local economy, strengthen regional food supply chains, and reinforce the connection between agricultural production and food access.

More broadly, farm-to-community programs align agricultural and hunger relief objectives by linking farm viability with food security outcomes. They demonstrate how public investment in food access can also function as an economic development strategy for local agriculture.

Challenges and Barriers to Farm to Community Programs

Despite their benefits, farm-to-community programs face a set of structural challenges that limit their ability to scale and persist over time.

Funding Instability and Limitations

The most significant challenge facing farm-to-community programs is funding that is insufficient, restricted, and uncertain. Programs rely on a patchwork of funding sources, each with inherent limitations.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ “*Increasing Farm Viability in King County*”, p. 46.

⁸⁰ *Ibid* at 47.

Philanthropic donations and foundation grants are commonly used to support purchasing from farmers, but these funds are often short-term, highly competitive, and vulnerable to economic downturns. Securing philanthropic support requires substantial fundraising capacity and year-to-year uncertainty makes it difficult for HROs to commit to consistent purchasing agreements with farmers.

Government grants, including federal and state local food purchasing programs, have played an important role, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these grants are frequently time-limited, administratively complex, and sometimes misaligned with local production cycles or needs. When grant funding ends after one to three years, purchasing relationships may be disrupted, undermining farmer trust and long-term planning.

Institutional purchasing by hospitals, schools, and universities can provide stable demand, but these buyers typically require scale, efficiency, and pricing structures that exclude many small, beginning, and emerging farmers. Payment timelines and administrative requirements also create barriers for small operations. Across these models, gaps between funding cycles can result in inconsistent ordering, reducing revenue stability for farmers and complicating supply planning for HROs.

Infrastructure and Logistics Constraints

Farm-to-community programs depend on reliable infrastructure to aggregate, store, and transport food. Limited access to cold storage, vehicles, and logistics systems is a common barrier, particularly for smaller organizations or rural areas. Programs with access to food hubs or established food banks with existing infrastructure are better positioned to succeed, while others struggle to manage aggregation, packing, and last-mile delivery.⁸¹

Staffing and Value Chain Coordination

Effective farm-to-community programs require skilled staff to manage procurement, logistics, compliance, and relationship-building across the value chain. Many organizations lack the resources to hire and retain staff with these specialized skills. Reliance on volunteers is often insufficient, particularly for roles that require training, certification, or consistent availability.⁸²

Value chain coordination—aligning farmers, transporters, storage facilities, HROs, and community distribution sites—is essential to program success but is rarely fully funded. Without dedicated coordination capacity, programs are difficult to scale and sustain.

Farm-to-Community Programs in King County

King County has a long history of farm-to-community and farm-to-food assistance efforts, many of which predate the COVID-19 pandemic. These efforts operate across a range of scales and geographies, with some programs focused specifically within King County and others functioning regionally across multiple counties in Washington State. Together, they reflect a diversity of approaches, partners, and funding

⁸¹ Ibid at 47.

⁸² Ibid at 47.

sources that demonstrate the flexibility and durability of farm-to-community strategies when adapted to local and regional contexts.

At the organizational level, many HROs in King County engage in farm-to-community work not through formal standalone programs, but through ongoing efforts to build relationships with local farmers in order to procure food directly when funding allows. These efforts are often supported by a mix of private donations, short-term grants, or flexible operating funds and are used to supplement donated food with locally grown produce. While typically limited in scale, these relationship-based purchasing efforts improve food quality and reliability for HROs and provide farmers with additional market opportunities, even when formal program infrastructure is not in place.

Beyond these organization-led efforts, several more structured farm-to-community programs operate in King County and across the broader region.

King County Farmer’s Share is led by Harvest Against Hunger and provides grants to HROs to purchase food directly from local farms. The program has been supported through a combination of King Conservation District Regional Food Systems funding and federal COVID-era relief funding administered through King County. Farmer’s Share demonstrates how nonprofit-led coordination, paired with public funding sources, can generate meaningful benefits for both farmers and food access organizations.⁸³

Farm to Food Pantry is a statewide program funded through Washington State legislative appropriations and administered by the Washington State Department of Agriculture. Operating across multiple counties, including King County, the program provides funding to purchase food from Washington farmers for distribution through food pantries and food banks. Farm to Food Pantry illustrates the role of state-level investment in supporting local procurement while allowing implementation to respond to regional conditions and partnerships.⁸⁴

Growing for Good represents a distinct and innovative farm-to-community model operating in King County as part of a broader regional effort. Launched in 2020 in response to rising food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic, Growing for Good is a partnership among Harvest Against Hunger, PCC Community Markets, Seattle Neighborhood Farmers Markets, local farmers, and HROs. Rather than relying primarily on grants or philanthropy, Growing for Good is financed through voluntary “round-up” donations made by customers at participating retail locations. These small, aggregated contributions create a predictable funding stream that provides farmers with up-front capital and fair prices while supplying consistent, high-quality food to HROs.⁸⁵

Together, these efforts illustrate the range of farm-to-community models active in King County and the surrounding region—from informal, relationship-based purchasing by individual organizations, to nonprofit-led programs supported by public funds, to community-financed approaches. While this diversity contributes to resilience, it also highlights a shared challenge across all models: the need for stable, predictable, and diversified funding. Long-term success will depend not only on continued public investment, but also on sustained community, institutional, and private-sector support that allows farm-

⁸³ [King County Farmers Share Program](#), Harvest Against Hunger website.

⁸⁴ [WSDA Farm to Food Pantry](#), Washington State Department of Agriculture website.

⁸⁵ [Growing for Good](#), Neighborhood Farmers Market Alliance website.

to-community efforts to move beyond short-term or crisis-driven purchasing and toward durable, year-round integration into both agricultural markets and hunger relief systems.

Recommendations

1. **Establish a County-Level Baseline for Farm-to-Community Purchasing.** King County could establish a predictable funding floor for farm-to-community programs by aligning existing County resources, including the Veterans, Seniors, and Human Services Levy, the General Fund, and King Conservation District Regional Food System funding. A baseline level of County-controlled funding would allow HROs to enter into longer-term purchasing agreements with farmers, improving income stability and farm planning while reducing reliance on short-term grants.
2. **Protect and Optimize State and Federal Funding Streams.** The County could continue to coordinate and advocate for state and federal programs that support local food purchasing, including the Washington State Farm to Food Pantry program and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)-aligned procurement. These programs provide continuity and scale and can stabilize purchasing when paired with County and community-based investments.⁸⁶
3. **Invest in Infrastructure, Staffing, and Coordination Capacity.** To support program effectiveness and growth, King County could invest in cold storage, transportation, logistics systems, and skilled staffing for farm-to-community partners. Funding should explicitly support value chain coordination as a core function necessary for implementation, not as an administrative overhead cost.
4. **Strengthen and Scale the Growing for Good Model.** King County could support the expansion of Growing for Good and similar community-powered models through multiyear seed funding, County-led outreach to additional retail partners, and public awareness efforts. The County should also explore opportunities to match community donations with public funds to accelerate growth while maintaining local control.
5. **Support Evaluation, Learning, and Program Alignment.** Finally, the County could support shared evaluation and data systems across farm-to-community programs to track impacts on farmer income, food access outcomes, and community benefits. Ongoing learning will support continuous improvement and help align farm-to-community investments with broader County goals related to equity, health, and economic resilience.

H. Expanding King County's Local Food Initiative

This section responds directly to the requirement in Ordinance 19762 to evaluate and develop recommendations related to expanding the County's Local Food Initiative. The Local Food Initiative (LFI)

⁸⁶ [The Emergency Food Assistance Program](#) (TEFAP) is a federal program that helps supplement the diets of people with low-income by providing them with emergency food assistance at no cost. [FNS](#), an agency of the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) (USDA), administers TEFAP at the federal level; and all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam administer the program at the state level.

is a central policy framework through which King County supports the local food and farm economy while expanding access to healthy, affordable food for residents across the county.

The analysis below describes the purpose and evolution of the LFI, summarizes how the initiative was updated through extensive community engagement and interagency coordination, and outlines the goals and priority actions that guide implementation. The section concludes with recommendations for how King County can continue to support and expand the LFI through coordinated funding, strategic investment, and sustained implementation capacity.

Background

The LFI is a core mechanism for advancing agricultural viability, food access, environmental sustainability, and equity across King County’s food system. It provides a unifying framework for County programs and partnerships that support farmers, food businesses, and communities across the full farm-to-plate continuum.

The LFI was originally established in 2015 to strengthen the local food system by growing the local food and farm economy and improving access to nutritious food for King County residents. Since its adoption, the LFI has guided County investments and cross-sector collaboration aimed at strengthening markets for local producers, expanding food access, and supporting sustainable agricultural practices.

In 2025, King County completed a comprehensive update to the LFI, renewing its vision through a 10-year roadmap designed to respond to current conditions and prepare for future needs. The updated LFI reaffirms the County’s commitment to a food system that is economically viable, environmentally sustainable, rooted in equity and justice, and responsive to community priorities across both rural and urban areas.

Development and Update of the Local Food Initiative

The updated LFI was developed through an 18-month planning and engagement process conducted during 2024–2025. The process was led by King County in partnership with the King Conservation District, with technical support from New Venture Advisors. Guidance was provided by the Food System Advisory Council, a multi-sector advisory body comprised of more than twenty leaders representing farms, food businesses, community-based organizations, and government.⁸⁷

Community engagement was foundational to the update. More than 1,600 residents participated in surveys, and additional input was gathered through listening sessions, focus groups, and interviews. These perspectives were combined with lessons learned from existing programs and initiatives, as well as findings from other County and regional plans, to ensure alignment across policy efforts and public investments.

Through this process, the updated LFI reflects lived experience and practical implementation knowledge while grounding future actions in data, programmatic experience, and community priorities.

⁸⁷ [King County Local Food Initiative](#), King County website.

Goals and Key Components of the Updated Initiative

The updated LFI is organized around four interconnected goals:

1. Ensure equitable food access and affordability, particularly for communities disproportionately impacted by food insecurity.
2. Build a thriving local food and farm economy by strengthening markets, distribution systems, and business viability for farmers and food enterprises.
3. Protect farmland and support sustainable food production, including improved access to land for new and beginning farmers.
4. Advance environmental sustainability and climate resilience across the food system.⁸⁸

To advance these goals, the LFI identifies 83 actions spanning policies, programs, and investments. These actions build on existing County efforts while introducing new approaches that require collaboration across public agencies, community organizations, and private-sector partners.

To support early implementation, the updated LFI identifies 10 priority actions that address urgent needs and offer the greatest potential for near-term impact. These include developing sustainable funding for farm-to-community food access programs; expanding voucher and incentive programs for purchasing local food; improving market coordination and distribution infrastructure; increasing farmland accessibility through innovative ownership and leasing models; and accelerating adoption of climate-smart and low-carbon practices across the food system.

Implementation and Stewardship

Implementation of the LFI will require coordinated action across multiple sectors. King County and the King Conservation District will provide stewardship, coordination, and technical support, but the success of the initiative depends on sustained collaboration with farmers, food businesses, community-based organizations, institutions, and residents.

The LFI is intended to function as a shared framework that aligns investments, policies, and partnerships toward common goals. Its long-term effectiveness will depend on the County's ability to maintain coordination across departments, adapt to emerging conditions, and support partners engaged in on-the-ground implementation.

Recommendations

1. **Coordinate and Sustain Funding for Implementation.** King County could prioritize coordinated, long-term funding to support implementation of the LFI. This includes aligning County funding sources, pursuing external grants, and leveraging public-private partnerships to provide stable resources for key programs such as farm-to-community food purchasing, incentive and voucher programs, and market and distribution coordination.
2. **Invest in Priority Actions to Drive Early Impact.** The County could focus early investments on the LFI's identified priority actions to demonstrate progress and build momentum. Targeted

⁸⁸ Ibid.

investment in these actions—such as farmland access models, value chain coordination, and climate-smart production practices—can deliver measurable benefits while laying the groundwork for broader implementation of the full action set.

3. **Strengthen Coordination, Governance, and Accountability.** King County could continue to strengthen coordination among County departments, the King Conservation District, the Food System Advisory Council, and community partners. Clear roles, shared performance measures, and regular reporting will support accountability and allow the initiative to adapt over time.
4. **Support Capacity Building and Technical Assistance.** The County could invest in capacity building and technical assistance for farmers, food businesses, and community organizations engaged in LFI implementation, with particular attention to small-scale and historically underserved participants.

I. Public Awareness and Education Campaign

This section responds directly to Ordinance 19762’s direction to evaluate opportunities for “developing a multimedia, multichannel public awareness campaign on the necessity of supporting county farmers and their products and educating the public on the quality and cost of producing farm products.” The ordinance recognizes that public awareness, consumer understanding, and demand-side support are important components of agricultural viability, particularly in regions where local farms operate in close proximity to urban populations.

This section provides background on the role of public awareness and media campaigns in supporting local agriculture; reviews different types of campaigns and past efforts to raise awareness of local food and farming in King County and the broader region; analyzes storytelling-based campaigns as one potential strategy available to the County; and concludes with recommendations for how King County could support and coordinate future public awareness efforts in alignment with broader agricultural and food system goals.

Background

Can Public Awareness Campaigns Influence Consumer Behavior and Support Farmers?

Public awareness and marketing campaigns have long been used to shape consumer preferences, increase product recognition, and influence purchasing behavior. In the context of local agriculture, these campaigns are typically designed to help consumers understand where their food comes from, how it is produced, and why locally grown products may differ in price, availability, or seasonality compared to commodity foods.⁸⁹

Research and case studies from across the United States demonstrate that well-designed local food campaigns can increase consumer recognition of local products, improve willingness to pay for locally grown food, and direct a greater share of food dollars back to regional producers. These campaigns are

⁸⁹ “*Increasing Farm Viability in King County*”, p. 67.

particularly effective when they move beyond generic “buy local” messaging and instead tell specific, relatable stories about farmers, production practices, and community benefits.⁹⁰

For farmers, increased consumer awareness can translate into stronger market demand, improved brand recognition, and greater resilience in competitive food markets. For communities, these campaigns help reinforce the idea that agriculture is not only a rural activity but an essential component of regional economic vitality, environmental stewardship, and food security.

Types of Public Awareness and Media Campaigns Supporting Local Agriculture

Public awareness campaigns supporting agriculture typically fall into several overlapping categories:

- **Branding and Labeling Campaigns**, which use logos, signage, or certifications to help consumers identify locally grown products at the point of purchase
- **Educational Campaigns**, which focus on explaining production practices, seasonality, and the costs of farming
- **Storytelling Campaigns**, which center farmers’ experiences, values, and connections to place
- **Digital and Social Media Campaigns**, which use short-form video, images, and narratives to reach consumers through platforms they already use
- **Partnership-Based Campaigns**, which rely on amplification through retailers, farmers markets, restaurants, and community organizations

Increasingly, successful campaigns combine several of these approaches and operate across multiple channels simultaneously.

Previous and Ongoing Efforts to Raise Public Awareness of Local Farming

King County and regional partners have a long history of supporting public awareness efforts related to local food and farming.

Puget Sound Fresh (Historic Program)

Puget Sound Fresh was a regional branding and awareness program initiated by the King County Agriculture Commission to encourage consumers, wholesalers, retailers, and restaurants to seek out and purchase locally grown products. The program used a recognizable logo and signage to identify local products in grocery stores and farmers markets and produced the Puget Sound Fresh Farm Guide, a widely used directory of farms, farm products, and agricultural events. The guide circulated for nearly 30 years and became a key resource for consumers seeking local food. Puget Sound Fresh was financially supported by King County and later expanded to include participation from other counties in the region. The program is no longer active but provides an important historical example of County-supported agricultural marketing.

Eat Local First (Statewide Effort)

Eat Local First is a statewide initiative launched by Sustainable Connections in 2011 to help consumers identify local farms and the businesses that purchase from them. The Eat Local First platform provides a

⁹⁰ Ibid. at 60.

searchable directory of farms, markets, restaurants, and food businesses across Washington State and includes a storytelling component that highlights individual farms and producers. The campaign operates as a collaborative network of regional partners and demonstrates how centralized platforms can support both consumer education and farm visibility at a statewide scale.⁹¹

Ongoing Organizational Storytelling and Outreach

In addition to formal campaigns, many organizations across King County and the region use their own communication platforms to share stories about local farms and food systems. Examples include PCC Community Markets' *Sound Consumer* publication, which highlights food, farming, and sustainability topics; King County's Local Food Initiative (LFI) newsletter and blog; and communications from farmers markets, food hubs, and farm support organizations.⁹² While these efforts are valuable, they are often fragmented and reach different audiences depending on organizational capacity and networks.

Analysis: Storytelling Campaigns as a Public Awareness Strategy

Storytelling-based public awareness campaigns represent one option King County could use to support local agriculture by increasing farm visibility, consumer understanding, and perceived value of locally produced food. Rather than focusing solely on price incentives or regulatory measures, storytelling campaigns operate by strengthening the relationship between consumers and the people and places behind food production.

In a region such as King County—where residents are highly engaged with food culture, environmental values, and social equity—storytelling can help bridge the gap between urban consumers and a largely invisible agricultural workforce. Without intentional visibility, farms can become politically, economically, and culturally vulnerable. Storytelling helps make agriculture visible again by connecting farming to shared community values and everyday purchasing decisions.

Storytelling Campaigns as an Option for King County

From a policy perspective, storytelling campaigns offer flexibility. They can be scaled up or down, adapted to different audiences, and integrated with existing County programs, retail partners, farmers markets, and institutional purchasers. They can also complement other agricultural support strategies by increasing consumer demand and reinforcing public understanding of the costs and benefits of local food production.

Storytelling campaigns are particularly well suited to contemporary media environments. Social media platforms increasingly prioritize short-form, engaging content that emphasizes authenticity and narrative. These platforms allow campaigns to reach audiences beyond those already interested in agriculture, including younger consumers who consume information through “edutainment” formats that combine learning and entertainment.

Illustrative Example: The “Rooted in King County” Storytelling Concept

⁹¹ [East Local First](#) website.

⁹² PCC Community Markets, [Sound Consumer](#) website.

As part of this study, the consultant supporting this work developed an illustrative storytelling concept to demonstrate how a modern, multichannel public awareness campaign could function. The “Rooted in King County” concept is presented here as an example, not as a prescribed recommendation, to show how storytelling tools could be structured and deployed.

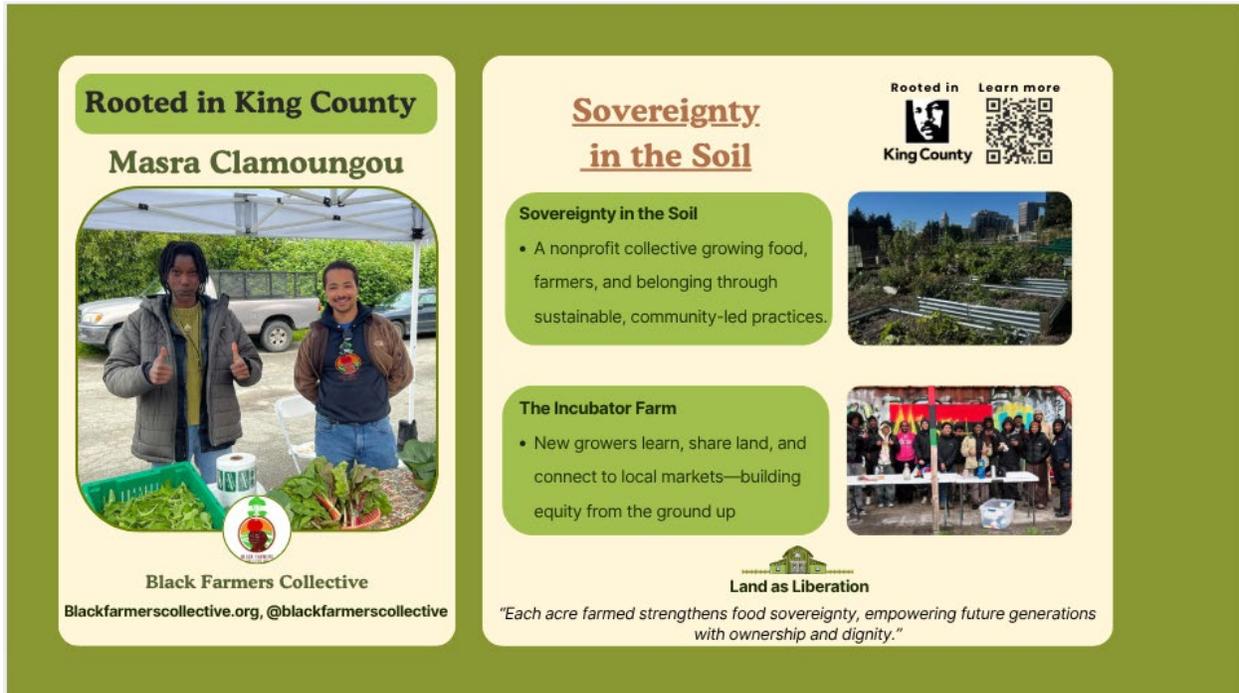
In this example, the campaign pairs Farmer Trading Cards with short-form videos, all connected through a unifying “Rooted in King County” identity. Each card features an individual farmer or farm, including a photograph, location, type of production, and a brief statement about values or purpose. See Figures 1 and 2. Short videos provide additional depth by giving farmers a voice and visual presence, allowing audiences to see farming as a lived, human experience rather than an abstract activity.

Cards and videos link back to a centralized landing page that serves as a hub for farm profiles, local purchasing information, and connections to County programs and partners. Physical cards could be distributed at farmers markets, grocery stores, schools, or community events, while digital versions and videos could be shared across platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube Shorts, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

Figure 1: Rooted in King County Farmer Trading Cards, Example 1



Figure 2: Rooted in King County Farmer Trading Cards, Example 2



This example illustrates several principles that research suggests are effective in public awareness campaigns:

- **Accessibility and Familiarity**, using formats that are recognizable and engaging
- **Values-Based Messaging**, connecting farming to issues such as climate resilience, food justice, culture, and community care
- **Platform Adaptability**, allowing content to be reused and amplified by partners
- **Emotional Connection**, which research shows is critical for building trust and influencing behavior

While the specific tools shown in this example are illustrative, they demonstrate how King County could support storytelling efforts that humanize farmers, explain the real costs of food production, and strengthen consumer connection to local agriculture.

Economic and Cultural Relevance

Storytelling campaigns can also play an important role in supporting the agricultural economy. King County’s LFI has previously noted that only a small share of regional food spending returns to local farms. Campaigns that increase consumer recognition and preference for local products can help recirculate food dollars within the local economy.

Long-running efforts such as the “Local Hero” campaign in Massachusetts demonstrate that sustained, recognizable marketing can deliver measurable economic benefits, including increased farm income and

strong public recognition. These examples suggest that storytelling is not merely educational but can be an economic development tool that supports farm viability and land retention.

Recommendations

To advance the intent of Ordinance 19762 and strengthen public understanding and support for local agriculture, the following recommendations are offered.

1. **Invest in and Partner with Existing Public Awareness Platforms.** King County could consider investing in and partnering with established platforms such as Eat Local First that already have statewide reach, technical infrastructure, and experience connecting consumers with farms. Supporting the sustainability and expansion of these platforms—particularly their storytelling components—could extend King County’s impact without duplicating existing efforts.
2. **Support Development of a County-Aligned Storytelling Campaign.** King County could support the development of a modern, values-based storytelling campaign that highlights local farms, farmers, and the realities of food production. The campaign should emphasize shared values and explain the quality and cost of producing food locally. Illustrative concepts such as the consultant-developed “Rooted in King County” example demonstrate how such a campaign could function, but the final format should remain flexible and responsive to partner input.
3. **Design Campaigns for Multichannel Use and Partner Amplification.** Any public awareness strategy should be designed to function across multiple platforms and be easily shared by partners, including grocery stores, farmers markets, schools, chefs, food banks, and community organizations. Consistent branding and centralized landing pages can help ensure coherence while allowing broad participation.
4. **Coordinate Regionally to Avoid Fragmentation.** King County could coordinate with regional partners to align messaging, avoid duplication, and reinforce consistent narratives about local agriculture. Coordination helps amplify impact, reduces confusion for consumers, and strengthens recognition of local food across county and jurisdictional boundaries.
5. **Link Storytelling to Broader Agricultural Goals.** Finally, public awareness efforts should be explicitly linked to broader County goals related to farm viability, food access, equity, and climate resilience. Evaluation metrics—such as consumer engagement, partner participation, and changes in purchasing behavior—should be used to inform ongoing refinement and investment decisions.

VI. Conclusion/Next Steps

This Agriculture Sector Study responds to the requirements of Ordinance 19762 by bringing together analysis, stakeholder input, and applied research to examine the conditions shaping agriculture in King County and to identify strategies that can strengthen the sector over time. Taken together, the findings underscore both the enduring importance of agriculture to the County’s economy, environment, and communities, and the growing pressures facing farmers related to land access, labor availability, market stability, climate impacts, and operating costs. The report emphasizes that these challenges are

interconnected and that effective responses must address agricultural viability, food access, and community well-being in a coordinated manner.

The recommendations identified align with King County’s broader policy frameworks and priorities, beginning with and building upon the County’s Local Food Initiative. The recommendations reinforce County goals related to strengthening the local food and farm economy, improving equitable access to healthy food, and advancing environmental sustainability and climate resilience. Additional strategies—such as farm-to-community purchasing, workforce development, healthcare access, and public awareness—complement existing County efforts under the Strategic Climate Action Plan and the Equity and Social Justice Strategic Plan by addressing structural barriers, investing in underrepresented farmers and workers, and recognizing agriculture as integral to public health, climate adaptation, and regional economic resilience.

This work reflects extensive collaboration and engagement across the agricultural sector and within County government. Farmers, farmworkers, nonprofit organizations, advisory bodies, and public agencies contributed insights that helped ground the analysis in lived experience and operational realities. Many of the strategies outlined build-on existing programs, partnerships, and investments already under way across the County, others offer new innovative approaches, while also highlighting opportunities to strengthen coordination, reduce fragmentation, and better align efforts across departments and with external partners.

Implementation of the strategies outlined in this report will require continued collaboration, prioritization, and adaptation. Not all recommendations will be pursued simultaneously and some will depend on future funding decisions, policy direction, and evolving conditions in the agricultural sector. However, by using this work as a foundation for ongoing decision-making, King County can continue to refine its approach, respond to emerging needs, and build on proven models. With sustained attention and partnership, these efforts can help support the agricultural sector that continues to provide food, economic opportunity, and environmental benefits for King County residents.

VII. Appendices

Appendix A: *King County Agricultural Sector Study: Land Access*, American Farmland Trust, Nov. 2025

Appendix B: *Increasing Farm Viability in King County*, Agritecture, Nov. 2025

Appendix C: *Strategies to Address Farmworker Housing Needs*, BERK Consulting, Nov. 2025

Appendix D: *King County Agricultural Sector Assessment Transportation Report*, Headwater Peoples Consulting, Nov. 2025

Appendix E: *King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Workforce Development Report*, Headwater Peoples Consulting, Nov. 2025

Appendix F: *King County Agricultural Sector Assessment: Healthcare Report*, Headwater Peoples Consulting, Nov. 2025

King County Agricultural Sector Study: Land Access

November 2025

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“Land access may as well be a myth.”

- Puget Sound area farmer¹

Background and Approach

According to the USDA’s 2022 Census of Agriculture, King County, Washington is home to 1,604 farms stewarding 46,261 acres, which is approximately 3% of the county’s total land area. The average farm size is 29 acres, with 49% of farms under 9 acres.²

Despite its small share of the land base, agriculture is deeply valued in King County. Since 1979, King County’s Farmland Preservation Program (FPP) has worked to permanently protect farmland from development through the use of agricultural conservation easements; to date the FPP has permanently protected more than 16,400 acres of farmland, about 35% of the county’s remaining farmland.

As in many areas around the country, agricultural land in King County is becoming increasingly expensive. An inventory of current real estate listings suggests that high quality farmland may sell for over \$50,000 per acre (more than 10 times the national average³ and thirteen times the state average⁴), with some parcels priced significantly higher because of their development potential.⁵ As a result, farmland is financially out of reach for young and beginning farmers. According to a 2022 survey by the National Young Farmers Coalition, finding affordable land to farm was cited as the most significant barrier for young and beginning farmers across the country.⁶ This finding is corroborated by American Farmland Trust’s recent Puget Sound Agricultural Viability Survey, in which farmers across 12 counties were surveyed on top challenges; 67% of respondents identified “finding affordable land to buy” as an “extreme” challenge. This was especially true in King County, where 83% of respondents ranked affordable access to land as a top challenge.⁷

King County has already made significant investments in promoting land access and affordability, notably through its Farmland Leasing Program, which makes approximately 200 acres of farmland available to over 60 farm businesses through short-term leases.⁸ Further, King County’s Conservation Futures program, as of 2024, makes grants to agricultural nonprofits to purchase farmland for educational and business incubation purposes. Taken together with the long-established FPP, these programs make King County a leader in promoting farmland protection and access.

Still, land access remains a “wicked problem” in King County.⁹ While there may be no perfect panacea to quickly and significantly improve land access, there are other tools and strategies that could be leveraged, and examples to look to from across the country.

This report is organized into four areas of intervention: Increasing the Supply of Land Available, Reducing the Cost of Acquiring Land, Increasing Access to Capital to Acquire Farmland, and Identifying Collective and Community Land Tenure Models. These categories are highly intersectional. Challenges with access to, and affordability of, land and capital stem from many of the same root, structural causes. Similarly, some of the strategies presented in this report may serve to improve outcomes in more than one area.

American Farmland Trust’s team involved in developing this report included regionally and nationally recognized land access experts who bring an unparalleled combination of experience with land access

policy, funding, research, and program implementation. This report draws on the team's deep knowledge of the topic and leverages AFT's previous research related to land access and agricultural viability. For example, over the past five years, AFT and Indiana University have conducted research on state and federal Land Access Policy Incentives (LAPIs), including state Beginning Farmer Tax Credit (BFTC) programs and Farm Purchase and Protection Incentives (FPPIs), as well as on the federal Transition Incentives Program. This report includes summaries of findings from AFT's LAPI research.

The team also reviewed publications by other organizations and academic literature related to land and capital access and conducted informational interviews with land access program administrators. These interviews provided crucial insights and informed the seven case studies included in the report.

Throughout the duration of the project, AFT staff continued to network and exchange ideas with peers and other experts in the field at venues like the Saving America's Working Lands conference, which AFT convened in Dallas, Texas, in April 2025, the Washington State Conservation Commission's quarterly Farmland Preservation Roundtable, and AFT's quarterly Pacific Northwest Land Transfer Forum.

Increasing the Supply of Land Available

Access to land for farmers is fundamentally a supply-and-demand challenge: the number of farmers seeking land far exceeds the amount of land readily available to young and beginning farmers and ranchers (YBFRs) for agricultural use. This imbalance creates significant barriers for YBFRs, who often lack the capital to compete in a tight market. When farmland is lost to development, consolidated into large operations, or converted to another use, the supply shrinks even further, exacerbating the problem. To meaningfully improve land access, it is critical to focus on strategies that protect agricultural lands and simultaneously increase the supply of land available to YBFRs for farming.

Beginning Farmer Tax Credits and Transition Incentive Programs

Beginning Farmer Tax Credit (BFTC) programs provide tax credits to landowners who sell or rent land and other assets to YBFRs. To date these programs have used income tax credits but other types of tax credits potentially could be used to achieve the same goals.

BFTCs incentivize landowners to prioritize YBFRs as tenants and buyers to help YBFRs start and expand agricultural operations. Nebraska passed the first BFTC in 1999. Its "Next Gen" program (Beginning Farmer Tax Credit Act) offers tax credits to owners who lease land to eligible beginning farmers. It also provides an exemption to YBFRs from Nebraska's personal property taxes (YBFRs' personal property used in agricultural and horticulture, valued up to \$100,000, is exempted from personal property taxes).

As land access challenges accelerated in the 21st Century, a handful of states followed suit and have tailored Nebraska's program to help their own YBFRs gain access to land.

- Iowa passed a BFTC program in 2007 to provide income tax credits to asset owners who rent their land, equipment, or buildings to a qualified beginning farmer.
- Minnesota launched a program in 2017 to provide a state tax credit to property owners who sell or rent agricultural assets, such as farmland, equipment, or livestock, to beginning farmers.
- Pennsylvania created a program in 2019. It offers state income tax credits to landowners who sell or rent agricultural assets to qualified beginning farmers.
- Kentucky authorized "Kentucky Selling Farmer Tax Credit" in 2020 to incentivize landowners to sell agricultural land and other assets to new farmers.
- Ohio authorized a program in 2022 to offer landowners and owners of other agricultural assets income tax credits for selling or renting land, livestock, buildings, and equipment to a qualified beginning farmer. In addition, eligible beginning farmers can claim an income tax credit to cover the cost of a financial management course.

Research on the longest running programs in Nebraska, Iowa and Minnesota found that while the programs include a variety of agricultural assets, nearly all agreements were for land. Overall, the programs successfully facilitated multi-year rental agreements between young, generational, commodity grain farmers (median age of 28 years) and landowners who had not worked together before (56%). Given that the longest-running BFTCs only incentivized rental agreements, it is not surprising that 96% reflected a lease arrangement. However, only in 5% of cases did these rental relationships lead to sales.

While the benefits of these programs accrue to the asset owner, in about half the cases, landowners discounted the price they charged to the YBFR. Still, while most YBFRs credited the BFTC with helping their farm succeed, their land access challenges persist. They rented about half of the total acres that they farm through the program but to be economically viable, most wanted to expand their operations significantly more. Thus, while current land tenure appears secure, the land access gap faced is wide.

It is also noteworthy that BFTCs predominantly serve commodity grain farms (96%) in states where only half of farms grow grains. As these programs spread to other states, it will be interesting to see if these patterns hold under different agricultural conditions. Given that Washington State does not have an income tax, King County would need to look at other types of tax incentives (for example, sales or property taxes) to support a BFTC. It also may be that this kind of program, which to date has prioritized commodity grain growers, is not the best fit for King County's agricultural conditions.

Looking at a different approach, Pennsylvania adopted an exemption from the state's realty transfer tax if a protected farm is conveyed to a beginning farmer who is certified by the state and meets certain requirements for agricultural production. The exemption applies only to properties protected by agricultural conservation easements that are transferred to a beginner farmer.¹⁰ The policy was initiated both because a significant amount of Pennsylvania's farmland is owned by farmers nearing or exceeding retirement age and because land access is a substantial barrier to entry. It also helps ensure that protected farmland can stay in agricultural use. So far, the program does not have much of a track record to report, but the concept is promising. Since King County currently levies Real Estate Excise Taxes under KCC 4A.510.100 and 4A.510.120, a similar exemption could be developed in King County.

Meanwhile, the USDA's Transition Incentives Program (TIP) is tied to the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). It provides landowners or operators with two additional annual rental payments on land enrolled in expiring CRP contracts, on the condition that they sell or rent this land to a beginning farmer or rancher, a military veteran, or a socially disadvantaged farmer or rancher. The new landowners or renters must return the land to production using sustainable grazing or farming methods.

TIP participation varies across the country, with most of the projects, acres enrolled, and payments directed to counties in the Mountain West, Mid-west, and Plains states. From 2018-2024, there were 119 contracts across 13 Eastern Washington counties, but there were none in King County or other Western Washington counties.

TIP offers a path to land access, but because the land is coming out of CRP, it tends to be environmentally sensitive and highly erodible, potentially suitable for grazing but not for crop production. Further, with only two-year extensions, the incentives appear to be largely insufficient to lure landowners, especially given the requirement to lease to a YBFR for at least five years. On the flip side, YBFRs, especially those from non-farming families, from historically underserved backgrounds, and those practicing organic or other nonconventional practices, often need a long-term lease on CRP lands given the remediation needed to bring the land into production. So, while it is good to know about the program, it would not be worth exploring in King County.

Area-wide Rights of First Refusal

A right of first refusal (ROFR) gives a designated party (such as a local government or land trust) the first opportunity to purchase a property if the owner decides to sell. ROFRs can protect access to and affordability of key resources, and there is a lot that farmland access practitioners can learn from the affordable housing world about the use of this tool. For example, San Francisco's Community Opportunity to Purchase Act (COPA) is a housing policy aimed at preserving affordable housing and preventing tenant displacement by giving qualified nonprofit organizations the first opportunity to purchase certain residential properties before they are sold on the open market.¹¹ It applies to buildings with three or more units and vacant land that could be developed into such housing. Sellers must notify both tenants and certified nonprofits before listing a property, allowing these organizations a chance to make an offer or match an existing one. The goal is to empower community-based organizations to preserve affordable housing and stabilize communities, often with financial support from the city's Small Sites Program.

As of 2025, COPA has shown modest but meaningful success. Nonprofits have acquired over 30 buildings, preserving more than 500 units of affordable housing. These acquisitions have helped prevent displacement and provided long-term stability for tenants. However, the program faces challenges, including limited scale, funding constraints, and inconsistent compliance by property owners. Despite these hurdles, COPA has strengthened the role of nonprofits in the housing market and contributed to the city's broader affordability goals.¹²

A similar approach could be adapted to farmland, or certain categories of farmland, such as land within an Agricultural Protection District (APD). A COPA-style policy implemented at the County level would give land trusts, cooperatives, or conservation organizations the first opportunity to purchase agricultural land before it was sold for non-agricultural uses. Land trusts, farmer cooperatives, and other nonprofit organizations could be certified as eligible purchasers, and farmland owners could be required to notify this group when they intend to sell to a non-farming entity.

Perhaps the closest existing corollary in the farmland protection space is the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' current-use taxation program, known as Chapter 61A. Like other states' current-use taxation programs, Chapter 61A provides essential tax relief to farmland owners by assessing agricultural land based on its current-use value rather than its full market value. A unique feature of this program is "Section 14," which grants municipalities an ROFR when land enrolled in 61A is proposed for conversion to residential or commercial use. This provision allows towns to either purchase the land themselves or assign the purchase right to a qualified conservation partner, helping to preserve farmland and open space that might otherwise be lost to development. The buyer must maintain at least 70% of the land in open space, with the option to develop up to 30% to support financial feasibility.

While Section 14 has proven effective in some cases, it is often underutilized due to practical challenges. Municipalities face tight 120-day timelines to act, must match potentially high developer offers, and often lack the funding or staff capacity to respond quickly. When an offer is made to purchase land by a developer who intends to change the use of the land, the town must match that offer if they want to buy and preserve the land, regardless of appraisal. (The exception is if the current owner of the land plans to

convert their property out of agricultural use themselves. In that case, the town must meet the current fair market value of the property as determined by an appraiser.) Despite these hurdles, the tool remains a powerful, locally driven mechanism for farmland protection, and offers a compelling model for other states or localities seeking innovative farmland preservation strategies. For more information about Massachusetts' 61A program and Section 14, please see the case study on page 45.

Embedding an ROFR in King County's current-use taxation program would require an amendment to RCW 84.34, also known as the "Open Space Taxation Act." This change could offer significant benefits but would almost certainly face challenges, including opposition from property rights advocates and concerns about administrative complexity. In addition, an amendment to RCW 84.34 would involve significant coalition-building and statewide advocacy, activities that may be beyond the scope and capacity of King County staff. Nonetheless, it is an approach that is valuable for King County to be aware of as it may have long-term relevance in Washington State.

Buy-Protect-Sell

The Buy-Protect-Sell (BPS) model is a land transition strategy developed to safeguard farmland from development and ensure its continued use in agriculture. It is particularly effective in bridging the gap between retiring farmers and incoming producers who face barriers to land access. In contrast to the more traditional acquisition of conservation easements, which can involve long time horizons, BPS enables conservation entities to act quickly to protect high-value farmland from conversion.

How It Works:

1. **Buy:** A land trust, conservation entity, or government agency purchases farmland at risk of development. This step is crucial during ownership transitions, a time when farmland is most vulnerable to being sold for non-agricultural development.
2. **Protect:** The land is then permanently protected through an agricultural conservation easement, which reduces or removes its development potential and protects agricultural uses. This legal tool ensures the land remains in agricultural use and typically lowers its market value, making it more affordable for incoming farmers.
3. **Sell:** The protected land is sold to a new owner at a price reflecting its agricultural value. This is often done through a public Request for Proposals process, through which the new owner is required to demonstrate their intent and ability to keep the land in agricultural production.

While nonprofit conservation organizations have historically taken the lead in pursuing BPS projects, public agencies, including USDA NRCS's ACEP-ALE program, have begun to take note. For instance, in California, Sonoma County's Ag + Open Space Program is actively pursuing its first BPS project as part of a suite of tools to protect farmland and facilitate land access (For more information, see the Sonoma County Ag + Open Space case study, page 37).

Organizations like The Conservation Fund have also expanded the BPS model to include intentionally longer timelines that enable more support for new farmers. This may involve technical assistance, soil

health and infrastructure investments, and help navigating financing and conservation programs (see The Conservation Fund’s Farms Fund case study, page 41).

A common challenge to BPS projects is the risk of acquiring a piece of land and then facing difficulty finding a qualified buyer, and the need to manage the land in the interim. Some entities, like Sonoma County Ag + Open Space, recommend maintaining a roster of pre-qualified buyers who can be matched with potential land purchases. Other entities have opted to pursue a Request for Proposals (RFP) process to identify a qualified farmer once a parcel of land has been purchased. Jefferson Land Trust, based in Jefferson County, WA, recently published a detailed, step-by-step guide for navigating the “sell” portion of a BPS project through a clear, transparent, and equitable RFP process.¹³

Conservation organizations in Washington State have a unique resource to support pursuit of BPS projects. The Farmland Protection and Affordability Investment (FarmPAI) program, housed at the Washington State Housing Finance Commission, offers land trusts low-interest loans for the sole purpose of protecting at-risk farmland and facilitating land access opportunities for historically underserved farmers. FarmPAI is complimented by the Farmland Protection and Land Access (FPLA) program at the Washington State Conservation Commission, which funds the conservation easements associated with FarmPAI projects. Since its inception in 2022, FarmPAI and FPLA have enabled the permanent protection and generational transition of six farms representing over 700 acres.

Land-Linking and Landowner Transition Planning

Planning for farm or ranch transfer is an important way that retiring farmers make their land available to the next generation. Effective succession planning can enable a farmer to exit from farming in the way he or she wants to, have a stable retirement, and ensure his or her goals or hopes for their business and/or land will be met. For the incoming generation, succession planning creates a secure pathway for access to land and capital to start or continue a farm business. At a community level, succession planning helps retiring farmers transfer their land into the hands of other farmers, leading to a greater likelihood that the land will stay in production and not be lost to development.

Unlike in other professions, farmers’ livelihoods, lifestyles, and retirements are all tied to their businesses and land. Without adequate plans in place, an unexpected illness or accident can precipitate a forced sale of the business and/or farmland. This short-changes the next generation of producers, as that land may be lost to development forever. Nearly 40% of producers in King County are over the age of 65.¹⁴ In the absence of proactive succession and transfer planning, a significant percentage of the County’s remaining farmland is at risk of going out of production or being converted to other uses. Supporting succession and transfer planning is a key component of expanding land availability.

In 2020, AFT conducted a needs assessment related to succession planning in King County as part of the Working Farmland Partnership (WFP) (of which King County was a participant). At the time, AFT found:

Successful and/or long-standing succession planning service providers offer some, or all, of the following:

Workshops as a point of entry: Many programs leverage introductory training opportunities, whether at conferences or as stand-alone events, to bring farmers and landowners in the door as a precursor to

accessing further services or support. However, most individuals consulted for this report agreed that workshops on their own are not enough to get landowners engaged in the planning process. Additional support and resources are required to ensure that landowners follow through with developing a plan.

Incentives for participation and/or continued engagement: Different programs have leveraged various kinds of incentives to bring farmers to the table to learn about and engage in succession planning. Those incentives have included providing meals at trainings, giving away complimentary copies of workbooks, free consultations with attorneys, or credits toward future support services. For example, Land For Good's "Farm Succession School," cost farmers \$300 to participate; they received a rebate of \$200 if they used it to purchase additional succession planning services.

Deep bench of potential referrals: Even relatively simple succession planning processes require the input of specialists like attorneys and tax experts. Effective succession planning service providers will have the capacity to refer participants to external advisors and will equip participants with the tools and information to choose an advisor that matches their needs. In providing referrals, it is also important that service providers offer multiple options and maintain a sense of impartiality, so that participants do not feel pressured to work with one advisor over another.

Peer-to-peer learning: Many programs facilitate networking and relationship building among participating farmers providing the opportunity swap stories, share resources, and learn from one another.

Team approach: The complexity of the farm succession planning process often necessitates the involvement and support of multiple professionals, as a single advisor may not have all the information or expertise required. These processes work best when a group of advisors communicates and collaborates to provide holistic support to the farm family.

Facilitation and coaching: While professional advisors provide expert advice, farm families may also benefit from the assistance of a supportive coach or facilitator to help navigate the process. The facilitator guides the family's communication around topics such as visioning and goal setting, helps manage family dynamics, and addresses conflicts or roadblocks as they emerge. Attorneys and other professional advisors may not be trained to do this emotional work.

On-going case management: A team approach also works best when ongoing case management is provided to ensure that families make it through the process. A case manager tracks where families are in the process, checks in according to a regular schedule, provides additional referrals as needed, and supports coordination amongst the team.

In the years since this needs assessment was conducted, AFT has worked to implement a succession and transfer support program that exemplifies these best practices and has collaborated with the WFP to extend the program to farmers and landowners in King County. However, participation by landowners in King County has been low, pointing to a need for more targeted and strategic outreach.

Moreover, AFT's approach is time and labor intensive, requiring a high proportion of staff time to deeply support a small group of producers. Over the first year of the program, one staff person has been able to

support an ongoing case load of approximately 35 farm and ranch families distributed across Washington State. More investment is needed in this work to sufficiently address demand.

Land-linking, or farm-linking, is the process of connecting incoming farmers with available land. It can support transition planning for farmers and landowners who do not have an identified successor. In King County (and across much of Washington State), Washington Farmland Trust (WFT) provides a land-linking service through their Farm to Farmer program. However, a mismatch between supply and demand (more land seekers than public land listings) is a frequent problem for land-linking programs in the region.¹⁵ This is certainly true in King County, where, as of October 2025, the Farm to Farmer website listed only two available properties.¹⁶ While the Farm to Farmer team is actively engaged in efforts to recruit more King County landowners with underutilized land to their program,¹⁷ there may also be ways the County can leverage internal resources to encourage landowners to make their land available to new farmers.

The New Entry Sustainable Farming Project offers an interesting example. New Entry was founded in 1998 as a way to help immigrants and refugees with agricultural experience launch farm businesses in Massachusetts. One of New Entry's most innovative efforts was its Farmland Matching Program (now retired, due to lack of funding). Created in 2007, the program helped incubator graduates and other aspiring farmers secure affordable land. The matching program connected farm seekers with landowners, often those enrolled in Massachusetts' current-use taxation program (Chapter 61A), who wanted to keep their land in production but were no longer farming themselves. By leveraging the current-use taxation program as an incentive to drive landowner engagement, New Entry was able to recruit landowners who otherwise might not have been aware of land-linking programs or considered leasing their land to new farmers (for more information about this program, see the case study on page 49). Across Washington State, enrollment in current-use taxation programs has been on the decline. Between 2011 and 2015, King County had one of the steepest declines in acres enrolled, with a drop of 6.7%.¹⁸ A model like New Entry's could be replicated in King County through partnership between the Farmland Preservation Program and the County Assessor's Office in order to bring more acreage back into current-use taxation.

Public Lands Leasing

Leasing publicly owned land offers another important pathway to increasing the supply of farmland readily available and accessible to YBFRs. Unlike other strategies discussed in this report, public lands leasing is hardly a novel concept. Across the western U.S., public lands are leased to ranchers through a system of grazing leases and permits. For example, the Bureau of Land Management leases approximately 155 million acres through 18,000 leases¹⁹, while the U.S. Forest Service manages around 6,250 grazing leases on 95 million acres of rangeland.²⁰ At the state level, the Washington Department of Natural Resources leases approximately 627,000 acres of state trust lands for crop production and grazing purposes.²¹ However, against this backdrop, the strategic use of public lands leasing to facilitate land access for YBFRs is a newer phenomenon, and one that is gaining traction.

As noted elsewhere, King County currently makes about 200 acres of farmland available to over 60 small farm businesses through its Farmland Leasing Program (average of 3 acres per lease). This is primarily

done through short-term (2-5 year) leases. However, as a steward of 205 parks and 32,000 acres of open space, King County could be doing significantly more.²² In contrast to King County's Farmland Leasing Program, Boulder County, Colorado, owns approximately 26,000 acres of agricultural land, which it makes available through 123 leases to 55 different agricultural producers (average of 200 acres per lease). (For more information about Boulder County's farmland leasing program, see the case study on 58).

Public lands leasing has the potential to support both individual and collective land tenure, either by leasing adjacent parcels to multiple farmers and facilitating use of shared infrastructure (as is the case with some of King County's holdings) or by leasing to a business or entity that has been structured to enable collective land tenure.

“There is no affordable land.”

- Puget Sound area farmer

Reducing the Cost of Acquiring Land

As noted elsewhere, the rapidly escalating cost of land is a primary contributing factor in farmers’ struggles to access land. Unfortunately, land access practitioners have limited ability to affect the conditions of the real estate market or change the way land is zoned and valued. However, two real estate tools, conservation easements and restrictive covenants, can help reduce purchase prices and ensure affordability into the future.

Easement Affordability Provisions

Conservation easements are property interests held by qualified entities to restrict certain activities and uses of the land. They are considered negative easements, which, though normally disallowed in common law, have been statutorily enabled in each state. It is also common for conservation easement deeds to include affirmative covenants in the body of the document that require a certain action take place. Landowners voluntarily place conservation easements on their property to protect important natural and cultural resources. Agricultural conservation easements are a type of conservation easement designed to keep land available for farming and ranching.

The “Agricultural Easement Affordability Analysis” report, prepared for the Washington State Conservation Commission’s Office of Farmland Preservation (OFP) in 2024, examines legal tools designed to improve farmland affordability and access for farmers. The report focuses on five mechanisms that can be incorporated into conservation easements or similar instruments: home size restrictions, requirements to sell only to qualified farmers, resale price limitations, ROFRs, and options to purchase at agricultural value (OPAV). These tools aim to ensure that farmland remains in agricultural use and accessible to working farmers, rather than being priced out by estate buyers or speculative investors. Drawing on practitioner experiences in eastern states like Vermont, Maine, and New York, the report finds that these mechanisms have been effective in supporting farmland affordability and long-term agricultural viability, though their success varies depending on local market conditions and how the tools are implemented. Reports of impact on property valuations are largely anecdotal; more research is needed to understand the impact to property resale values at a landscape scale. The report concludes that, from a legal standpoint, three of the five mechanisms—home size restrictions, qualified farmer requirements, and ROFRs—are likely valid under Washington law.²³

The mechanisms’ validity under Washington law is related to whether they are considered restraints on alienation. A direct restraint on alienation is a clause in a real estate document that attempts to prevent a property owner from selling or transferring their property. These restrictions are often considered void because they are contrary to public policy, which favors the free transfer of property. However, certain reasonable restrictions that serve a policy purpose and are limited in time or scope may be upheld by courts.

Home-Size Restriction

This provision limits the size of residential structures on protected farmland. The goal is to discourage

estate-style development and ensure that the land remains focused on agricultural use. For example, King County's Farmland Preservation Program has been including a home-size restriction in easements for a number of years; the restriction limits the primary residence to 2,955 square feet.

The home-size restriction is considered an indirect restraint on alienation, which means it limits how the property can be used rather than who can own it. Under Washington law, such indirect restraints are generally valid if they have a rational justification. The restriction aligns with the purpose of Washington's conservation easement statutes, which allow for limitations on the future use of land and improvements. According to the OFP report, courts are likely to uphold this provision because it directly supports the conservation goals of maintaining land for agricultural purposes.

The home size restriction increases affordability by limiting the size of residential buildings on farmland (e.g., capping the main house at 2,955 square feet). This provision discourages buyers who are interested in building large estate homes or luxury residences. It reduces the appeal of the property to non-farming buyers who might otherwise drive-up prices based on residential or recreational value rather than agricultural productivity. This helps keep the land's market value more closely aligned with its agricultural use, making it more financially accessible to working farmers.

In some cases, appraisers have found that home-size restrictions reduce the land's value, which in turn lowers the purchase price for future buyers. Over time, implementation of this provision at scale could help maintain a pool of farmland that is priced within reach of new and beginning farmers.

Requirement to Sell to a Qualified Farmer

This provision requires that any future sale of the protected property be made only to a "qualified farmer," and the intent is to ensure that farmland remains in the hands of those who will actively farm it. A "qualified farmer" is typically defined as someone who earns a majority of their income from farming or has a viable farm business plan. However, land trusts and other easement holders can craft a definition of "qualified farmer" to align with organizational goals related to facilitating land access.

This is a direct restraint on alienation, as it limits who can buy the property. However, it is likely valid under Washington law because it serves a legitimate purpose—furthering conservation by ensuring the land is used for its intended agricultural purpose. Courts apply a reasonableness test to such restraints, weighing the utility of the restriction against any potential harm. According to the OFP report, since the pool of potential buyers (qualified farmers) still includes most likely purchasers of agricultural land, and the restriction supports public policy goals, it is likely to be upheld—especially if it includes a reasonable duration or exceptions.

This provision supports affordability because it effectively removes non-farming buyers from the market, reducing competition from those who might be willing to pay a premium for rural lifestyle or investment purposes. By narrowing the buyer pool to those who are likely to use the land for its intended agricultural purpose, it helps keep prices more reflective of agricultural value rather than speculative or estate-driven value.

Practitioners report that this requirement can significantly reduce the land’s market value, especially in areas where estate or recreational buyers are active. It also supports long-term agricultural use, which aligns with public investment in conservation easements.

Right of First Refusal (ROFR)

A prior section of this report discussed how ROFRs can be embedded in current-use taxation programs and applied across a wide geography; ROFRs can also be embedded in agricultural conservation easements. As noted above, a ROFR gives a designated party (such as a local government or land trust) the first opportunity to purchase a property if the owner decides to sell. ROFR provisions are often structured so that the holder of the ROFR can match the terms of a third-party offer, typically at a discounted price (e.g., 90% of the offer).

Although a ROFR is a direct restraint on alienation, Washington courts treat it as a contractual right rather than a property interest, which means it is not subject to the rule against perpetuities. Courts evaluate its validity based on reasonableness. According to the OFP report, a ROFR with a limited term (e.g., 10 years) and clear procedures is likely to be upheld. It indirectly supports conservation by prioritizing agricultural buyers and maintaining the land’s intended use. Further, whereas a traditional purchase option gives the holder the power to compel a sale despite an unwilling landowner, ROFRs are more often structured to restrict the sale only *if* a landowner decides to sell. This adds to the reasonability of a ROFR—it only minimally impacts a property’s transferability, while purchase options have greater power over transferability.

A ROFR supports affordability by giving a land trust or public agency the opportunity to purchase the land before it is sold to a third party, often at a discounted rate (e.g., 90% of the offered price). This tool allows conservation organizations to intervene in sales that might otherwise result in the land being transferred to non-farming or speculative buyers. By exercising the ROFR, the land trust can then resell the land to a qualified farmer at a price aligned with agricultural value.

In Washington, ROFR provisions have been appraised as adding about 10% to the value of the conservation easement, which helps reduce the land’s post-easement market value. Because the ROFR is typically time-limited (e.g., 10 years), it balances enforceability with effectiveness in maintaining affordability during key transition periods.

The OFP report identifies that resale price limitations and OPAVs may face legal challenges unless they are carefully drafted or supported by new legislation. To address this, the report recommends updating Washington’s conservation easement laws and potentially adopting a new “affordability covenant enabling act” to provide legal clarity and protection for these tools. As of November 2025, this work has not yet progressed. Stakeholders, including funders and agricultural lenders, generally support the use of these mechanisms but emphasize the importance of clear, consistent definitions—especially for terms like “qualified farmer”—to ensure equitable access. The report also identifies future research opportunities, such as analyzing the impact of these tools on land values, exploring shared equity models from the affordable housing sector, and investigating alternative land tenure strategies like ground leases and public ownership.

Retroactive Easement Provisions

While the easement provisions identified above are typically included in the easement at the time the easement is written and recorded, there is precedent for the retroactive application of easement affordability provisions to solidify the long-term affordability of land that has already been protected. Vermont Land Trust (VLT), which regularly includes the OPAV provision in their easement, has purchased between 30 and 40 retroactive OPAVs, often when the owner of an already eased property expresses a desire or plan to sell their land (For more information, see the case study on Vermont Land Trust's Retroactive OPAVs, page 54). The addition of an OPAV to the easement at the point of land transition can strengthen affordability for the incoming buyer. While currently OPAVs may not be legally valid in Washington State, a similar retroactive approach could be designed and implemented to add other affordability provisions to existing easements, in order to increase the likelihood that protected agricultural lands transfer to YBFRs and stay in production. This would require identifying a funding source to compensate landowners for the value of the new provisions and developing a process for prioritizing which easements to amend.

Restrictive Covenants

A covenant is a restriction (or obligation) on the use of land by someone who does not own the land; it is an agreement binding current owners, users, and future successors of the land. Covenants can be used to accomplish many of the same goals as the conservation easement provisions above: limit resale price, require resale to a qualified farmer, and require active agricultural production.

A deed restriction is a type of restrictive covenant. Restrictive covenants are more similar to contracts than to property interests. Covenants must be in writing, bind successors, have privity (courts have relaxed this requirement; privity is only necessary if financial damages are sought in enforcement), meet notice requirements (i.e. recorded in land records or a sign on the property), and impact the use of the land. Often, this impact on the land must both burden and benefit some parcel of land (e.g. a right of way in favor of a neighboring parcel), but if the covenant is held by a government entity or nonprofit, its benefit is considered "in gross" and does not need to be tied to a specific parcel of land. Similarly, conservation easements are considered to offer benefits "in gross".

An easement-holding entity can accept or purchase a conservation easement but may not want to commit to permanent enforcement of certain terms requested by the landowner, such as specific stewardship requirements. It can record the easement without the additional obligation and record the covenant separately to address the more innovative or high-obligation terms. This also enables the entity to adjust the covenant language and terms over time to respond to changed needs, as the standards for modifications are lower than they are for conservation easements. Further, it is not necessary for an entity to hold or enforce the covenant. In general, covenants can be entered into by neighbors who agree to the commitment, or another entity could be named as the enforcer. While this offers a greater variety of options, it also requires the enforcing party to be willing and able to enforce if a situation arises.

Table 1: Comparing Conservation Easements and Restrictive Covenants

	Restrictive Covenant	Conservation Easement
Does it run with the land?	Yes, unless otherwise stated in instrument.	Yes. Easements can be assigned to other entities but limited to qualified conservation organizations and government entities.
Permanence	State law dependent. Periodic re-records may be necessary or a best practice to ensure the restriction appears in title searches. If a term is stated, the restriction may automatically renew unless action is taken.	Usually permanent, unless otherwise specified.
Adaptability	May include provisions enabling modification with approval requirements. All parties can agree to release the covenant. Courts give less deference to restrictive covenants than conservation easements, making them easier to modify or extinguish.	Greater deference is given by courts to keep the easement unchanged.
Enforcement	Can only be enforced by parties to the agreement (private agreements) or a named party. Seldom include monitoring and stewardship. More easily ignored without someone willing to enforce. No access right to monitor the property unless explicitly included.	Can only be enforced by named easement holder(s). Holders have articulated enforcement rights. This means they have a responsibility to steward and monitor for compliance and are given limited access rights for these purposes. As a result, they need to sign the instrument in addition to the landowner. Courts tend to err on the side of enforcing restrictions.
Impact on land value	Variable, depending on the terms of the covenant. There are no tax incentives for “donating” a restrictive covenant.	Often requires subordination to mortgages and some other title exceptions. May be eligible for income tax incentives for donating all or part of value to a qualified public or non-profit entity.
Form	May be in separate document recorded in land records or included within the conveyance instrument, such as a property deed.	Standalone document recorded in land records.

Increasingly, conservation entities around the country have begun deploying restrictive covenants to further their goals related to land access and affordability. These initiatives are young, and in many cases, their impacts on resale price and affordability are as yet unproven.

Jefferson Land Trust, Washington

In June 2025, Jefferson Land Trust (JLT) released a sample restrictive covenant that they have used to

ensure that a specific piece of farmland remains both actively farmed and affordable for future generations of farmers.²⁴ The sample covenant caps the resale price to limit how much the property can increase in value over time. Specifically, the resale price can only increase by 1.5% per year (non-compounded), plus approved costs for certain capital improvements (like barns or irrigation systems), and typical selling expenses. This is meant to prevent speculative price inflation and keep the land affordable for farmers.

The covenant requires that the land be used for agricultural purposes, and the farmer must generate enough income to cover basic operating costs and maintain eligibility for agricultural tax benefits. JLT retains a right of first refusal which helps ensure the land stays in farmers' hands. The covenant lasts for 99 years, with an option to extend for another 99 years, and includes enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance. Overall, it protects the land from being converted to non-farm uses or priced out of reach, preserving both its agricultural use and affordability over the long term. JLT's covenant achieves many of the same goals as a resale price limitation and an OPAV, while circumventing concerns about legal validity.

Sonoma County Ag + Open Space Program, California

Sonoma County Ag + Open Space uses an "affirmative agricultural covenant," a tool to ensure continued agricultural use on properties at risk of being converted to non-agricultural open space. Also referred to as a mandatory ag use or ag conservation covenant, Sonoma is piloting the covenant both to preserve farmland and to explore its potential to reduce land prices, particularly for small farms.

Early data suggests that the covenant's effect on land values varies depending on the type of agricultural use. For example, properties with high per-acre income (like organic dairies or specialty crops) see less value reduction, and the presence of a Williamson Act contract (California's current-use taxation program) can nullify the covenant's impact altogether. Currently, two projects—one on a large ranch and another on a small farm—are moving forward with this tool, while others have faced challenges related to compensation or timing.²⁵

In parallel, the agency is researching a long-term affordability tool modeled after housing land trusts, which would restrict resale prices to the original sale price plus improvements and a capped rate of appreciation. While there is strong support for mechanisms that help farmers access land affordably, feedback has highlighted concerns about the covenant's enforceability and rigidity. Some stakeholders have expressed discomfort with requirements like management plans or production thresholds, citing the need for flexibility and more collaborative language. Although there is no formal policy yet, Sonoma County Ag + Open Space is developing a publicly shareable sample covenant, which will soon be available on their Buy-Protect-Sell pilot program webpage.²⁶ (For more information about Sonoma County Ag + Open Space, see the case study on page 37).

Peconic Land Trust, New York

In response to growing concerns about New York's farmland being repurposed as rural estates (Madonna famously purchased conserved land and converted it into a large lawn), Peconic Land Trust has begun incorporating affordable and affirmative farming covenants to ensure that preserved farmland remains actively used for food production. Key requirements include a mandate that at least 80% of the land be

dedicated to food production, with specific prohibitions on equestrian uses, nurseries, and vineyards. Agricultural production is not optional—it is a condition of ownership. Additionally, practices that remove topsoil, such as sod harvesting, are generally restricted, especially under enhanced easements.

To maintain affordability and accessibility for working farmers, resale values are capped using a formula that ties resale prices to Area Median Income (AMI) or the Consumer Price Index (CPI), with annual increases not to exceed 3.5%, plus the value of approved improvements. Sales are restricted to qualified farmers, and the land trust serves as the buyer of last resort to prevent speculative purchases. To preserve the rural character of these landscapes, residential development is tightly controlled, with a proposed maximum house size of 3,500 square feet—an effort to prevent scenarios like the construction of a 15,000-square-foot home that disrupted the visual integrity of a historic farm belt.²⁷

While Peconic Land Trust has implemented these covenants on a number of properties, none have yet come up for resale, so the long-term impact on affordability remains to be seen.

Farm Connect and Missoula County, Montana

Farm Connect Montana is partnering with Missoula County to pilot a new conservation initiative aimed at protecting smaller agricultural parcels—typically 100 acres or less—through a legal tool they are calling a “conservation servitude.”²⁸ This voluntary agreement, essentially a deed restriction, allows landowners to safeguard their farmland for future generations by entering into a binding arrangement with both Missoula County and Farm Connect. The servitudes will require agreement from all named parties, expected to be the landowner, Farm Connect, and the County Commissioners, for any modifications. These agreements can be perpetual or time-limited, and while they do not offer tax incentives or other compensation, they provide a flexible and enforceable way to prevent development and maintain agricultural use, even as land changes hands.

Although servitudes have historically been used in Montana for environmental protections for critical areas like wetlands, this marks the first time they are being applied to agricultural land. The program addresses a critical gap: many land trusts in the region lack the capacity to steward small parcels, leaving small-acreage landowners without viable conservation options. Farm Connect’s role will include landowner outreach, recruitment, and some monitoring, while the County will lead enforcement—removing legal liability from Farm Connect. As of July 2025, the program was still in development.²⁹

“Land Trusts want to increase land access, but often the barriers require so much of the farmer. To access [land] you have to be ready, but we have been systematically excluded from the opportunity of being ready.”

– Puget Sound area farmer

Improving Access to Capital to Acquire Farmland

It is widely documented that along with access to land, access to capital is one of the most significant challenges farmers face (particularly beginning farmers, immigrants, and others from historically underserved communities). Immigrant farmers face additional barriers as they often lack the formal documentation required for loans or grants. Language barriers and limited formal education further hinder access to institutional support, while cultural disconnects in farming knowledge and practices make it difficult to meet standardized application requirements. Distrust of government agencies, stemming from immigration experiences and historical exclusion, can exacerbate these challenges.³⁰ While federal and private lending institutions offer various programs that prioritize beginning farmers, structural and systemic barriers continue to limit equitable access.

AFT inventoried capital access programs in King County and across the country and reviewed recent academic literature to shed light on the specific barriers that farmers face in pursuing various pathways to capital access. Notably, while ample literature exists documenting YBFRs’ experiences with USDA’s Farm Services Agency (FSA) loans, less research has been conducted exploring barriers and challenges with other capital access pathways, particularly with venture capital and impact investment programs.

Capital Access Programs in King County

Farm Service Agency

USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA) provides various types of loans to farmers and ranchers to help them buy and finance their farms. These include direct loans provided directly by the FSA and guaranteed loans issued by commercial lenders and backed by the FSA. Loan types cover operating expenses (like seed, feed, and fuel), and farm ownership (buying land or equipment), with programs also available for beginning farmers, minority farmers, and disaster relief.³¹

FSA’s Farm Ownership Loans help farmers and ranchers purchase, develop, or expand their agricultural operations. These loans are available to U.S. citizens or permanent residents who have sufficient education, training, or experience in managing a farm, and demonstrate an ability to repay the loan. Specific eligibility requirements may vary depending on the type of ownership loan.

FSA plays a critical role in financing land purchases for young and beginning farmers. Its "Beginning Farmer" direct and guaranteed loan programs provide access to land and capital to meet the particular credit needs of farmers and ranchers in their first 10 years of operation. Operating loans help beginners pay normal operating or family living expenses as well as diversify their operations and/or develop new marketing opportunities, among other priorities. FSA also has a microloan program to help beginning farmers and ranchers during their start-up years. FSA’s Beginning Farmer Loan Program offers loans up to

\$600,000, and as of September 2025, FSA Direct Farm Ownership Loans had a below market interest rate of 5.875%.

FSA is considered a “lender of last resort” because it makes direct farm ownership and operating loans to family farms that are unable to obtain credit elsewhere. As a result, FSA loans are widely used by beginning farmers and ranchers. In 2024, FSA loaned more than \$3 billion to beginners—over \$35.7 million in Washington State.³² Yet many farmers struggle to access FSA’s offerings. FSA’s eligibility requirements include demonstrating inability to secure credit elsewhere, having farming experience, and meeting labor requirements—criteria that exclude many part-time or off-farm income-reliant farmers. The requirement for on-farm labor restricts access for farmers who rely on off-farm income, creating a cycle of dependency on FSA loans.

Application processes are reported to be extensive and cumbersome. Even microloans require substantial documentation and staff time, deterring applicants with limited resources.³³ FSA loan allocations vary widely by county, often based on historical usage rather than current need, creating inequitable access. And statutory caps on FSA loans have not kept pace with farmland inflation, limiting their utility in high-cost regions like King County.³⁴ FSA also does not do pre-qualifications; FSA loans require a signed purchase agreement up front, which not only does not align with the speed of the market (sellers must be patient and willing), but also places disproportionate burden on farmers from marginalized groups who may not have pre-existing relationships with farmland owners. Finally, FSA loans do not dissolve with bankruptcy. Farmers are required to repay the loan irrespective of their ability to continue farming. The fact that failure can have long-term consequences may discourage applicants from starting the process.³⁵

Farm Credit

Farm Credit is a nationwide network of customer-owned cooperatives that supports over 600,000 farmers, ranchers, farmer co-ops, agribusinesses, and rural communities with financial services in all 50 states and Puerto Rico. Created by Congress in 1916, it raises funds by selling securities on the money markets, allowing it to offer a range of loans for agricultural production, real estate, and agribusiness development.³⁶

In Washington State and King County, the primary private lender serving agricultural businesses is AgWest, which operates the AgVision program to provide real estate and operating loans to new and beginning farmers. AgVision serves producers who are 35 years of age or younger, have 10 years or less of agricultural experience, and have an annual gross income of less than \$350,000.

Aggie Bonds

The Aggie Bonds program is a federally authorized initiative designed to help beginning farmers access affordable financing for farmland and agricultural equipment. Launched in 1980 and administered at the state level, Aggie Bonds work by allowing private lenders to offer lower interest rates on loans to eligible farmers. This is achieved through the issuance of tax-exempt bonds, which reduce the lender’s federal tax liability on the interest earned from the loan. In turn, lenders can pass those savings on to farmers in

the form of reduced interest rates, making it easier for new and small-scale producers to afford land and capital investments.³⁷

Aggie Bonds differ from traditional commercial loans in several key ways. First, they are specifically targeted at beginning farmers, generally defined as those with less than 10 years of farming experience and limited ownership of agricultural land. Second, the program is collaborative, involving state agencies, private lenders, and federal tax incentives. Unlike commercial lenders, who may prioritize borrowers with strong credit histories and substantial collateral, Aggie Bonds are designed to support those who might not meet conventional lending criteria but demonstrate a viable farm business plan. In Washington State, Aggie Bonds are administered through the Housing Finance Commission's Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program and Ag West. The program offers loans up to \$649,000 for land purchases and can be combined with other programs. Aggie Bond loans do not automatically dissolve upon bankruptcy; their status depends on several factors, including what type of bankruptcy is filed and whether the loan is considered secured or unsecured.

Commercial Banks

Commercial banks also provide loans to beginning farmers. While FSA may guarantee these loans, private lenders generally require a solid credit history and substantial collateral. Thus, they present distinct challenges for farmers seeking capital. Private banks often favor large-scale, commodity-based farms due to perceived lower risk and standardized underwriting criteria. Community banks, which are more attuned to local markets and direct-to-consumer (DTC) agriculture, are declining in number and market share. Farmers without long-standing relationships with lenders tend to face higher interest rates and stricter collateral requirements.³⁸

Further, consolidation across the banking industry has reduced access to small loans and personalized service, particularly in rural areas. Farms engaged in local food systems often lack access to subsidies and crop insurance, both of which lenders often seek to use as collateral for loans. Research shows that community bank deposits are positively correlated with DTC sales, highlighting the importance of local knowledge and relationships in lending decisions. However, the rapid consolidation of the banking industry threatens this model, with larger banks offering fewer loans to small farms and relying on standardized criteria that disadvantage non-traditional operations.³⁹

Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs)

Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs) are specialized financial institutions that provide credit and financial services to underserved markets and populations. Their mission-driven approach focuses on fostering economic opportunity and revitalizing communities, particularly in rural areas, low-income neighborhoods, and among historically marginalized groups. CDFIs often support small businesses, affordable housing, and community facilities, and in the agricultural sector, they can play a role in helping farmers, especially beginning, and historically underserved producers, access capital that traditional lenders may not offer.

Unlike commercial lenders, CDFIs prioritize social impact over profit. While commercial banks typically assess loan applications based on strict credit scores, collateral, and financial history, CDFIs are more flexible and willing to work with borrowers who may not meet conventional criteria. They often provide

technical assistance, financial education, and personalized support to help borrowers succeed. This makes them particularly valuable in farmland acquisition, where farmers may face barriers such as lack of credit history, limited equity, or nontraditional business models.

Farmers in King County have several options for financing through CDFIs. Business Impact Northwest (BINW) operates both an advising side and a financing side, which often work together to help businesses compile their financial documents, assess whether a loan will help them grow, and apply for financing if that is determined to be an appropriate next step. They can loan up to \$1.5 million for commercial real estate purchases. BINW can be more flexible on requirements like collateral and credit than a traditional commercial lender, and they are working on a loan option for undocumented borrowers. However, their interest rates tend to be higher to compensate for taking on riskier clients.⁴⁰

Craft3 works with businesses and nonprofits in Oregon and Washington, with a special focus on nonprofits and entrepreneurs representing or working with underserved communities. Loan amounts extend to \$4 million but their interest rates are significantly higher than FSA or other commercial mortgage rates. Their website notes that entrepreneurs of color may qualify for lower rates and other special loan terms.⁴¹

Venture Capital and Impact Investment

In recent years, a growing number of venture capital and impact investment firms have turned their attention to agriculture, particularly in supporting farmers with land access and infrastructure financing. Firms like Dirt Capital Partners, Foodshed Capital, Mad Capital, Iroquois Valley REIT, and Steward are leading this shift by offering innovative financial models that prioritize sustainability, equity, and long-term viability over short-term profit. These organizations recognize that traditional lending often fails to meet the needs of small-scale, regenerative, and beginning farmers, especially those without generational wealth or strong credit histories.

By offering flexible capital structures such as lease-to-own arrangements, revenue-based financing, and low-interest loans, these firms help farmers acquire land, build infrastructure, and grow their operations without the burdens of conventional debt. For example, Dirt Capital Partners works directly with farmers to purchase farmland and lease it back with the option to buy, helping producers overcome upfront capital barriers. Foodshed Capital, a nonprofit lender, provides zero-interest loans to farmers committed to sustainable practices. Steward uses a crowdfunding model to connect individual investors with regenerative farm projects, enabling farmers to access capital while also building community support.

While these lenders' values-based approaches make them a promising complement to federal, state, and private options, they bring limitations as well. Similar to CDFIs, impact investment driven loans tend to be more expensive, and several of the firms listed (Mad Capital, Iroquois Valley REIT) tend to focus on much larger operations than those represented by YBFRs. They are also untested in King County. Dirt Capital recently completed a project in Skagit County in partnership with a participant at Viva Farms' farm incubator.⁴² Steward has supported several projects in Washington State, including several projects to finance land acquisition, but none in King County.⁴³

Resources for Native-Owned Farms

Native and Tribal farmers in King County have access to unique funding pathways. The Northwest Native Chamber of Commerce's Strategic Asset Acquisition Program (SAAP), offered in partnership with the Washington State Department of Commerce, is a competitive grant program providing up to \$100,000 to acquire land or equipment or invest in infrastructure.⁴⁴ Akiptan is a Native American CDFI that provides loans and technical assistance to agricultural producers "across Indian country."⁴⁵ Their Land Mortgage & Down Payment Assistance program offers loans up to \$250,000.

Farm Purchase and Protection Incentives

AFT's research into Land Access Policy Incentives (LAPIs) categorizes programs that help young and beginning farmers buy and protect land as Farm Purchase and Protection Incentives (FPPIs).

The most established FPPI programs are in Delaware and Maryland. They lend money at 0% interest to young and beginning farmers to purchase farmland and protect it with an agricultural conservation easement. For example, Maryland's "Next Gen" program describes itself as a fast-moving agricultural conservation easement option purchase program.⁴⁶ The Maryland Agricultural & Resource Based-Industry Development Corporation (MARBIDCO), a state economic development authority, offers down-payment assistance to qualified first time farm buyers and gives them several years to sell an agricultural conservation easement to a county or state PACE program. Once the easement is sold, the farmer repays MARBIDCO, plus a modest administrative fee. If they cannot sell an easement within the timeframe, the option is exercised, and the easement assigned to a county program or private land trust. MARBIDCO also has a Small Acreage Next Gen (SANG) Program to help qualified YBFRs purchase small properties between ten and 49 acres which are ineligible for the original Next Gen program.

Research on Delaware and Maryland's FPPI programs found that the programs mostly help young beginning farmers age 35 or younger (78%) who were raised on a farm (64%) although over a third did not grow up in a farming family (36%). A substantial majority used the FPPI to buy land for the first time (84%), most often from an unrelated party (72%).

Most of the farms were located in areas with substantial non-farm development pressure. The majority (82%) either had residential neighbors and/or were in areas classified as urban or large rural towns. Nearly all the farms were contiguous with other farms (93%) but nearly half were also next to land that already was developed into residences (48%).

In contrast to the Beginning Farmer Tax Credits (BFTCs) discussed earlier, FPPIs serve diverse farm types and scales. Farms were as small as 20 and as large as 1,900 acres and quite diversified. Most of the properties included infrastructure like a house, barn, fencing, equipment shed, and/or milking parlor. First-generation farmers were more likely to sell into direct or intermediated local food markets than generational farmers (56% versus 29%) who were more likely to sell into commodity markets.

Nearly all respondents reported that the FPPI made it possible for them to buy farmland and contributed to their success. Many went on to re-invest in their farm businesses after buying the farm. Still, about half reported that they continued to face land access challenges. Their acreage goals varied widely based on the type of operation, which ranged in Maryland from 25 to 2,000 acres and from 50 to 4,000 acres in

Delaware. Overall, AFT's findings suggest that Maryland and Delaware's FPPIs are an effective approach that dovetails farmland access with farmland protection and facilitates farm ownership for YBFRs. While developing a FPPI program of this kind would take time and designated funding, it may be worth considering for King County.

“I have been leaning on cooperative models and started a collective land ownership discussion with other farmers. The 6 to 8 farmers don’t qualify alone for a farm loan; it takes all of them to put a proposal together, which is a burden in figuring out that intimacy level, exit plans, etc. It is . . . a lot of extra work.”

- Puget Sound area farmer

Identifying Collective and Community Farmland Tenure Models

In recent years, interest has been building in collective or community farmland tenure models, as evidenced by publications such as The Greenhorns’ “Cooperative Farming: Frameworks for Farming Together”⁴⁷ and Land For Good’s “Accessing Farmland Together: A Decision Tool for Farmers”,⁴⁸ and by developments like Washington Farmland Trust’s recent hiring of a Farmer Collectives Manager to join their Farm to Farmer team and support groups of farmers in accessing land. Not surprisingly, there is no standard definition of “collective” or “community” land tenure models; rather the terms are a loose categorization of emergent land access pathways that circumvent traditional economic structures and/or support groups of farmers to access land together.

AFT has found that collective tenure models generally fall into one of three categories (see Fig. 1). In the first, farmers self-organize into a group business structure (e.g. a cooperative association) and, as the group business structure, lease or purchase land. In the second, farmers or community members organize an umbrella entity (e.g. a community land trust) which leases or purchases land and then subleases to individual farm businesses. In the third category, an umbrella entity (usually a nonprofit) leases or purchases land, then facilitates access to land through programming for its staff, volunteers, and clients. Critically, once a group forms, it may pursue land tenure through fairly conventional lease or purchase pathways.

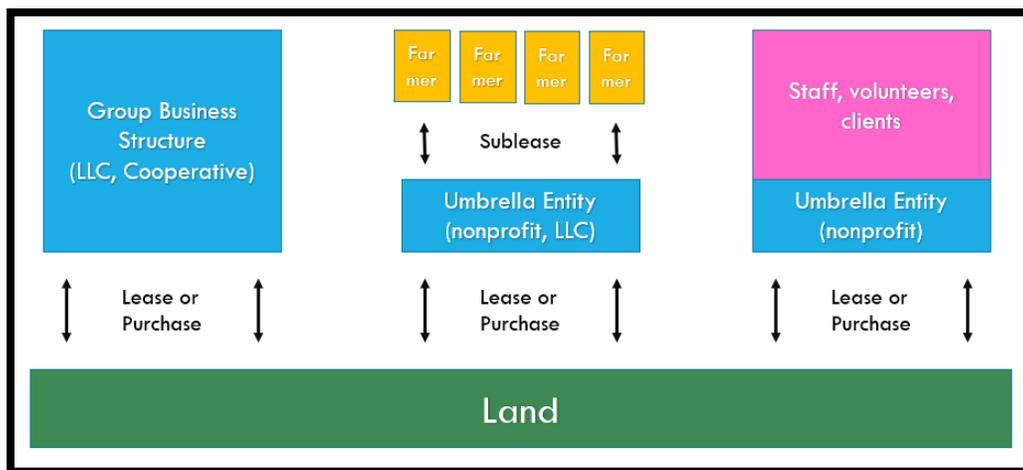


Figure 1: Three ways to structure collective tenure

A group’s goals, values, and priorities will dictate the business or entity structure the group decides to organize into. That business or entity structure may be just as, if not more, important than the group’s land access pathway. In other words, collective land tenure models depend heavily on the types of businesses or entities that seek to access land. As a result, collective tenure projects may principally require technical assistance in the formation of their group or structure (e.g. a nonprofit or worker’s

cooperative) before land access can even be considered, and land access practitioners may be ill equipped to advise on these matters.

Cooperatives

Washington State provides a robust legal framework for the formation and operation of cooperative entities. Under RCW 23.86, any number of individuals, starting with just one, may form a cooperative association to conduct any lawful business for mutual benefit. The statute explicitly includes agricultural businesses, defining "agricultural association" broadly to encompass activities related to the marketing, processing, and distribution of agricultural products, as well as the supply of equipment and financing for these activities. This definition includes a wide range of products such as horticultural, dairy, livestock, poultry, and forestry goods.

Cooperative associations in Washington have a wide powers. They can acquire and manage property, enter into contracts, borrow funds, and issue capital stock or equity certificates if desired. They also can allocate earnings and losses, establish reserves, and elect officers with defined compensation. The formation process requires filing articles of incorporation with the Secretary of State, which must outline the structure of member rights—whether equal or unequal—and the rules for determining those rights. These articles also specify the initial board of directors and voting procedures. Cooperatives must file annual reports with basic identifying information and may be subject to renewal fees.

In addition to traditional cooperatives, Washington has introduced Limited Cooperative Associations (LCAs), a newer entity type that became effective in 2019. LCAs are modeled after the Uniform Limited Cooperative Associations Act and are designed to balance traditional cooperative principles with the need for increased capital. Unlike traditional cooperatives, LCAs allow for investor-members who do not use the cooperative's services. This structure enables greater financial flexibility but introduces the risk of diluting the cooperative's patron-focused mission. To mitigate this, Washington's statute places restrictions on the role of investor-members to ensure that patron-members retain control and that the cooperative remains aligned with its original purpose.⁴⁹

As an approach to an entity structure that would enable collective land tenure, cooperatives offer a number of benefits. Cooperatives tend to favor stability over profit and have lower failure rates because more people are involved. Decision making is democratic; each member has a vote, and votes are not proportional to shares held. Cooperatives also tend to receive better tax incentives than corporations. At the same time, there tend to be more up-front administrative requirements to starting a cooperative (as opposed to an LLC), and some cooperatives have encountered barriers to financing.

While it may be simplest at the start for a group of farmers to form a classic multi-member LLC or corporation as a way to pool resources and attain land access, this approach erodes some of the personal decision-making and autonomy crucial to individual businesses. An LLC or corporation would own all of the assets and income rather than individuals, making it more challenging for farmers to enter and exit over time. Cooperatives may require more up-front effort and maintenance, but they provide greater autonomy and potential for individual equity. Cooperative formation is not a land access pathway in and of itself; however the formation of a cooperative may be a prerequisite step to enabling a group of farmers to access land together.

Community Land Trusts

When applied to farmland, the Community Land Trust (CLT) model offers a powerful tool for preserving agricultural land, supporting farmers, and promoting long-term stewardship. Originally developed in the U.S. civil rights movement of the 1960s, the CLT model was first implemented by New Communities, Inc. in Georgia, which sought to secure land for Black farmers and create a cooperative farming community. The model has since evolved and expanded, and with leadership from Massachusetts-based Equity Trust, its application to farmland has gained traction as a response to rising land prices, development pressure, and generational turnover in agriculture.

In a farmland CLT, a nonprofit organization acquires and holds title to agricultural land in perpetuity, removing it from the speculative market. The lease agreements used by farmland CLTs are central to their success. These are typically 99-year ground leases that separate ownership of the land from ownership of the infrastructure (like barns, greenhouses, or homes), which the farmer may own. The lease includes provisions that ensure the land remains in agricultural use, often with requirements for sustainable or regenerative practices, and sometimes includes conservation easements. Importantly, resale formulas or affordability restrictions may be built into the lease to prevent speculative resale and keep the land accessible to future farmers. Leases are designed to be inheritable and transferable, allowing farmers to build equity through ownership of the buildings and infrastructure, and to plan for succession. Some CLTs also offer technical assistance, financing support, or cooperative marketing, further strengthening the viability of the farms they steward.

CLTs that steward farmland typically operate with a board structure that reflects their mission of community accountability and agricultural sustainability. Most CLTs have a tripartite board composed of three groups: leaseholders (farmers or residents), community members, and public interest representatives (such as nonprofit leaders, conservationists, or local government officials). This structure ensures that decisions are made with input from those directly using the land, the broader community, and individuals with expertise or oversight responsibilities. In farmland CLTs, the board may also include farmers with experience in land stewardship, helping to guide policies that support viable farming operations and ecological health.

While common across states in the Northeast, the CLT model has yet to be widely adopted in Washington State. The Community Farm Land Trust, which works in the South Sound, and Lopez Island Community Land Trust, are the only organizations in Washington State currently facilitating farmland access through the CLT model (see Scatter Creek Community Farm case study, page 62). A new entity, Coastal Farmland Trust, based in Whatcom County, aims to implement the CLT model but has yet to initiate its first project.

The Agrarian Commons are another example of the CLT model. Initiated by the nonprofit Agrarian Trust, the Agrarian Commons model was launched in 2020 to address the need for secure, affordable access to farmland for the next generation of farmers. Like CLTs, Agrarian Commons remove farmland from the speculative market and place it under the stewardship of a nonprofit entity. However, one of the key differences between Agrarian Commons and traditional CLTs lies in their ownership and governance. While land in a CLT is owned by a single nonprofit, land in the Agrarian Commons is co-owned by

Agrarian Trust and a local Commons entity, creating a structure that aims to balance national support with local autonomy. The local Commons also function with a tripartite board that includes leaseholders, community members, and Agrarian Trust representatives; the board is largely responsible for overseeing lease agreements, land management, and other operations. Like CLTs, the Agrarian Commons also rely on a ground-lease model to facilitate land access and enable leaseholders to build equity.

The Agrarian Trust launched a Commons project in the Puget Sound region in 2020. The Puget Sound Agrarian Commons was legally structured as a title-holding nonprofit corporation under IRS Code 501(c)(2). This designation allowed the Commons to hold title to agricultural land, while ensuring that all income, after expenses, was transferred to its parent organization, the Agrarian Trust, which is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. This structure was designed in part to reinforce the Commons' role as a land steward rather than a revenue-generating entity and to centralize fundraising and other administrative functions within Agrarian Trust.⁵⁰ While the Puget Sound Agrarian Commons ultimately folded following leadership changes at Agrarian Trust in 2023, the model nonetheless offers potential value.

The CLT model has the potential to support collective land tenure; however this is not a requirement of the model. For instance, a CLT could issue a ground lease to a multi-member LLC, workers' cooperative, or nonprofit operating an incubator farm, but there are also many instances of a CLT issuing a ground lease to a single farm business.

Common Interest Communities

Common Interest Communities (CICs) offer another potential, albeit less tested, pathway to group land tenure. CICs are essentially land management organizations formed through a declaration and other governing documents. They feature shared obligations and common elements, while individual units within the community remain under the control and responsibility of their respective owners. These associations can be structured as nonprofit or for-profit corporations, LLCs, or cooperatives. CICs can be divided into two primary types: Cooperative and Non-Cooperative.

A key distinction between cooperative and non-cooperative CICs lies in land ownership. In cooperative CICs, the association owns the land, and individuals hold rights to occupy units through leases and have an allocated interest in the association. In contrast, non-cooperative CICs involve individual ownership of units, with the association owning only the common elements. This difference has implications for equity, control, and property transferability.

Non-cooperative CICs operate similarly to traditional condominium associations. Unit owners hold title to their units and contribute to shared costs such as property taxes, insurance, and maintenance of common areas. They retain the ability to buy and sell their units at market value, offering flexibility and potential financial return. These associations must be composed of unit owners and are typically organized as corporations or LLCs.

Cooperative CICs, on the other hand, in some ways resemble the Community Land Trust (CLT) model (see Table 2). Individuals do not hold title to their units but instead have possession rights through leases and a share in the association. If the CIC is dissolved, the property is distributed among leaseholders as tenants in common. The association must be governed by a board of at least three members, with a

majority being leaseholders. This model emphasizes collective ownership and long-term affordability, making it a potentially powerful tool for equitable farmland access.

Table 2: Comparing Group Land Tenure Models

Tool	Community Land Trusts (CLTs)	Non-Cooperative Common Interest Communities (CICs)	Cooperative Common Interest Communities (CICs)
Core features	The “classic” CLT model has four key features: nonprofit incorporation, tripartite board structure, corporate community membership, and land held in trust and leased long-term.	Land management organizations established by a declaration and other formation governing documents. They have shared obligations and common elements, though each unit is owned by individuals that comprise the association.	Land management organizations established by a declaration and other formation governing documents. They have shared obligations and common elements, though each unit is leased by individuals.
Who owns land and improvements	The CLT purchases land and leases the use of land to long-term tenants. Tenants build equity through ownership of improvements.	Only common elements are owned by the association, while individuals own units. This allows unit owners to receive market value for unit and improvements when selling.	The association holds the land and leases units (or plots) to members. Members all have a share in the association’s assets and liabilities.
Business entity options	The most common legal form is a 501(c)(3). ⁵¹	Can be formed as a nonprofit corporation, for-profit corporation, or LLC.	Can be formed as a nonresidential cooperative association.
Capacity needs	Need to establish CLT organization and board, secure funding to purchase land, create shared equity arrangement and criteria, and draft and enforce leases. May need to purchase improvements from tenants after a term expires. CLT boards have a tripartite governing structure: leaseholders living in leased housing; community members who live in the CLT’s service area; and local representatives from government, funding agencies, or the nonprofit sector.	Created by a recording a declaration and map in county land records. The declarant (original owner of the entire property) sells units to individuals over time. The association of unit owners then adopts organization documents, develops rules and budgets, and hires contractors as necessary. The association also maintains funds and prepares financial statements. At least some unit owners must participate in decision-making in the association board.	Created by a recording a declaration and map in county land records. Need to convey the property to the co-op association and develop leases for units. The association then adopts organization documents, develops rules and budgets, and hires contractors as necessary. The association also maintains funds and prepares financial statements.

In Washington, residential CICs are regulated under RCW 64.90. However, non-residential cooperative associations, such as those potentially used for farmland access, are not required to follow this statute. Instead, they may opt to be governed by it in whole or in part, or they may fall under RCW 23.86, which pertains to cooperative associations. This flexibility potentially would allow a farmland access project to tailor their governance structures to suit their specific needs.

AFT's research did not uncover any examples of CICs being used to facilitate farmland access. While the model, particularly Cooperative CICs, holds promise as a strategy to facilitate group tenure, any group pursuing this pathway in Washington State would need to conduct thorough legal due diligence.

Final Discussion and Recommendations

Land access in King County is a multifaceted challenge shaped by high land prices, limited availability, and structural barriers that disproportionately affect young, beginning, and historically underserved farmers. While the County has made significant strides through its Farmland Preservation Program, Farmland Leasing Program, and Conservation Futures investments, these efforts alone are not sufficient to meet the growing demand for affordable farmland and secure land tenure.

This report explores four areas of intervention: Increasing the Supply of Land Available, Reducing the Cost of Acquiring Land, Increasing Access to Capital to Acquire Farmland, and Identifying Collective and Community Land Tenure Models. These categories are highly intersectional, as challenges with access to and affordability of land and capital stem from many of the same root, structural causes. The report also outlines a suite of promising strategies—ranging from succession planning and land-linking to innovative tools like Buy-Protect-Sell, restrictive covenants, and collective tenure models—that, if layered intentionally, could help facilitate new pathways to land access. Some of the strategies presented may serve to improve outcomes in more than one area of intervention. Many of the strategies presented fall within the County’s authority to develop and implement; others depend on changes to state policies and would therefore require regional collaboration and coalition building.

Increasing the Supply of Land Available

Unlocking the land access challenge in King County will depend, in large part, on increasing supply. This may require an intentional layering of strategies: for example, targeted land-linking efforts, combined with investments in succession planning technical assistance, could be augmented by new tax credits and Buy-Protect-Sell projects. BPS is increasingly used by public entities to permanently protect farmland from development, keep farmland in production, support equitable land access, and promote long-term stewardship, especially in regions facing high development pressure and among communities seeking to support beginning and historically underserved farmers.

Further, mapping the county’s land resources to identify arable soils could unlock an additional supply of public lands the county could lease with longer term rental agreements. Following the lead of the Boulder County Parks & Open Space Agricultural Resources Division, King County could expand its program to lease county-owned land to local farmers and ranchers for below-market prices and extend lease terms with options to renew.

Reducing the Cost of Acquiring Land

Leveraging the County’s easement program could help reduce the cost of acquiring land. AFT found that, instead of embedding affordability provisions directly into conservation easements, restrictive covenants could be a strategic choice to enhance legal clarity, flexibility, and enforceability. Since conservation easements are primarily designed to protect land from development and preserve its natural resource values, courts or regulators may view affordability terms, such as resale price caps or income requirements, as outside their legal scope. Thus, a restrictive covenant may be more appropriate. It can be enforced like any other property covenant, and covenants may be used to protect land that, because of size, location, or other factors, may not be a match or a priority for easement programs. Land trusts and conservation entities across the country have begun to turn to restrictive covenants to further their

land access and affordability goals; while the long-term impact of the covenants is as-yet unproven, it is an area ripe for exploration and experimentation.

Increasing Access to Capital to Acquire Farmland

AFT found that capital access issues in King County are less tied to availability or even accessibility of capital, but rather to the inflated cost of land which makes accessing capital prohibitively expensive, particularly for YBFRs without established businesses. Technical assistance to support capital access for farmers is fairly robust in King County, with organizations such as Business Impact Northwest, Viva Farms, Northwest Agricultural Business Center, and the Center for Inclusive Entrepreneurship offering free or low-cost financial advising.

A challenge in farmland affordability work is that there is no standard benchmark for determining farmland affordability; rather lenders use a complex set of financial ratios to assess a farm's profitability and capacity to repay a loan.⁵² However, the 28/36 rule can be a useful assessment tool. The 28/36 rule for mortgage affordability suggests that housing expenses should not exceed 28% of gross monthly income, and that total debt (including the mortgage) should not exceed 36% of gross monthly income.⁵³

To illustrate the challenges in accessing capital, consider a scenario in which a new farmer qualifies for an FSA Beginning Farmer Loan, borrowing 100% of the maximum \$600,000 loan amount for a 30-year mortgage, to purchase a five-acre farm. As of September 2025, FSA Direct Farm Ownership Loans have an interest rate of 5.875%. In this scenario, the total repayment amount over 30 years would be \$1,277,721, of which \$677,722 is interest. Including property taxes and insurance, monthly payments would be approximately \$4,224. Applying the 28/36 rule, the farm would need to gross at least \$15,085 per month, or \$181,028 per year, as many farms do not generate income consistently throughout the year (for perspective, according to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, only 6% of farms in King County grossed more than \$100,000 per year). Assuming 4 of the 5 acres are cultivatable, this translates to a per acre income of \$45,257 per year, an ambitious target, especially for newer operations.

In simple terms, as land acquisition gets more expensive, a farm's mortgage will comprise a larger and larger share of its operating expenses. Combined with rising input costs,⁵⁴ a hefty mortgage makes it challenging for farmers to earn a livable income from farming, and thus difficult to become or stay financially viable long-term. Land access practitioners should consider the ethics of encouraging YBFRs to take on more debt than their nascent businesses can tolerate.

Identifying Collective and Community Land Tenure Models

The goal of land access work should be to provide secure, long-term, and affordable land tenure for farmers. While creative, community- and collective-driven approaches to land access have proliferated in recent years, many of them have fallen short of this goal.

Several issues require consideration if the County wants to encourage and ultimately perpetuate community and collective land tenure models. First, it is important to disaggregate a farm's business model from a farm's land access strategy. One certainly informs the other, but the two are distinct and should be treated as such. Second, collective tenure approaches require a high degree of collaboration, communication, and interdependence. Some farmers may seek these out as a reflection of their

underlying values, but they may not be right or desirable for many farmers. Finally, collective tenure models can be legally complex and poorly understood by agricultural service providers. Some, like Common Interest Communities, are untested in Washington State and will require research and due diligence. In promoting and encouraging collective tenure models, it is important that land access practitioners take responsibility for self-education and shoulder the burden of explaining the pros and cons to ensure these models work long term for farmers.

Ultimately, addressing land access is not only about protecting farmland—it is about investing in the future of farming, food systems, and community resilience. With bold leadership and strategic collaboration, King County can continue to be a national model for equitable farmland access and agricultural viability. While this report uplifts many promising tools and strategies, AFT proposes the following five recommendations as achievable, near-term strategies to advance King County’s land access work:

Invest in targeted land-linking and succession planning

Leverage internal King County resources such as current-use taxation records, and data sources like Washington State Department of Agriculture’s Agricultural Land Use map, to identify landowners who have underutilized farmland, may be challenged to generate the revenue needed to retain their current-use taxation status, and/or who are thinking about transitioning out of farming, either by leasing or selling their land. Partner with, and provide capacity funding to, local nonprofits who can conduct targeted outreach and provide one-on-one succession support and land-linking.

Explore the use of restrictive covenants to ensure long-term affordability of eased land

Using restrictive covenants instead of embedding affordability provisions directly into conservation easements could be a strategic choice for King County. Restrictive covenants can be enforced like any other property covenant, and are often easier to amend than easements, which would allow King County to adapt affordability provisions over time. By using both conservation easements and restrictive covenants in tandem, King County could ensure that farmland remains both protected and accessible to working farmers without compromising the legal integrity of either instrument.

Pursue Buy-Protect-Sell projects

Acting independently, or in partnership with nonprofit conservation organizations, use Conservation Futures or other funding, such as FarmPAI, to pursue Buy-Protect-Sell projects to take at-risk farmland off the market and make it available to qualified farmers. King County Conservation Futures already has the program infrastructure in place to make large grants for capital purchases to qualified entities. This unique funding source could be leveraged by making targeted grants to entities for the explicit purpose of engaging in a BPS project, or by expanding the county’s programming to purchase the land in fee itself before protecting and selling it. King County is uniquely positioned to provide incoming farmers with a “patient pathway” to landownership, holding the land and leasing it to the farmers while providing other wrap-around supports, until the point that incoming farmers are capitalized and prepared to take on a land purchase.

Expand King County's Farmland Leasing Program

Historically, many land access initiatives have focused on land ownership as the desired end goal for all farmers; however, when affordability, security, and longevity are provided for, leasing may be an equally viable pathway, particularly when coupled with opportunities to build equity. Either by acquiring new lands, or by bringing additional county-owned lands into production, expand King County's agricultural landholdings available for lease. Consider mapping and inventorying county-owned land that is suitable for agriculture, and/or partnering with municipalities within the County to activate other publicly owned lands that are suitable for agriculture. Consider allocating a portion of County-owned farmland to support expansion of farm businesses on larger parcels and allowing longer term leases to encourage land stewardship. Explore developing a Common Interest Community model to facilitate self-organizing of farmers on shared parcels and reduce administrative burden on King County staff.

Evaluate all programs to ensure they are clear about who they are enabling land access for and why, and that they are facilitating long-term, secure, and affordable land access

While King County is already a leader in farmland access work, more can be done to clarify whom the County intends to serve, and the desired long-term outcomes. King County farmers in search of land represent a range of goals and scales. For example, an urban nonprofit focused on facilitating hunger relief, food sovereignty, and connection to the land for its participants has different land access needs and constraints than a sole-proprietor farm business that seeks to scale and supply wholesale and institutional buyers. They also deliver distinct benefits to the local food system. To advance land access goals, King County's farmland programs should be intentional about who they intend to serve and why. They should also work to ensure that all land access interventions are designed to support long-term, secure, and affordable tenure for the farmers they intend to serve. Further, King County should take steps to ensure that its farmland protection and land access initiatives are synergistic and complementary, and that the appropriate staff are in place to support farmers and landowners in navigating their options.

Case Studies

Sonoma County Ag + Open Space Buy-Protect-Sell Program

Background

Located just northwest of San Francisco, Sonoma County is an important agricultural community. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, it is home to more than 3,000 farms, most of which are less than 180 acres in size. And at \$976,394,000, the county ranks 16th in California—and 59th in the entire nation—for the total market value of agricultural products sold.

Of the county's 6,000 producers, only 300 (or 5 percent) are younger than 35 while nearly 45 percent are 65 or older. As in other communities throughout the country, access to affordable land is a key challenge thwarting the next generation of farmers. Leaders in Sonoma County are aware of the challenge and are working to address it in various ways.

The Sonoma County Agricultural and Open Space District (Sonoma County Ag + Open Space), is a special district of County government. Its mission is to “permanently protect the diverse agricultural, natural resource, and scenic open space lands of Sonoma County for future generations.” Ag + Open Space is addressing land access through a toolbox of support called the “Farmland for All” program. This toolbox is in service to the overarching vision of connecting more young and beginning farmers with secure land tenure opportunities.

The Farmland for All program has six primary goals:

- Prevent conversion of agricultural land to non-agricultural uses through tools such as conservation easements and covenants.
- Preserve land's agricultural conservation values by supporting responsible stewardship via stable land tenure and best management practices.
- Increase access to agricultural land for agricultural producers by reducing the price of agricultural land via conservation easements and easement enhancements.
- Increase access to agricultural land for agricultural producers by proactively connecting producers with access opportunities.
- Enhance equitable access to agricultural land and expand conservation programs to racially and culturally diverse communities.
- Support local food security by ensuring that land remains in productive agricultural use.

One of the program's key tools is to pilot a Buy-Protect-Sell (BPS) program. While still in its infancy, the county's BPS program is a flagship investment to enhance access to land for the next generation and ensure that it remains in agricultural production. Because the program is just beginning, Ag + Open Space has not yet completed a full BPS project.

Program Description

Mary Chambers, the Agricultural Specialist within the Ag + Open Space, explains that the BPS program is a complementary effort meant to "make agricultural land more accessible to producers"; it does not replace their other conservation easement-focused work. It is similar to other BPS programs across the

country; staff will work to identify suitable properties, purchase land, protect it with a conservation easement, then sell it to a farmer at the appraised restricted value.

Ag + Open Space's BPS program is placing its initial focus on buying, protecting, and selling farms that are between 5-50 acres in size. According to Chambers, these farms are most at risk of conversion and often the most sought after by farmers for whom land access and affordability is the primary barrier to long-term success. Ag + Open Space aims to own the land for as short of a time period as possible. While other organizations, like The Conservation Fund, hold land for several years before selling it to a new farmer, Ag + Open Space plans to minimize its risk and carrying costs by holding land for only short periods or, where possible, conveying ownership to a new farmer immediately after purchase. Ag + Open Space will maintain a list of prospective buyers, all of whom will have gone through an initial vetting and application process, to ensure that the property can quickly transfer to someone who is interested and prepared. Finally, Chambers shared that there is tremendous interest in the program even though Ag & Open Space is still working on their first transaction.

Discussion

Because the program is, at this point, still in its pilot phase, it is difficult to point toward specific outcomes. Chambers explains that Ag + Open Space is looking for proof of concept and that, so far, things are going well and they are on track to achieve their goals.

Program leaders are heartened by many aspects of the initiative, including the effort's consistent funding. Ag + Open Space uses sales tax revenue to fund much of its conservation work, including BPS. Since 1991, and renewed with overwhelming support in 2006, Ag + Open Space has received a quarter of a cent on every dollar of sales tax to fund its work. This creates a steady stream of funding that enables proactive planning, a real strength of the program. This sales tax will be up for a vote again in 2031, when voters will either approve or reject the measure.

Despite its positive trajectory, challenges exist. Crucially, the BPS program's newness offers a chance to understand the challenges that can arise in the early years of a new effort.

First, as is true across most of the land conservation sphere, staff capacity is limited. Chambers leads and manages the BPS program, but she does so with only a portion of her time—just a few hours each week. Overall, there are 3-4 people who are also regularly involved and help to make major decisions, while other staff, such as those with legal, real estate transaction, or GIS mapping skills, jump in to help on occasion. Leveraging these experts' abilities is useful, though Chambers does suggest that it would be helpful to have one full-time person coordinating all aspects of the program.

Other challenges relate to funding. While the consistent funding is a major boost, its use is constrained. For example, there are limitations on how the funds can be used when purchasing a property. Because these are public dollars, Ag + Open Space is restricted from paying any more than a piece of land's appraised fair market value. In theory, that's responsible. However, open agricultural land often sells at a premium, especially when targeted by developers, and its sale price can easily exceed the appraised fair market value. In those situations, Ag + Open Space can't make higher offers to be a competitive buyer.

Further, the funds can only be used to purchase land or deed restrictions; they cannot be used to make improvements to the land, like building a new barn. Infrastructure enhancements could make land much more appealing to prospective agricultural buyers because it could make their business plans more viable. At this point, though, the option to spend funds in this strategic way does not exist. “We want the properties to be as turnkey as possible for the selected producer,” Chambers says, “but that is difficult with our funding restrictions.”

Continuing, Chambers shares an example. Sonoma County once had many vibrant smaller-scale dairies. Now, many of those dairies have gone out of business, and the barns are crumbling. These structures could be repaired and retrofitted so that they could house a new agricultural operation, but the funding limitations don’t allow Ag + Open Space to do so. This shifts the capital-intensive burden of infrastructure upgrades to the incoming farmer(s).

Chambers shares one final challenge that relates to public perception. The BPS program’s mission is to purchase farmland, protect it, and then sell it. That mission is broadly supported, especially by the agricultural community. However, Chambers shares that this support could waver if farmers perceive the program as being in competition with other farmers. If Ag + Open Space tries to purchase land that is eyed by another farmer, whether they are new or established, feathers could be ruffled. For that reason, BPS program leaders work hard to ensure they are not competing with other agricultural buyers, which requires frequent communication and transparency.

Looking Forward

In the immediate future, Ag + Open Space does not have any changes they intend to implement to their program. They want to complete a few transactions and then reflect on their outcomes before shifting their approach.

Looking a few years down the road, Chambers can envision a few possible adjustments. For one, they are interested in introducing an “affordability covenant” that would make land more affordable by limiting the land’s sale price, not only for buyers in the initial BPS transaction but for future buyers as well. However, there are concerns that the “rule against perpetuities” could prohibit the use of this tool. They are also hoping that, in 2031, the sales tax measure will be renewed since this steady stream of funding is crucial to their ability to plan ahead for, potentially, an ongoing buy-protect-sell program.

Chambers has advice for other localities who might like to pursue or improve a BPS program. First, she says that having a prospective pool of vetted buyers is key. Otherwise, there’s the risk that an organization could wind up purchasing, and then having to hold, land that is difficult to resell.

Relatedly, conducting due diligence on any possible acquisition is essential. That due diligence extends beyond traditional measures and includes evaluations of the property’s agricultural viability. What is the water access situation? Could this property plug into a viable marketing opportunity? “This may sound strange,” says Chambers, “but you should have a list of reasons to say ‘no’ to purchasing a property. And if a property gives you a good reason to say no, you need to be willing to do so.”

That advice is true even in emergency situations. The community may clamor for a specific parcel of land to be saved, but if the property doesn't seem viable for agriculture, program leaders should exercise extreme caution and, even when difficult, think about long-term impacts.

Finally, Chambers encourages people to ask for advice, especially from others with differing levels of experience with this work. "Buy-Protect-Sell is having a moment," she says. "There are so many people who are interested in this work, and there are many people who are willing to help. Don't be afraid to reach out and ask for their advice. In my experience, they are more than happy to share their expertise if it helps further the work of land conservation and farmland access."

Additional Information and Resources

- 2022 Census of Agriculture – "Sonoma County, California":
https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2022/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/California/cp06097.pdf
- Sonoma County Ag + Open Space: <https://www.sonomaopenspace.org/>
- Sonoma County Ag + Open Space – "Protected Forever":
<https://www.sonomaopenspace.org/our-vision/#simple-faq-item-2>

The Conservation Fund’s Farms Fund Program

Background

The Conservation Fund (TCF) is a national conservation organization known for its expertise in the complexities of land acquisition. Because it is nimble, TCF often steps in to acquire at-risk land for conservation partners who aren’t able to move as quickly. TCF has a history of working with grassroots communities, governments at all scales, and private businesses. Founded in 1985, it has protected 9 million acres of land across all 50 states.

While TCF works to protect all kinds of landscapes, it has recently begun focusing specific efforts to protect farmland, especially near major metropolitan centers where land is most at risk of conversion. But more than just protecting it, TCF works to help next generation farmers access and afford the land, increasing the supply of agricultural acreage available to aspiring agrarians. Its Farms Fund, launched in 2021, has been a primary vehicle for this work.

Program Description

TCF’s Farms Fund, which Director Krisztián Varsa referred to as a “Buy-Support-Protect-Sell” program, is currently active outside three cities—Atlanta, GA, Chicago, IL, and Charlotte, NC, with expansion possible in the future.

TCF purchases agricultural land at risk of non-farm development near the edge of major metro areas—typically 30-90 minutes from downtown areas. According to Varsa, “That distance is a sweet spot where farmland protection is really needed and where small and mid-sized farms can plug into robust markets for local food.” Once TCF owns the land, staff work through partner networks and other outreach strategies to match the farm to an ideal farmer who initially leases and stewards the land. The farmers may be looking to expand their existing operations, or they could be starting new farm ventures from scratch. Whatever the case, TCF helps them find financing and refine their business plan, and they connect them with technical assistance that can help improve their conservation practices and economic viability.

Eventually, after the new farmer is established, which usually takes 3-5 years, TCF protects the land with an agricultural conservation easement, ensuring that the property can remain available for farming forever. Once in place, the conservation easement lowers the resale value of the land since it can no longer be developed for agricultural uses. TCF then sells the land to the farmer at that more affordable price, simultaneously protecting land, facilitating affordable land access, and supporting a farm business.

TCF lists several core goals for the Farms Fund initiative including a “patient pathway to affordable land ownership for a new generation of visionary farmers.”⁵⁵ It seeks to make communities healthier with stronger food systems; increasing access to fresh food; secure cleaner air and water; and enhance resilience against the effects of climate change.

In less than five years, the Farms Fund has secured more than \$16 million in land value through strategic acquisitions, using a combination of philanthropic and government funds to buy land that otherwise would have been developed. They have also invested more than \$400,000 in on-farm infrastructure.

Varsa shares that their impact is spread across 21 different farms covering about 1,700 acres; on these properties, they are now working with 35 different farmers.

Crucially, TCF has also worked with other entities—from local nonprofits and government agencies to institutions like colleges and universities—to ensure the farmers they work with have access to substantial, consistent markets and support to implement conservation practices.

Discussion

Varsa reports that the Farms Fund is achieving its goals and truly making a difference in the communities in which they operate. “In terms of affordable farm ownership,” he says, noting how difficult secure land tenure is for most young farmers, “the Farms Fund is helping to ease land access and ensure that the farmers we partner with have a real chance at success.”

Conservation easements have been key to the program’s effectiveness. They protect the land, which is a primary goal for TCF, but they also make the land more affordable. By severing the development rights from a property so that it cannot be developed for non-agricultural use, farmers are able to buy the land at a reduced price from TCF once they are settled and established.

The last part of that description is key; using conservation easements to protect land and lower resale prices to support land access is no longer a new or novel concept, but the patience with which TCF can pursue these transactions, holding the land for a few years while the farmers get settled, save money, and solidify their operations and markets, is an important distinguishing factor. This process carries additional costs and logistical challenges, but it is impactful.

Varsa shares that other goals are being achieved, too. In Atlanta, Charlotte, and Chicago, TCF has seen that the Farms Fund has led to greater buy-in for local food systems, including from major institutions that have thrown their support behind some of the farms and leveraged their purchasing power to support regional agriculture. And through the land protection elements of the work, the organization is securing cleaner air and water for the community, in part because it has had success in “layering” their work to advance regenerative agriculture.

“We think of the Farms Fund as ‘systems work,’” Varsa says. “Yes, we’re helping protect land in areas threatened with intense development pressure. And yes, a primary goal is to connect young and beginning farmers with opportunities for secure land tenure. But we are also helping them engage with market opportunities, setting them up for short- and long- term economic success. *And* we are building out toolkits to help other entities and individuals buy more local food. *And* we’re helping the farmers adopt conservation practices, connecting them with technical assistance and financial support.”

In short, Varsa emphasizes that “we aren’t just helping random farms in a scattershot way. We are strategic and systems focused. This improves resilience for the farms and farmers themselves but also the surrounding community.”

Successes aside, TCF’s Farms Fund has faced challenges. Staff capacity, explains Varsa, is always an issue. Currently, the organization has one overall program director—Varsa—and one program manager in each of the three states in which they work. Varsa handles most of the real estate and financial elements of

the work, while the local program managers conduct outreach, engage with farmers, and support land management efforts. Other staff at TCF—those with legal and fundraising roles, for example—also spend some time on Farms Fund projects. Having more people dedicated solely to this work would help ease difficulties, especially given the broad geographies in which they work.

Lining up funds for conservation easements can be difficult and land protection take time, even for the simplest transactions. All the variables associated with a Farms Fund project—the impending transition to a new owner and negotiations with that individual, making sure the easement meets the needs of a new farming operation, and more— can make the conservation easement element of the work even more time-consuming and daunting. Varsa explains that it's most helpful when local and/or state funds exist to protect land as opposed to relying solely on federal dollars. The “holding period,” or the 3-5 years in which TCF remains the owner before selling to a farmer, can also present difficulties. These “carrying costs” can be financial, logistical, and even relational.

In addition to challenges, the Farms Fund has also experienced some unexpected outcomes and developments. In some places, Varsa and his team expected more financial support and investor support than has materialized. But Varsa says that local communities have bought into their work more quickly than expected. “There’s something about the culture of doing this work in a systemic way that has made people really believe in it. We try our best to be collaborative, and that is paying off.”

Looking Forward

At the moment, the Farms Fund doesn't have any major plans to change or adjust the program. Their tools are working, and they are proud of their impact. That said, they would love to do more work in the communities in which they are already active, and they are considering expanding to new areas. To inform decisions about expansion, they conduct a thorough market assessment, trying to understand:

1. Is there land under development pressure?
2. Are there young farmers ready for opportunities like this?
3. Is there an existing ecosystem of support services, like other conservation nonprofits, active government agencies that help with conservation, and the potential for a robust local food system and profitable market?
4. Is there capital for land and conservation easements?

When it comes to offering advice to a locality that might like to pursue work of this sort, Varsa offers a few primary suggestions. First, “Start with the farmers.” Ask young and aspiring farmers in the community what they need under what conditions. “Do they need support because land costs too much and the easement makes it more affordable, like in Atlanta? Or is it more about the patience and holding period to help farmers get to scale and then purchase the land, like in Chicago? Or is there a very strong local food scene, like in Charlotte, and farmers need help to take advantage of that through strategic farm locations?”

It could, Varsa acknowledges, be all these things and more. The key is to *ask* the farmers and learn from their experience and expertise, which allows for a “pro forma” approach that can serve the specific community well and achieve the farmer's *and* the locality's goals. “You want to avoid going out and

buying land and then not knowing what to do with it or who specifically will farm it,” Varsa warns. “You need a clear, thorough plan from the outset.”

Second, in addition to engaging early with farmers, Varsa suggests being transparent with them, especially when entering into easement and land purchase agreements. It’s essential to share expectations up front and to revisit these regularly. It’s also important to be honest about the nature of the relationship. TCF, for instance, wants to build strong, supportive, friendly partnerships with farmers—and they also have to act as their “landlords” for a few years, which is a different dynamic. Then, at some point, they are also the “sellers” of the property, which creates an entirely new situation even if it has been planned for years. It’s a complicated scenario.

Being open and honest throughout the process is key. Use standard templates. Set regular meetings. Make sure that everyone “has their eyes wide open” throughout the process to minimize surprises. Because, ultimately, the goal isn’t just affordable land access—it’s ensuring long-term success for local farms, farmers, and the community’s food system.

Additional Information and Resources

- The Conservation Fund – “Working Farms”: <https://www.conservationfund.org/our-priorities/working-lands/working-farms/>
- The Conservation Fund – “The Working Farms Fund – Scaling Next Generation Farming”: <https://youtu.be/DmtccLp5CZ0?feature=shared>
- *The Charlotte Ledger* – “Preserving Local Farmland”: <https://charlotteledger.substack.com/p/preserving-local-farmland-with-tim>
- *Forbes* -- “Conservation Fund Program Supports Local Farms And Local Food Near Metro Areas”: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffkart/2022/11/27/conservation-fund-program-supports-local-farms-and-local-food-near-metro-areas/>
- *The Philadelphia Citizen* – “Ideas We Should Steal: Working Farms Funds”: <https://thephiladelphiacitizen.org/working-farms-fund/>

Massachusetts Chapter 61A, Section 14

Background

Like most states, Massachusetts has adopted a current-use taxation program. Known as Chapter 61A in reference to its legislative chapter, this taxation policy helps keep farmland ownership affordable and preserves open space. Without it, many working farmers would be taxed out of landownership. A program of this nature is especially important in Massachusetts, which has some of the highest agricultural land values in the nation.

The fact that Massachusetts has a current-use taxation program isn't itself noteworthy. However, for the purposes of this report, the embedded right of first refusal provision of the 61A program stands out and deserves deeper examination. Called "Section 14" and established within the passage of the 61A legislative code in 1973 (as part of the Farmland Assessment Act of 1973), this provision enables municipalities to purchase land enrolled in the program—or assign the right to purchase that land to a qualified conservation partner—if that land's use is intended to change from agricultural to residential or commercial. Massachusetts is the only state in the country with a provision like this embedded within its current-use taxation program.

While a program like this requires enabling legislation, its innovative, local action-oriented approach is worthy of investigation for communities that seek to maintain a supply of agricultural land.

Program Description

First instituted in 1960, Chapter 61A taxes eligible land at its agricultural value rather than its "highest and best use," which is considered its value for development. It is part of a larger piece of legislation which also protects forest land and land used for open space and recreation. The Commonwealth created the program because these lands provide valuable public benefits and require fewer community services.

Kathleen Doherty, who lives in Massachusetts and serves as a Farmland Easement Support Specialist at American Farmland Trust, says that Chapter 61A is specifically "designed to encourage the preservation of the Commonwealth's valuable farmland and promote active agricultural and horticultural land use. It offers significant local property tax benefits to landowners who make a long-term commitment to farming. Properties must consist of at least 5 contiguous acres under the same ownership that are 'actively devoted' to agricultural or horticultural use. An equal amount of contiguous non-productive land may also qualify for classification."

Landowners are required to keep land in the 61A program in agricultural production in order to maintain their 61A tax status. However, a landowner can at any time apply to change the land's use or sell the land to a new owner who intends to convert the land to residential or commercial development. In these scenarios, the landowner, whether the current or new owner, would be subject to rollback and/or conveyance taxes, penalties intended to disincentivize land conversion.

Since conversion penalties are not always substantial enough to deter developers, the right of first refusal within Section 14 enables municipalities to purchase high-priority agricultural land and keep it in agricultural use. Municipalities hold an option to match a bona fide offer to purchase a piece of

agricultural land currently enrolled in 61A but set to be converted to another use. Within 120 days of receiving notice of either a) the landowner's intent to sell for another use, or b) the landowner's intent to change use without sale, the municipality can opt to purchase the land. The municipality's purchase price must either match the sale offer or be equal to the fair market value of the property as determined by an independent appraiser.

In other words, if a developer offers an agricultural landowner \$2 million for their property with the intent to change the land's use and the landowner plans to accept, the governing municipality has 120 days post-notification to match that \$2 million offer in an attempt to preserve the land. Crucially, a municipality can also assign their right of first refusal to a "nonprofit conservation organization or to the commonwealth or any of its political subdivisions." That conservation partner entity may then act to purchase the land and match the bona fide offer.

Whether the option is exercised by the municipality or a conservation partner, land purchased via the right of first refusal must maintain at least 70 percent of its area in open space. The buyer may choose to develop up to 30 percent of the property, potentially as a way to generate revenue that could make the purchase feasible and protect the majority of the land.

Discussion

Doherty explains that Section 14 is an effective tool and has helped some towns preserve agricultural land—but the provision can be difficult to use. The program is designed to help preserve agricultural land but she says, "but it is also designed to protect the rights of the property owner."

The 120-day time limit is one factor intended to protect the property owner and ensure that municipalities cannot drag out their right of first refusal option forever. However, it is difficult for a town to pull together the funds and go through all the necessary processes and protocols to purchase a property in less than 120 days. The requirement to match a bona fide offer can also be challenging, forcing local governments to pay the same, sometimes extravagant, prices as private developers to keep the land in agriculture. Again, these provisions are intended to create fairness for the landowner and are generally beneficial—but they are difficult to navigate.

"The right of first refusal established in Section 14 is probably underutilized," Doherty says.

"Municipalities must act fast in order to use it, and they have to either have the funds on hand to make the purchase or have a willing and ready conservation partner with access to funds that can step in and assume the option. Because of financial, time, and staff constraints, it's tough for most municipalities to be this strategic."

Difficulties aside, there are some examples of municipalities that have used this program effectively for its intended conservation purposes. In 2019, the Town of Hatfield purchased a property via the mechanism in Section 14, assigning their right of first refusal to Kestrel Land Trust, contributing land conservation funds from the Community Preservation Act, and partnering with a neighboring farmer to keep the land in agricultural production. Here, the town was able to match a \$430,000 offer from a developer to preserve an important piece of agricultural land in their community.

In 2021, the Town of Middleborough also successfully used Section 14. A developer was trying to purchase the 190-acre Picone Farm, one of the most important remaining agricultural properties in the area, for a 378-unit manufactured home development. Working together with the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR), Wildlands Trust, and the privately-owned Greensmith Farm, Middleborough exercised its right of first refusal option. Preserving Picone Farm had long been a priority for the town, and they had prepared for this opportunity, which enabled them to act quickly. Ultimately, the town and its partners were able to buy the land, splitting it into two sections: a “Town” component that includes walking trails and community gardens and a “Farm” component operated by Greensmith Farm.

Looking Forward

“Honestly, from a town’s perspective, the easy thing to do is let the conversion happen and collect the rollback and conveyance taxes,” admits Doherty. “But for towns that really want to prioritize conservation and conserve their agricultural landscapes, the right of first refusal option provides a path to do it—if they can be strategic and forward-thinking.”

In regard to being strategic, Doherty offers a few different recommendations. For one, communities should proactively identify land that is a priority for conservation. That way, if those landowners share their intent to sell the property or change its use, the municipality is not caught off guard and can instead jump into action. For another, they should work to develop relationships with qualified conservation partners, like land trusts. Established, trusting relationships can lead to quicker and more effective action.

Further, it is essential that the different individuals and commissions leading conservation efforts for a municipality are in frequent contact with one another. Sometimes, Doherty explains, “the conservation commission will be aware of an opportunity, but they don’t communicate with town officials or the city council, or vice versa. Clear and ongoing communication is essential.”

And perhaps the biggest recommendation of all is to work toward securing funding for these sorts of opportunities. When they successfully used Section 14, both Hatfield and Middleborough accessed money through the Community Preservation Act, a Massachusetts state fund generated by property tax surcharges that can help communities preserve open space and historic sites, create affordable housing, and develop outdoor recreational facilities. Middleborough also used Municipal Vulnerability Preparedness and Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources Agricultural Preservation Restriction funds.

For communities in other states that are envisioning ways to protect agricultural land in their community, Doherty believes that a right of first refusal model through their respective current-use value taxation programs is worth exploring. “If you have trusted and experienced conservation partners in your community, a clear vision from local leaders that prioritizes farmland protection, and dedicated funding to facilitate land acquisitions, potentially with the goal of selling the land back to a young or beginning farmer,” she says, “this tool could be very beneficial.”

Additional Information and References

- MassWoods – “Chapter 61 Current Use Tax Programs”: <https://masswoods.org/future-my-land/chapter-61-current-use-tax-programs>
- Massachusetts Legislature – “Chapter 61A, Section 14”: <https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleIX/Chapter61A/Section14>
- The Massachusetts Land Trust Coalition – “Land Conservation Options: A Guide for Massachusetts Landowners”: <https://massland.org/sites/default/files/files/landconsoptionsupd2008.pdf>
- Community Preservation Coalition – “Community Preservation Act: An Overview”: <https://www.communitypreservation.org/about>
- Community Preservation Coalition – “Hatfield’s Sliwoski Farm: Achieving the Impossible with the Community Preservation Act”: <https://www.communitypreservation.org/cpa-success-stories/news/hatfield%E2%80%99s-sliwoski-farm-achieving-impossible-community-preservation-act>
- Wildlands Trust – “Protected: Picone Farm, Middleborough”: <https://www.wildlandstrust.org/news-blog/2023/12/18/protected-picone-farm-middleborough?rq=picone%20farm>
- American Farmland Trust -- “Massachusetts Farmland Protection Options”: <https://farmlandinfo.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2025/07/ma-farmland-protection-options.pdf>

New Entry Sustainable Farming Project

Background

Founded in 1998, the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project (New Entry), housed at Tufts University Friedman School of Nutrition Science and Policy, supports beginning farmers in Massachusetts and across New England. Initially, the project began as a way to connect immigrants and refugees with opportunities to start farm operations. Many of these individuals came from agricultural backgrounds and had the necessary knowledge and experience to succeed, but they needed support with business planning, market integration, and land access. New Entry provided that support.

In 2007, after nearly a decade of success, New Entry conducted an in-depth landscape analysis of their local food and farm systems. They saw, among other things, that aspiring and beginning farmers were struggling, putting the future of regional agriculture in jeopardy. This analysis led them to broaden their work to all beginning farmers.

“At that time, we saw that many people wanted to farm,” says Jennifer Hashley, the Trisha Pérez Kennealy and Michael Kennealy Director for New Entry. “But few people understood that it could be a real possibility for them. Those were the people we began working to support. We realized that we need so many more people to be prepared to be farmers, regardless of their backgrounds.” Now, Hashley explains, “our farmers are very diverse, and immigrant farmers still make up about 30 percent of our cohort.”

New Entry has three primary programs. Their farmer training program includes courses and workshops on crop production, farm business planning, and farm management topics, as well as an incubator farm, land access coaching, and advice on securing long term land tenure. They also run a marketing and food hub program, where they introduce farmers to wholesale marketing opportunities, like selling to schools, co-ops, and other institutions. Finally, they share lessons learned nationally through a FIELD Network. Through a national conference (the “FIELD School”), a census of new farmer training and land access programs, and policy advocacy efforts, they support beginning farmers at systemic, structural levels. “Our founder, who was a professor at Tufts, wanted New Entry to be seen as a national model,” explains Hashley.

One particular New Entry project—the Farmland Matching Program—is of particular relevance to this report. Although it is no longer in operation, the Farmland Matching Program provides insights and lessons for other communities that might like to creatively facilitate land access opportunities that benefit both aspiring farmers and landowners.

Program Description

In 2007—at the same time the program broadened its offerings to support all beginning farmers regardless of their backgrounds—New Entry formally began their Farmland Matching Program.

It started as a way to address a looming problem with their incubator farm. “We only had so many incubator sites, and we realized that we couldn’t keep expanding and managing more properties,” says Hashley. “These farmers will need to leave the incubator at some point. But she remembers asking,

“Where will they go? Most of them can’t afford to buy land in Massachusetts because of the high prices. So how could we help them address this land access conundrum?”

New Entry reached out to local land trusts, municipalities, conservation commissions, buy-local groups—everyone who would listen with a sympathetic ear to the problems the program’s farmers were facing. New Entry engaged with these groups because they were interested in finding land already in agricultural use, rather than open space that would need to be converted into agricultural production.

With various partners, New Entry began to look at publicly available data, particularly Massachusetts’ current-use taxation program, Chapter 61A. They prioritized land in specific areas that were close to the program’s operations. When they found promising results, such as a high percentage of agricultural land, New Entry connected with a local partner to determine if the community was interested in learning about their program to connect farm seekers with landowners.

Some communities showed no interest. But for those that were interested, New Entry sent mailings to local landowners sharing information about their program and inviting them to a public meeting, usually held in a library or other community space. At this meeting, New Entry spoke about the farmers who were part of their cohort, and they described their goal to connect the trained farmers in their cohort with landowners who wanted to keep their land enrolled in 61A but were at risk of losing current-use status if they weren’t actively farming anymore. The project also dealt with land that was not enrolled in 61A if the community, land quality, and location were a good fit for the farm seeker. The approach helped beginning farmers by giving them affordable access to agricultural land and helped landowners by giving them a way to ease their property tax burden and generate revenue by leasing their land.

In addition to speaking about the program generally, New Entry presenters dove into important details on the reality of leasing land for agricultural use. They talked about their farmers, often introducing several of them on a panel and inviting them to share their visions for farming. They explained what farming might look, smell, and sound like on these parcels. “For vegetable farmers, there may be washing stations, deer fencing, black plastic mulch, and high tunnels. They may need to use your hose or well,” Hashley remembers saying. “For livestock farmers, there will be manure. There will be wandering animals that can sometimes be loud. There could be electric fences.” Hashley and her team stressed these things so that landowners—who may never have farmed themselves—understood what was in store.

For landowners who expressed interest, New Entry staff would speak with them in one-on-one follow-up meetings. If the situation still felt promising after that meeting, New Entry would facilitate a farm walkthrough with the landowner, the farm seeker, and the New Entry team. If that meeting went well and it seemed as if everyone was in agreement and had a sense of shared values and vision, New Entry would slowly step back, encouraging everyone to pursue a formal lease agreement—and then connect them with lease development resources and pro bono legal services for anyone in the process who couldn’t afford their own attorney.

What began as a way to support just their incubator farmers morphed into a goal of supporting even more aspiring farmers in navigating land access challenges. With this new vision in mind, New Entry

began accepting farm seeker and landowner applications, expanding their offerings beyond only those farmers in their incubator program. They created “heat maps” where the geographies, interests, and visions of farm seekers and landowners aligned, and they worked to connect these different groups. Hashley estimates that, from start to finish, it took New Entry at least forty hours of work over the course of weeks or months to complete a successful match. Much of the match depended on the quality and suitability of the available land to match the farmer’s goals, the motivations of the landowner, and the chemistry between the farmer and landowner.

The Farmland Matching Program was in official operation from 2007-2015; New Entry still helps with land access when they’re able, but it’s a less formal approach now. During its eight years, the program was never able to hire more than one full-time person to lead this initiative—and at times could only fund a halftime position. Hashley estimates that, back when the Farmland Matching Program began, it cost about \$50,000 a year to run it, between staff salary, outreach and event costs, and overhead. Now, she estimates that it would take \$100,000 a year if they were to resume the program in a similar manner with one full-time employee given rising operating costs, university overhead, and current salaries.

Discussion

As noted above, the Farmland Matching Program enjoyed eight years of success. Over that span, Hashley shares that their efforts supported land access saying, “It was really, *really* helping.” She estimates that they made somewhere between 12-20 successful matches where a farm seeker leased a specific piece of land for more than a year. Hashley notes that, to her knowledge, no other organizations in their area take such a hands-on, wrap-around approach to address land access with beginning farmers of all backgrounds.

However, New Entry faced major funding challenges. “We helped so many farmers, even those who didn’t end up matching through our efforts,” Hashley says. “But when we succeeded, there was no ‘commission’ like a broker would receive in a typical real estate transaction. We were doing this work for free, both for the farmer and the landowner. We *wanted* to do it for free for these farmers—but that’s a tough business model to keep a program funded.”

New Entry supported its work with grants which made it hard to secure consistent, meaningful, year-after-year funding. Plus, communicating impact metrics with donors was difficult as they often did not understand the complexity, effort, and often luck, involved. “We need funding to make more matches,” says Hashley, “but we need to show outcomes and successful matches to get the funding... So it’s a cyclical problem, one that made our business model at the time difficult to sustain.”

Finances aside, New Entry sometimes faced troubles with landowners who weren’t clear on their goals or desires. A landowner would start down the land-linking process, taking up precious time and resources along the way—and then change their mind toward the end of the process because a family member expressed hesitation. That situation frustrated all involved: New Entry, the farm seeker, and the landowner.

Looking Forward

New Entry’s Farmland Matching Program has been shuttered for ten years. But, says Hashley, with the

land access problem only growing worse, there are thoughts of reviving it in a new way. A generous donor who believes in New Entry's work would like to support farmers who finish their training and leave the program.

There are many factors to consider. Hashley emphasizes that showing early success with a land matching program is tough, and she fears other donors won't join in without seeing quick, news-worthy wins. It may make more sense for New Entry to lease or purchase more land and make it available to farmers using a "commons" or ground lease model. But they are exploring the idea of renewing their land matching efforts and doing research on newly emerging shared land use models across the country.

For those who are interested in starting a land matching initiative, Hashley has advice. Unsurprisingly, she advocates for finding sustainable funding. That is one of the biggest keys to success. The land matching process requires building relationships, which necessitates consistent staffing, which necessitates sustainable funds.

She also encourages others to develop a very clear vision of what your program will offer. Ask, "How will your work contribute something meaningful and make a difference?" She also says to pick your priority audience and know that you can only have one priority. If the focus of the land matching program is aspiring farmers and land seekers, you must gear your strategy around them rather than trying to always please landowners and conservation groups all at once. That said, be attuned to what might appeal to others—like reduced property taxes for landowners and longer-term stewardship arrangements for conservation groups.

When it comes to aspiring farmers, Hashley says it's important to vet them carefully—for everyone's sake. Be honest with them, she says, and make sure they have an authentic chance of success before you help launch them down a certain path. You don't want them to fail a few months in because they weren't ready for the opportunity. Even beyond the individual farmers, it is important to maintain a good reputation for the program in the broader community.

Finally, she encourages people to promote longer-term leases when connecting farm seekers with landowners. "Ideally, you want to find a farm seeker and a landowner who are both comfortable with a lengthy agreement—say, 10 years or more. These 1- and 2- year leases aren't very helpful for anyone involved given the investment in the soil and infrastructure required."

With that advice, and with the lessons learned from New Entry's Farmland Matching Program, others could work toward a successful effort to connect aspiring farmers with landowners in a way that benefits all involved—especially if a sustained, meaningful funding source is present.

Additional Information and References

- New Entry Sustainable Farming Project: <https://nesfp.nutrition.tufts.edu/>
- New Entry Sustainable Farming Project – "Starting a Farm from Scratch – Decision Tool": <https://nesfp.nutrition.tufts.edu/resources/starting-farm-scratch-decision-tool>

- Land for Good – “How to Find, Assess, and Secure Farmland”: <https://landforgood.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/LFG-NESFP-How-To-Find-Assess-Secure-Farmland-plain-language-guide.pdf>
- New Entry Sustainable Farming Project – “Community Farmland Connections: A guide to the use of GIS mapping for discovering underutilized farmland and expanding its use for agriculture”: <https://nesfp.nutrition.tufts.edu/resources/community-farmland-connections-guide-use-gis-mapping-discovering-underutilized-farmland>

Vermont Land Trust's Retroactive OPAVs

Background

Vermont Land Trust (VLT) is a successful conservation organization that operates throughout the Green Mountain State. It has permanently protected 650,000 acres of land, covering more than 11 percent of the state. While the organization conserves many different types of landscapes, agricultural land is a top priority. Since 1977, VLT has protected about 160,000 acres of farmland.

The organization's work to conserve farmland is important given agriculture's contributions to Vermont's environment, economy, and culture. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, though it is a small state, Vermont is home to more than 6,500 farms tended by roughly 12,500 producers. About a third of farmers are reported as new and beginning producers—those who have operated a farm for 10 or fewer years. Vermont has nearly 1.2 million acres of land in farms, and VLT has protected more than 13 percent of this land. The market value of agricultural products sold in Vermont exceeds \$1 billion.

Over time, VLT has evolved to do more than protect land. It also works to ease land access challenges for young and beginning farmers by making sure that protected agricultural land remains owned by farmers and by lowering the cost of land. VLT specifically lists “supporting farmers in buying land and growing sustainable businesses” as one of their primary organizational goals.

While the organization uses many tools to pursue and achieve this goal, one such strategy—called an Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value, which the organization can apply retroactively to already-protected land—is of particular interest.

According to the Center for Agriculture and Food Systems' *Farmland Access Legal Toolkit*, an Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value (OPAV) is “a voluntary legal agreement that restricts the sale of land to only certain farmers or to family members and restricts the sale price to agricultural value, versus the higher fair market value. An OPAV is placed when the landowner sells or donates an OPAV to a land trust or government agency. Once land has an OPAV, its value is usually lowered because the land is no longer able to be sold to all willing buyers and must be sold for agricultural value. This decreased value can make land with an OPAV more affordable for buyers, including farmers who may want to purchase the land.”

OPAVs were first created in Massachusetts in 1994. Their introduction was a response to protected farms transitioning from active agricultural production to “estate-like” properties owned by wealthy individuals with no intention to farm. Concerned that this trend would undermine public investments in agricultural land protection and make it even more difficult for next-generation farmers to afford land, Massachusetts took action.

In 2003, Vermont followed suit, pursuing their own OPAV approach. Since then, Vermont Land Trust has regularly used this tool to help ease access to land for farmers, and it has become a standard element of all new farm-focused conservation easement transactions.

For farms protected before 2003, Vermont Land Trust has been working to acquire “retroactive OPAVs,” meaning that they are purchasing these rights from landowners who have already protected their land

via easement and plan to transfer or sell it, typically within the next year. According to Maggie Donin, Vermont Land Trust's Farmland Access Director, these OPAVs "have a significant impact on the value of the property" and can help both the property seller and buyer. This approach to sale price restrictions is noteworthy.

Program Description

VLT's primary goal in acquiring OPAVs is to "make sure that productive agricultural land is owned by farmers," says Donin. "Conservation easements themselves are great, especially to protect ecological values. But OPAVs help ensure the future sale of agricultural land to farmers so that they can control their means of production."

An additional goal relates to affordability. Because non-family buyers must use the land for agricultural purposes—and they must present a farm plan to show that they intend to do so—they encounter less competition from non-agricultural buyers, such as wealthy individuals looking to purchase land for a non-farming estate. This reduced cost is especially helpful for young farmers with limited capital.

Donin shares that her organization has now acquired more than 500 OPAVs using funds from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board. For retroactive OPAVs, which make up 30-40 of the total, she estimates that each acquisition costs an average of \$100,000. With their current funding levels, VLT is able to purchase 2-3 of those options per year.

For these retroactive options, VLT staff first begin to explore purchasing an OPAV when the owner of an already-eased property expresses a desire or plan to sell the land. Donin shares that "we let them know [the OPAV] is an additional tool that can help make the purchase more affordable for an incoming buyer, and then we explain the timeline and process." In other words, VLT's approach to retroactive OPAVs is largely reactive rather than proactive. "We don't call landowners who don't have an OPAV and ask them if they are interested," she says. "We have generally had enough farm property transfers [each year] that we haven't had to reach out to other landowners to gauge their interest."

Donin shares that VLT will also occasionally work with the new owner of a protected property to purchase a retroactive OPAV. The influx of funds that can come from selling this option can be particularly helpful to beginning farmers without generational wealth, substantial savings, or access to significant credit or capital. "It is a way they can pay down debt or invest elsewhere in their business," Donin emphasizes, increasing their economic viability.

Whether purchasing from the landowner who is selling a protected property or the new owner of a conserved farm, VLT typically pursues OPAVs on a first-come, first-served basis as funding allows. At least for now, they don't prioritize based on a property's conservation values. Despite the large number of OPAVs VLT has purchased, Donin shares that the organization has only fully exercised these options on a handful of occasions—less than 10. That's not because OPAVs are ineffective or irrelevant. Because these agreements serve as an explicit deterrent to sell land to a non-agricultural user, the need to exercise the option is rare, though VLT has taken this step when needed.

Discussion

Donin shares that OPAVs, whether purchased at the close of a conservation easement or purchased

retroactively on previously protected land, have helped achieve VLT's primary goal. They have, she says, "been very effective in keeping farmland owned *by farmers*." In a state where open land is in high demand, that is no small feat.

VLT's OPAVs have had mixed success at making land more affordable for the next generation of farmers. Donin explains that, even though the land must sell at an agricultural value under an OPAV, "established producers are typically the ones who 'set' farmland values. They have greater access to credit and financial leverage and can pay higher prices. So 'agricultural value' doesn't always mean 'affordable price'" for young farmers.

This reality echoes larger trends of agricultural consolidation across the country, where established farmers have greater capacity than beginning producers to expand their operations. "Most young or aspiring farmers can't compete with these established farms, which puts them at a disadvantage. So while we have seen OPAVs help some young farmers get started, we are continuing to think of other ways to help get new and beginning farmers affordably onto land."

VLT has experienced several challenges with their OPAV efforts. For one, finding appraisers to correctly value OPAVs, whether traditional or retroactive, can be a challenge. The valuations are difficult, and finding a critical mass of professionals to do the work has proven tough.

A bigger challenge lies in the inherently adversarial nature of the tool. Donin explains that OPAVs require "getting involved in a real estate transaction and reducing the sale price of a piece of private property. Even though they've been compensated for the OPAV, that dynamic still runs the risk of making people angry." With an OPAV and conservation easement, some of the land's value has been extracted over time rather than all at once. Sometimes, that value was received years earlier, making it feel less immediate for farmers once a sale situation arises. It's important for farmers with land encumbered by an OPAV to prepare for that lower sale price down the road. For these reasons, the retroactive arrangements—where the OPAV is purchased just before or just after a property is sold—can be more appealing to landowners.

Two other challenges stand out. First, some farmers VLT has worked with have had challenges borrowing money from lenders. Since the OPAV adds yet another restriction on top of the existing conservation easement, some lenders find the overall package too risky to loan meaningful money to, for example, build a home. If the bank were forced to foreclose, they worry about recouping their investment. Second, more young farmers are pursuing "lease-to-own" arrangements with farmers. OPAVs work best when there is a traditional fee simple sale of the property and money changes hands all at once, and lease-to-own arrangements don't fit that model neatly.

Looking Forward

VLT plans to continue using the OPAV tool to keep agricultural land in farmer ownership and to lower the resale cost of protected land. "We are way better off with this tool than we are without it, even if it's imperfect," says Donin. They are also considering some related shared equity models that could help accomplish affordability goals.

For other entities that are interested in pursuing OPAVs, Donin shares a few key insights. First, acquiring these options requires access to significant capital. These options aren't cheap, and a steady funding source is needed. In Vermont, the Housing and Conservation Board is able to provide this funding, but only after adapting their stated mission and purpose to include "keeping conserved agricultural land in production and affordable for future generations of farmers." Securing this state funding—and having its purpose explicitly spelled out in code—has been essential.

Ensuring adequate staff capacity—both to acquire OPAVs and, when needed, to go through the legal enforcement process—is also important. It's difficult to say exactly how many staff work on OPAVs for VLT. These options are a small part of several employees' jobs, depending on whether they help acquire these agreements, steward them, enforce them, or handle legal aspects. It could be helpful to have one point person who coordinates all aspects of OPAVs and ensures different team members are covering the different aspects of the work, and it would be especially useful if that person had paralegal, project management, and outreach skills.

Finally, conducting effective outreach and education is critical. For landowners, realtors, and lenders, it's important that they understand exactly how OPAVs work before committing to this arrangement. "You don't want people to feel like they agreed to something they don't fully understand," says Donin.

For young, beginning, and aspiring farmers, outreach is also key. On this topic, Donin explains that "you have to be plugged into the people who might want to buy land. You can work in partnership with a group of farm seekers or a young farmers organization to make sure you can find people who might like to purchase land encumbered by an OPAV."

Agricultural conservation easements are in no way a silver bullet solution to the challenge of affordable land access. Still, when combined with other land access and protection efforts, retroactive affordability provisions like OPAVs can be an effective tool.

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Boulder County’s Farmland Leasing Program

Background

Boulder County is in north-central Colorado, just northwest of Denver. Home to the city of Boulder and the University of Colorado’s flagship campus, the county is bustling. Boasting urban amenities and a population of roughly 330,000 people, Boulder County also continues to support an active agricultural community.

The 2022 Census of Agriculture lists 826 farms in the county, most of which—about 94 percent—are smaller than 180 acres. Overall, the county is home to nearly 75,000 acres of “land in farms.” Specialty crops, like vegetables, fruits, nuts, and nursery crops, are particularly important to the local agricultural economy. Grains and hay, as well as poultry, horses, and, to a lesser extent, cattle, are also important agricultural products. About 16 percent of farms sell directly to consumers, which is more than double the state average, and nearly 36 percent of the county’s producers are new and beginning farmers.

Boulder County has experienced significant development pressure on its open lands, and the agricultural community has faced challenging economic conditions, losing a significant number of farms—18 percent—between 2017 and 2022. Decades ago, local leaders across the county came together to address challenges related to farmland conversion, land access, and agricultural viability. As part of their larger open-space conservation program, they created an agricultural land leasing initiative to connect existing and aspiring farmers with land.

The land leasing program was first created in 1980, when the county acquired its first agricultural property. Initially, it operated on a shoestring budget, and multiple attempts to create a new sales tax to support the program failed. However, as Boulder County faced increasing development pressure and more residents saw the agricultural land around them disappearing, support for the program increased. In 1993, a sales tax to fund the Parks & Open Space Department finally passed, enabling a flurry of agricultural land purchases over the next two decades. Sales tax revenue continues to support the county’s conservation work.

Now, after operating for nearly 50 years, the county owns 26,000 acres of agricultural land. Cassandra Schnarr, Boulder County’s agricultural resource program supervisor, points out this is roughly one-third of all the remaining farm and ranch land in the county. The county leases it to dozens of different farmers, helping them navigate the challenges of land access and economic viability in a suburbanizing community.

Program Description

The Boulder County Parks & Open Space Agricultural Resources Division operates the Agricultural Lands on Open Space program which leases agricultural county land to local farmers and ranchers for below-market prices.

Whenever a vacancy occurs on a piece of agricultural land owned by the county, program leaders open a request for proposals process where people can apply to farm the land. Interested farmers learn about the property, and sometimes visit it, to evaluate the location, land, and infrastructure. The county selects a new lessee based on scoring criteria, which considers farmers’ sustainability and water management

plans, experience levels, and overall fit for specific parcels. Farmers who end up leasing land from the county pay either cash rent or crop shares; price levels for county-owned properties are set and designed to be affordable.

Leases are typically three years—an initial year with two options to renew. After three years, the lessee can apply to be considered for a new lease. The lessee is responsible for property maintenance, and the county is responsible for infrastructure. As Schnarr explains: “If there’s a need to fix a fence, that’s on the lessee. If there is a need to replace a fence, that’s on us.” Some properties have county-owned housing on adjacent properties that farmers can rent—a process handled by the administrative division of Boulder County Parks & Open Space—but not all have this sort of adjacent residential component.

The land leasing program is particularly beneficial to farmers with limited access to capital, giving them a chance to farm that they might otherwise struggle to purchase. As the Boulder County Parks & Open Space Agricultural Resources website states, they provide this “subsidized agricultural opportunity for local farmers” to “support agriculture in Boulder County, an important community value to residents. This includes supporting the farmers’ livelihoods, their families, and their way of life.”

The Agricultural Lands on Open Space program now manages 123 leases to 55 different farmers who raise livestock, produce food for local consumption, and/or grow commodity crops. It operates on an annual budget of roughly \$3 million and has sixteen full-time staff, five seasonal employees, and one part-time administrative staffer. (Four of the full-time staff and one seasonal employee work on water efforts, a major issue in this part of Colorado; three full-time staff and four seasonal employees work on the program’s initiative to control prairie dogs, which have become a major problem on some properties.

Discussion

The agricultural land leasing program has preserved 26,000 acres of open space for agricultural use and since its inception has leased that land to many local farmers who need affordable land access. Program leaders share that it has helped boost local food production, supported the local agricultural economy, and, through new grant funds and technical assistance, promoted soil health on county-owned land. The program is not a universal fix to the many challenges that farmers face, but it is an important tool to improve access to land and protect farmland from development.

The consistent funds generated from sales taxes, as well as support from state lottery contributions, grant programs, and the county’s general fund, have played a major part in the program’s success. So have the dedicated team members who embrace agriculture as part of their mission. Their willingness to engage with and learn from farmers is also a strength. For example, the department conducted an in-depth survey among local farmers in 2022 to better understand key challenges so the staff can adapt their efforts to better serve the agricultural community.

Strengths and successes aside, the program has faced challenges. Managing publicly owned land that is tended by private individuals can be difficult; there is a constant balance between being over-involved in land management decisions and not being involved enough. Maintaining staff capacity to steward properties is also difficult when the acquisitions team is always working to add to the county’s protected agricultural acreage.

Further, some decisions within the program have been contentious. Boulder County has, for instance, prohibited the planting of some genetically modified crops on county-owned land, and they have limited the use of certain chemical pesticides. These decisions were driven by active sustainability-focused community members and elected leaders. Despite the good intent, these actions have led to frustrations for local farmers and diminished trust between parties (see *The Colorado Sun* article in the “Additional Information and References” section).

Looking Forward

Staff of Boulder County’s Agricultural Lands on Open Space program anticipate making some changes to their work in the coming years. Historically, staff have taken a “hands-off” approach to land management decisions, but this is changing. While they will still trust farmers with decisions, Schnarr says that they plan to incentivize sound agricultural practices through grant programs and offer more technical support to their lessees to enhance soil health and pursue regenerative practices. These new tactics are driven by public demand, farmer interest, and staff commitment.

Moving forward, Schnarr says that the program will do more to align actions with its vision statement: “Thriving Agricultural Lands for Generations to Come.” The program team knows the vision statement, but Schnarr believes it must be more deeply ingrained in smaller, day-to-day decisions. “How do we manage pests on this specific property? How do we encourage better grazing practices on that one? How might we think about supporting a beginning farmer on this ranch or that farm?” she asks, emphasizing that they must hold their vision statement up to all these questions and more.

For other communities that might like to pursue a similar public land leasing program, Schnarr has some words of wisdom. Think long term, she advises, and carefully consider the program’s main goals and vision. When making decisions, think about what is good for the land and for the community—and not only what may be good for one specific farmer at one moment in time. That said, she cautions: “Know that the decisions you make can affect a farm family’s business—so be thoughtful and careful.”

Also, make sure the program team is staffed with the right balance of people. Schnarr explains that their program grew rapidly, and staff became skilled at “putting out fires.” While that is a good thing, more strategic, systems-building capacities suffered, which led to challenges down the road. It is essential, she explains, to balance staff who can work quickly, fix problems, and remain in the moment with staff who can evaluate decisions, create sound processes for sustainable action, and focus on the long term.

As a final comment, Schnarr shares, “It is a secret dream of mine for our program to be a model that other communities look to, learn from, and emulate.” Given the successes Boulder County has achieved in protecting farmland and leasing it to increase land access, other local leaders—especially in areas where development pressure and land prices are high—may want to invest in similar programs.

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Scatter Creek Community Farm

Background

The Community Farm Land Trust (CFLT) is a nonprofit conservation organization based in Olympia, Washington. Focusing its efforts on areas south of Puget Sound, CFLT has a mission that seeks to “promote vibrant local food and farming systems through community supported farmland preservation strategies, educational outreach, and partnerships that increase opportunities for farms and farmers to flourish.” The organization is small—it has three part-time employees that work alongside board members and volunteers, and its annual budget is less than \$500,000.

CFLT uses several different strategies to achieve its mission. One revolves around the organization’s role as a community land trust. As a farm-focused community land trust, CFLT seeks to protect agricultural land, and, as its website states, “ensure its permanent affordability, stewardship, and agricultural production.” They do this by owning agricultural land and then establishing long-term “ground leases” with farmers. These ground lease agreements mean that the farmer is renting the land, often for a 99-year term, without ever owning it. While they do not own the land, the farmer may own improvements on the property, such as homes and agricultural buildings.

An approach that has its roots in the affordable housing movement, the ground lease model is favorable for farmers because it enables long-term connection to a specific piece of farmland—meaning that the farmer can comfortably make investments in enhancing soil health, developing local markets, and pursuing other farm viability tactics—without the costs of purchasing that land outright. The ability to own the actual structures, and to build equity in them, is another benefit of this approach.

While ground leases have been used extensively in the northeast to facilitate land access, CFLT’s Scatter Creek Farm and Conservancy is one of the few places in Washington State where this model has been deployed.

Program Description

Scatter Creek Farm and Conservancy is located in south Thurston County, Washington, roughly 80 miles southwest of King County. Currently, Colin Barricklow and Genine Bradwin, who jointly operate Kirsop Farm, raise vegetables, poultry, and grain on 60 of the farm’s 149 acres. They sell these products in farmers’ markets and through a Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) program in Olympia and Seattle. The farm also hosts other small agricultural enterprises, including a produce processing and packing shed that, in the fall, doubles as a storage space for pumpkins and winter squash. Other nearby farmers rent space in the shed to store other materials and crops.

Typical of the community land trust model, Barricklow and Bradwin own their home and other structures on the farm, and CFLT owns and leases the land to them. Aligning with CFLT’s organizational goals and mission, the long-term ground lease arrangement has made farming more affordable for Kirsop Farm.

Rachel Friedman, who serves as the chair of the Community Farm Land Trust board, explains the origins of the Scatter Creek Farm and Conservancy. The southern end of Thurston County is a rich agricultural area, one in which farming is part of the landscape, economy, and culture. As such, “When land looks

like it will transition out of agricultural production into another use,” Friedman says, “the community is rightfully concerned.”

This conversion was poised to happen in 2011-2012, when the land that is now Scatter Creek Farm and Conservancy was at risk of being developed. However, community members formed a coalition, and CFLT stepped in to help. In the organization’s first acquisition, CFLT purchased the land, using both public and private funds. In the summer of 2013, they formally began a partnership with Barricklow and Bradwin to farm the land. CFLT also partnered with Creekside Conservancy to protect a portion of the property for habitat values via conservation easement.

Barricklow and Bradwin have a 99-year agricultural ground lease on the land, giving them secure tenure without the extreme upfront costs of a land purchase. The lease is “heritable,” which means it can be transferred to Barricklow and Bradwin’s heirs should they be interested in continuing to farm. In addition to holding the long-term lease, the farmers also own the farmhouse and some of the outbuildings, which sit on the land owned by CFLT (CFLT sold title to the infrastructure after acquiring the property in fee).

In addition to leasing the land at Scatter Creek to local farmers, CFLT has also used the property for other purposes. For example, in the lease with Barricklow and Bradwin, CFLT has reserved the right to conduct farm tours and explore other educational opportunities with the public. At one point, a farm incubator for young and aspiring farmers was also hosted by a partner organization on the land. These diverse efforts have, according to Friedman, “worked toward the goal of ensuring private land can also serve a public purpose and a public good.”

Discussion

The ownership structure of Scatter Creek Farm and Conservancy has eased a land access challenge for a successful local farm operation while also connecting the public with agriculture. “We’d like to be doing more,” says Friedman, referencing back to the farm incubator that used to be on the property as well as her desire to offer more public tours.

While the key goal of facilitating affordable farmland access has been achieved in this instance, concerns and challenges remain for both the farmers and for CFLT. For the farmers, Friedman mentions that CFLT has restrictions on how much they can earn if they should ever sell the farmhouse or agricultural structures. These earnings limitations, which are restricted to the market rate for such buildings, are intended to make entry more affordable for the next farmers, whenever that time may come. However, they can cause concerns for the current owners. With prices of housing and land all around them escalating, the farmers fear that, when retirement comes, they may not have enough equity in the buildings to afford to move on.

In other words, their land access and housing costs were much lower up front than in a traditional scenario—but their resale value will also be lower down the road. This pinch point, says Friedman, is not limited to CFLT or Scatter Creek Farm and Conservancy but is instead a reality of the community land trust model.

For CFLT, other issues have emerged. Owning land has carrying costs, like property taxes, insurance, infrastructure maintenance, and more. As such, they have to charge rent to the farmers at a level that

can help keep their organization afloat while also balancing the tension of setting a too-high price for the farmers and counteracting their own organizational goals of providing affordable land access. It's a balancing act, and it can be difficult to maintain.

In addition to the financial costs of landownership, there are other, non-monetary difficulties to navigate. Having enough staff to handle the property's management and maintenance is one thing. When a culvert needs replacement or a well fails, who handles the work for that project? These practical complications aside, a deeper philosophical tension can at times arise; as a community-focused nonprofit, being a "landlord" alone creates an odd scenario. There are power dynamics involved that can be uncomfortable and difficult to navigate.

Looking Forward

Friedman offers guidance to other organizations considering a ground lease approach to address land access and affordability. First and foremost, "You need to ask yourself: 'What does it look like to be a landlord?'" she says. "You need to consider that question carefully, and you need to become very educated about all the responsibilities, and challenges, that come with property ownership as an organization."

It's also important to have a clear-to-everyone stewardship plan in place. Ensuring that the lease agreement is upheld, that the property is being used for its intended conservation purposes, and that everyone involved is updated and aware is crucial.

For the farmer, sound financial planning—in both the present and future—is a necessity. Establishing clear communications and setting expectations, as well as avoiding surprise situations, are also important strategies.

The community land trust model involves diverse difficulties that can make implementation a challenge. These difficulties range from everyday management challenges and long-term economic complexities to philosophical predicaments about power. However, this model can also help directly address land affordability in the immediate term and facilitate land access for farmers that otherwise may struggle to gain land tenure. In that light, these models are important to consider and investigate for entities that would like to pursue these goals.

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List of Acronyms

ACEP-ALE – Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agricultural Land Easements

AFT – American Farmland Trust

AMI – Area Median Income

APD – Agricultural Protection District

BFTC – Beginning Farmer Tax Credit

BPS – Buy-Protect-Sell

CIC – Common Interest Communities

CLT – Community Land Trust

CFLT – Community Farm Land Trust

COPA – Community Opportunity to Purchase Act

CPI – Consumer Price Index

CRP – Conservation Reserve Program

DTC – Direct to Consumer

FarmPAI – Farmland Protection and Affordability Investment Program

FPLA – Farmland Protection and Land Access

FPP – Farmland Protection Program

FPPIs – Farmland Protection Policy Incentives

JLT – Jefferson Land Trust

KCC – King County Code

LAPIs – Land Access Policy Incentives

NRCS – Natural Resources Conservation Service

OFP – Office of Farmland Preservation

OPAV – Option to Purchase at Agricultural Value

RCW – Revised Code of Washington

RFP – Request for Proposals

ROFR – Right of First Refusal

TCF – The Conservation Fund

TIP - Transition Incentives Program

USDA – United States Department of Agriculture

VLT – Vermont Land Trust

WFP – Working Farmland Partnership

WFT – Washington Farmland Trust

YBFRs – Young and Beginning Farmers and Ranchers

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INCREASING FARM VIABILITY IN KING COUNTY, WA

SUBJECT: FINAL REPORT

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November 17, 2025*

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Executive Summary

The goal of this agricultural study, conducted by Agritecture, is to understand and propose strategies for addressing the economic viability challenges faced by King County farms. The analysis focuses on four key aspects of the agricultural system: Equipment Sharing Programs, Food Bank Funding Sources, Enterprise Farm Budgets, and Storytelling Models for Social Media. The findings are based on a six-month research period, including stakeholder interviews, farmer surveys, and desktop research.

Many King County farmers are operating on small plots of land without the ability to grow their operations by expansion. To increase economic viability, these operators must focus on increasing efficiency in their operations. Many of the recommendations in this report focus on ways to increase efficiency via reducing labor costs, extending the production season, diversifying product offerings and optimizing farm efficiency. There is not a “magic bullet” for King County farmers. Instead they must use a mixture of strategies to remain financially viable. This report helps identify those strategies and outlines how King County can support its farmers.

Key Findings & Recommendations

Existing Data Accuracy: Agritecture notes a significant disconnect between the dire financial picture painted by the 2022 USDA Census (78% of farms operating at a loss, over half with revenue below \$2,500) and higher revenue figures reported by smaller-scale, actively producing vegetable farmers in local surveys. Despite higher revenues, these farmers still report viability challenges. The report recommends that King County conduct its own local agricultural census to gather accurate, actionable data essential for effectively tracking the impact of any new farm support initiatives.

Equipment Sharing Programs (ESPs): Agritecture identifies a strong potential to reduce farm labor and operating costs by providing access to specialized, high-value equipment. For ESPs to succeed, convenience and reliability are critical (e.g., equipment storage near farm operations and rapid repair). Agritecture suggests that existing ESP’s move beyond the current focus on conservation-level equipment and instead target major labor sinks, such as harvesting, and even explore newer robotic technologies. Agritecture recommends considering a pilot program in a small geographic area, such as on Vashon Island, and leveraging private third-party logistics like custom operators to manage equipment maintenance and deployment.

Analysis of Food Bank Funding Sources: Agritecture recommends establishing new, sustainable, and innovative non-public funding streams. Agritecture proposes several high-potential models, including structured corporate giving through Corporate Philanthropy, consumer-facing campaigns like "Point of Sale" Campaigns and Product Campaigns, and community-based mechanisms such as a Utility Bill Round-Up. Furthermore, it advocates for a long-term investment structure through an Endowment or Revolving Loan Fund, and explores the potential to utilize or dedicate revenue from the Sweetened Beverage Tax (SBT) to ensure the program's resilience and continued growth.

Enterprise Farm Budgets: Agritecture provides four detailed financial case studies to help farmers evaluate new, high-value revenue streams that complement their core business:

- **Agritourism Mini-Farm:** Projected Net Return of **\$4,379** from leasing prepared garden plots.
- **Off-Season Greenhouse Microgreens:** Projected Net Return of **\$5,924** from year-round production of a high-value crop.
- **Pickling Vegetables:** Projected Net Return of **\$3,014** (for pickled carrots) by processing surplus or damaged crops for extended market engagement.
- **Whole Farm Budget Model:** A financial benchmark for a mid-sized farm using a CSA and farmer's market distribution mix, projecting a Net Return of approximately **\$134,000** for the owner-operator.

Storytelling Models for Social Media: Agritecture recommends a social media strategy that is critical to securing the viability of King County farms. The recommended strategy pairs collectible Farmer Trading Cards with engaging Short-Form Videos to maximize digital reach and emotional connection with urban audiences. The content must be framed to connect farming to shared community values—such as food justice and climate-action—to build consumer trust and loyalty, which has been proven in other regions to increase farm profitability.

Agritecture believes that a diverse strategy by both King County and its farmers will provide the best chance for long term economic viability and sustainability for the local food economy.

Increasing Farm Viability in King County, WA

Introduction

The goal of this portion of the agricultural study is to understand the challenges that King County farms are facing in terms of economic viability and to suggest strategies to address those viability issues. The portion of the study conducted by Agritecture (AGR) includes 4 different aspects:

- Analysis of Equipment Sharing Programs
- Analysis of Food Bank Funding Sources
- Creation of Enterprise Farm Budgets
- Creation of Storytelling Models for Social Media

The work being done on this project is being informed by numerous sources, including interviews with relevant stakeholders, surveys of King County farmers and desktop research. The information in this report was collected during a 6 month period, from May - November of 2025. As May - October is the main production season for most King County farmers, AGR would like to thank them for taking the time to answer surveys and participate in interviews during this time period.

Existing Data Accuracy

To understand the current viability of King County farms and to track the direction of future viability and the impact of any initiatives being undertaken, the data being collected and used must be understood and accurate. Currently, the data being used is from the USDA agricultural census of 2022.

“Based upon USDA Census of Agriculture data, in 2022, total sales of agricultural and value-added food products in King County reached \$102,690,000, reflecting a 24% decrease since 2017. Alarmingly, over half of the farms reported annual revenues below \$2,500, and the average annual sales per operation fell to \$64,021—a 15% decrease from 2017. Among the 1,604 food and farm operations in the county, 78% operated at a loss, a figure consistent with 2017.”¹

The Census reports that “more than half of the farms reported annual revenues below \$2,500”. According to the Census data, 838 farms, of 1,604 total, had revenue below \$2,500. At the same time, the Census showed 788 farms in the smallest size category, 1-9 acres. If we assume that there is a high degree of alignment between these categories, and the average size of these lower earning farms is 5 acres, then we are looking at an average income of only \$500 per acre per year. This type of revenue per acre could be associated with large scale row

crop producers but is not relevant to the smaller scale, mixed vegetable producing operations that were a part of this study. For those farms, this revenue figure would be extremely low. Based on the limited number of surveys conducted with King County farmers to date, farmers reported the following average revenues per acre: \$35,000, \$6,000, \$21,500, and \$140,000. All the figures reported were from the production of vegetables on actively producing farms. The reported revenue per acre among this group of respondents was way above the estimated average of \$500 per acre among Census respondents. Even though this revenue was significantly higher than the estimated average from the Census, these farmers still reported numerous challenges in maintaining the economic viability of their farm operations.

Within King County there are numerous types of farmers. The largest amount of acreage is dedicated to hay and forage (9,022) while vegetable production only accounted for 815 acres in the last Census. Supporting vegetable farmers, especially smaller producers, is important because they are highly integrated with the local economy. Due to the high degree of perishability of most vegetables, they must be sold fairly quickly after harvest and this means that local sales are the best option. The same is true for consumers- if they can purchase their vegetables from a local producer, it is likely a fresher product and of higher nutritional value than produce that comes from California or Mexico.

The County wants to support these small producers that target the local market but there is limited data available on who these farmers are, the economic status of their farms and the specific challenges these farms are facing. This study is an important first step in that journey. Having additional data on these farms and farm operators would be a valuable subsequent step to understand the current realities of King County farmers and to be able to track the effectiveness of any programs that are launched as part of this effort. Conducting some sort of agricultural census within King County will be an important component of this work. This will allow King County to more accurately understand what is occurring in the county, specifically related to the goals that are being targeted. It should be noted that a Local Food Initiative and Farm King County website was launched in 2015 and contains a lot of important metrics relating to farmer characteristics and farm viability.² Unfortunately, the most recent data on this website is from 2018 and needs to be updated. If this project is not funded or will not be updated, the county should consider funding this type of study as it is critical to understand the farm population that it is trying to support.



Figure 1: Farm King County Data Center website³

Equipment Sharing Programs: Key Points

Equipment sharing programs (ESP's) absolutely have the potential to reduce operating costs for farmers in King County. The degree to which that is achieved and the number of farmers that are positively affected depends on numerous factors.

Equipment sharing programs can reduce costs for farms in several different ways. These include:

- Allowing farms to access equipment that has an equal or greater productivity and operational cost less than that of paid labor. (labor replacement)
- Allows farms to access equipment that makes their existing labor more productive. (improved labor efficiency)
- Allowing farms to access equipment that allows them to scale their current production through increased area or time period of production (cover more acreage, work longer hours, etc)

ESP's come in many different sizes and operational models, with mixed levels of success⁴. If King County decides to pursue an ESP as a strategy to improve local farmer profit margins, the following is critical when designing a successful ESP.

- **Convenience is critical:** If the equipment isn't conveniently located or delivery included, farmers will be hesitant to participate. Time is like gold to farmers, especially during certain windows when farm activities have to occur. Consider equipment storage near farm operations.
- **Reliability:** Farmers must be able to rely on getting the equipment when they need it and that it won't break down or a repair/ replacement will be provided quickly. ESP's must have this level of reliability to gain favor with local farmers. As an alternative, equipment rental agencies are experts in this. Collaboration with local equipment rental companies to expand the types of equipment they offer could be a valuable hybrid solution.
- **Storage and Security:** Provide secure, covered storage for equipment to prevent damage, theft, and reduce maintenance needs.
- **Consider starting with a Pilot Program:** A pilot ESP on Vashon Island could increase the chances of a successful program due to geographic concentration, reduced transport times and the ability to potentially leverage the existing tool library in some fashion.
- **Align Equipment with Farmer Needs:** Ensure shared equipment is appropriate for the scale and resources (e.g., tractor size, transport capabilities) of target farms. Conducting proper surveys of farms and equipment needs is critical to a successful program.
- **Facilitate Transport:** Address the challenge of equipment transport, possibly by offering delivery services or connecting farmers with third-party transport providers.
- **Focus on Harvesting:** For small farms, harvesting is generally the biggest labor sink. Targeting equipment that improves labor productivity is likely the biggest win. Consider newer, robotic technologies as they could prove very valuable.
- **Custom Operators:** Custom Operators should also be considered as a means of increasing local farm efficiency and reducing labor costs. King County could enable businesses that more efficiently operate this equipment and service more farms.
- **High-Value, Limited-Use Equipment:** If there is sufficient demand for their use among local farmers, it may make sense to prioritize acquiring expensive, specialized tools that individual farmers struggle to purchase, as these can offer significant labor saving value (harvest equipment, soil steamer, etc)
- **Leverage existing infrastructure:** It may be prudent to add farm equipment to existing tool lending libraries, if there is a high enough farmer concentration in the area.
- **Embrace Training and Education:** Implement mandatory training for equipment users to ensure proper, safe, and efficient operation.
- **Leverage Grant Funding:** Utilize available grant programs (e.g., through KCD) to acquire new equipment.
- **Improve Data Collection:** Collect data on equipment use and farm economic viability to better understand program effectiveness. An ESP should require data from farm operators that will help justify its function in exchange for providing discounted equipment use or funding for equipment acquisition.
- **Explore Partnerships:** Local universities, research institutions, conservation districts, equipment dealers, farm non-profits, local corporations and others can collaborate to make ESP's a success. Leverage these relationships as much as possible.

King County Equipment Sharing Programs

The following are organized ESP's in King County. Additionally, there are certainly many others that operate on an informal basis. If information becomes available on others, it will be added to this report.

King Conservation District

Overview

The King Conservation District (KCD), similar to many conservation districts throughout the country, has an equipment sharing program. The types of equipment that are offered in the KCD ESP are aligned with other KCD goals around soil conservation. The program began in 2015-16 with one piece of equipment and was funded by a grant. Carrie King joined KCD in 2019 and took over management of the program. The program has expanded to include more equipment based on what equipment they would require.

The image below is from the KCD ESP webpage which describes the equipment which is available.

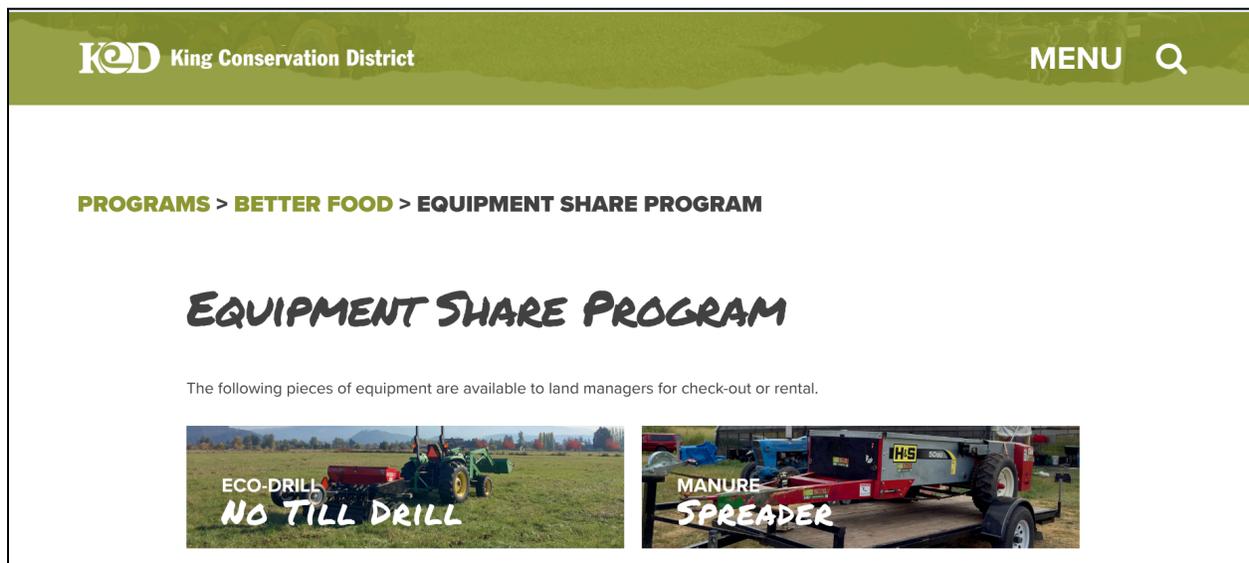


Figure 2: KCD ESP webpage⁵

Operations and Funding

The KCD ESP features 6 pieces of equipment including:

- Manure spreader
- Lime spreader

- Seed Drill
- Poultry Processing equipment
- Weed wrenches
- Hay Probe

Ms King manages the ESP along with several other programs. All the equipment listed above is stored at a KCD facility in Renton. KCD additionally owns a piece of equipment that is specific to servicing manure lagoons at dairy operations, which is extremely difficult to transport, and is stored by the dairy operations. All equipment is rented on a fee per day basis or a fee per day + fee per acre basis.

The KCD is funded through a small portion of property taxes. Within the KCD operating budget, it is unclear what the exact budget for the ESP is, but likely in the \$2,000 range for replacement parts and maintenance costs, which is usually covered by rental fees from the equipment. Ms King says that if additional money is needed for the program, it can usually come from the general Farm Services budget. When additional equipment is needed, that money comes from grants that are written by Ms King.

What Works

According to Carrie King, Program Services Manager at KCD, rentals average about 60 total per year. The following chart shows rentals for 2022-2024.

Equipment	2022	2023	2024
Manure Spreader	7	14	6
Lime Spreader	4	4	2
Seed Drill	6	7	5
Chicken Processing Trailer	31	28	26
Weed Wrench	12	n/a (didn't track)	20
total	60	53	59

As shown by the equipment rentals above, the program is being used by local residents and farmers and is helping to achieve the KCD soil conservation goals. It is unclear if any of these tools are helping local farmers be more efficient or reduce their operating costs, neither of which are the goal of this particular program. The majority of users of the ESP are homesteaders, not commercial farmers, according to Ms King.

The program has also encouraged some farmers to try the above services through KCD and then hire local service providers for the same task, due to convenience. So, KCD considers this to be a win since their goal is about the adoption of the conservation practice, not specifically the use of the equipment or tools.

Challenges

- **Equipment Safety and Storage:** Equipment has been stolen or vandalized, and protection from elements is an issue, leading to rust, wear, and increased maintenance. A secure, covered location is needed.
- **Misalignment with Farmer Resources:** Farmers often lack appropriately sized tractors or necessary hydraulics for equipment (e.g., no-till seeder). Lime spreader capacity can be too small. Many farmers lack appropriate trailers or ability to haul equipment, and KCD delivering drains limited staff time.
- **Limited Staff:** Managing equipment maintenance and repairs is time-consuming for limited staff.
- **Low Use Numbers:** Rental numbers seem low compared to other ESPs. This could be due to misalignment, poor marketing, or inconvenient location. A past online survey for feedback received no responses.
- **User Demographics:** The majority of users are homesteaders, not commercial farmers, so it's unclear if tools significantly help commercial farmers with efficiency or cost reduction, which isn't the program's primary goal.⁶

Key Takeaways & Recommendations for King County

The KCD is designed to meet conservation goals. While likely effective for meeting those goals, the KCD ESP faces challenges in serving commercial farmers due to equipment/resource misalignment and transport issues. Addressing storage security, and potentially expanding equipment suitable for commercial farm efficiency (beyond just conservation) could enhance its impact on farm viability.

Vashon Tool Lending Library

Overview

The Vashon Tool Lending Library is a 100% volunteer run operation that loans tools to local residents. The library specializes in tools that local homeowners will use for home maintenance, gardening and yard maintenance, in addition to a few tools for food processing and conservation.

Operations and Funding

The library contains almost 1,500 tools, about 300 of which fall into the 'yard and garden' category. Some of these tools could be used for very small scale agriculture, but most are more appropriate for home gardening.

Most of the library's tools have been donated but the library will purchase a small number of tools that can highly benefit the community. The library was founded in 2014 and in 2017 became a 501c3 organization and has an annual budget of \$12,000- \$15,000 which includes rent of the library space, maintenance and acquisition of tools, consumables and insurance.

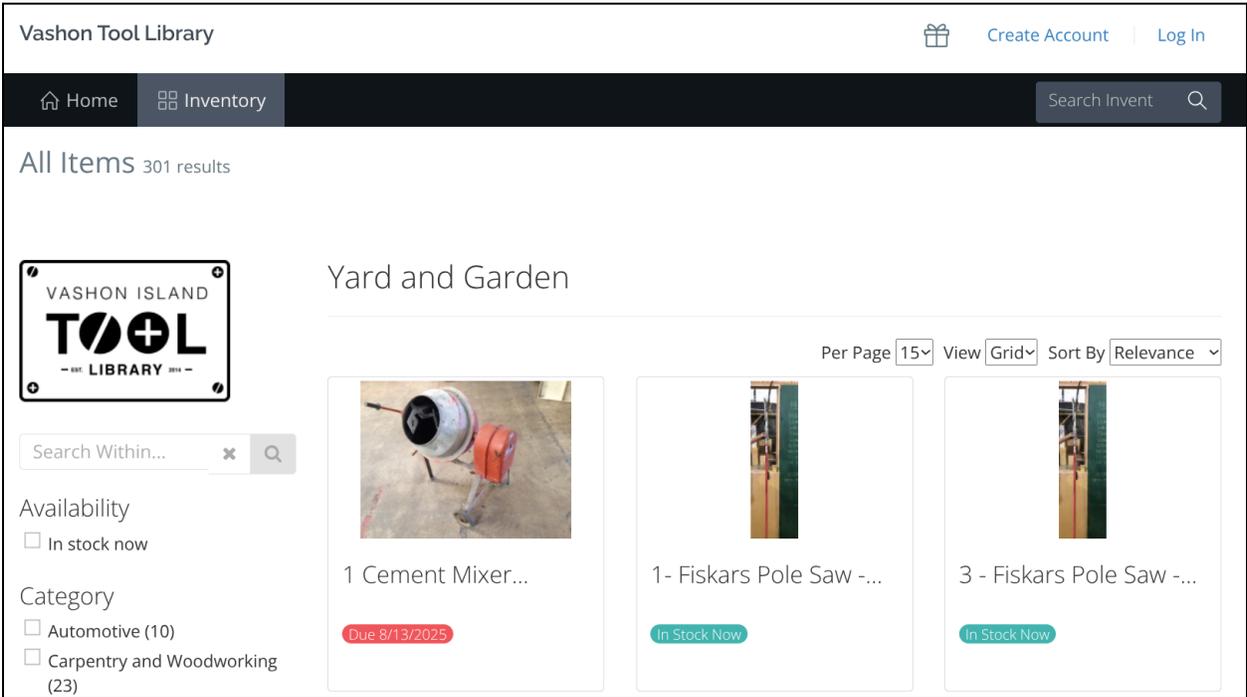


Figure 3: Screenshot from the Vashon Tool Library webpage, showing Yard and Garden tools.⁷

What Works

Based on my conversation with Alex Giron, Vashon Tool Library president, the organization and its services run pretty well and it seems to provide a lot of value to the community. On August 12, upon doing a random check of the website, 142 tools were checked out. Additionally, the library runs other events such as "Fix it cafes" where residents bring in non-working items and on site volunteer technicians help fix these things. A recent fix-it cafe kept almost 800 lbs of stuff from going to the landfill.

Challenges

- **Equipment Maintenance:** Ensuring tool maintenance is a major challenge, especially for items with higher safety risks like chainsaws, due to the criticality of user safety.
- **Communication and Education:** Communicating with and educating members on proper tool use is also a challenge.
- **Limited Agricultural Focus:** While some farmers are members, the majority are not, and most tools are suited for home gardening rather than commercial agriculture.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations for King County

This model demonstrates two important things. One is that an ESP can be run successfully by volunteers. The second is that the centralized location of this resource in a small community is critical to its success. To better serve King County farmers, the concept could be adapted to include agricultural tools. Potential acquisitions for very small scale agricultural use include battery-powered tillers and augers, orchard ladders, soil testing equipment, fence building tools, and fruit dehydrators. Larger agricultural tools such as a walk behind tractor, could be very valuable to farmers in the local community but would require that the volunteer team has the expertise to manage this type of equipment or that it is owned by the tool library but stored/managed by local farmers.

Snohomish Poultry Processing Unit

Overview

The Snohomish Coop houses a poultry processing unit (PPU) that is available to be rented by the local community. The PPU was originally purchased and loaned by the [NABC](#) (NorthWest Agriculture Business Center) but later turned over to the Snohomish Coop. The Coop has been serving the local community for more than 90 years and has 2 locations. The Co-op offers the PPU as a service to the community, not to make money.



Figure 4: The availability of the PPU is displayed on the front of the Coop.

Operations and Funding

The co-op has been renting the PPU for the past 3 years. According to data provided by Mike Lukjanowicz, General Manager of the Snohomish Coop, the equipment has the following number of rentals during the past 3 years.

Equipment	2023	2024	2025 (to date)
Poultry Processing Unit	38	86.5	56.5

A check of [Co-op website](#) shows that the PPU is high demand for both August and September (red indicates reserved dates)

potential for expansion. This could extend to equipment for vegetable production, if there are currently vegetable producers in the area or locals who might begin commercial production.

Other King County Equipment Sharing Programs⁸

AGR has spoken with the ESP's mentioned in the prior section. There are a number of other ESP's in King County which AGR is aware of, but has not collected additional information. More information is below.

- Other tool lending libraries

King County has a large number of tool lending libraries as shown by the map below.

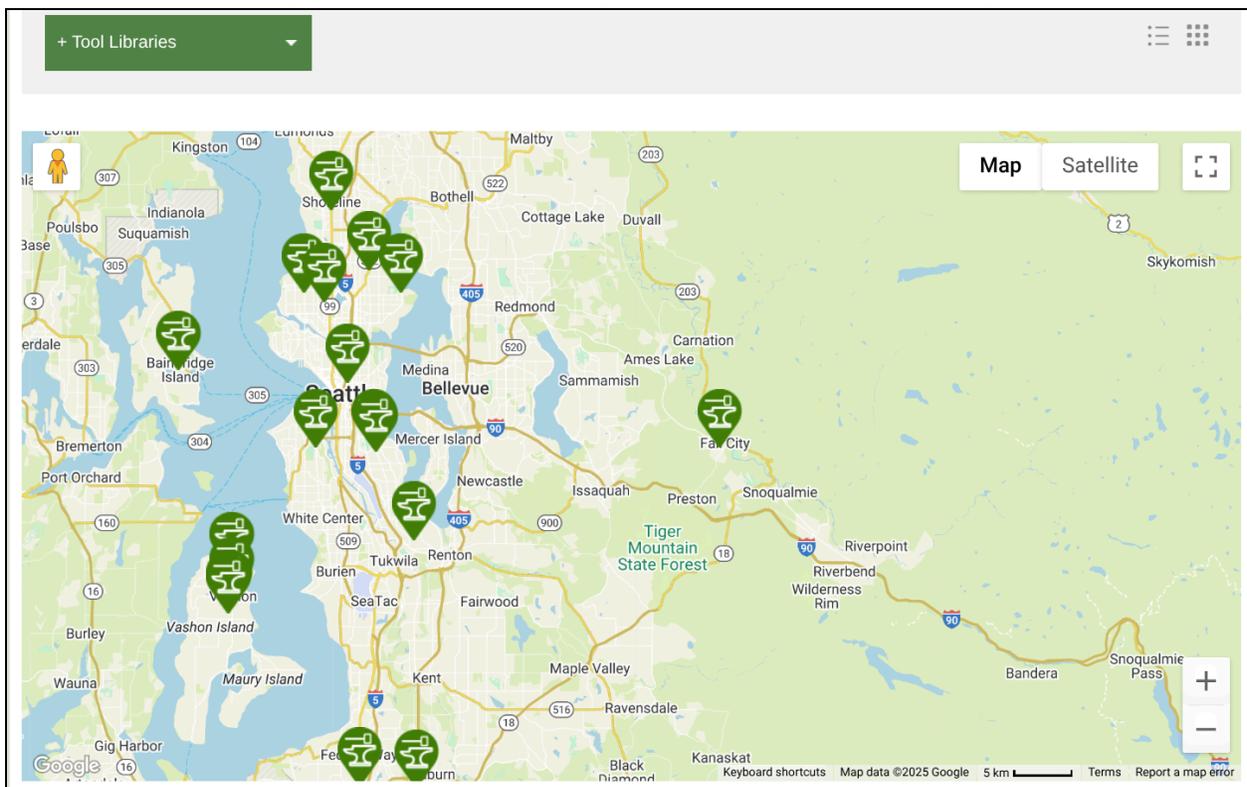


Figure 6: Map of tool libraries in King County

Like the Vashon library, all of these target homeowners and not farmers. AGR does not believe that it makes sense to reach out to the libraries individually for additional information. That said, some of these locations could be leveraged to lend farm equipment if there is a concentration of farmers nearby.

- Farmer training programs

There are several farmer training programs and farms where farmers without land can rent plots. An example of this is [Viva Farms](#). It is common for these types of farms to have internal equipment sharing programs. These types of programs tend to function very well since the

farmers are all concentrated in the same area, the soil type is often very similar and the plots are often of similar size. Micah Anderson from Viva Farms gave this information regarding their ESP.

“At VFKC, Viva offers shared infrastructure and equipment that help farmers start their businesses without purchasing a lot up front. The most important, I think, are the cooler and wash pack, followed by production tools and equipment (like tractors, seeders, etc.) and propagation houses. Some of the biggest initial costs our farmers do incur are high tunnels, irrigation supplies, and delivery/transport vehicles.”

AGR has reached out to Viva Farms for additional information on their ESP but has not received a reply.

Model Equipment Sharing Program Case Studies

The following represents 5 US based case studies of different ESP's and how they could provide value for King County farmers.

Case Study 1: HarvestPort: Online Farmer Marketplace

Overview

HarvestPort was a free-market online platform launched in 2015 to facilitate the rental of idle agricultural equipment (harvest bins), infrastructure (cold storage), and services between farmers, agricultural suppliers, dealerships, and farming groups. It was incubated by the Western Growers association and privately funded by venture capital. It was launched in 2015 and operated for about 3 years. While it is common for farmers to do contract work for one another or lend equipment to friends and neighbors, most of these arrangements are made via word of mouth. An organized, online platform is rare.

Operations and Funding

HarvestPort was an online platform that started with the sharing of harvesting bins and then expanded across other agricultural categories such as equipment, infrastructure like cold storage space, as well as services including heavy machinery, farm implements, transport assets, site services, irrigation equipment, power and lighting, and supply chain assets like pallets. The clients of HarvestPort included not only farmers but agricultural suppliers, dealerships and farming groups. It was privately funded via \$2.5 Mn from venture capital investment.⁹ The equipment sharing platform lasted for about 3 years but it was not lucrative enough for the investors according to founder Brian Dawson. The ESP closed after 3 years and

the rest morphed into [Palogix](#), the global leader in rental and sharing of harvest bins and an input procurement company for large scale farms.

What works

This type of platform has several advantages:

- Allows equipment owning farmers to earn extra income when they are not using their equipment
- Allows farmers that are renting equipment to try many different types of equipment before making a large investment
- Increases the use efficiency of tools that are in the existing farm landscape
- Removes chance of ESP's purchasing equipment that is incompatible with local farm resources.

A free market approach may also be less expensive to setup and operate than one run by government, resulting in reduce rental fees for farmers.

Challenges

- **Liability:** The main challenge was around liability, with farmers worried about liability if someone was hurt using their equipment. A \$3 Mn blanket policy was the solution.
- **Equipment Transport:** This was a challenge due to a nationwide program and equipment of all different shapes and sizes.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations for King County

An organized platform for sharing/ renting ag equipment and providing other farmer services could benefit many in the farm community. The goal should not be to share equipment, the goal should be to get whatever job is needed accomplished in a more efficient manner. Equipment transport is another challenge faced by King County ESP's, which could easily be solved by engaging 3rd party transport service providers, especially in a localized area such as King County. Collaboration with tech companies like Microsoft and Amazon in the King County community, their expertise and grant programs could be leveraged to create this type of platform quickly.

Case Study 2: Specialized Equipment Sharing via Conservation District

Overview

This case study involves a group of flower farmers that share a piece of high value, specialized equipment in Maine. The equipment, a soil steamer, is used for soil sterilization in high tunnels, and is a valuable tool to fight soil pathogens and weeds, especially for organic producers. The

project was organized by John Bliss of [Broadturn Farm](#) and facilitated through a local soil and water conservation district.



Figure 7: A soil steamer is a piece of equipment that can be a valuable part of an ESP.

Operations and Funding

A specialty crop block grant (valued at approximately \$36,000) was secured by the conservation district to purchase the soil steamer. The equipment was housed at Broadturn Farm for use by five initial participating farms. The initial plan was for farmers to pay rental fees that would repay the investment over five years so that the Conservation District could replicate the program. Other fees such as insurance and administrative costs were covered by the Conservation District. Fees are charged for use, and new farms pay an initiation fee plus a use fee.

What works

This model is effective for expensive, limited-use equipment that individual farms struggle to purchase. Soil steaming is particularly valuable for organic farmers and in high tunnel production where soil pathogens and weeds are prevalent and control methods are limited. The timing of use for a soil steamer can be flexible, unlike some other farm equipment, making it more valuable in an ESP. The program has been active for a number of years and there are 6-7 farms currently using the equipment. Finally, this ESP model works due to a geographically concentrated group of growers that can take advantage of this equipment.

Challenges

- Getting “buy-in” from local farms for a grant was easy but when the program started, several “committed” farms backed out because the fees were too high.
- The initial plan for rental fees to repay the equipment within five years was not achieved, as some farms withdrew.
- Getting new users to adopt the equipment can be challenging if they are unfamiliar with the technology.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations for King County

King County could consider acquiring similar high-value, limited-use equipment (like a soil steamer, given the prevalence of organic farming and high tunnels). Grant funding is available for KCD to acquire new equipment. It is critical that there is a geographic concentration of relevant farmers that can take advantage of this equipment.

Case Study 3: Specialized Equipment Sharing via LLC

Overview

A group of eight aronia berry farmers in Iowa formed an LLC to collectively purchase and share a large-scale harvester. The goal was to increase labor efficiency and provide a solution for an area with labor shortages.

Operations and Funding

Each of the eight farms contributed \$5,000 to the LLC, totaling \$40,000, to purchase a used harvester, a trailer, and attachments. Each farmer owned a 12.5% share and had equal voting rights. Use of the machine was charged on a per-pound basis to cover costs. Each farm provided two laborers to operate the machine and insurance for liability. Farmers needed to have a minimum number of berry plants and live within a certain geographic radius to participate so that transport was not overly burdensome.

What Works

This model significantly reduces harvest labor costs and can greatly increase productivity. The formation of an LLC provides a formal structure for shared ownership and decision-making.

Challenges

- Time Commitment: This arrangement requires a significant time commitment from LLC members for activities beyond direct operation, including transport, setup, adjustment, cleaning, maintenance, meetings, and training.¹⁰
- Machine Use Timing: The main challenge with sharing harvesting equipment is often simultaneous need among multiple farms.
- Conventional & Organic growers: The challenge of organic vs. conventional contamination was addressed by a strict cleaning protocol using a pressure washer.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations for King County

This model could be valuable in King County, especially given anecdotal evidence that harvest labor is the number one use of labor on King County farms. Small scale, [automated harvest equipment for leafy greens](#) could be especially valuable since there are many leafy greens growers in King County and harvests occur continuously. For slightly larger operations, custom operator services for King County farms should also be considered as this could be a means to greatly increase efficiency. Collaboration with local manufacturers like [Oxbo](#) could be explored, though their equipment is typically for larger operations.

Case Study 4: Equipment Cooperatives- a distributed approach

Overview

The Sustainable Agriculture Tool Lending Library¹¹ in Durham, NC, is an equipment cooperative initiated in 2011 by farmer George O'Neal of [Lil' Farm](#) to address a lack of appropriate tools. It was funded through a grant program of [RAFI USA](#).

Operations and Funding

This ESP is an equipment cooperative of 11 farmer members who co-own numerous pieces of farm equipment. Members pay annual fees to cover maintenance, insurance, and other costs. Equipment is stored at the farm of the last user, eliminating the need for a dedicated storage facility. Scheduling is done via a Google Calendar. Farmers meet regularly to discuss tool use. All members are located within a 45 miles radius. The equipment that is shared includes a rototiller, two harrows, two plastic mulch layers, a large trailer, a small manure spreader, a leaf vacuum, a double bottom plow, potato plow, pneumatic post pounder, brush hog, and some hand tools.

What Works

This distributed model, located within the farming community, lowers barriers to use compared to checking out equipment from a government agency. Co-ownership fosters collaboration and shared responsibility. It also encourages socialization among farmers which can be a problem, especially for new farmers.

Challenges

- **Commitment:** This model requires ongoing commitment from members for meetings and coordination. There is no dedicated staff to keep it operational.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations for King County

This distributed, farmer-led cooperative model could be a viable option for King County to “seed”. King County could offer guidelines for these cooperatives and seed money to get started, especially for commonly needed tools. This removes the need for central storage infrastructure and allows cooperatives to “organically” form where there is enough interest and participation already existing. Successful cooperatives could earn additional money each year for equipment in exchange for data relating to farm viability.

Case Study 5: F3Local lending library

Overview

The F3Local Lending Library is a new ESP in California, a project of the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UCANR). The program targets farmers on less than 50 acres in 5 counties in California’s central valley.

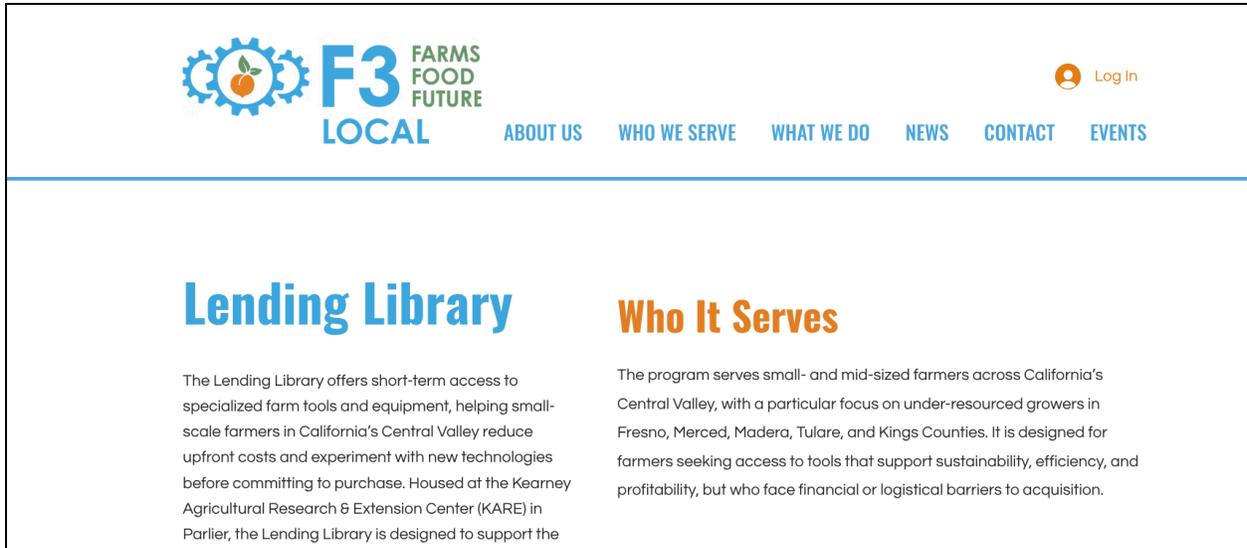


Figure 8: Screenshot of the F3Local Lending Library website¹²

Operations and Funding

The project received \$400,000 in funding (\$150,000 for a storage structure, \$250,000 for equipment), authorized by the BBB Act. Salaries for management, transport, and maintenance are assumed to be covered by existing UCANR staff. The library will contain 36 pieces of equipment, including BCS tractors with attachments, four-wheel tractor equipment, and electric automated harvest carts from a company called [Gather](#). This is a new, robotic technology which can help increase labor efficiency by removing trips between the harvest area and the packing shed. All equipment is housed at the UCANR Kearney Ag and Research Station. UCANR transports the equipment (though it cannot travel on highways). Farmers must attend a training session and demonstrate proficiency before borrowing. A small daily rental fee, based on acreage, will be charged.

What Works

This program aims to improve economic viability for local farmers, particularly smaller operations. It provides access to new, often robotic, technologies that can increase labor efficiency. The mandatory training ensures proper and safe equipment use. The program has clear goals relating to the number of farmers it wants to reach, allowing it to measure program effectiveness.

Challenges

- **Transport:** Equipment transport is limited to non-highway routes, potentially restricting reach. This is due to UCANR's risk management practices.

- **Scheduling:** A good method of reserving and scheduling equipment has not been determined and could hinder the program.
- **Financial Viability:** The project is funded through mid-2027. It is unclear if the current fee structure will maintain program viability after funding expires.

Key Takeaways & Recommendations for King County

King County could explore a similar partnership with a local agricultural university or research institution to house and manage an ESP. The focus on smaller farmers and modern, labor-saving equipment is highly relevant. Implementing mandatory training for equipment use is standard practice for all ESP's. Any programs implemented by King County should also have clear goals so that program effectiveness can be evaluated.

Farmer Resource Needs Survey

AGR suggests conducting a survey that focuses on farmer needs rather than just equipment sharing.

- Farm Name
- Farm Address
- Farmer name
- Contact info- phone, e-mail etc

- Years farming
- Size of current operation- total acreage
- Crop types- either a blank table can be provided for farmer to fill in or a checklist can be provided. It is likely easier to provide a table so that way no crops are missed.
- Farm is Organic / Conventional / Other (please describe)

Crop	Area or Number
Ex. Flowers- Dahlias	2 acres
Ex. Beef Cattle	400 head

This survey is to determine if there is sufficient interest in forming a shared-access equipment and services platform in King County. Multiple farmers would share access to needed equipment, inputs and services at a reasonable or low-cost basis. Would you be interested in participating in the program?

Yes - very interested

Yes - interested, but have concerns

No - not interested

Have you ever participated in an Equipment Sharing Program (ESP) or shared equipment with other farmers? (yes, no)

There are many different types of ESP's. Which one of the following arrangements is most desirable to you?

- Farmers rent their existing equipment to other farmers when they don't need it. Rentals are facilitated by a third party platform.
- Equipment is owned by a government agency or non-profit agency and farmers can rent the equipment from the agency at low cost. Equipment is stored at the government agency.
- A government agency purchases equipment for use by farmers and equipment is stored with farmers.
- Farmers self organize into small groups and pool financial resources to purchase equipment that will be shared by all members of the group.
- Don't know- would like more information first.

Your answers to the following questions will help us to understand what type of ESP, if any, would have the most potential to help King County farmers.

- Would you be interested in renting your idle equipment to other farmers? (yes, no)
- We are aware of many concerns that farmers have about renting their equipment or renting from their peers. The following are the most commonly expressed concerns:
 - Potential damage to the equipment
 - Liability if someone is hurt using my equipment
 - Biosecurity Concerns- transmission of soil or plant diseases
 - Won't be able to get the equipment when I need it
 - The equipment won't be reliable
 - I don't have the ability to transport the equipment that I would want to borrow
 - I don't have the time to transport my equipment to others
 - My farm is organic and I am concerned about contamination issues from equipment used on conventional farms

Are there any other concerns that you have? Please list them below.

Fee Structure: As a renter of equipment, which of the following would you prefer:

- Higher annual membership fee and lower fees per rental
- Lower annual membership fees and higher fees per rental

Do you currently rent equipment from local dealers? Please choose which of the following best applies to you:

- Yes, I currently rent equipment from local dealers and find the pricing to be reasonable
- Yes, I currently rent equipment from local dealers but find the pricing to be too high
- No, I don't rent equipment from local dealers because I don't have a need
- No, I don't rent equipment from local dealers because it is too expensive for the value provided
- No, I don't rent equipment from local dealers because the equipment I need is not available.

If you rent equipment, please list the equipment that you rent and the source of the rental.

Equipment Type	Rental source	Rental Rate

Do you currently use custom operator services?

- No, I don't use custom hire.
- Yes, I use custom hire for the following services (please list):

Do you offer custom operator services? If so, please describe below:

Please fill out the following table regarding tractors that your farm owns and tractor lending/borrowing. Check the appropriate boxes. If you own more than one of a type of tractor, please indicate how many.

Type of tractor	I own this tractor	I would consider renting this tractor to other farmers	I would like to rent/borrow this tractor
4WD, 75 HP and above			
4WD, 35-75 HP			
4WD, Under 35 HP			

2WD, 35-75 HP			
2WD, Under 35 HP			
Walk-Behind Tractor/ BCS			
No Tractor			

Please fill out the following table regarding equipment. Check the appropriate boxes.

Type of Operation	Type of Equipment	I own this equipment	I would consider renting this equipment to other farmers	I would like to rent/borrow this equipment
General	Pickup truck			
	Drone			
Hay	Hay Rake			
	Baler			
	Tedder			
Grain	Mower			
	Combine			
	Thresher			
Livestock	Poultry Processing Unit (fixed location)			
	Mobile Poultry Processing Unit			
	Poultry Crates			
	Egg Washer			
	Livestock Trailer			
	Hay Bale Chopper			
	Handling Pens/ Head Gates			

	Livestock Scale			
Vegetable	Chisel Plow			
	Flail Mower			
	Flame Weeder (tractor mounted)			
	Flame Weeder			
	Fertilizer/Lime Spreader			
	Mechanical Weeder			
	Manure Spreader			
	Moldboard Plow			
	Plastic Mulch Layer			
	Plastic Mulch Lifter			
	Post Hole Auger			
	Rototiller			
	Rotary Mower			
	Sickly Bar Mower			
	Subsoiler			
	Water Wheel Transplanter			
	Boom Sprayer			
	Toolbar			
	Spaders			
	Undercutter			
	Potato Cutter			
	Garlic Breaker			
	Seed Drill			
	Roller Crimper			
	No-Till Drill Seeder			

	BCS Implements (specify type)			
	Cultivation Implements (specify type)			
Seeders & Hand Tools	Broadfork			
	Earthway Seeder			
	Flame Weeder (manual)			
	Jang Seeder			
	Pinpoint Seeder			
	Paper Pot Transplanter			
	Pipe Bender			
	Tilther			
Storage & Sales	Freezers			
	Cryovac Sealer			
	Market Tent			
Irrigation	PTO Irrigation Pump			
	Water Cannon			
	Tanker Truck			
Land Management & Construction	Bulldozer			
	Bobcat / Skid Steer			
	Brush Hog			
	Chain Pole Saw			

	Compost Turner			
	Compost Screener			
	Compost Windrower			
	Excavator			
	Forestry Mower			
	Forestry Mulcher			
	Fork Lift			
	Generator			
	Keyline Plow			
	Rock Picker			
	Dump Truck			
	Box Grader			
	Saw Mill			
	Surveying Equipment			
	Wood Splitter			
	Wood Chipper			
	Wheelbarrow (manual)			
	Wheelbarrow (electric)			
Harvest & Processing	Potato Digger			
	Berry Harvester			
	Carrot Harvester			
	Greens Harvester			
	Hops Harvester			
	Root Washer			
	Bagging Equipment			
	Harvest Bulk Bins			

	Harvest Carts- manual			
	Harvest Carts- automated			
	Honey Extractor			
	Scales			
	Canning Equipment			
	Cold Storage Equipment			
	Commercial Kitchen Space			
Propagation Equipment	Greenhouse Space			
	Vacuum Seeder			
	Drum Seeder			
Other	Shop Space			
	Farmland Available (organic)			
	Farmland Available (conventional)			
	Secure, Dry storage space for equipment			
Other: please list				

Would you be interested in purchasing inputs through a cooperatively organized platform to help save money?

Would you be interested in sharing labor?

Would you be interested in attending an equipment demonstration day to learn more about the different types of equipment mentioned above?

Are there other agricultural supplies or services that you would like to see offered through a shared agricultural platform?

Farm Service Provider Survey

The following questions are relevant to King County farm service providers. This includes organizations such as: equipment dealerships, rental companies, input suppliers, farm-related non-profits, conservation districts / soil and water offices, local ag development commissions, Small Business Administration, local/community grange, farm bureau, Farm Credit, tool companies, local universities/technical schools (especially ag programs), tech and logistics companies and interested community members.

This is a short initial survey. As the logistics of the program was developed more thoroughly, more specific questions would be developed around types of equipment available, rental costs, transportation logistics etc.

- Do you currently or have you in the past operated an Equipment Sharing Program?
- If yes, please describe the program including tools, equipment, processes, etc. (information gathered should be similar to case study info provided)
- Would you be interested in participating in a County wide platform to support farmers through equipment sharing, bulk purchases of inputs and supplies and other farm related services?
- In what manner would your organization be willing to participate?
 - Donation of money towards purchasing equipment
 - Donation of equipment
 - Supplying of rental equipment or other services at a discounted rate
 - Supplying of inputs and supplies at a discounted rate
 - Space for safe and dry storage of farm equipment
 - Equipment transportation
 - Equipment maintenance and repair
 - Program management, administration and logistics
 - Training farmers in proper equipment use
 - Program financing
 - Liability insurance
 - Legal support
 - Marketing
 - Technical infrastructure & programming
 - Host events and meetings
 - Other: please describe

King County Farm-to-Food Bank Program: Ideas for Long-Term Sustainability

Farm to Food Banks: Key Points

King County, Washington, has been a leader in the farm-to-food bank (FTFB) movement. The success of these initiatives—in providing fresh, healthy food to residents and creating a stable, profitable market for local farmers—demonstrates a powerful dual-purpose model. In recent years, the approximate funding for these programs has been about \$800,000. Recent reliance on one-time federal and state grants tied to pandemic relief creates a need to transition to more sustainable, long-term funding strategies.

FTFB programs, **when reliably funded**, can be an important revenue stream for medium and large farms. These programs allow these farms to establish reliable revenue streams, expand production and help their food insecure neighbors simultaneously. Agritecture recommends a sequenced portfolio that prioritizes near-term, administratively clear county/state levers that will support consistent FTFB funding and reduce funding whiplash. Other funding mechanisms which need to be built “organically” should also be added to the portfolio and will allow for expansion in future years or a funding cushion should other budgets begin to dry up.

Top Recommendations at a glance (By order of Priority):

1. Lock in County-Level Baseline
 - a. Mechanisms: Targeted set-asides via VSHL and General Fund, plus sustained KCD Regional Food System support
 - b. Why first: Locally controlled, mission-aligned, and administratively familiar to existing partners. It might be the fastest way to stabilize annual purchasing.
2. Protect & Optimize State/Federal Support Already in Use
 - a. Mechanisms: Maintain/Expand WSDA Farm to Food Pantry and TEFAP-aligned local procurement
 - b. Why: Continuity with minimal policy lift. Familiar and predictable if coordinated well.
3. Explore leveraging the Seattle Sweetened Beverage Tax (SBT)
 - a. Mechanisms: Many aligned programs are already funded but could be better leveraged to support King County farms
 - b. Why: Tax already exists and supports aligned programs
4. Corporate Philanthropy
 - a. Mechanisms: Point-of-sale round-ups, product-tied donations, and corporate giving/matching
 - b. Why: Diversifies income, leverages Seattle-area corporate footprint, and county can broker while funding designated nonprofit partners
5. Build a Philanthropic Vehicle through Endowment or Revolving Loan Fund

- a. Mechanisms: Seed an agency fund/endowment (e.g., via Seattle Foundation) to yield a recurring distribution toward the ~\$800k target
 - b. Why: Long-run stability and it pairs well with major-donor campaigns
6. Legislative Option: Monitor Statewide SBT
- a. Mechanisms: A state-enabled SBT (City of Seattle shows proof of concept for food access). It requires state action to overcome current limits on new local beverage taxes.
 - b. Why: Could create a sizable, dedicated, health-aligned revenue stream. However, not a near-term fix.

What this delivers:

A resilient mix of funding sources, with county and state/federal providing a predictable funding floor, and corporate/consumer philanthropy adding growth and shock-absorption, together with infrastructure and admin support, will make it easier for farmers to participate and remain engaged in the program.

Analysis of Existing Public Funding Sources

While many pandemic-era grants are winding down, some public funding sources remain and can be leveraged for continued support. These sources are often less flexible than recent relief funds but are tied to core government goals that align with the FTFB program.

County Funding

Veterans, Seniors, and Human Services Levy (VSHSL)

Summary:

[King County's VSHSL](#) is a voter-approved property tax levy that funds services for veterans, seniors, and vulnerable populations. Food security and healthy living are key goals, making it a strong candidate for supporting the FTFB program on an ongoing basis.

King County General Fund

Summary:

A portion of the King County government's general fund could be directly appropriated to the FTFB program. This would signal a high-level commitment from the county to view the program as a core service, similar to parks or waste management.

King County Conservation District

Summary:

The KCD already plays a major role through its Regional Food Systems Grant Program, which funds the Farmer's Share initiative, purchasing produce from local farms for hunger relief organizations. Together, these three county mechanisms can create a "**county floor**" of predictable public funding that stabilizes the FTFB program.

Opportunities:

- VSHSL - Targeted Program Alignment
 - Funding item HL 8, Mobile Meal Delivery for Seniors, allots approximately \$2.1 Mn for years 2026-29. Which may support food banks and farmer's market programs providing meals to seniors. "Eligible program uses may include support for food banks or farmer's market programs that provide food support to seniors." FTFB-aligned food banks could qualify, or legislation could be refined to prioritize purchasing from King County farmers.
 - Funding item SE 8, Support Local Solutions, has funded 69 agencies in 2024, including local food banks (e.g. Bollard Food Bank and the Black Diamond Community Center). Future RFPs could add procurement criteria to require or incentivize local sourcing from farms.
- King County General Fund - Baseline Commitment
 - Direct appropriation from the General Fund would institutionalize FTFB as a core county service, providing baseline funding to reduce reliance on external grants.
 - Aligns with county priorities around health equity, climate resilience, and regional food system development
- KCD - Sustained Agricultural Link
 - King County Farmer's Share program has demonstrated measurable impact: \$167, 000 in 2024 with purchases from 51 King County farms, supplying 31 hunger relief organizations.
 - The KCD budget for 2025-2029 includes \$900k per year to "to provide direct assistance to support King County's Local Food Initiative, growing the local food economy, and increasing access to fresh local foods for King County residents"¹³. These funds can be formally tied to FTFB to make the program permanent and scalable
 - An increase in the KCD property tax levy could further expand this stream and make funding for this program permanent

Barriers:

- Competition for VSHSL and General Fund allocations: both funding sources support multiple human-service priorities, so FTFB would need strong advocacy to secure a recurring allocation
- Administrative complexity: aligning multiple funding channels requires interdepartmental coordination
- RFP and legislative constraints: revision to VSHSL RFP criteria or tax levy legislation would require staff and council approval

State Funding

Farm to Food Pantry (F2FP) - State Legislative Appropriations

Summary:

Washington State's "[Farm to Food Pantry \(F2FP\)](#)" initiative, which began in 2014, provides direct funding for purchasing food from local farms for distribution to food-insecure residents. It demonstrates a strong legislative precedent for state level investment in local procurement. In FY 2024, King and Pierce counties purchased a combined total of 75,097 lbs of produce and milk through the program. It appears that the program is funded through 2027, but its renewal depends on legislative reauthorization.

Opportunities:

- A proven, state-backed model that directly links farmers and food banks and demonstrates statewide political support for local food procurement
- Continued advocacy from King County could help make F2FP permanent and expand allocations to meet regional need
- Clear fit with the county's FTFB program goals—can be used to stabilize annual purchasing while other revenue streams mature

Barriers:

- Funding depends on biennial budget cycles and state priorities
- Reporting and compliance are managed by WSDA, creating administrative workload for local partners

Governor's Office - Seed Funding and Executive Support

Summary:

In other states, governor's offices have provided seed funding for local food systems programs. For example, the Arizona Food Bank Network funded numerous programs including a "[Friends of the Farm](#)" program which launched with seed money from the state governor's office and has grown with support from both federal programs and private donors. A similar approach could be explored in Washington.

Opportunities:

- High-visibility executive support could attract matching funds from philanthropy or corporate donors
- Aligns well with statewide food system and climate priorities

Barriers:

- Would require proactive advocacy from King County and partners to elevate FTFB within the Governor's policy agenda
- Competes with priorities for limited discretionary executive funding

Federal Funding

The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)

Summary:

Administered by the USDA, [TEFAP](#) is the cornerstone of the federal emergency food system. Historically focused on commodity food distribution, USDA now encourages states to use a portion of TEFAP administrative funds for local procurement, covering costs such as “pick-and-pack” fees or direct purchasing from local farms. Washington received \$117,962 in FY 2024 and \$712,000 total between 2020–2024 under the FTFB component. The program has been extended through 2031 as part of [PL 119](#) with a total annual budget of \$4 million nationwide. Washington state will receive some money from this program and a portion of it should go to King County.

Opportunities:

- Provides a stable, long-term federal funding channel for local purchasing if the state allocates a portion to King County.
- Aligns well with FTFB’s mission of sourcing local, healthy foods for food banks
- Encouraged by USDA policy and gives King County leverage to advocate for higher proportional allocation

Barriers:

- State-level allocation formulas relating to poverty levels and other population and socio-economic criteria determine King County’s share
- Administrative processes are complex; local partners must comply with USDA procurement and reporting standards

Local Food Purchase Assistance (LFPA)

Summary:

The [Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement](#) was a federal program that was used to purchase food for many local needs, including for food banks. One example was the [Farms Together](#) program in California. The LPFA money was authorized as part of COVID-19 pandemic relief efforts but is no longer available. However, its success offers a valuable proof of concept for future federal investments.

Opportunities:

- Framework could inform future advocacy for new USDA procurement initiatives modeled on LFPA

Barriers:

- No longer funded; reauthorization would require new congressional action
- Short-term nature limited infrastructure development and long-term planning

Identification and Evaluation of New Sustainable Funding Sources

To achieve true financial stability, the program must diversify its funding portfolio beyond government grants. Through support from corporations and various consumer programs, it is possible to raise a significant amount of funds to support an FTFB program. Most of the funding opportunities listed in this section support non-profit organizations, so the county could not receive funds directly from these programs. The role of the county should be to facilitate funding for official partner organizations such as [Growing for Good](#), [Farms For Life](#), and [King County Farmer's Share](#). These organizations, some of which are already partners, do exactly what the FTFB program does. Farmer's Share already is a partner with King County and the King County logo is prominently displayed as part of their work. Expanding the number of official partner organizations will help increase and track the impact of King County's work. Many of the existing non-profit organizations may already be using many of the funding mechanisms that are mentioned below.

"Point of Sale" Campaigns

Summary: Retail Round-up campaigns let customers donate spare change at checkout. Organizations like [Round It Up America](#) administer these programs for supermarkets, restaurants, and other retailers. Nationally, they raised about \$750 million¹⁴ in 2022. In King County, food banks that buy directly from farmers, or FTFB partners themselves, could seek to be designated recipients. Logical retail partners include garden centers and other ag-focused businesses where customers are already attuned to local food and farming.

Opportunity: High-volume fundraising potential, a single large retail chain partnership could yield tens or hundreds of thousands annually. Builds public awareness of FTFB by tying donations directly to food security.

Barriers: Requires stores or restaurants to opt in and designate King County FTFB as a beneficiary. Competition with other nonprofits that already participate in round-up campaigns. Administrative time to coordinate with multiple merchants and ensure transparency.

Next Steps:

- Identify 3–5 priority retail categories (e.g., supermarkets, co-ops, garden centers)
- Pilot with one partner to test consumer uptake and refine administration.

Product Campaigns

Summary: Product-tied campaigns are a form of marketing where each unit of a product sold generates a small donation to a designated cause. In the FTFB context, this could mean retail partners, such grocery chains, florists, or restaurants, agreeing to donate a set amount from specific products to FTFB programs. Seattle has an existing precedent with grocery retailers that link fresh produce and floral purchases to food access donations, demonstrating both consumer willingness to participate and retailer interest in aligning sales with social good.

- The "[Extending Smiles](#)" program donates \$0.75 for every flower bouquet purchased. A similar program could be created where sales of certain products include a small

donation to the King County FTFB program partners. This campaign could be focused on produce items that are grown in King County, which would help to highlight local producers. It is not clear how the Extending Smiles was initiated. There is existing collaboration between the Albertson's program and the Washington department of Health, so that relationship could potentially be used to leverage additional funding. The 2023 Annual Report¹⁵ mentions "Our Seattle division collaborates with the Washington State Department of Health to address food insecurity, through a produce incentive program. This program enables select healthcare sites to provide patients experiencing food insecurity with "prescriptions" for fruits and vegetables that can be used like cash to buy produce at Safeway stores in Washington state." It is also noted that the Seattle division donated \$1.4 Mn to the local pediatric hospital, so that division seems to be quite active and could be a very valuable partner.

- **Albertsons Companies' "Nourishing Neighbors" program** has raised over \$300 million for food banks nationwide through customer donations at checkout and matching funds. It appears that they raise about \$30 Mn per year. In 2023, \$9 Mn was distributed to 3 non-profits working on [innovative community based hunger solutions](#). Several of the funded programs focused on increasing wages to reduce food insecurity. It is possible that King County or a project partner could pitch the FTFB program for funding through this grant. While FTFB programs have been funded by the government, it is not clear if Nourishing Neighbors has funded this type of program in the past. The large grant amounts would fund the program for several years. The grant program is called "Innovation Spark Fund" and is announced through an RFP process. The Albertson's Market Foundation also has an open grant program which is reviewed 4-6 times per year. Additional info can be found here: <http://albertsonsmarketfoundation.org/get-funded/>
- **Fred Meyer's Community Rewards Program**: Consumers who shop at Fred Meyer's and use their Fred Meyer's card will earn money for non-profit organizations with each purchase. Consumers must select a non-profit organization and connect it to their account. Organizations receive a quarterly check from Fred Meyer's. It is not clear how much organizations might earn through this program.

Opportunity: Launch a "Grown in King County" campaign with a few specific produce SKUs (berries, flowers, etc). Leverage Albertsons/Safeway as an anchor partner, given existing health-focused collaborations. Extend the model to regional chains or specialty retailers . Raises both funds and visibility for local farmers, since products themselves come from the county. This type of program could target medium sized farms which are not currently distributing to large supermarkets but also have capacity to scale their production as the collaboration grows.

Barriers: Retail buy-in. Donation margins are modest per unit, so scaling depends on volume.

Next Steps: Start with 1–2 chains and seasonal pilots. For example, engage Albertsons' Seattle division to explore alignment with current product incentive partnerships. Propose a pilot campaign around a seasonal product (e.g., summer berries, spring bouquets). Build a joint marketing package emphasizing local farmer stories and community health benefits. Track outcomes to demonstrate viability for expansion to other chains.

Corporate Philanthropy

Summary: King County is home to several global corporations with deep philanthropic footprints, including Starbucks, Amazon, Microsoft, Boeing, and the Allen Family Foundation. While most of these companies do not operate open grant cycles, they have established programs that support food security, health, and community initiatives. Accessing funding typically depends on building relationships with corporate giving teams or leveraging employee-driven donation channels (e.g., Benevity). For this reason, it is critical for the FTFB program to cultivate local champions, both within corporate partners and from the farming/food bank community, to make introductions and advocate for alignment.

- **Starbucks Foundation:** [The Starbucks foundation](#) supports numerous organizations in the Seattle area through its Hometown Partnerships and Neighborhood Grants programs. Over the past 5 years, Hometown Partnerships has donated to Wellspring Family Services, Mary's Place, Urban League of Seattle and several other organizations. The Neighborhood Grants program gives smaller amounts of funding and these donations are initiated based on employee suggestions. Over the past couple of years this program has supported the Boys & Girls Club of King County, Edible Hope and #HashtagLunchBagSeattle, among others.
- **Amazon:** [Amazon](#) gives millions of dollars annually to charities in Seattle. In 2024 they gave \$68 Mn to 120 different organizations including \$1 Mn to two food banks in the region¹⁶. Food security is one of the targets of their giving. It does not appear that there is an open grant process for receiving funding but rather it is based on establishing relationships with the community engagement decision makers within Amazon.
- **Microsoft:** Microsoft Philanthropies has significant giving in the [Puget Sound region](#). That said, they do not have an application process and do not accept unsolicited proposals. Getting funding for a FTFB program would have to occur via relationship building, similar to receiving funding from Amazon. Microsoft also has a [community giving program](#) and matches donations to local charities made by employees. This program likely already supports numerous food banks and FTFB program partners would be eligible for funding in this way. Microsoft and many other corporations use the [Benevity](#) platform and registration on this platform would allow the FTFB non-profit to receive donations from employees at corporations all over the country.
- **Boeing:** Boeing is another major employer in the region, who also has an [employee matching program](#) and uses the Benevity platform. Additionally Boeing has an [Employees Community Fund](#) which is managed by employee teams from each city. This team determines where to give millions of dollars each year. It is believed that accessing this funding would be through building relationships- another reason why project champions would be invaluable.
- **Allen Family Philanthropy:** The [Allen Family Foundation](#) has given more than \$500 Mn over the past 10 years to organizations in the PNW. Current grants are in the categories of Environment, Youth and Art. While the category descriptions don't exactly align with the FTFB program, it is possible that a custom program could be created like "FTFB for youth" to better align with the goals of the foundation. Since the donations from this group are so significant, it is critical to be creative in approaching this funding source.

Opportunity: The region's corporate footprint is strong, with deep ties to food security, health, and community initiatives. Employee-giving and matching platforms (Benevity, corporate foundations) could channel recurring micro-gifts at scale. County and nonprofit partners can play a role by pitching FTFB as a high-visibility, community-rooted investment. Possibility to frame FTFB within ESG commitments (equity, sustainability, health).

Barriers: Many corporate programs do not accept unsolicited proposals; access depends on relationships with corporate engagement staff. Competition for corporate giving is high, and corporations often rotate priorities. Reporting and impact measurement requirements may exceed capacity of smaller farm/food bank partners.

Next Steps: Build a "Corporate Partner Pack" with talking points, data on FTFB impact, and farm success stories. Register FTFB nonprofit intermediaries on Benevity to unlock employee matching donations.

Direct Farm Support that benefits Food Banks

Summary: Beyond allocating funds to food banks or intermediaries, another model is to provide direct financial support to farms so they can supply produce to food banks. This approach ensures that farms receive fair payment for their work, while food-insecure households gain consistent access to fresh, local produce. Several models demonstrate how this can work:

- **Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) for Food Banks:** This model builds on the existing CSA structure, where individuals can purchase a "Solidarity Share" or "Community Share" from a participating farm. The money from this share funds the farm to grow and deliver an equivalent amount of produce to a food bank. [New Tradition Farm in Vermont](#) offers a program of this type. It is not clear if any of the CSA farms in King County offer this but it is highly likely that some do.
- **Local Example:** Sounds Farm in King County has a "[Sow it Forward](#)" program where people can pay \$3 and buy a bunch of produce for a food bank.
- **CSA for direct hunger relief:** NOFA Vermont operates a statewide program of discounted CSA boxes for hunger relief which is participated in by 60 farms.
- **Farm-to-Fridge Model:** Food Roots NW in Oregon operates a similar type of program called [Farm to Fridge](#) where they solicit grant funds to purchase food directly from farms for the food insecure.

Opportunity: It builds a direct relationship between farms and food banks, bypassing complex intermediaries. It also offers farms upfront payments, helping them plan crops and manage cash flow. It can be scaled from small "\$3 add-on" models (like Sounds Farm) to larger county-wide solidarity CSA networks

Barriers: It requires farms to handle additional logistics (multiple small donations, delivery to food banks). Moreover, success depends on consumer uptake or consistent philanthropic support, especially in off-seasons

Next Steps:

- Survey King County CSA farms to assess interest in solidarity share or “buy one–give one” models
- Have a pilot cohort of 2–3 farms (leveraging existing models like Sounds Farm)
- Explore options for a county-backed match fund (e.g., for every share purchased by community members, county funds match with an additional share)
- Evaluate outcomes after one season, then expand to more farms or establish a formal county CSA-to-Food Bank program

Endowment or Revolving Loan Fund

Summary: King County, in partnership with a community foundation, could establish an endowment where investment returns are used to fund the program. To establish a community foundation that would provide \$800k annually (recent funding levels) would require an endowment fund of \$12- 16 Mn¹⁷. The [Seattle Foundation](#) already exists in King County and could be leveraged to create a program for FTFB but currently doesn’t appear to have any programs that would specifically align with this program. Many counties work in conjunction with community foundations to support agricultural and food security programs. A few examples are:

- **Tillamook County, Oregon:** While not a county government endowment, the [Food Roots organization](#) in Tillamook County has an endowment fund aimed at supporting its work, which includes building a resilient local food system by supporting farmers and increasing access to healthy food.
- **Marin County, California:** The [Marin Agricultural Land Trust](#) (MALT) is a pioneering organization that uses a revolving fund and has endowment components to protect agricultural land in Marin County. By placing agricultural conservation easements on farms, they ensure the land remains in farming forever, thereby providing long-term support to the farming community.
- **Whatcom County, Washington:** The [Whatcom Community Foundation](#) manages multiple endowment funds for a large number of different causes, and delivered more than \$10 Mn to the community in 2024. This includes support to different county services including multiple library foundations. A non-profit to support FTFB could possibly be established within the Seattle Foundation if they offer a similar endowment fund management service.

Opportunity: It provides a permanent, stable funding stream, insulating FTFB from year-to-year budget fluctuations and grant cycles. It may appeal strongly to major donors and legacy givers, who value permanence and stewardship. It can be structured within an existing foundation

(Seattle Foundation) to avoid administrative burdens. Overall, it creates a visible, long-term commitment to both food security and local agriculture.

Barriers: It requires significant upfront fundraising (\$12–16M) before generating meaningful annual returns. The donors may prefer near-term, tangible impact over building an endowment. If the philanthropic landscape is crowded, FTFB would need to compete with other causes for donor attention.

Next Steps:

- Initiate discussions with the Seattle Foundation to assess interest and structure for hosting an FTFB-designated endowment
- Draft a statement for major donors, emphasizing permanence, community resilience, and dual impact (farmers + food banks)
- Identify lead donors (corporate partners, wealthy individuals, family foundations)

Utility Bill Round Up

Summary: Many county or municipal utilities run voluntary bill-round-up programs where customers round bills to the next dollar and the revenue is allocated to a local charitable fund. Counties can designate food access/farm-to-food bank as an eligible use. Examples include Pasco County, FL's [Project Round-Up](#) and "[Operation Round Up](#)" in Central Ohio.

Opportunity: Create a county-administered Round-Up fund earmarked for: (a) purchasing from local farms and (b) infrastructure grants for related farm uses (such as packing or storage). Utility bill reach is broad, so micro-donations can add up.

Barriers: Requires utility partnership, billing system tweaks, and clear governance of funds.

Next Steps:

- Meet with the county utility and treasurer to see if opportunity exists in King County and assess technology needs
- Draft ordinance establishing a restricted Round-Up Food Access Fund with annual public reporting

Sweetened Beverage Tax (SBT)

Summary: A per-ounce excise tax on sugar-sweetened beverages. Seattle adopted a [1.75¢/oz tax in 2018](#), and revenue has since been used to fund a wide range of food access and health equity programs, including produce vouchers, food bank support, and farm-to-community initiatives. Evaluations show that the tax has reduced consumption of sugary drinks while generating [\\$21.5 Mn in 2023](#). Programs funded through the tax which benefit farms include \$5.3 Mn to the Fresh Bucks program which allows consumers to spend Bucks on produce at farmer's markets and grocery stores. \$2.3 Mn went to the Food Equity Fund, which supported numerous

local organizations aligning with farms and food distribution. The Seattle Farm to PreSchool program was also supported, purchasing about \$390k from farms, but only a portion from farms in King County. Finally, the Healthy Food in Schools program also delivered fresh fruit and veggies to many schools although it is not clear how much was allocated to this program or the revenue to King County farmers. One of the main revenue destinations for this program is implementation of the Seattle Food Action Plan, which includes Community Food Security, Local Supply Chains among other priorities that could be leveraged to provide FTFB funding.

Opportunity: It provides a dedicated, long-term revenue stream aligned with health and nutrition goals. Many of the programs already being supported are highly aligned with the FTFB programs but could be further leveraged to source more food from King County farms. Coordination with or membership on the [SBT Community Advisory Board](#) could increase the opportunity for FTFB funding. If alignment with FTFB is created, a small portion of the revenue from this tax could fully fund FTFB efforts (~\$800K) and expand reach.

Barriers: [Revenue from the Seattle tax has not kept up with predictions and the budgeted programs are currently running a deficit](#), making it potentially difficult to carve out FTFB funds from the existing program. Current state preemption law prevents new local beverage taxes. Legislative change is uncertain and politically contested. The beverage industry opposition is strong and campaigns against soda taxes are well-funded. Not a near-term fix, legislative reform could take several years.

Next Steps:

- Align with the Seattle SBT Community Advisory Board to leverage existing programs to work more closely with King County farms.
- Monitor state legislative activity on preemption repeal or statewide SBT proposals
- Build a coalition of allies (King County Public Health, anti-obesity groups, children's health advocates, farm/food access nonprofits) to advocate for expansion when political timing is favorable.
- Prepare a revenue allocation framework in advance, specifying that a portion of any future SBT revenue should be earmarked for FTFB purchasing from King County farmers.

Importance to Farmers

FTFB programs can be an important source of revenue for King County farms, if they have a reliable source of funding. Reliable funding is critical for farms as this allows them to schedule their crops with certainty. For this reason, many King County farmers operate using the CSA model, which provides a more reliable income stream than Direct to Consumer sales, which can vary from week to week. In the same way, FTFB programs that are reliably funded can create a reliable, recurring revenue stream that allows farmers to plan their operations and make investments in equipment and land. While occasional purchases of surplus vegetables by FB's can be beneficial in the moment, reliably funded programs that allow farmers to incorporate the

needs of FB's into their crop plans is the best way to help both parties align their goals and maximize success. Reliably funded programs will:

- Allow farmers to provide the appropriate quantities of produce needed at the scheduled time and at the lowest price.
- Allow FB's to have reliable supplies of fresh produce, keeping them from last minute logistics problems.
- Provide the best working relationship for both parties, allowing them to grow together, and create long lasting, sustainable relationships.

Numerous farms reported positive experience with FTFB programs. The exact financial impact on the farms is not well understood but anecdotally, was quite important during the COVID-19 pandemic. If King County can find a reliable funding stream for FTFB programs, it is critical that it measures and tracks the impact for farms, which will help ensure program funding moving forward.

Barriers to Farmer Participation

Typical barriers relating to farmer participation in FTFB programs fall into the following four categories.

- **Price Point:** Farmers need to be paid a fair market price for their products to maintain a profitable business. Funding through grants or other programs may have price point constraints that do not adequately cover the costs of labor, inputs, and transportation. A sustainable program must allow food banks to pay a price that makes participation profitable for farmers, particularly mid-sized operations.
- **Produce Type and Quantities:** Food banks often have specific needs for certain produce types and quantities. Farmers, on the other hand, need to plan months in advance regarding what they will grow and the quantities they plan to produce. Additionally, weather events often interfere with the best made plans and harvests often are not as predicted in terms of timing or product volume. Misalignment between available supply and the needs of food banks can be a major barrier.
- **Logistics and Labor:** Farmers operate on tight schedules and generally maintain the minimal labor force possible to meet their current obligations. They may lack the time, labor, and infrastructure (e.g., refrigerated trucks, washing stations, packaging materials) to handle orders for food banks. A sustainable FTFB program must include coordinated planning in addition to providing technical assistance and funding to help farmers overcome these logistical hurdles (<https://www.harvestagainsthunger.org/kcfs/>).
- **Contracting and Administration:** The administrative burden of applying for grants, reporting, and managing contracts can be a significant barrier for small farmers who lack dedicated administrative staff. The program should avoid placing the burden of grants on farmers or provide a high level of technical assistance if farmers must source any grants.

AGR has spoken with a number of King County farmers and the following has been noted regarding barriers to participation in local FTFB programs.

- **Logistics and Labor:** Various small farms and market gardens reported that they sell out their produce on a regular basis and don't have the incentive or capacity to participate in a FTFB program.
- **Logistics and Labor:** Various medium sized farms reported selling surplus produce to FB's throughout the season and that this arrangement worked out well for the farmers.
- **Logistics and Labor:** One farmer reported contracting with FB's to provide them with certain quantities of produce throughout the season and noted that this arrangement was excellent for his business. It allowed him to invest in land and equipment.
- **Price point:** Several medium sized farms, 5 - 20 acres, reported that they have previously sold to FB's and that they charged similar rates as they do to other accounts. They noted that they were very happy to be earning extra revenue and supporting their neighbors.

Most of the farmers noted that the transactions were initiated by the FB's or by other intermediary organizations and their only obligation was to harvest and supply the produce. None of them were tasked with applying for grants or securing funding for these programs.

Conclusion

King County's FTFB ecosystem already delivers dual wins: healthier households and a resilient market for local farms. The challenge ahead is not proving the model but stabilizing funding. In this deliverable we outline a path forward: build a county-controlled funding floor first, protect and adjust state/federal streams, and layer in diversified private revenue that can grow over time. Investment in infrastructure and coordination to make it easy and profitable for farms to participate is also crucial.

Enterprise Farm Budgets for King County

Enterprise Farm Budgets: Key Points

The selected portion of the report presents several strategies and enterprise budget case studies for increasing the economic viability of farms in King County, focusing on diversified revenue streams.

The most important points include:

- **Four Avenues for Farm Viability:** The study analyzes four distinct strategies to enhance farm revenue:
 - **Agritourism Mini-Farm:** Renting prepared garden plots to community members to generate revenue through leases and accessory purchases while reducing farm labor and increasing community engagement. A 1/4-acre model is projected to have an estimated Net Return of **\$4,379**.
 - **Off-Season Greenhouse Microgreens Production:** Utilizing high tunnels or greenhouses during the winter to grow a high-value crop, adding product variety to winter CSA programs and providing year-round employment. This model is estimated to provide a Net Return of **\$5,924**.
 - **Pickling Vegetables:** Diversifying product offerings by processing crops (including cosmetically damaged produce) into pickled goods, which extends shelf life and taps into consumer interest, especially among younger demographics. An analysis of pickled carrots projected an estimated Net Return of **\$3,014**.
 - **Whole Farm Budget Model:** A comprehensive model for a 10 acre farm utilizing a CSA and farmer's market distribution mix, serving as a financial benchmark for King County farmers. This model projects a substantial Net Return of approximately **\$134,000** for the owner-operator.

The overall objective is to help King County farmers increase the viability of their operations by providing detailed analysis of low-disruption, high-potential new endeavors that take advantage of existing skill sets and resources.

Rationale

King County, home to Seattle and the largest contiguous metropolitan area in the Pacific Northwest, boasts a robust food system and serves as the region's largest food market. Despite being Washington's most populated county and the 13th most populated in the nation, King County maintains a significant rural agricultural economy, with over 1,600

small and mid-sized farms contributing approximately \$102 million to the regional economy.

The county features a thriving local food economy with 40 farmers markets and around 20 restaurants for every 10,000 residents. However, many local farmers face financial challenges, often resorting to off-farm work to support themselves. Although consumer interest in food from King County growers is rising, local farm businesses continue to struggle for viability due to high production cost, land access challenges and regulatory compliance.

In order to improve the viability of farming operations in King County, this report considers 4 case studies/enterprise budgets that look at potentially profitable farming systems that can be incorporated by King County farmers.

What are enterprise budgets and why are they important?

An enterprise budget is a detailed financial plan that estimates the projected income, expenses, and profitability for a *single part* of a farm business, typically over one production cycle. Enterprise budgets are one of the most powerful decision-making tools a farmer or agricultural business manager has. They move beyond a "gut feeling" and provide hard numbers to answer critical questions about profitability and efficiency. An enterprise budget helps identify important elements of any business such as the breakeven price for a crop, breakeven yield and answer important questions like what if I switch varieties of carrot, what if I switch to organic production or will a high tunnel producing microgreens be a good investment?

For King County vegetable producers, enterprise budgets can be valuable to help them consider if adding new components to their farm might be a good investment to help increase revenue and net income. AGR has selected the following 3 modules as strategies that King County farms can consider including in their farm operations to improve economic viability. Each module is explained in detail below including rationale for selecting that module as being appropriate for King County farmers. In addition to the three enterprise modules and budgets, a whole farm budget has been created that represents a mid-sized farm operation distributing its product through a mix of CSA and farmer's markets, which is a common farm type in King County. This budget has been created as a benchmarking tool that both existing operations can use as well as smaller operators who aspire to grow into this type of operation.

Note: The results presented in these case studies serve as a general guide for evaluating the feasibility of establishing and operating different farming endeavours. The intention of these case studies is to be helpful in estimating the physical and financial requirements of establishing said operations. Each case study contains numerous assumptions that can influence the economic viability of these models and those should be carefully reviewed and if necessary, adjusted to meet the realities of each farm operator. A traditional enterprise model does not consider principal payments on capital investments in said agricultural projects but Agritecture

does not consider this to tell the full financial story if this element is excluded, so principal payments are included in the financial analysis for the case studies.

Case Study 1: Agritourism Mini-Farm

What is a Mini-Farm?

A Mini-Farm is a specific type of agritourism where an area of a farm is converted into a “community farm”, where prepared beds are rented to interested individuals and families for the season. In King County, this means preparing the beds in the spring and making them available through the fall growing season. Individuals and families then use these beds to grow their own vegetables. The goals of a Mini-Farm include:

- Increase revenue for farms via Mini-Farm plot leases
- Increase revenue for farms via accessory purchases by Mini-Farmers.
- Increase revenue via a method that uses tools and systems that the farmer is already familiar with.
- Reduce labor needs on the farm. A Mini-Farm removes a plot of land from typical production, removing the labor component of those crops. Many King County farms are strained by either a lack of labor or the high cost of labor, and this helps reduce labor needs during the main production season.
- Attract more community members to your farm.
- Give community members a greater understanding of the methods and challenges of being a farmer.
- Allow community members to grow their own vegetables, especially those that might not be readily available in the area.
- Get more people interested and involved in agriculture at a deeper level.
- Establish a revenue stream that can be repeated year over year, with the costs of operation and management of the Mini-Farm should reduce as experience is gained.

[First Light Farm in Carnation](#) began a Mini-Farm program in 2012 and has been doing this with varying numbers of mini-farmers since then. Their farm is focused on bringing people to the farm and The Mini-Farm is set up in the following manner.

- The program is “announced” each year in January and interested parties express their desire to participate and pay the seasonal fee.
- Mini-farmers can choose from different plot sizes. Fees charged by First Light Farms in 2025 were the following. As can be seen, there is a slight price reduction per area as the plot sizes increase. Prices range from \$1.35 per square foot at the smallest size to \$1.17 per square foot for larger plots. According to First Light Farms, the most popular size is 10' x 30'.
 - 10' x 10' plot: \$135
 - 10' x 30' plot: \$400

- 10' x 60' plot: \$750
- 10' x 90' plot: \$1050

Agritourism in King County

Agritourism refers to farm- or agriculture-based enterprises that welcome visitors for purposes of recreation, education, entertainment, or hospitality. Rather than focusing solely on crop or livestock production for sale, these farms diversify their activities by offering opportunities for guests to experience farm life firsthand, engage with agricultural practices, enjoy food and natural landscapes, participate in learning experiences, or simply relax within rural environments. According to the 2022 USDA Census, more than 28,000 US farms used agritourism as a means to generate revenue and the average revenue generated was approximately \$44,000 per farm¹⁸. It is important to note that this is only revenue generated by the agritourism activity and does not include other direct sales to farm visitors. Across the US, farms in the <10 acre size classification had an average revenue of \$27,010 per farm. The dominant farm size in King County is under 10 acres, so this is particularly relevant. In 2022, 507 farms (1.4%) in Washington state reported income from agritourism activities, totaling \$19.1 Mn, or an average of \$37,672 per farm. In King County specifically, 61 farms reported revenue from agritourism in the 2022 Census, averaging approximately \$19,400 per farm¹⁹.

Agritourism has been identified as one of the potential mechanisms to help King County farmers increase the viability of their farms. Agritourism comes in all different sizes and formats and is already employed to some degree at farms in King County. Common forms of agritourism that many will be familiar with include pumpkin patches, corn mazes, wine tasting and u-pick operations.

This study looks specifically at using Mini-Farms as a type of agritourism activity that can be easily integrated to existing King County farm operations. While many types of agritourism can be disruptive to existing farm operations or change the culture and nature of a farm entirely, this type of agritourism is less disruptive and takes advantage of the existing skill set and resources already present in King County farms.

Demand for Mini-Farms

A comprehensive study has not been conducted to determine the level of demand for Mini-Farm plots but there is some evidence that there is demand for this type of offering:

- When First Light Farms in Carnation launched their program in 2012, they had no problem filling 25 slots in their Mini-Farm program.
- Seattle has a P-Patch program with over 90 gardens and most have waiting lists of several months to several years for a garden plot. Demand in your location may vary.

- First Light Farms is planning to use an innovative strategy in 2026 where they will partner with a non-profit organization that will secure grant funding to pay for plots that can be used by food insecure families.
- Marketing is critical to the success of participant recruitment for a Mini-Farm program. Please consider your operation's ability to successfully market this type of program when estimating the potential success of a Mini-Farm program at your farm.

Summary of Results

The study assumes an average Mini-farm occupancy rate of 28 plots of a total of 32 and a seasonal lease rate of \$400 per season. Based on the above assumptions, the total costs for a ¼ acre Mini-Farm are \$6,495. The total projected revenue from plot rentals is \$11,200, leaving an estimated Net Return of \$4,704. The break-even rental rate for Mini-Farm plots is about \$232, including all costs and depreciation. Two of the principal costs for the Mini-Farm are hiring a manager and renting a porta-potty. If the farm owner manages the program or there are restroom facilities already available on site, the net return can be increased to more than \$9,000 for a quarter acre. In comparison, most crops will return in the range of \$4 - \$5,000 per quarter acre but require 60-80 hours of labor plus management time. The Mini-Farm allows for similar or greater net returns without the high labor requirement, freeing up that element for other uses around the farm during the busy season. The table below shows the sensitivity of net returns to plot rental rates and mini-farm occupancy combinations. It is important to note that these net return scenarios do not consider accessory purchases made by Mini-Farmers at the farm, such as plant starts and vegetables.

Table 3. Estimated Net Returns (\$/Mini-Farm) at Various Plot rental rates and Plot occupancy rates

Number of plots rented (32 max)	Plot Rental Fee (\$/season 10 x 30 plot)				
	300.00	350.00	400.00	425.00	450.00
10	-\$3,496	-\$2,996	-\$2,496	-\$2,246	-\$1,996
15	-\$1,996	-\$1,246	-\$496	-\$121	\$254
20	-\$496	\$504	\$1,504	\$2,004	\$2,504
26	\$1,304	\$2,604	\$3,904	\$4,554	\$5,204
32	\$3,104	\$4,704	\$6,304	\$7,104	\$7,904

Note: Green area denotes a positive profit based on the combination of plot occupancy and rental rate.

Conclusion

The Mini-Farm is a great opportunity for the farmer who wants to increase revenue while increasing engagement with the community. It can take a small, unused or underused plot of land on the farm, and turn it into a several thousand dollars of extra income per year. The capital

requirements to get started are minimal. Most of the responsibilities are on the management side and those should decline year over year as the concept gets more established.

Case Study 2: Off-Season Greenhouse Microgreens Production

What are Microgreens?

Microgreens are immature versions of common edible plants such as radish, kale and arugula, harvested when the first true leaves appear and the crops are extremely tender. This usually translates to a growing cycle of 8-16 days, and crops that are between 1.5 - 3 inches tall. Microgreens are generally grown in 1020 trays in a very dense manner and harvested with scissors or an electric knife. Microgreens are then packaged in a bag or clamshell, refrigerated and sold. They can be sold individually, in microgreen mixes or added to salads. Microgreens generally have more flavor than mature vegetables and are great when added to sandwiches, salads and soups.

It is very important to note that microgreens are different than sprouts. While sprouts are germinated seeds which can carry food safety risks, microgreens are grown in soil or potting mix and should not pose any greater food safety risk than regular vegetable production.

Why Microgreens?

Microgreens are a good crop to add to existing farm operations, especially as an off season crop for a number of reasons.

- Microgreens are easy to produce, even for beginners. If you are not familiar with the production process, please see this guide from Penn State University (<https://extension.psu.edu/growing-microgreens>).
- Microgreens are a high value crop, so a small production area can provide a high amount of revenue.
- Microgreens can be produced in a variety of locations. This model looks at a heated high tunnel but they can also be produced in unused spaces that may already be available on a farm, such as a garage.

Why off-season production of microgreens?

There are numerous reasons why off-season microgreens production complements existing King County farm operations. These include the following:

- Many King County farms rely heavily on a CSA model. Winter CSA boxes often lack a similar variety of produce to summer CSA boxes and adding microgreens to the mix is a

great way to add variety to the CSA box and keep customers interested in subscribing year round. There are more than 40 different types of microgreens and growers can produce multiple varieties to provide customers with variety each week.

- Many King County farms already have a high tunnel and benches which are being used for seedling production in the spring but may sit vacant during the winter months. This structure can be utilized for microgreens production with some small modifications.
- King County farms generally produce a large variety of leafy greens during the summer season. While microgreens can also be produced in the summer, these may compete detrimentally with the existing leafy greens and vegetable production. It is advised to focus on off-season production and then gradually introduce during the main growing season if your customers request them or holes need to be filled in the production schedule.
- Many microgreens have high vitamin contents and are often marketed as superfoods. During the colder, wetter off-season months, colds and flus are more common and crops marketed as superfoods may be especially appealing to consumers.
- Some farms in King County struggle to provide year round employment for their workers. Off season microgreens production can help provide work to keep employees busy year round.

Demand and pricing for microgreens

Over the past 20 years, microgreens in the US have transitioned from a niche garnish, used almost exclusively by fine-dining chefs, to a high-growth mainstream consumer product. This shift has been driven by a significant increase in consumer health consciousness, as microgreens are widely marketed as being nutrient-dense, with some studies suggesting they contain significantly higher vitamin and antioxidant levels than their mature counterparts. This demand is also supported by the "farm-to-table" and "local food" movements, as microgreens are ideally suited for production in urban vertical farms and commercial greenhouses. These controlled-environment agriculture (CEA) methods allow for year-round, local production, which has increased their availability and visibility to everyday shoppers.

While specific public data on sales *volumes* (e.g., tonnage) in mainstream supermarkets is not readily available, recent market analysis shows that the retail channel is a primary driver of the sector's rapid growth. The total US microgreens market has an estimated value of approximately \$600 million for 2025, with supermarkets accounting for the largest share of sales, approximately 40%. One of the strongest indicators of supermarket demand comes from retail analytics, which show that the microgreens category turnover has been rising by as much as 28% year-over-year in stores that have implemented dedicated product displays.

Pricing for microgreens can vary greatly by variety. The larger, heavier varieties such as pea shoots and sunflower shoots will sell in the range of \$1.50 - \$2.00 per ounce while varieties such as micro basil and micro carrots can fetch up to \$5.00 - \$6.00 per ounce. At supermarket

locations in the Seattle area, microgreens retail for \$2.30 per ounce at Safeway and \$2.35 - \$2.70 per ounce at Whole Foods. For this study, an average price of \$2.50 per ounce was used.

Summary of Results

The study estimates sales of 9,594 units of microgreens (2 oz packages), across a 30 week period. This is equivalent to sales of approximately 320 units per week. Many farms have a winter CSA program. Assuming an 80 member winter CSA, then if 4 units are provided per share each week (8 oz), that will account for the entire production. If only 2 units are provided per share, then 160 units, or 20 lbs, will have to be distributed via another method. Restaurants are often users of microgreens and farms that already have restaurant customers can likely distribute this product to them. Based on the above assumptions, the total projected revenue is \$47,974, the total variable costs are \$28,173, the total fixed costs are \$13,876, leaving an estimated Net Return of \$5,924. The break-even sales cost per pack of microgreens \$4.38, including all costs and depreciation.

Table 3. Estimated Net Returns producing Microgreens at Various sales rates and volumes

Total Sales (11,288 max)	Microgreens Price (\$ per 2 oz pack)				
	3.50	4.00	4.50	5.00	5.50
7,000	-\$17,549	-\$14,049	-\$10,549	-\$7,049	-\$3,549
8,000	-\$14,049	-\$10,049	-\$6,049	-\$2,049	\$1,951
8,500	-\$12,299	-\$8,049	-\$3,799	\$451	\$4,701
9,000	-\$10,549	-\$6,049	-\$1,549	\$2,951	\$7,451
10,000	-\$7,049	-\$2,049	\$2,951	\$7,951	\$12,951

Note: Green area denotes a positive profit based on the combination of yield and price.

Conclusion

Adding or utilizing an existing high tunnel or greenhouse for off-season microgreens production can have great benefits for an existing farm operation. It is a great way to increase revenue, provide winter crop variety, increase the timespan of existing customer engagement and keep seasonal workers on site year round. Microgreens are an easy crop to grow even for people with no experience. The biggest challenge is finding buyers but with an established CSA program, it provides the perfect outlet.

Case Study 3: Pickling Vegetables to Increase Profits & Extend Customer Engagement

Why pickle vegetables?

Diverting a portion of a crop for pickling can have numerous benefits. These include:

- Providing a greater diversity of products to your customers. A greater product diversity can often result in a wider customer base, increasing opportunities for financial success. GenZ, the population group 13 - 28 years of age, is considered to be especially into pickled and fermented foods, while the traditional farmer's market shopper is over 40 and the typical CSA customer is 35 - 56 years of age.
- Extending the life of produce. Fresh market vegetables usually have a short shelf life. Pickling vegetables can extend their shelf life to 6 months.
- Cosmetically damaged produce can be hard to sell fresh but it can be easily pickled. Carrots are a crop that often suffer from cosmetic damage but can be pickled to bring good value.
- Winter CSA programs often lack product diversity. Adding pickled vegetables can help keep customer interest high, resulting in a larger customer base for a longer period each year.
- When we think of pickles, we usually think about traditional pickles (cucumbers), but in reality many different types of fruits, vegetables and even eggs can be pickled.
- Partnering with a local company that specializes in pickling, such as [The Pickled Chef](#), allows you as the farmer to focus on farming and helps support other local businesses.

Demand for pickled products

The demand for pickled products has skyrocketed over the past 5 years in the US and globally. The global fermented food market is projected to reach nearly \$800 billion by 2025. In a health-forward city like Seattle, products that offer functional benefits (like gut health from probiotics) are in high demand.

- Vendors like [Seattle Pickle Co.](#) and [Britt's Fermented Foods](#) have become staples at popular markets like Ballard, University District, and West Seattle. These vendors don't just sell pickles; they offer a connection to local agriculture, which Seattle shoppers are eager to support.
- Consumers are interested in artisan products and this includes unique pickled items, such as pickled grapes and carrots.
- GrubHub reported that orders for pickles increased by 89% from 2022 to 2023, from 3.6 to 6.9 million orders.
- Pickles are a huge food trend among GenZ²⁰. Farms that sell pickles can help them connect with a younger consumer base, something that is critically important in local agriculture.

Summary of Results

The study assumes production of 699 jars of pickles, for an off-season CSA program. Based on the assumptions given, the total costs for growing carrots for pickling is \$5,024. The total projected revenue from sales of pickled carrots is \$8,038, leaving an estimated Net Return of \$3,014. The break-even price for pickled carrots is \$7.19 including all costs and depreciation. In comparison, if the same amount of land is used for fresh market carrot production and those carrots are sold through farmer's market outlets, the net return is likely to be about the same. That is why pickling of vegetables should be used to complement existing crops and amplify product diversity rather than replacing a crop like fresh market carrots.

Table 3. Estimated Net Returns at Various sales volumes and prices per jar of pickles

Number of jars sold (max 699)	Price per jar				
	9.00	10.00	11.00	11.50	12.00
400	-\$1,424	-\$1,024	-\$624	-\$424	-\$224
500	-\$524	-\$24	\$476	\$726	\$976
575	\$151	\$726	\$1,301	\$1,588	\$1,876
625	\$601	\$1,226	\$1,851	\$2,163	\$2,476
699	\$1,267	\$1,966	\$2,665	\$3,014	\$3,364

Note: Green area denotes a positive profit based on the combination of sales volume and price.

Conclusion

Working with a local company to pickle vegetables from your farm operation is a great way to diversify your product selection and expand your customer base. The typical farmer's market and CSA customers are generally Caucasian and over 40, while GenZ, the most enthusiastic group for fermented foods is 13 - 28 years old and much more diverse. Farms should not substitute pickled carrots for fresh carrots in their markets but offer both options. Pickled options also are a great strategy to diversify off-season CSA programs and maintain product diversity throughout the year.

Case Study 4: Whole Farm Budget- CSA & Farmer's Market Distribution Channels

This model is highly relevant to many farms in King County for a number of reasons:

- Farm size: Active farms are small in King County. According to the 2022 Agricultural Census, 788 of 1,604 farms were between 1-10 acres in size. This budget presents a model that these farms can follow for a profitable operation.
- Distribution model: A farm that distributes through CSA and farmer's market channels was selected as this model since it is particularly common within King County, meaning that it likely can be an economically viable farm model if well operated. This budget can serve as a benchmarking tool for farms that are operating this type of model.
- Aspiring operators: There are numerous farm incubator programs where aspiring farmers are operating on very small plots, ¼ to 1.5 acres in size. They do this in conjunction with a full time or part time off farm job. Many of these farmers are desiring to move into farming full time but unsure how to make this work economically. This model can provide a path to follow for operators who are looking to grow their operation.
- The model considers 10 crops that are commonly grown in King County. These crops include salad mix, lettuce, kale, spinach, chard, broccoli, beets, carrots, bell peppers and butternut squash.
- Setting up, marketing and operating a 120 share CSA program can be very logistically challenging. Agritecture suggests starting with a smaller CSA program and building up to this larger number across a year or two.

Summary of Results

The study considers the cultivation of 10 crops with distribution via a 120 share CSA program which operates for 20 weeks during the main production season, June - October. Additional sales are done through farmer's markets, also during the same 20 week period. The model estimates sales of \$362,000 or approximately \$45,000 per acre of production. The variable costs are estimated at approximately \$184,000 or \$23,000 per acre of production. The fixed costs are estimated to total approximately \$45,000 per year. This leaves a net return of approximately \$134,000 for the farm operator, or approximately \$17,000 per acre. It is important to note that the owner operator is assumed to perform all of the tractor and management work associated with the farm and other than portions of this work that may be outsourced, such as farm overhead items like accounting, and is not compensated directly for these activities. The owner is only compensated based on the returns of the farm. Taxes are also not considered in this budget, which will also reduce the final take home amount for the farm operator. **This budget contains more than 100 different assumptions and factors that can each greatly affect the financial outcome. It is critical to closely examine the assumptions made in this guide and then adjust the data in this model to be appropriate for your own operation.**

Storytelling Models for Social Media

Storytelling Models: Key Points

Social media has exploded in popularity in our society but many farmers and the agricultural community in general have not kept up the same social media pace. This means that local agriculture is excluded from the “reality” of so many. A King County social media campaign can help bridge the gap between the agricultural community and the urban dweller.

- **Storytelling is Critical for Farm Visibility and Viability:** In a region with strong tech, food culture, and environmental values, intentional storytelling is essential to prevent farms from becoming politically, economically, and culturally vulnerable by making farmers “seen again” and bridging the gap with urban consumers.
- **Use of Farmer Trading Cards and Short Videos:** The core strategy is a paired format of collectible Farmer Trading Cards and Short-Form Videos.
 - The cards are instantly recognizable, personal, and efficient for communicating identity and purpose.
 - The videos strengthen the emotional connection and are ideal for social platforms like TikTok and Instagram, capitalizing on their algorithmic reach to introduce new audiences to farming.
- **Connect to Consumer Values:** The content successfully reframes farming not just as agriculture, but as shared community values like “climate-action,” “food justice,” “equity,” and “community care.” This focus on value similarity is key to earning consumer trust, as identified by the Center for Food Integrity (CFI).
- **Designed for Digital and Local Impact:** The content is optimized for social platforms, can be leveraged by local partners (schools, chefs, etc.), and drives traffic to a central landing page for consistent branding and engagement tracking.
- **Proven Economic Benefits:** Case studies like CISA’s *Local Hero* demonstrate that strategic marketing can significantly increase farm profitability and help recirculate consumer spending back into the local agricultural economy.

Why King County Needs Storytelling

In a region like King County where tech, food culture, and environmental values run deep—marketing isn’t just about visibility. It’s about connection. Farming happens on the edge of cities, carried out by people most consumers will never meet. Without intentional storytelling farms remain invisible. When farms are invisible, they become vulnerable politically, economically, and culturally.

Storytelling is how we make farmers seen again.

Each farmer card and short video collapses the distance between urban consumers and the people feeding them. In a place like Seattle—where diversity, sustainability, and community impact are celebrated—these stories hit directly at what people already value. It’s just been that until now there hasn’t been a way for people to connect with them.

Farmer Trading Cards: Why this Strategy Works

The trading-card format works because it feels familiar, collectible, and personal. It breaks farming down into approachable, person-connected stories. A single card can efficiently communicate identity, purpose, and place in seconds. These cards used at farmers markets can spark discovery, used at grocery stores can spark recognition, and digital cards can spark curiosity and sharing.

Rooted in King County

Sean Stratman

SnoValley Tilth
SnoValleyTilth.org, @snovalleytilth

Cultivating Farmers

Rooted in King County Learn more

Growing Farmers, Not Just Crops

- Raises and mentors new farmers from around the world growing multicultural crops that feed Seattle.

Healthy Soil, Healthy Communities

- Innovation, resilience, and care for the earth nourish both people and place.

Farming as Connection

"Each seed builds belonging, linking cultures, land, and community growth."

Figure 9: Rooted in King County farmer card highlighting Sean at Sno Valley Tilth

Rooted in King County

Masra Clamoungou



Black Farmers Collective
Blackfarmerscollective.org, @blackfarmerscollective

**Sovereignty
in the Soil**

Rooted in King County
Learn more 

Sovereignty in the Soil

- A nonprofit collective growing food, farmers, and belonging through sustainable, community-led practices.



The Incubator Farm

- New growers learn, share land, and connect to local markets—building equity from the ground up



Land as Liberation

"Each acre farmed strengthens food sovereignty, empowering future generations with ownership and dignity."

Figure 10: Rooted in King County farmer card highlighting Masra at Black Farmers Collective

Rooted in King County

**Ashley, Ellen and Ryan
Frisky Girl Farm x
Steel Wheel Farm**



Steel Wheel Farm
Friskygirlfarm.com, @friskygirlfarm

**Greens to Grains
Customized CSA**

Rooted in King County
Learn more 

Community Grown

- Two hundred families share in the harvest, fresh, local, and packed by hand with care..



Sustainable from Soil to Table

- Organic methods turn greens to grains, restoring the earth and feeding the region.



Stronger Together

"Through the SnoValley Co-op, farmers and neighbors grow a more connected, resilient community.."

Figure 11: Rooted in King County farmer card highlighting Ashley, Ellen & Ryan at Frisky Girl & Steel Wheel Farms

Rooted in King County

Lisa & Chris



Forest Garden farm
ForestGardenFarm.earth, @forestgardenfarm

Soil Preservation and Innovation

Farming for Regeneration

- No-till methods, cover crops, and diverse plantings restore soil life and pollinator habitats.

Rooted in Legacy

- At the historic Fujioka Farm, heritage meets community through local food and shared abundance

Learning from the Land

"Experimenting with living roots and rewilding 22 acres, they're rebuilding ecosystems for future generations."

Rooted in  King County **Learn more** 




Figure 12: Rooted in King County farmer card highlighting Lisa & Chris at Forest Garden Farm

Rooted in King County

Eric Popp



Carnation Farms
Carnationfarms.org, @carnationfarms

Mastering Rotational Grazing

Regenerative Roots

- Rotational grazing nurtures healthy animals, fertile soil, and thriving ecosystems.

120 Years, One Mission

- Carnation Farms carries forward a legacy of sustainability, education, and innovation.

From Field to Community

"Workshops and shared meals connect farmers, chefs, and neighbors, proving that healthy soil grows healthy communities.."

Rooted in  King County **Learn more** 

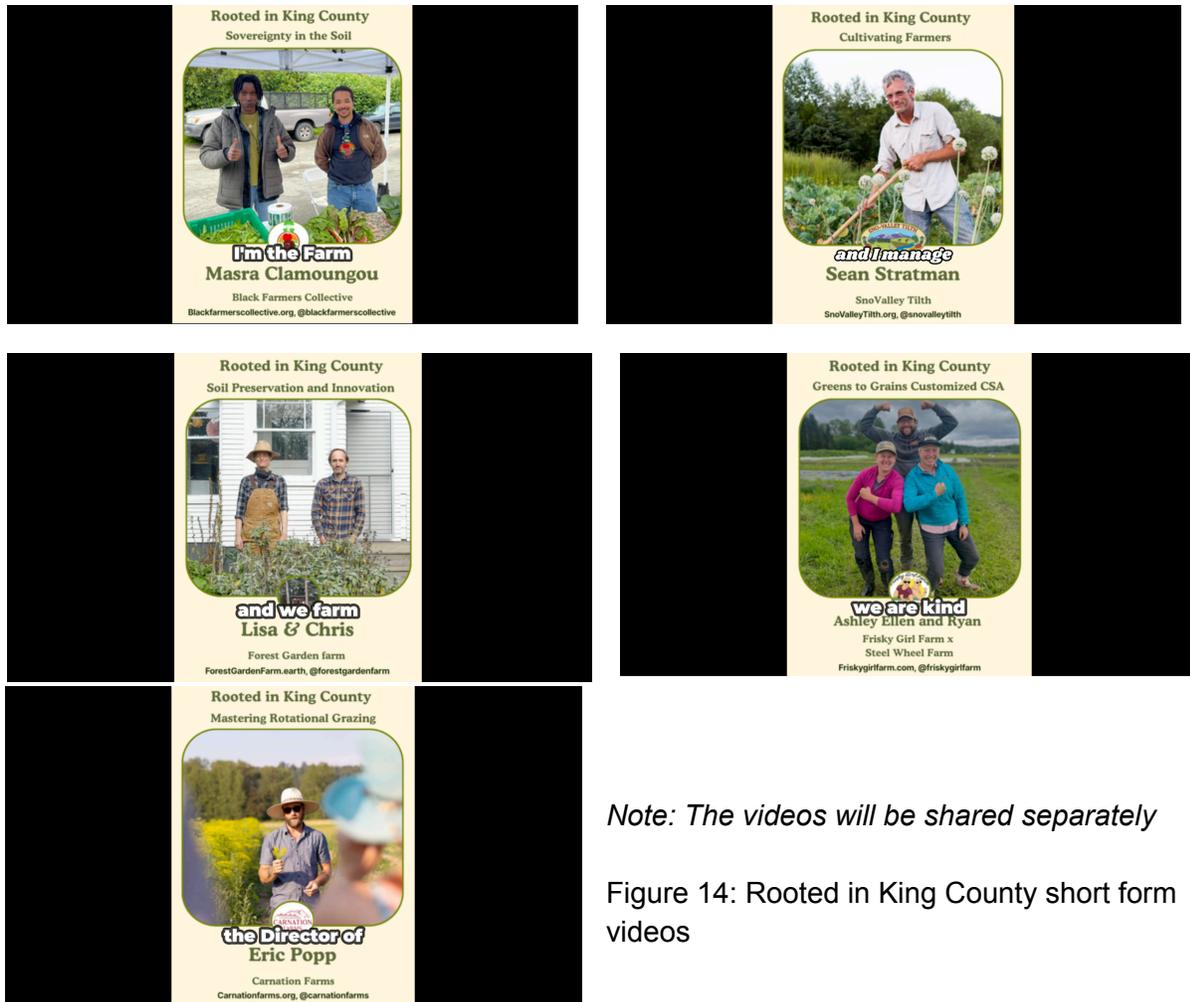



Figure 13: Rooted in King County farmer card highlighting Eric at Carnation Farm

Additionally, the short-form videos that are paired with these cards can strengthen the emotional bridge. People scrolling TikTok or Instagram can have a moment of learning and connection. For a county trying to support small and midsize growers, these moments of connection build

infrastructure. They build trust and loyalty, shifting agriculture from something that may be abstract to the urban resident to something deeply local and human. The Center for Food Integrity found that value similarity is key to earning trust. They found that having “shared values is 3-to-5 times more important to earning trust than talking about science or demonstrating technical skills and expertise”.²¹

The Short-Form Videos (1-2 Minutes in length)



Seattle hosts more than 40 farmers’ markets and we know that demand for local food is high. Moreover, programs like Farmstand Local Foods that connect BIPOC and immigrant farmers with urban consumers reflects Seattleites’ interest in justice and resilient food systems²². It’s clear that Seattle residents seek things that are local, sustainable, artisanal, heritage, and community-driven. King County farmers meet all of those expectations but many residents don’t know it. When a consumer encounters a beautifully designed farmer card featuring growers like Lisa & Chris of Forest Garden Farm, who use no-till methods, cover crops, and diverse plantings to restore soil life and pollinator habitats, they immediately recognize how it aligns with

their values. These stories reveal what's been inaccessible: innovators building soil health, communities reviving heritage farms, young farmers practicing regenerative practices, and communities fighting for equity and access in food systems.

To Seattle residents, it doesn't have to be "just farming" to them. Through our form of storytelling it becomes "climate-action", "food justice", "culture", "community care", "equity", "empowerment of future generations". It's the kind of thing people want to repost. A form of social signaling that helps people identify and indicate the types of communities and values they want to be associated with—what they care about, what they believe in, and what they want their region to be. For example, from the Center For Food Integrity's 2023 study they found that "with Gen Z, food goes beyond basic sustenance, enjoyment and tradition. They tie what they eat directly to their identities, according to 2022 research that surveyed consumers in the U.S. and UK. The survey showed that more than half of the Gen Z respondents believe what they eat is indicative of who they are as a person".²³

Farming now feels modern, intentional, and part of a larger mission.

Ultimately, these stories aren't agricultural—they're human. And that's why people will respond. The cards give a face, a name, a farm, and a mission. The videos give voice, emotion, movement, and personality. They turn farmers from anonymous laborers into local icons. We start rooting for them, caring about them, and of course choosing them.

Why People Who Know Nothing About Agriculture Will Still Connect

A person doesn't need to know what rotational grazing is or agricultural understanding to feel the joy of someone harvesting a crop that connects them to their heritage like what Sean Straman is doing at SnoValley Tilth. These cards and videos offer multiple doorways into caring:

- Kids see the cards at farmers markets or grocery stores and are hooked by the colors, faces, fun facts, and the collectibility.
- Food lovers see freshness and organic crops
- Environmentalists see soil carbon, pollinators, and rewilding
- Community-minded people see mentorship, education, and shared meals

These are just a few examples of what people can latch onto.

Social Media Strategy

The farmer card and short-form video format is designed to function across multiple social platforms. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Youtube Shorts, TikTok, Facebook, and LinkedIn are ideal channels for agricultural storytelling because they allow visual and narrative posts that can create emotional connections with consumers. Because of the card's design, these cards can be used by local partners (schools, chefs, food banks, community

organizations, etc.) who can use them to feature farmers they work with, creating a known network and recognizable identity. The trading-card design makes the content instantly recognizable and transferable across most platforms. Every card and video also links back to a centralized “Rooted in King County” landing page which allows easy tracking of engagement, updates to farmer features, and integrations with newsletters, events, and local programs. The goal is to have brand consistency and offline to online engagement.



Figure 15: Rooted in King County farmer cards - second design option

Additionally, Social Media has the power of reach. For example, TikTok’s “For You” algorithm pushes content to users based on engagement signals, not who they follow. This is ideal for reaching people who don’t already care about farming. The short videos are an ideal length for TikTok and the captions will help keep audiences engaged. We also know that Gen Z consumes “edutainment” at high rates. Video explainers receive longer watch times and higher share rates. Our short farm videos naturally lend to this style.

We can draw from social-media storytelling campaigns like [Know Farms Know Food](#) who provide free online promotions and digital assets to farmers so that they can share it online themselves which helps consumers develop relationships with farms. These strategies also differentiate local agriculture from commodity products. Campaigns like Marin County’s *GROWN*

LOCAL use bright signage and a local label to remind customers that purchasing local food keeps dollars in the local economy.²⁴



Figure 16: Various logos supporting local food across the US

Why Storytelling is Important for Healthy Economies

Our form of marketing and promotion is critical for the health of the agricultural economy as it creates demand and ensures that dollars spent on food return to local producers. King County's Local Food Initiative notes that only ~2 % of the US\$6 billion spent on food in the region goes back to local farms²⁵. Much more of this spending should be recirculating back into the local economy.

We can look to [CISA's Local Hero](#) campaign in Massachusetts. The campaign has been running since 1999 and uses paid advertising, social media and a recognizable logo. They found that from this campaign, 54% of participating farms reported net income increases and more than 78% of residents recognize the logo. This demonstrates that marketing strengthens farmers' profitability and keeps agricultural land in production, which in turn helps sustain healthy rural communities.



Figure 17: Rooted in King County farmer cards - second design option (con't)

Conclusion

This storytelling model provides King County with an evidence-based strategy for strengthening the visibility, viability, and long-term resilience of its agricultural sector. Farmer cards and short-form videos humanizes growers, illustrates shared values, and educates consumers through engaging and accessible formats. By making farmers visible, relatable, and present in the regular media habits of consumers we connect people to their food and to one another. This storytelling plan creates emotional infrastructure: a system of memories, faces, voices, and values that anchors agriculture into the lives of people who rely on it but rarely see it.

This approach aligns contemporary media consumption patterns, short videos and engaging posts, to reinforce broader local-food goals. By increasing consumer recognition, strengthening brand identity, and linking engagement with in-person experiences at markets and grocery stores, this model supports both farm profitability and community connection. Programs from CISA's Local Hero to Marin County's GROWN LOCAL demonstrate that strategic storytelling can deliver measurable economic benefits and expands the share of dollars staying within the region.

By lifting the people behind the work, we can ensure that King County agriculture remains culturally relevant and economically viable. Let's keep farmers rooted, thriving, and able to nourish the region for generations to come.

Endnotes

1. Text from King County Agricultural Study contract
2. <https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/dnrp/about-king-county/about-dnrp/sustainability-commitments/local-food-initiative>
3. <https://www.farmkingcounty.org/data-center/index.html>
4. There is extremely little data available that calculates savings to farmers from sharing equipment. One study in Sweden with a 20 year simulation period found that equipment sharing resulted in a 50% reduction in investment cost and a 15% reduction in operational expenses. These figures were for the sharing of equipment for the production of wheat and other cereals amongst 6 farmers, with production areas ranging from 59 - 164 ha (145 - 405 acres)([source](#)). AGR advises against using these figures as meaningful metrics since this size of farm is not prevalent in King County- Census data shows only 2.4% of farms in King County (39/1604) larger than 180 acres. (2022 USDA Agricultural Census)
5. <https://kingcd.org/programs/better-food/equipment-share-program/>
6. Per direct conversation with Carrie King. Survey link [here](#).
7. https://vashon.myturn.com/library/inventory/browse?category_hierarchy=0%2FYard+and+Garden%7C848
8. AGR also reached out to the 21 Acres Electric Tractor Sharing program and the Feisty Fowl PPU. As of the writing of this report, the communication has been unsuccessful and no important information has been gained. If that changes, this report will be updated with the relevant information.
9. <https://agfundernews.com/exclusive-harvestport-closes-2-5m-series-cultivian-taylor-farms>
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16. <https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/community/amazon-seattle-bellevue-puget-sound-news?p=amazon-gives-2-million-to-support-critical-food-security-initiatives-in-seattle-region>
17. The average community foundation investment return was approx 7% over the past 10 years which would require an endowment of approximately \$11.5 Mn to provide a return of \$800k. If investment criteria are stricter and the an annual average return is only 5%, then an endowment of \$16 Mn would be required to meet the annual \$800k goal. This does not include management fees or operations budget.
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King County Agricultural Sector Study

Strategies to Address Farmworker Housing Needs



NOVEMBER 2025





STRATEGY ■ ANALYSIS ■ COMMUNICATIONS

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Project Team

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Photo Source: Unsplash

Executive Summary

The lack of affordable housing options for farmworkers is an urgent challenge that impacts the viability of King County’s agricultural economy. While there are many initiatives in King County to tackle housing affordability, none focus specifically on the needs of farmworkers. This study identifies several barriers to meeting farmworker housing needs, as well as strategies to overcome those barriers. It also presents five case studies of innovative approaches to meeting farmworker housing needs in similar communities across Washington and the United States. This work supports King County’s commitment to a vibrant agricultural sector, as it implements the minimum wage requirements established by Ordinance 19762.¹

Barriers to Meeting Farmworker Housing Needs

- **Lack of Data About Farmworkers**, including limited understanding of farmworker demographics and their housing needs.
- **Economic Barriers to Employer-Provided Housing**, including limited farm capital for housing and limitations on economy of scale due to the propensity of small farms.
- **Barriers to On-Farm Housing Development**, such as floodplain development restrictions, limitations on new housing construction in rural areas consistent with state law, complex permitting requirements, a need to interface with multiple agencies, unclear land use and infrastructure regulations and misalignment between unit allowances and labor needs.
- **Barriers to Farmworker Housing in Nearby Communities**, including land use and density limitations and a lack of local affordable housing providers that specialize in farmworker housing.

Strategies and Actions for County Consideration

1. **PRIORITY ACTION: Increase Knowledge of Farmworker Housing Needs** by conducting regular housing needs assessments. This is a necessary first step that will provide focus for the remaining strategies. It would help the County to customize strategies to address the unique conditions of each agricultural region.
2. **Support Off-Farm Housing That Prioritizes Farmworkers.** Integrating farmworkers into existing communities is an equitable strategy and a best practice from the case studies. In addition, not every farm in King County is appropriate for on-farm housing, due to size and geography. Specific actions to support the development of off-farm housing include:
 - a. Explore partnerships with housing providers to identify solutions that meet local need.
 - b. Identify opportunity sites through local city knowledge and the most recent Urban Growth Capacity Report.
 - c. Build local understanding and support of the need for affordable farmworker housing.
3. **Lower Unnecessary Barriers to On-Farm Housing.** Where appropriate, look at opportunities to clarify the permit process and consider greater zoning flexibility for farmworker housing in an intentional way. Actions to consider include:
 - a. Develop a navigator program to help guide the agricultural housing permitting process.
 - b. Provide preapproved plan designs for temporary and permanent farmworker housing.

- c. Provide a list of contractors who specialize in farmworker and temporary housing development.
 - d. Reduce or eliminate the permit cost for new farmworker housing.
 - e. Apply a planned rural residential development overlay in select Agricultural and Rural Area zones.
 - f. Revise permanent farmworker housing so unit limits are based on farm operations and tied to labor need, instead of farm acreage.
4. **Lower Barriers to Temporary Farmworker Housing.** Where appropriate, reduce barriers to the use of wheeled housing that can more easily be moved off-farm in the winter months, and review and clarify requirements for temporary farmworker housing. Specific actions include:
- a. Review zoning barriers that prevent the siting of temporary wheeled homes on a single parcel.
 - b. Provide space outside the floodplain to store temporary farmworker housing.
 - c. Clarify and remove the county requirement that homes on wheels cannot be occupied for more than 60 days per 365-day period.
 - d. Advocate for Washington Department of Health (WADOH) to review its water supply requirement for licensed temporary farmworker housing.
 - e. Provide clear guidance on the requirements for non-WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing.
 - f. Review allowable permitted building types for non-WADOH-licensed temporary housing.
5. **Improve Farmer Access to Capital** to develop or acquire farmworker housing by leveraging the Farmland Preservation program. The County and Flood Program Preservation staff could explore modifying the program to provide capital to farm owners that could be used to support the development of deed-restricted farmworker housing.
6. **Preserve Existing Housing on Farmland** when elevating and floodproofing is feasible by leveraging the Flood Buyout and Elevation Program. Actions to consider include:
- a. Prioritize elevation assistance for farmworkers and farm residences.
 - b. Review the process of participating in the home elevation process and identify opportunities to streamline participation for farm owners.
 - c. Coordinate with state and federal programs to leverage funds for elevation and repair.
 - d. Develop a safe housing fund to offset the cost of elevating or retrofitting farm housing.
 - e. Introduce covenants to maintain affordability of a home after it has been retrofitted.

While this study is narrowly focused on addressing farmworker housing needs, we recognize the County is balancing many policy objectives that must be considered holistically. Each strategy should be evaluated based on its potential to improve the lives of farmworkers, increase the viability of farms, and avoid unintended negative consequences. As a next step, the County could explore these barriers and strategies in more depth through the forthcoming **Rural Economic Strategies Review, Analysis, and Evaluation**, which will be conducted between 2026-2028. That study is expected to include a more detailed assessment of farmworker housing needs and potential recommendations to strategies, policies, and codes. That study will be invaluable to prioritize the actions presented in this study and identify where the County should focus for implementation.

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Introduction

Background

King County is in the midst of a [sustained housing crisis](#), with the greatest impacts to households with low incomes. Even with the recent increase to King County's minimum wage, it can be extremely difficult for workers with low wages to find affordable housing near their places of work. This challenge is particularly acute for farmworkers, who often work at the outskirts of metropolitan regions, where housing options are most limited. As a result, many farmers and farmworkers face long commutes and increased transportation costs, which can diminish their overall quality of life, inhibit the ability of farm businesses to attract needed workers, and reduce the economic sustainability of local food systems.

Maintaining a viable and vibrant agricultural economy in King County requires a stable and reliable workforce. Ensuring that farmworkers have access to safe and affordable housing options is essential to this stability.

There are currently many initiatives in King County to address the housing shortage and support the production of new affordable housing. However, few of these initiatives focus specifically on the housing needs of farmworkers.ⁱⁱ The issue of farmworker housing has received more attention in other parts of the state where agriculture is a much larger proportion of the regional economy. For instance, the 2022 Washington Farmworker Housing Needs Assessmentⁱⁱⁱ profiles conditions in 11 counties, none of which are in the Central Puget Sound region. This previous study and others provide important general insights into how farmworker housing needs can vary from the needs of other workers with low wages, but do not address King County's unique conditions and challenges, including:

- **Rapid growth.** King County is in the center of a rapidly growing metropolitan region. Housing production has not kept pace with demand, which intensifies competition and drives up housing costs.
- **Land Use and Zoning regulations.**
 - **County land use and zoning.** Consistent with state law, King County has strong growth management policies that limit housing production in rural unincorporated areas that surround many Agricultural Production Districts (APDs). Instead, county policies focus the majority of new housing production in established urban and regional centers, which are typically further from agricultural areas.
 - **Nearby City zoning.** Many of the incorporated cities and towns neighboring APDs have less zoned capacity for new housing construction than larger cities and may be required by countywide policies to help maintain rural character. This has historically resulted in less production of lower-cost housing options, such as apartment buildings.

- **Floodplains.** Many farms are in floodplains where new development is highly regulated to protect public health and safety. This limits farmers' options for providing permanent on-farm housing.

To address the need for farmworker housing in King County, the County could pursue innovative new strategies such as those detailed in this report.

DEFINITIONS

The following terms are used throughout the report.

- **Farm** – the land, buildings equipment and infrastructure used in the raising and production of agricultural products and/or livestock for commercial sales. A farm in King County may be either owned or leased.
- **Farmer** – an agricultural employer responsible for managing or operating a farm. It includes farm owners and farm operators, and a farmer may be the landowner or the lessee of a farm. A farmer can employ farmworkers to support farm operations.
- **Farmworker** – a person who is employed under the direction of a farmer in connection with the employer's agricultural activity. Farmworkers may be hired on a permanent, seasonal, or part-time basis, depending on the needs of the farm operation.

King County Agricultural Regions

This study focuses on farmworker housing needs in six different agricultural regions of King County. These include five designated APDs as well as Vashon Island. Each region is unique, and the kinds of housing options available for farmworkers varies significantly. So, while there are some overarching challenges that impact housing availability and affordability countywide, conditions in each agricultural region present unique challenges and opportunities for farmworkers seeking housing options.

Enumclaw Plateau APD

The Enumclaw Plateau APD consists of three large areas surrounding the city of Enumclaw and its unincorporated urban growth area (UGA). The largest area extends to the northwest and adjoins the Upper Green River APD. The city of Black Diamond is nearby to the north, and the city of Buckley in Pierce County adjoins the APD to the south. The remaining area surrounding the APD is unincorporated rural land.

With the exception of Vashon Island, this agricultural region is furthest away from the urban core of King County. However, its proximity to three cities provides some options for housing within reasonable commuting distance. These cities and the unincorporated UGA also provide urban areas where new off-farm farmworker housing could be sited.

Lower Green River APD

The Lower Green River APD includes two relatively small agricultural areas that are surrounded by the cities of Kent and Auburn as well as unincorporated King County. This farmland is surrounded by urban areas and far from rural parts in the county. While much of the surrounding area is built out with detached single family homes, there are nearby apartment buildings and affordable housing providers. Among the agricultural regions in this study, the Lower Green River APD has the greatest supply of nearby housing options available to farmworkers. Additionally, while still unaffordable to the typical farmworker, rents for housing in this area are relatively low compared to the rest of King County.

Sammamish River APD

The Sammamish River APD is a relatively small agricultural region located in northern King County. It borders the cities of Kirkland, Redmond, and Woodinville. To the east is unincorporated rural land. While this APD is relatively near large suburban population centers that can add to existing housing inventories, it is the most expensive part of King County when it comes to housing costs. So, housing affordability is a particular challenge.

Snoqualmie River APD

The Snoqualmie River APD includes two large agricultural areas located next to the Cascade foothills at the outskirts of the Seattle metropolitan region in northeast King County. This area is mostly surrounded by unincorporated rural King County with a few adjoining urban areas. The northern section borders the city of Duvall and its UGA, while the city of Carnation and its UGA is sandwiched between the two areas. To the east is the city of Sammamish and its unincorporated UGA. To the south is Fall City, a rural town with some urban-level zoning. These urban incorporated areas and unincorporated areas with urban-level zoning have opportunities to add additional housing consistent with state law.

Given its remote location, housing availability is scarce. The neighboring cities have very limited housing options affordable to farmworkers. It is likely that many farmworkers commute long distances to work in this area.

Upper Green River APD

This APD stretches from the city of Auburn to the east out to nearly the city of Black Diamond to the west. Most of its area borders unincorporated rural King County, including the Enumclaw Plateau APD to the south. Geographic barriers and lack of road network connectivity keep this region fairly isolated from its urban neighbors. There is a limited supply of nearby housing options. However, the urban incorporated areas like the city of Black Diamond have opportunities to add additional housing.

Vashon Island

Vashon Island is located in Puget Sound and accessible only by ferry. The island does not include any cities and is not part of the UGA. Housing options are limited, consistent with its rural designation, and spread thinly across the island.¹ However, the rural town of Vashon in the center of the island is zoned for multifamily housing at a moderate density. This area has seen some affordable housing production in recent years.

There is limited water supply on Vashon Island that impacts future development. King County Water District 19, which provides water service to Vashon Island, issued a water connection moratorium from 2022-2023. Since then, the Water District has held an annual lottery to issue new water connections. There is a draft resolution to amend the District's water allocation process and prioritize new affordable housing development for new water connections.^{iv} However, it has not yet been approved.

Given that there are limited affordable options for farmworkers on Vashon Island, the County is making efforts to increase affordable housing. In the most recent comprehensive plan update, the County upzoned the rural town to allow for moderate density housing.

Organization of this Report

There are three primary sections in the body of this report:

- **Accessibility of Existing and Planned Housing to Farmworkers** summarizes the availability of housing options in proximity to the agricultural regions in King County. This includes market housing, subsidized affordable housing, and planned future affordable housing projects.
- **Barriers to Meeting Farmworker Housing Needs** identifies several barriers to meeting farmworker housing needs in King County.
- **Strategies and Actions for Addressing Farmworker Housing Needs** include six strategies for overcoming barriers as well as several potential actions for the County to consider. For many of these actions, there are examples of successful implementation in other parts of the country.

The report also includes the following appendices:

- **BERK Appendix A. Case Studies of Off-Farm Housing** highlights five examples of recently developed farmworker housing outside of King County and lessons learned.
- **BERK Appendix B: Requirements of Farmworker Housing in King County** summarizes an overview of requirements to build permitted farmworker housing.
- **BERK Appendix C: Zoning in Agricultural and Rural Areas** describes the allowable residential density levels within the common zoning areas of farmland in King County.

¹ As a local vacation destination, Vashon Island is also impacted by a strong demand for short-term rentals through services such as Airbnb. This further reduces the supply of housing potentially available for use by farmworkers.

- **BERK Appendix D: Floodplain Development Details** provides a high-level overview of floodplain regulations and the location of the floodplain in relation to the APDs and farmland in King County.

Methodology

The BERK team conducted a blend of desk research and engagement to support this study.

Desk research

- **Landscape scan.** Review of existing studies and resources about farmworker housing, both within and outside King County. Examples include data from the USDA Census of Agriculture; publications from King County’s Local Food Initiative; and the Washington State Department of Commerce’s 2021 Washington Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment. See for a summary of all sources used.
- **Code review.** Collaboration with King County staff to review and analyze King County land use code to understand limitations, allowances, and expectations for development of on-farm housing.
- **Housing assessment.** Analysis of market-rate housing affordability for farmworkers and an inventory of current and planned affordable housing near agricultural regions.

Engagement

- **Engagement with farmers in King County.** Interviews and email correspondence with eight farmers in King County to understand examples of and barriers to employer-provided farmworker housing. Farms engaged included:
 - Carnation Farms
 - Forest Garden Farm
 - Frisky Girl Farm
 - Jubilee Farms
 - Keller Farms
 - Local Roots Farm
 - Matsuda Farm (Vashon Land Trust)
 - Steel Wheel Farm
- **Engagement with farm organizations that operate in King County.** Interviews and email correspondence with six organizations that provide support to farms in King County to understand broader patterns affecting farmworker housing in the agricultural industry. Organizations engaged included:
 - Business Impact Northwest
 - Northwest Agriculture Business Center

- Snoqualmie Valley Preservation Alliance
- SnoValley Tilth
- Vashon Island Growers Association
- VIVA Farms
- **Engagement with farmworker housing providers and organizations outside King County.**
Interviews and email correspondence with six organizations and housing providers that offer farmworker housing in other counties to understand potential models for new farmworker housing within King County. Organizations engaged included:
 - Jefferson Land Trust
 - Olympic Housing Trust
 - Office of Rural and Farmworker Housing
 - People’s Self-Help Housing Corporation
 - Skagit County Housing Authority
 - Worker and Farmer Labor Association

Accessibility of Existing and Planned Housing to Farmworkers

Farmworker Housing Needs in King County

There is limited information about the housing needs of farmers and farmworkers in King County. Washington State Employment Security Department Agricultural Workforce Statistics^v indicate that there were at least 1,360 agricultural workers in King County in 2024.^{vi} This number excludes many self-employed farmers and farmworkers. So, the actual population in need of accessible and affordable housing is likely higher. Every five years, the USDA Census of Agriculture conducts a complete count of US farms and producers, defined as “a person who is involved in making decisions for the farm operation.” However, the Census of Agriculture does not collect information about farmworkers other than producers.

There is no data available about where farmers and farmworkers live or whether they have found affordable housing opportunities in King County. There is also a lack of quantitative data about the characteristics of these agricultural workers. For instance, there is no reliable information about how many farmworkers are seasonal compared to year-round; how many workers are single; how many have families; how many live in housing provided by their employer; or how many live in surrounding communities.

This study does not include a full assessment of the agricultural workforce or farmworker housing needs. Our primary and most urgent recommendation is for the County to conduct a Housing Needs Assessment for farmworkers, so that strategies can be tailored to identified needs.

Based on interviews with farmers and farm organizations in King County, the BERK team has learned that housing affordability is an urgent challenge impacting the viability of local farms. We have also learned that farmworkers housing needs can vary based on farm type and location. Some takeaways include:

- Many small farms employ no farmworkers. Instead, the farm owner and their family provide all labor.
- Some farms employ farmworkers only seasonally or part-time for harvesting crops, while others employ workers year-round.
- Unlike many fruit orchards and farms in Eastern Washington, farms in King County do not typically rely on migrant farmworkers.
- Some farms provide on-farm housing for farmworkers. But many do not, and it is likely that most farmworkers in King County live in surrounding communities.
- Some farms provide housing as a benefit for their workers, while others make the housing available for rent to their workers.

These qualitative findings indicate that farmworker housing needs are diverse. While affordability is one important barrier to farmworkers' ability to access housing, there are other dimensions as well. There are seven different dimensions of housing accessibility that can be used to assess whether available housing is accessible to farmworkers and meeting their housing needs.

- **Affordability:** Is the monthly housing cost less than 30% of the typical farmworker's household income?
- **Workplace access:** Is the home close enough to the work location for a reasonable daily commute? Are there adequate options for commuting to the workplace location? Would the farmworker need a personal vehicle? Or is transit an option?
- **Access to utilities:** Does the housing provide access to basic utilities (i.e., electricity, internet, potable running water, refrigeration, kitchen, safe disposal of sewage and waste)?
- **Access to services:** Is the housing in a location where occupants have adequate access to services, such as groceries, pharmacy, laundry, etc.?
- **Size and suitability:** Are the size and format of the housing unit appropriate for the farmworker's needs? This will vary by context. Smaller, temporary units may be suitable for seasonal workers that move several times a year, while year-round workers may need larger permanent units suitable for families.
- **Population served:** Does the property allow for working individuals and families? Many income-restricted affordable housing projects are designated for specific populations such as formerly homeless, seniors, disabled, veterans, and/or those with needs for permanent supportive services. These kinds of places would typically not accept farmworkers.
- **Farmworker priority:** Does the housing manager prioritize farmworkers when making units available for occupancy? Or must farmworkers compete with all other eligible households?

Market Housing Accessibility and Affordability

About 94% of the housing units in King County are provided by the market, where rents and housing prices are determined by competition.^{vii} It is likely that most farmworkers must compete for housing in this same market. While housing costs have increased dramatically over the past decade, there is wide variation in average rental housing costs across the county. There is also wide variation in the available supply of housing options in proximity to agricultural regions.

Exhibit 1 presents average rents among active listings within an approximately six-mile radius of each APD. These monthly rents are compared to the monthly earnings of a minimum wage worker, based on King County's 2025 small business minimum wage (\$17.29/hour).^{viii} While some farmworkers are paid more than this amount, minimum wage is nonetheless a useful benchmark for housing affordability evaluation.

In all regions, average rental housing costs were near or above 50% of monthly income. This is the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's threshold for considering a household to be "severely cost burdened" where remaining income may be insufficient to cover other life necessities such as transportation, food, and utilities. Housing costs are highest near

the Snoqualmie River APD at 69% of minimum wage income, and lowest in the Upper Green River APD at 48%. In Vashon Island, the supply of housing is so limited that there was only a single studio rental listing at the time of analysis.

Exhibit 1. Market-Rate Rental Housing Affordability Near Agricultural Regions

Agricultural Region	Average 1 bedroom apartment rent	Monthly income needed to afford	Monthly min. wage income for small farm (\$17.29/hour)	Market rent as a % of minimum wage
Enumclaw Plateau APD	\$1,700	\$5,667	\$2,997	57%
Lower Green River APD	\$1,590	\$5,300		53%
Sammamish River APD	\$1,753	\$5,843		58%
Snoqualmie River APD	\$2,062	\$6,873		69%
Upper Green River APD	\$1,435	\$4,783		48%
Vashon Island	Insufficient data*			

* Vashon Island included a single studio rental listing with inconsistent information.

Source: Craigslist, 2025 (Average studio or 1 bedroom apartment rent for active listings on Sept. 22, 2025); King County, 2025; BERK, 2025.

While farmworkers can live further from their worksite, there are no areas of King County where rents are significantly lower than those shown in **Exhibit 1**. The average studio or 1-bedroom apartment listing countywide was \$1,862 at the time of analysis, higher than all but one of the APDs.

Another way to measure affordability is to compare annual wages to a Living Wage. [MIT Living Wage Calculator](#) estimates that a single adult with no children in King County needs an annual income of approximately \$64,100—including \$27,588 just for housing—and more to support a family or children. A farmworker paid the small business minimum wage in 2025 only earns about \$36,000 per year.^{ix}

Subsidized Affordable Housing Supply

As of 2023, King County had nearly 66,000 subsidized rental housing units available for income-qualified tenants.^x Some of these units are available only for specific populations such as seniors or veterans, due to restrictions placed by the funding used to build the housing. Other units are reserved for individuals who need permanent supportive housing. The remainder of this housing is typically available to any resident who meets the income qualification. The income of many farmworkers is often low enough to qualify for these affordable housing units. However, the supply of affordable housing is far less than the

demand. So, farmworkers seeking permanent year-round housing must compete with other low-income residents to gain access to this housing.

Exhibit 2 summarizes affordable housing within a 15-minute drive of an agricultural region in King County. It excludes housing known to be exclusively available for specific populations, such as seniors, veterans, or permanent supportive housing. In total, there were nearly 23,000 units near these agricultural areas as of July 2025, and nearly 2,000 additional units that were funded but not yet in service. However, these units are not evenly distributed. Over half of the units are near the Lower Green River APD, which is surrounded by the cities of Auburn, Kent, and Federal Way. Agricultural regions furthest from the urban core, including Enumclaw APD and Vashon Island, have significantly less affordable housing.

Exhibit 2. Affordable Housing within a 15-minute Drive of an Agricultural Region

Closest Agricultural Region	Units in Service by July 2025	Units Funded but Not Yet in Service
Enumclaw Plateau APD	157	366
Lower Green River APD	12,453	410
Sammamish River APD	6,341	1,118
Snoqualmie River APD	1,712	-
Upper Green River APD	1,998	-
Vashon Island	70	40
Total	22,731	1,934

Note: This summary excludes housing assumed to be exclusively available for specific populations, such as seniors, veterans, or permanent supportive housing.
 Source: King County, 2025; Washington State Housing Finance Commission, 2025; BERK, 2025.

With the exception of housing provided by farm employers, BERK could not identify any subsidized affordable housing that provides preferential access to farmworkers. King County Housing Authority, one of the largest providers of subsidized affordable housing in the county, confirmed they do not provide any special consideration for employment type (including farmworkers) when selecting applicants for housing assistance at any of their properties. They also do not consider employment type when selecting applicants for the limited supply of housing choice vouchers.

Planned Affordable Housing

King County continues to add to its affordable housing supply through new development. **Exhibit 2** shows that there were nearly 2,000 units in projects near agricultural regions that had been awarded Low Income Tax Credits or other subsidies as of July 2025, but were not yet fully in service. BERK reached out to housing developers of planned projects closest to APDs to inquire

about whether they were making any consideration for the potential use of the units by farmworkers. We received no confirmation of any such considerations. This is most likely because farmworkers are just one of many types of low-wage workers in need of affordable housing.

Barriers to Meeting Farmworker Housing Needs

There are many barriers in King County to the production of new affordable housing. Examples include lack of adequate public funding, challenges with managing financial incentives, lack of access to affordable land, local land use regulations, complex permitting processes, fees on new development, and neighborhood opposition, among other barriers. Many of these barriers have increased in recent years. Construction costs have shot up dramatically since the COVID-19 pandemic due to labor and materials cost inflation. Interest rates increased significantly in 2022, impacting the cost of borrowing. The costs of insuring and operating affordable housing have also ballooned. Details about these barriers and others can be found in other reports.^{xi} Here the focus is on additional barriers that are unique to the provision of affordable farmworker housing in King County. These specific barriers include:

- **Lack of Data About Farmworkers**, including limited understanding of farmworker demographics and their housing needs.
- **Economic Barriers to Employer-Provided Housing**, including limited farm capital for housing and limitations on economy of scale due to the propensity of small farms.
- **Permitting Complexity**, including unclear permitting requirements, a need to interface with multiple agencies, and timeline.
- **Regulatory Barriers**, including a low number of allowable units of permanent farmworker housing, challenging water supply requirements, and complex code requirements.
- **Zoning Limitations**, including limited farmworker options for on-farm housing, such as a lack of home clustering allowed in agricultural zones.
- **Floodplain Development Restrictions**, including development regulation limitations on temporary farmworker housing.
- **Barriers to Farmworker Housing in Nearby Communities**, including low farmworker wages compared to market housing costs, less zoned capacity and lower density in nearby communities, and a lack of affordable housing providers that provide housing that prioritize farmworkers.

Lack of Data About Farmworkers

Limited Understanding of Farmworker Demographics

As discussed in the previous section, there is a lack of available quantitative data about farmworker characteristics in King County. For instance, there is no reliable information about how many farmworkers are seasonal compared to year-round; how many workers are single; how many have families; and the anticipated trends among farmworkers. This kind of information would help the County to understand who the farmworkers are in King County in order to better understand their needs.

Lack of Understanding of Farmworker Housing Needs

In addition, there is a lack of available data around the housing needs of farmworkers in King County. Most notably, the County has no data about where farmers and farmworkers live or whether they have found affordable housing opportunities. In addition to farmworker characteristics, there is a lack of reliable quantitative data about how many live in housing provided by their employer; how many live in surrounding communities; the type of housing they live in; the level of cost burden among farmworkers; specific housing gaps and housing mismatches among farmworkers; and anticipated future housing demand. This information in addition to the data on farmworker demographics would help the County identify housing strategies that are most likely to have the biggest impact. It would also help the County to customize strategies geographically to reflect the unique conditions of each agricultural region.

Economic Barriers to Employer-Provided Housing

Many farmers face economic barriers to providing housing for their farmworkers, whether on-farm or off-farm. These barriers are linked to the broader challenge of the economic viability of farming in King County.

Limited Farm Capital for Housing

Most farms and farm organizations engaged in this study noted that King County farms struggle to generate adequate capital to provide farmworker housing. A large proportion of farms generate very little sales. According to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, approximately three-quarters (74%) of the 1,604 King County farms had less than \$10,000 in gross sales in 2022. Only 92 farms, or 6% of all county farms, had sales of \$100,000 or more. Factoring in the initial cost to purchase the farm and the expenses of operating a farm—such as labor, equipment, and utilities—leaves farms with little excess capital to invest in farmworker housing.

Small Farm Scale Limits Economy of Scale

Farms in King County tend to be relatively small in scale. According to the 2022 Census of Agriculture, 49% of King County farms are smaller than 10 acres and another 41% of farms are between 10 and 49 acres.^{xiii} Smaller-scale farms cannot benefit from economies of scale in providing farmworker housing, both because they typically have fewer farmworkers to house and because land use regulations limit the number of housing units by a property's acreage. It can be much less expensive on a per-unit basis to construct several units of housing (either clustered or in a multi-unit building) than a single standalone housing unit because non-scaling costs such as building site preparation, infrastructure, and utility hookups are spread across multiple units. In the case of temporary housing, clustered units can also share essentials such as bathrooms and cooking areas.

Low Farmworker Wages

Due to relatively low wages and the high cost of living in King County, employer-provided farmworker housing would need to be highly subsidized or free in order to be affordable to farmworkers.

Barriers to On-Farm Housing Development

In many agricultural regions across the country, farmworkers live in employer-provided housing located on or adjacent to their worksite. When housing is provided by the employer for free or at a discounted rate, farmworkers can have a more affordable living situation compared to living in surrounding communities where housing may be scarce or more expensive. Not every farm in King County is appropriate for on-farm housing, due to size and geography. However, in King County there are several barriers to increasing the supply of housing. Many of these barriers are related to state and King County policy objectives to focus new housing production in urban areas and to limit new housing production in rural areas that lack urban services and in areas where flooding risks pose a danger to human health and property.

Permitting Complexity

Farms face complex permitting requirements for on-farm housing that can be difficult to interpret and navigate. First, permitting requirements vary significantly depending on if the housing is permanent farmworker housing, temporary housing licensed by WADOH, or temporary housing not licensed by WADOH. Below are specific permitting barriers to highlight:

Unclear Permitting Requirements

The permitting pathway for on-farm housing can vary significantly depending on whether the housing is permanent farmworker housing, temporary housing licensed by WADOH, or temporary housing not licensed by WADOH. Clear guidance on the specific requirements for

each pathway is lacking, which can create confusion, delays, and additional costs for farmers. It is specifically unclear for a farmer to identify which codes apply and which agencies to coordinate with when building temporary housing not licensed by WADOH. The unclear permitting requirements lead to additional questions, uncertainty, and added risk when a farmer pursues the pathway of building on-farm farmworker housing.

Need to Interface with Multiple Agencies

Relevant regulations for on-farm farmworker housing are dispersed across multiple agencies and documents, rather than consolidated in one place. Permitted farmworker housing requires that the farmer coordinate with multiple agencies across, which may include:

- King County Department of Local Services – Permitting Division
- Public Health – Seattle and King County
- King County Fire Marshal
- Washington Department of Health (for licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing)
- Washington Department of Labor & Industries (if manufactured or offsite modular units are used).

Each agency has distinct requirements, making it challenging for farmers to navigate the process efficiently, keep costs low, and provide the housing quickly. The time, coordination, and administrative burden can be especially challenging for farmers when providing temporary housing since the housing will only be available for a relatively short period of time.

Permitting Timelines

Permitting farmworker housing often takes time due to review processes and coordination among multiple agencies. The County provides estimated permit review timelines and estimates it takes 65 days to review a building permit, and 100 days for a land use permit e.g., a temporary use permit.^{xiii} For temporary farmworker housing, these review timelines can exceed the period when housing is needed, which makes the investment impractical. The lack of an expedited or predictable temporary worker permitting process can also create added uncertainty and risk, leading some farmers to choose not to pursue permitted temporary housing despite seasonal labor needs.

Regulatory Barriers

Regulations for farmworker housing also vary depending on if the housing is permanent farmworker housing, WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing, or non-WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing. **BERK Appendix B: Requirements of Farmworker Housing in King County** includes a description and summary of the requirements by farmworker housing type for comparison. Each housing type has regulatory barriers, with specific examples highlighted below.

Low Number of Allowable Units of Permanent Farmworker Housing

A specific regulatory barrier for building permanent farmworker housing is the relationship of farm size to allowable Agricultural Employee Dwelling Units (AEDUs). King County code limits farms to one AEDU for approximately every 20 acres of farmland. See K.C.C. 21A.090 and **BERK Appendix B: Requirements of Farmworker Housing in King County** for more details on these requirements.

King County's current AEDU standard aims to maintain the agricultural character of rural land. However, this regulation may not connect farm size with the farm's need for employees, as some forms of farm production and processing may be more employee-intensive than others. For example, smaller farms that are more labor-intensive, such as vegetables or greenhouse crops, may require more farmworkers per acre. The current acreage-based formula can limit the amount of permanent farmworker housing that is needed to meet farm operation needs. This can force smaller farms to rely on seasonal farmworkers, hire employees who have off-farm housing, or decrease farm operations due to lack of labor.

Challenging Water Supply Requirements of WADOH-Licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing

One barrier for WADOH-licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing is the provision of drinking water. According to WAC-246-358-055, WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing must have drinking water from an approved Group A or Group B public water system. Private wells are not considered an acceptable source of water supply and would not meet the appropriate licensing requirements for this type of housing, despite private wells being an adequate drinking water source for permanent housing. For farms on private wells and not near a public water system, the added water supply requirement can create additional logistical and financial challenges. With temporary farmworker housing only needed for a limited time in the year, the added investment needed to meet regulation requirements can be impractical for the farmer.

Complex Code Requirements for Non-WADOH-Licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing

If temporary housing is not licensed through WADOH, it must comply with the state building code (RCW 19.27.03 and 19.27.067) and King County Building and Construction Standards (K.C.C. Title 16). This includes requirements around residential construction, plumbing, fire and sanitation codes similar to requirements for permanent housing. For non-WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing, some requirements include:

- **Permanent foundation requirements for onsite housing:** If the housing is constructed onsite, it must have a permanent foundation. For temporary housing, this may not be logical especially if the housing must be removed or is unoccupied in the off-season.
- **Occupancy limitation for temporary wheeled housing forms:** Other temporary housing forms (e.g., recreational vehicles, trailers, and temporary wheeled farmworker housing) face

occupancy barriers. These housing forms are limited to occupancy of no more than 60 days, which may not extend through the full growing season.^{xiv}

These requirements create barriers for farmers seeking to provide farmworker housing, both in terms of cost and the time needed to meet all building and permitting standards.

Zoning Limitations

Farmland in King County are primarily located in the Agricultural and Rural Area zones. These are the only two zones in King County that permit permanent and temporary farmworker housing. As required by state law and county policy, these zones focus on the prioritization and protection of farmland and have very low residential density limits. This priority is reflected in very low dwelling units per acre requirements, which limits the number of farmworker housing units on and near farmland.

In addition, Agricultural and Rural Area zones are often served only by wells and septic systems. Public utilities generally do not extend to rural areas in accordance with county code, state law and the Growth Management Act. Per King County Title 13 – Water and Sewer Systems,^{xv} there are limited conditions when sewer can extend into rural areas, and extension of new sewer connections is prohibited from extending into an APD. This can make it difficult and costly for a farmer to meet permitting requirements for some forms of temporary farmworker housing.

See **BERK Appendix C: Zoning in Agricultural and Rural Areas** for details on what each zone allows for residential development. With these limitations, there is a noted barrier that can be addressed within state law.

Lack of Clustering Allowance in Agricultural Zones

King County's Agricultural zones (A-10 and A-35) do not allow clustering of residential units, even for farmworker housing. This limitation prevents the concentration of housing in one area of a larger farm (greater than 20 acres) to preserve contiguous farmland, which could otherwise allow for more efficient utility connections, reduced land disturbance, and better site design.

Floodplain Development Restrictions

A significant portion of the farmland in King County is in a flood hazard area, including a designated floodplain, which has limitations on new residential development and significant improvements to existing residential development. Parcels in flood hazard areas face more stringent development regulations in order to promote public health, safety, and welfare and to minimize losses due to flooding. See **BERK Appendix D: Floodplain Development Details** for the extent of the floodway and regulatory floodplain across the APDs and Vashon Island. The Snoqualmie Valley, Sammamish Valley, and Lower Green River APDs are largely in the regulatory floodplain, with limited land outside of the floodplain available for residential development.

In King County, floodplain development restrictions apply to various structures, including residential buildings, nonresidential buildings, and temporary recreational vehicles. Development

restrictions vary depending on if the farmland is in the floodway, floodplain, or in the flood fringe. However, all development restrictions either prohibit new or expanded permanent residential housing or require all new housing to be elevated above the flood protection elevation and not increase flood level (“zero rise”). Temporary housing also has limitations. Most notable is that it is not allowed in the floodplain, particularly during the flood months of September 30 – March 1. See **Exhibit 11** in **BERK Appendix D: Floodplain Development Details** for a summary of how development restrictions vary depending on where the farm is located in proximity to the regulatory floodplain.

Barriers to Farmworker Housing in Nearby Communities

All of the agricultural regions in King County are adjacent to at least one city or unincorporated urban area.^{xvi} King County’s policies and comprehensive plan both call for focusing new housing production within these urban areas while minimizing new development in rural areas. So, it is important to consider opportunities for, and barriers to, housing suitable for farmworkers within these neighboring communities.

Land Use Regulations and Low Zoned Capacity in Nearby Communities

Most cities adjacent to agricultural areas are in the outskirts of the Seattle metropolitan region where many residents have grown to value the rural small-town aesthetic. Land use and zoning regulations in these areas typically have limited building heights and less zoned capacity than larger cities. This can prevent the development of new lower-cost housing options, such as apartments or clustered manufactured homes. As a result, there is a limited supply of housing in these communities, and the housing that exists is often unaffordable to low-wage workers.

Recent changes to the state Growth Management Act require these cities to plan for and accommodate new housing that is affordable at all income levels. Zoning changes and other actions to comply with this new requirement are just beginning to be implemented in many of these communities. So, it is too early to see whether the changes allow for and encourage new market rate or affordable housing construction that could meet farmworker needs.

Lack of Affordable Housing Providers that Specialize in Farmworker Housing

King County has a rich ecosystem of organizations that fund, finance, develop, and operate affordable housing. However, this study has found no evidence that any of these organizations focus specifically on the needs of farmworkers in King County. Therefore, farmworkers must compete with other low-income residents to secure subsidized affordable housing, which is in high demand.

Other counties in Washington, including Benton, Chelan, Douglas, Skagit, and Yakima counties, have local organizations that provide housing units reserved specifically for farmworkers. A key difference between these counties and King County is the significant role that agriculture plays in the local economy relative to other economic sectors. So, ensuring that farmworkers can access affordable housing is a high priority for local officials, nonprofits, and charitable organizations.

On the other hand, the housing affordability crisis in King County impacts low-income workers in many different economic sectors. Farmworkers represent a small share of the overall population of workers who cannot find affordable housing. So, it can be harder to justify prioritizing the creation of affordable housing to be set aside only for farmworkers and exclusive of other residents with affordable housing needs.

Strategies and Actions for Addressing Farmworker Housing Needs

King County and its many cities are already engaged in several initiatives to address different aspects of the affordable housing crisis. Any actions with potential to increase housing supply and diversity in the county can benefit farmworkers as well; building more housing can reduce the upward pressure on housing costs. However, there are additional actions the County can consider for addressing and overcoming barriers to meeting the specific housing needs of farmworkers. The eleven actions identified in this chapter are organized into the following six strategies:

- 1. Increase Knowledge of Farmworker Housing Needs**
- 2. Support Off-Farm Housing that Prioritizes Farmworkers**
- 3. Lower Unnecessary Barriers to On-Farm Housing**
- 4. Lower Barriers to Temporary Farmworker Housing**
- 5. Improve Farmer Access to Capital for Housing Construction**
- 6. Preserve Existing Housing on Farmland**

Exhibit 3 lists each of the eleven actions associated with these strategies and cross references them with the barriers to addressing farmworker housing needs identified in the previous section. Each action addresses one or more barriers (as indicated by a check mark). Following **Exhibit 3**, there is a detailed discussion of each strategy and action. For many of these actions, examples of successful implementation in similar communities across the United States are provided.

Exhibit 3. Farmworker Housing Barriers and Potential Actions to Address

	<u>PRIORITY ACTION:</u>										
	Conduct a Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment.	Explore Housing Developer Partnerships.	Support Off-Farm Housing Opportunities.	Build Local Understanding & Support for Affordable Farmworker Housing.	Clarify and Expediate the Permit Process.	Allow for Greater Zoning Flexibility.	Reduce Barriers to Wheeled Housing.	Review and Clarify Requirements for Temporary Housing.	Leverage the Farmland Preservation Program.	Support the Financial Viability of Farms.	Enhance the King County Flood Buyout and Elevation Program.
Lack of Data around Farmworkers											
Limited Understanding of Farmworker Demographics	✓										
Limited Understanding of Farmworker Housing Needs	✓										
Economic Barriers to Employer-Provided Housing											
Limited Farm Capital for Housing									✓	✓	
Small Farm Scale Limits Economy of Scale		✓	✓							✓	
Low Farmworker Wages										✓	
Barriers to On-Farm Housing Development											
Permitting Complexity					✓			✓			
Regulatory Barriers						✓	✓	✓			
Zoning Limitations		✓	✓			✓					
Floodplain Development Restrictions		✓	✓								✓
Barriers to Farmworker Housing in Nearby Communities											
Land Use Regulations and Low Zoned Capacity in Nearby Communities				✓							
Lack of Affordable Housing Providers that Specialize in Farmworker Housing		✓									

1. Increase Knowledge of Farmworker Housing Needs

PRIORITY ACTION: Regularly conduct a farmworker housing needs assessment

King County conducts a general housing needs assessment (HNA) as part of its regular comprehensive plan review cycle. However, the latest report from 2024 makes no mention of farmworkers as a group that needs special attention.^{xvii} The County should consider conducting a regular HNA focused specifically on the needs of farmworkers as part of its regular comprehensive plan update. This assessment could address topics such as those listed in **Exhibit 4**. Ideally, this analysis could build on the countywide HNA, which provides the broader context for housing affordability challenges.

We anticipate a farmworker HNA would likely require surveying and engaging with farmers, farmworkers, and agricultural organizations to supplement the limited available data. Another source of information could be farm plans from farm operators, provided through the Farm Management Plans Public Rule; these individualized farm management plans could be updated to request farm operators include information about their farmworkers and their housing needs.

The County could use this farmworker HNA to prioritize strategies and geographic areas of focus. The County could also share findings with farms and partners in the affordable housing community to provide these groups with additional information to inform their decision-making around housing provision. If regularly updated, the County could use this report to monitor and evaluate progress in addressing farmworker housing needs over time.

Exhibit 4. Topics that could be addressed in a farmworker HNA

Topic	Data to be gathered
Farm labor needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Number and location of farms that employ farmworkers ▪ Typical wages paid ▪ Total seasonal and year round farmworker labor needs by agricultural region ▪ Number of farms that provide employee housing ▪ Number of farms that have a need for on-farm employee housing but currently do not provide it
Farmworker demographics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Proportion with families ▪ Family/household size ▪ Language spoken

Topic	Data to be gathered
Farmworker housing situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Household income ▪ General location and distance from workplace ▪ Commute time ▪ Housing type and condition ▪ Availability of utilities and local services ▪ Housing cost and cost burden ▪ Overcrowding or other housing problems

2. Support Off-Farm Housing that Prioritizes Farmworkers

Explore partnerships with nonprofit housing providers and local farm associations to identify potential solutions that align with local needs

As noted earlier, there are no affordable housing providers in King County that prioritize farmworkers. However, there are many examples of affordable housing projects outside of King County that are designed explicitly for farmworkers. King County could initiate conversations with farmworker housing developers and providers that operate in Washington to identify:

- Any real or perceived barriers to providing this type of housing in King County and the surrounding region.
- Opportunities or other incentives that could make such housing development feasible.
- How the farmworker HNA can be designed to help inform market analysis reports to support proposed farmworker housing projects.

The County could also engage with local farm associations to explore their potential roles in partnering with housing developers and providers to create housing that is aligned with local farmworker housing needs.

Examples: Washington-based affordable housing developers and operators that specialize in farmworker housing include Office of Rural and Farmworker Housing and Worker, Farmer Labor Association, and Catholic Community Services of Western Washington. See **BERK Appendix A. Case Studies of Off-Farm Housing** for descriptions of several farmworker housing projects operated by local nonprofit organizations in Washington and California.

Help identify opportunity sites for off-farm housing developments

To further support the provision of off-farm housing development, King County could help identify opportunity sites for affordable housing projects and collaborate with local jurisdictions to reduce barriers to development. Specific criteria include parcel characteristics (public or privately owned, vacant and underutilized land, lot size), proximity to agricultural areas, outside of the floodplain, access to sewer and water, proximity to local services, and transportation connectivity. In conducting this analysis, the County could leverage the most recent Urban Growth Capacity Report as well as local city knowledge to identify priority sites. Aligning this analysis and efforts with neighboring counties (i.e., Snohomish and Pierce counties) could help identify potential assets that support a coordinated regional approach to supporting affordable farmworker housing.

Build local understanding and support for affordable farmworker housing

Surrounding jurisdictions to farmland can also play an important role in supporting farmworker housing. While these small cities may have limited zoned capacity for housing, King County could develop and share outreach materials that build the case to encourage affordable farmworker housing production. These materials would help local jurisdictions and advocates share the community and economic benefits of housing for farmworkers, as well as help address skepticism among residents and elected officials and build broader public support.

In addition, King County can engage with local jurisdictions to encourage and support the implementation of comprehensive plans consistent with countywide planning policies and new statewide requirements related to the provision of affordable housing. Per state law, cities are required to provide zoned capacity for housing, including affordable housing for low- and moderate-income residents. This coordination would help ensure that local land use and housing policies enable the development of affordable housing that meets the needs of the local farmworker community.

3. Lower Unnecessary Barriers to On-Farm Housing

Clarify and expediate the permit process

While there are some resource materials currently available, there are further opportunities to improve the farmworker housing permitting process. Improvements can help with navigation of the permitting process, ensure timely responses to questions, and provide a better understanding of what development is possible. Potential actions to consider:

- **Develop a navigator program** for the permitting process and offer a one-point of contact that coordinates information and specializes in agricultural permitting. This person would

serve as the single primary point of contact for all farmworker housing permits and provide guidance and assistance with permit applications. Support could include pre-application consultations to identify potential issues early and ensure completion, as well as potential funding sources (e.g., USDA Section 514/516 program) that the farmer could utilize. The navigator program could work with partners, such as King County Conservation District, to provide educational workshops to inform farmers about the permitting process and how to accomplish the varying requirements of the different farmworker housing types, including permanent farmworker housing, WADOH-licensed temporary housing, and non-WADOH-licensed temporary housing.

Examples: Ventura County has a dedicated staff contact who provides guidance and assistance on farmworker housing development. Sonoma County has clear listed regulation requirements (e.g., zoning, minimum parcel size, setback, parking, water board, and access road requirements) for all forms of farmworker housing, including agricultural employee dwelling unit, seasonal farmworker housing, and extended seasonal farmworker housing.^{xviii} Each housing type includes detailed eligibility criteria and zoning permit application requirements. Sonoma County also assigns a project planner to review the farmworker application and conduct a site visit.

- **Provide a list of preapproved plan designs** for temporary and permanent farmworker housing. Preapproved plan designs provide standardized design options for farmers to use to provide affordable housing without added design cost or time. In turn, the applicant could receive reduced review fees and expediated review time to obtain a building permit.

Example: Ventura County developed a set of documents to facilitate the development of farmworker housing.^{xix} The County offers free, standardized plans for farmworker units that align with its code and regulations. These plans include accessory dwelling units (ADUs) and farmworker dwelling units that are 1-3 bedrooms and range from 700-1,200 square feet.

- **Provide a list of contractors** who specialize in farmworker and temporary housing development. Farmers can use this list to more easily identify contractors with experience complying with relevant building and land use regulations in rural areas.

Steps to create a roster include issuing an RFQ to identify these specialized firms, creating categories for types of work (e.g., new farmworker housing construction, rehabilitation, repairs/maintenance), requiring performance standards (e.g., warranties), and including a periodic review to ensure the list stays current.

- **Reduce or eliminate the permit cost** for farmworker housing. Development fees collected by King County for farmworker housing include permit and review fees, pre-development and preapplication fees, impact fees (parks, traffic, utilities), and stormwater fees. King County Code currently charges 50% of its fees for processing, review, or inspection of applications. However, the County could consider waiving development fees to help further lower the cost of constructing farmworker housing.

Examples: King County Code allows permanent supportive housing to be exempt from school impact fees; the County could consider extending that exemption to farmworker housing. For comparison, Sonoma County provides similar fee waivers based on farmworker housing type.

Fee waivers include park fees, traffic mitigation fees, and development impact fees.^{xx} Ventura County also provides some form of a fee waiver for each agricultural housing type.^{xxi}

Allow greater zoning flexibility in agricultural land

While our case studies illustrate the best practice of integrating farmworkers into existing communities, there may be some types of farms for which on-farm housing is appropriate. Given the existing zoning, there are opportunities to increase flexibility for farmworker housing in rural zones (e.g., rural clustering, incentive zoning). Jurisdictions outside of King County have applied these methods. Some actions to increase flexibility include the following:

- **Consider applying a planned rural residential development overlay in select Agricultural and Rural Area zones:** To balance housing needs with preservation of rural character, King County could consider applying a planned rural residential development (PRRD) overlay, similar to the overlay applied by Jefferson County.

Example: The Jefferson County PRRD overlay allows for increased flexibility and creativity in site layout and design for residential development in rural residential and agricultural districts. It defines the minimum and maximum land area for a PRRD, with the minimum land area set at twice the minimum parcel size of the zoning district (e.g., a zoning district that allows one dwelling unit for 5 acres would require a minimum of 10 gross acres for a PRRD). The dwelling unit cap is calculated based on the dwelling unit density of the underlying land use zone. Then, it provides incentives to make more efficient use of land; incentives include clustered housing, small density bonuses, lot size averaging, flexible yards, and mixed residential types. To promote agricultural preservation, it requires a reserve tract requirement of 65-85% to preserve land with prime agricultural soils. See the **Chimacum Commons Case Study** in **BERK Appendix A. Case Studies of Off-Farm Housing** for details on how Olympic Housing Trust and Jefferson Land Trust utilized Jefferson County's PRRD overlay to develop a mix of affordable housing in the rural area.

- **Consider revising permanent farmworker housing so unit limits are based on farm operations instead of farm acreage:** King County could consider updating its permanent farmworker housing standards to allow for greater flexibility of AEDUs. Currently, the amount of AEDUs is acreage-based, with one AEDU allowed per approximately 20 acres. This standard does not account for the diversity of farm operations across the county. A more flexible approach could be to determine AEDU unit amounts based on other factors, such as type and intensity of production, to align AEDU capacity with farm employee need.

Example: Sonoma County regulates AEDUs by farm operation type. It allows one AEDU for every 50 dairy animals, 20 acres of permanent crops, three-acres of field grown nursesey stock, or one acre of greenhouse.^{xxii}

4. Lower Barriers to Temporary Farmworker Housing

Reduce barriers to the use of wheeled housing

Homes on wheels, such as recreational vehicles (RVs) and park model homes², can be a practical and cost-efficient model for temporary farmworker housing, particularly in floodplain areas where the homes must be removed during the off-season (September 30 to May 1). However, land use regulations and permitting requirements in King County present barriers that reduce the effectiveness of this strategy. There are several actions the County could explore to address these challenges:

- **Review zoning barriers that prevent the siting of multiple temporary homes on wheels on a single parcel.** King County could explore a pilot program or code amendment that would allow safe, code compliant temporary farmworker housing in agricultural and rural area zones. King County could extend this review to include the siting of temporary pallet homes as well.

Example: Sonoma County allows travel trailers and RVs to house agricultural employees for 90 days, provided there is not more than one camp per property with up to four vehicles and travel trailers, all sewage is discharged in a lawful sewage disposal system, and the units are removed when no longer occupied by agricultural employees.^{xxiii} See Sonoma County Code [Sec 26-24-060](#).

- **Provide space outside the floodplain to store temporary farmworker housing.** Farmers need a place to put wheeled housing during the off-season. These units could serve as housing during the off-season months if sited in an appropriate location. King County could acquire or lease land where storage of homes on wheels is legal and sub-lease individual pads to farmers at a low cost. Ideally, this location could provide hook-ups to electricity, water, and sewer/septic to provide King County-based seasonal employees with housing in the off-season too. One potential option could be an RV park that caters to short-term visitors in the summer months. Relocating temporary farmworker housing on wheels to this kind of facility would provide the park with stable off-season revenue.

Example: The City of Salida in Colorado purchased 10 RV units and sited them at the Salida RV Resort. It rents the units to members of the local workforce, at least through the warmest months.^{xxiv}

- **Clarify and remove county requirement for homes on wheels to be occupied no more than 60 days per 365-day period.** King County could consider modifying its occupancy duration limit to allow for the use of wheeled housing for an entire farming season, which may exceed current 60-day limit. This would make wheeled housing a feasible and legal option for temporary farmworker housing. If the duration was increased to four months, then the wheeled housing could be used for most of the harvest season. If the duration was increased to six months, then wheeled homes could be used year-round, with six months on the farm

² Park model homes are tiny homes on wheels that can be pulled as a trailer.

and another six months at an alternative off-farm location. The length of temporary farmworker housing would need to be evaluated based on findings from a farmworker housing needs assessment.

King County could conduct a similar review of pallet homes as a temporary housing solution.

Examples: Snohomish County uses a similar approach to regulate wheeled housing and allows recreational vehicles in similar rural zones.^{xxv} These RVs may be occupied for up to 180 days in a 12-month period.^{xxvi} Ventura County in California also allows temporary trailers to be occupied by seasonal farmworkers on agricultural land.^{xxvii} Permitted temporary housing trailer types include motor homes, travel trailer, truck camper, recreational vehicle, or camping trailer. The trailer may be inhabited by a farmworker for 180 consecutive days in a 12-month period, and the Planning Director can grant a one-time extension of an additional 90 days.

Review and clarify requirements for temporary farmworker housing

The regulation requirements for temporary farmworker housing are complex and may exceed the investment and timing for a housing type that is needed only temporarily. (See **Barriers to On-Farm Housing Development- Regulatory Barriers** for a summary and **BERK Appendix B: Requirements of Farmworker Housing in King** County for an overview of how requirements vary by farmworker housing type). A farmer who builds temporary farmworker housing licensed through the Washington Department of Health (WADOH) is limited by water supply requirements and cannot provide drinking water through a private well. But if a farmer builds permitted temporary farmworker housing not licensed through WADOH, the farmer must follow state building code for the housing, which means navigating through complex requirements and coordinating multiple agencies to meet requirements.

There are opportunities to clarify and improve the process for on-farm temporary housing. Specific considerations include:

- **Advocate for WADOH to review its water supply requirements:** Current WADOH regulations for licensed temporary farmworker housing do not allow private wells as an adequate water supply source. This is a more stringent requirement than permanent housing, which does allow private wells to be used as water supply source. King County could advocate for WADOH to clarify and review its water supply requirements, particularly the limitation on use of a private well for temporary farmworker housing, and explore alternative water options that reduce cost for farm owners while still maintaining safe drinking water standards.
- **Provide clear regulatory guidance for non-WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing:** While King County code and published materials outline requirements for WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing, the regulations surrounding non-WADOH-licensed temporary housing are not as clearly described. King County could develop and publish clear guidance summarizing applicable permitting, building, and health

requirements for non-WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing to improve consistency, transparency, and understanding among farmers and applicants.

- **Review permitted building types for non-WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing:** Non-WADOH-licensed farmworker housing must comply with state building code, which generally applies the same construction standards as permanent farmworker housing. For temporary housing, this level of investment may not be practical or proportional to the duration of use. King County could review the building types currently permitted for temporary farmworker housing and consider allowing more flexible, lower-cost structures (e.g., wheeled housing types, travel trailer, temporary housing on skids, pallet homes) that better align with the temporary nature of farmworker housing. This review and consideration would help streamline permitting, improve clarity for farmers, and expand viable housing options for seasonal farmworkers.

5. Improve Farmer Access to Capital for Housing Construction

Leverage the Farmland Preservation Program to increase supply of affordable housing for farmworkers

King County uses this program to purchase agricultural easements from landowners in agricultural regions. These easements restrict the landowner's development rights with the goal of reducing the future loss of high-quality farmland. One consequence of this program is that it constrains the ability of farms to provide housing for their employees, which can deteriorate farm viability. The County could explore modifications to this program, such as allowing development with long-term deed-restricted farmworker housing. In this way, the County could provide some capital to farm owners that could be used to support the development of farmworker housing. In return, the County gets assurance the units will be maintained as affordable housing. The easement could also place constraints on the size or location of the farmworker housing units to ensure they do not impact high-quality farmland or rural character.

Examples: BERK interviewed a farmer in King County who sold their development rights through the Farmland Preservation Program and then used the proceeds to purchase a nearby home to house farmworkers. While this is a successful example of a farmer overcoming a lack of capital to create new farmworker housing, the result does not guarantee the home will remain affordable or in use by farmworkers in years to come.

Another example is the Summit County, Colorado ADU Assistance Program,^{xxviii} which was designed to ensure new homes are maintained as affordable workforce housing. The program works by the County reimbursing 25% of the cost of constructing an ADU. In return, the ADU must be restricted by covenant for use as workforce housing with a rental cap.

Support the financial viability of farms

There may be actions the County can take to provide more flexibility to farms seeking ways to grow their revenue. See the affiliated study conducted by Agritecture focused on identifying tools and strategies to reduce operating costs, grow existing markets, and develop new outlets for King County farm businesses. Some farms engaged in this housing study noted that farms can grow their revenue by exploring expanding their operations to include agritourism.

6. Preserve Existing Housing on Farmland

Enhance the King County Flood Buyout and Elevation Program

Much of the farmland in some King County's APDs is in flood-prone areas, putting many homes on these farms at risk of flooding. While the County's Flood Buyout and Elevation Program helps to reduce these risks by buying out willing homeowners, it can also result in loss of rural housing stock when those farmworker homes are demolished. Possible actions to consider to enhance the program include:

- Prioritize elevation assistance for farmworker and farm-related residences before pursuing buyouts, and clarify if farmworker housing is eligible for elevation assistance.
- Review the process of participating in the home elevation program and identify opportunities to streamline the process for farm owners to participate.
- Coordinate with state and federal programs (e.g., FEMA) to leverage funds for elevation and repair rather than relocation.
- Develop a safe housing fund to help offset the cost of elevating or retrofitting affordable farm housing.
- Introduce covenants to maintain affordability of the improved homes after the homes have been retrofitted and enhanced.

These strategies could help maintain and enhance existing affordable housing for farm owners and farmworkers.

Conclusion

While this study is narrowly focused on actions the County can take to address farmworker housing needs, we recognize the County is balancing many policy objectives that must be considered holistically. Each strategy identified in this study should be evaluated based on its potential to improve the lives of farmworkers, increase the viability of farms, and avoid unintended negative consequences. As a next step, the County can explore these barriers and strategies in more depth through the forthcoming Rural Economic Strategies Review, Analysis, and Evaluation, which will be conducted 2026 through 2028. Most notably, that study is

expected to include a more detailed assessment of farmworker housing needs, which will be invaluable to prioritizing the strategies and actions presented in this study, and identifying where the County should focus on implementation and changes to policies and code.

Acronyms and References

Acronyms

ADU	Accessory Dwelling Unit
AEDU	Agricultural Employee Dwelling Unit
AMI	Area Median Income
CDBG	Community Development Block Grant
CHIP	Connecting Housing to Infrastructure Program
CLT	Community Land Trust
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
GMA	Growth Management Act
HASC	Housing Authority of Skagit County
HNA	Housing Needs Assessment
HOME	HOME Investment Partnership Program, administered through US HUD
HUD	U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
JLT	Jefferson Land Trust
KCC	King County Code
LAFCO	Local Agency Formation Commissions
LIHTC	Low-Income Housing Tax Credit
OHT	Olympic Housing Trust
ORFH	Office of Rural and Farmworker Housing
PRRD	Planned Rural Residential Development
PSHHC	People’s Self-Help Housing Corporation
RCW	Revised Code of Washington
RFQ	Request for Qualifications
RV	Recreational Vehicle
UGA	Urban Growth Area
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
WAC	Washington Administrative Code
WADOH	Washington Department of Health
WAFLA	Worker and Farmer Labor Association

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Endnotes

- ⁱ Source: King County, 2025. [Ordinance 19762](#). Accessed on November 4, 2025.
- ⁱⁱ One exception is the 2024 Snoqualmie Valley Agricultural Strategic Plan, which included strategies to enhance the King County Flood Buyout and Elevation Program to preserve existing homes in the Snoqualmie Valley Agriculture Production District.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Source: Washington State Department of Commerce, 2022. *Washington Farmworker Housing Needs Assessment*.
- ^{iv} Source: King County Water District 19, 2025. [Draft Resolution on Water Allocation Policy – 04.08 Meeting Version](#). Accessed on Nov 4, 2025.
- ^v Washington State Employment Security Department Agricultural Workforce Statistics offer annual counts of the number of agricultural workers in each county in Washington, disaggregated by industry type (e.g., “dairy cattle and milk production” or “vegetable and melon farming”). These estimates exclude many self-employed farmers and farmworkers. So, the actual population of farmworkers is likely higher.
- ^{vi} Source: Washington State Employment Security Department, 2025. [Agricultural Workforce Statistics and Data Downloads](#). Accessed on Oct. 3, 2025.
- ^{vii} Source: BERK analysis of subsidized rental housing data from [Washington Center for Real Estate Research](#) (WCRER) and housing estimates from [Washington State Office of Financial Management](#).
- ^{viii} See [Minimum wage in unincorporated King County](#) for wage levels by business size and grow revenue. Wages for small businesses will rise to \$18.32 in 2026.
- ^{ix} This calculation is based on a 40-hour workweek and 52 workweeks per year. Farmworkers often work more variable hours due to growing seasons; we use this calculation as a rough estimate. Actual annual wage could be lower if income is not supplemented by other jobs.
- ^x Source: [Washington Center for Real Estate Research, 2025](#).
- ^{xi} Barriers to affordable housing production are well documented in other reports. For example, see Washington State Affordable Housing Advisory Board, 2023. [Housing Advisory Plan 2023-2028](#).
- ^{xii} Source: USDA Census of Agriculture, 2022.
- ^{xiii} Source: King County, 2025. [2025 County Review Timelines](#). Accessed November 4, 2025.
- ^{xiv} Source: King County, 2020. [Residential Tiny Homes](#). Accessed: October 15, 2025.
- ^{xv} Source: King County, 2025. [Title 13 – Water and Sewer Systems](#). Accessed November 5, 2025.
- ^{xvi} While Vashon Island does not have its own area with urban zoning, it has two regular ferry services to Seattle.
- ^{xvii} Source: King County, 2024. [Housing Needs Assessment](#). Accessed October 15, 2025.
- ^{xviii} Source: County of Sonoma, 2025. [Agricultural Housing](#). Accessed on October 6, 2025.
- ^{xix} Source: County of Ventura Resource Management Agency, 2025. [Standardized Plans for Accessory Dwelling Units and Farmworker/Animal Caretaker Dwelling Units](#). Accessed on October 8, 2025.
- ^{xx} Source: County of Sonoma, 2025. [Agricultural Housing](#). Accessed on October 6, 2025.
- ^{xxi} Source: County of Ventura Resource Management Agency, 2025. [Standardized Plans for Accessory Dwelling Units and Farmworker/Animal Caretaker Dwelling Units](#). Accessed on October 8, 2025.
- ^{xxii} Source: County of Sonoma, 2025. [Agricultural Housing](#). Accessed on October 6, 2025.
- ^{xxiii} Source: County of Sonoma, 2025. [Temporary Occupancy of Travel Trailers, Recreational Vehicles, and Transportable Housing Units \(Tiny Homes\)](#). Accessed on October 6, 2025.
- ^{xxiv} Source: Northwest Colorado Council of Governments and Colorado Association of Ski Towns, 2023. [2023 Workforce Housing Report](#). Accessed on October 17, 2025.
- ^{xxv} Snohomish County zones that allow for RVs to be occupied up to 180 days include Rural Resource Transition–10 Acre, Rural–5 Acre, Agriculture–10 Acre, and Rural Conservation.
- ^{xxvi} Source: Snohomish County, 2025. [Assistance Bulletin #5 – Recreational Vehicles](#). Accessed on October 13, 2025.

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- ^{xxvii} Source: County of Ventura, 2025. [Guide to Agricultural Worker Housing](#). Accessed on October 8, 2025.
- ^{xxviii} Source: Summit County, 2025. [ADU Assistance Program Guidelines](#). Accessed on October 17, 2025.
- ^{xxix} Source: Skagit County, 2017. [2016 Seasonal Farmworker Housing at Raspberry Ridge](#). Accessed on October 4, 2025.
- ^{xxx} Source: County of Ventura Resource Management Agency, 2024. [Ventura County Farmworker Study – Phase 2 and 3 Survey Summary Report](#). Accessed on October 2, 2025.
- ^{xxxi} Source: California Housing Partnership, 2025. [San Luis Obispo County 2025 Affordable Housing Needs Report](#). Accessed on October 2, 2025.
- ^{xxxii} Source: Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2025. [44 C.F.R. 59.1 Definitions](#). Accessed on November 5, 2025.

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BERK Appendix A. Case Studies of Off-Farm Housing

The case study examples of farmworker housing outside of King County capture five examples of recently constructed or soon-to-be-developed models. These five examples represent a mix of housing solutions for permanent and seasonal farmworkers.

Key Takeaways

Key takeaways from the selected case studies include:

- **Collaboration among multiple organizations helps enable housing projects.** Each example demonstrates that successful farmworker or affordable housing development relies on partnerships across nonprofits, housing authorities, and community organizations. Often, one organization will develop the land while a second organization provides the land and manages the housing. For example, the Skagit County Seasonal Housing Development required close collaboration between the Housing Authority of Skagit County (HASC), the Office of Rural and Farmworker Housing (ORFH), Skagit County, and the City of Burlington. These partnerships combine specialized expertise in land acquisition, financing, and development to support the development of these farmworker housing projects.
- **County and jurisdictional partnerships can make a project viable.** Counties and cities played pivotal roles in each project, such as sewer infrastructure or providing direct funding. For example, Skagit County and the City of Burlington entered into an interlocal agreement with HASC to extend sewer services and permit affordable multifamily development. Jefferson County clarified its development code and allowed clustering of residential units on rural lands, allowing Olympic Housing Trust and Jefferson Land Trust to maximize the residential overlay incentives while also preserving farmland. Meanwhile, Ventura County provided direct funding that helped make the People's Self-Help Housing Corporation (PSHHC) People's Place development feasible. These cases show that county participation can help make a project successful, whether through infrastructure expansion, direct funding, or zoning and regulation.
- **Locating housing on the agricultural fringe balances connectivity and access to the farms.** Most case studies are situated on parcels in a city but in close proximity to farmland. This enables farmworkers to be near farmland while also staying near urban services, schools, and transportation. This reflects a shift toward housing models that integrate farmworkers into the broader community and reduce isolation. These considerations for off-farm housing can also be a more feasible and desirable option for farmworkers in King County, particularly when zoning, floodplain, and infrastructure constraints can significantly limit development of on-farm farmworker housing.
- **Flexibility can help increase a project's adaptability.** Due to grant requirements, some case study examples limit housing eligibility to certain types of tenants or timelines. However, several case studies also identified creative ways to fund a project and offer flexibility, which allows them to meet farmworker housing need while remaining responsive to broader market conditions. For example, the PSHHC developments include a mix of units, with a certain percentage of units set aside for farmworkers and their families. The Olympic Housing Trust

(OHT) avoided labeling Chimacum Commons as “farmworker housing” to access a wider range of funding and serve both farmworkers and food system workers. In the Casa Grande case study example, a private investor funded the property renovation, which gives the Worker and Farmer Labor Association (WAFLA) the flexibility to lease the units to non-farmworkers in the off-season

How the Case Studies were Selected

The BERK team selected the case studies using factors that are similar to King County’s land use, housing market, and policy context to ensure findings are relevant and transferable. The five case studies—located in **Jefferson County, WA; Skagit County, WA; Ventura County, CA; and San Luis Obispo County, CA**—were chosen based on the following considerations:

- **Land Use and Policy Context:** To identify models that could be adapted for King County, all case studies are situated in counties with similar land use frameworks. Three case studies are located in Washington and are subject to the Growth Management Act (GMA), which directs growth to the urban growth area and protects agricultural and resource lands. The two California case studies operate under a comparable planning framework that includes Local Agency Formation Commissions (LAFCOs), which manage boundary expansions and guide development toward existing urban areas. These policy similarities create comparable challenges in balancing farmland preservation with the provision of farmworker housing.
- **Housing Market and Proximity to Metropolitan Areas:** Each case study reflects high-cost housing markets where farmworkers face limited housing options and must compete with other community members for scarce affordable units. The proximity to major metropolitan regions—such as Seattle–Tacoma, Los Angeles, and San Luis Obispo—creates strong regional housing pressures, mirroring dynamics that farmworkers face in the agricultural communities in King County.
- **Recency:** All housing developments were completed (or nearing completion) within the past decade, reflecting contemporary development practices, funding structures, and regulatory conditions. This allows for insights into financing mechanisms, partnerships, and permitting pathways relevant for the context in King County.

One note is that the case studies all represent off-farm housing developments that are near agricultural areas. While on-farm housing is important for some agricultural operations, the BERK team did not identify recently developed, permitted on-farm housing examples that reflected the selection factors listed above. Farmworker housing development has increasingly shifted toward off-farm housing development that can serve multiple farms and potentially offer year-round occupancy. In reviewing opportunities and constraints in King County, off-farm housing is one of the more feasible and scalable approaches to meet the housing needs of its farmworkers.

Case Study 1. Olympic Housing Trust and Jefferson Land Trust: Chimacum Commons

Background

Olympic Housing Trust (OHT) and Jefferson Land Trust (JLT) are partnering to develop Chimacum Commons, a housing project focused on workers in Jefferson County's food industry, including farmworkers, grocers, and restaurant workers. The 16-acre project is centrally located between four of the main farms in the region. It is in the predevelopment phase as of writing; OHT plans to raise funds in 2026 and construct in 2027.

OHT anticipates that the project will ultimately offer 30 bedrooms over 7 buildings, including:

- **4 affordable homes for purchase**, with 2-3 bedrooms per house.
- **2 rental buildings that each offer 8 bedrooms** of varying size, designed for occupation by one or two people. Smaller bedrooms are designed for seasonal workers and 6- or 9-month leases, while larger bedrooms are designed for permanent workers and annual leases. Each bedroom includes a bathroom and a kitchenette; the building will have a shared full kitchen. These buildings are the focus of the initial phase of construction.
- **1 flexible rental building**, which will include 3 bedrooms. In the summer, OHT will rent the bedrooms as a vacation rental for agritourists, while the bedrooms will be available as worker housing during the tourism off-season.

Red Dog Farm, the largest farm in the vicinity, plans to hold a master lease to one of the buildings for their farmworkers.

How It Was Developed

JLT purchased the land in 2014 and started working with OHT to develop a plan for the property in 2023. The land is zoned for Rural Residential, which allows the following:

- 3 dwelling units per county code allowances of one dwelling unit per five acres.
- 3 ADUs total; one ADU per dwelling unit.
- 1 bonus dwelling unit per the county's Planned Rural Residential Development code, which offers additional flexibility to increase density for select projects.

The Department of Commerce provided a Community Based Organization grant for predevelopment and a 40-year deferred loan for project construction. OHT anticipates that the first phase of development (i.e., to construct two buildings that will house a total of 16 bedrooms) will cost \$3 million, inclusive of infrastructure, construction, and overhead. That is approximately \$187,500 per bedroom in construction costs.

OHT expects that after the project is constructed, ongoing operational costs will be funded through rent from income-qualified farmworker occupants and the flexible rental from agritourists.

Reflection / Lessons Learned

This project illustrates the following themes:

- **Importance of housing organizations.** OHT noted that development of this project is closely aligned with its mission and the mission of JLT. JLT funded the purchase of the land, and OHT is managing the construction of the housing—two efforts that might not be feasible for a single farm in the area.
- **Value of the community land trust (CLT) model.** The CLT model can be an effective mechanism to ensure long-term affordability because it separates land ownership from building ownership. Under this model, OHT can provide four affordable homes for permanent homeownership; OHT retains ownership of the land while the residents purchase the building. The CLT model could provide a pathway for permanent housing for farm owners who live off-farm and for farmworkers.
- **Code and funding challenges associated with offering farmworker-focused housing.** OHT does not intend to formally designate this project as farmworker housing. This is because USDA farmworker housing grants typically prioritize on-farm housing development. While the Chimacum Commons property is on rural land, OHT anticipates that many of its residents will work on surrounding farms rather than directly on the property. Further, OHT identified some inconsistencies between state and county income requirements for farmworker housing. To address these barriers, OHT is developing housing that meets the needs of farmworkers and workers in the food industry and will market available housing to this community without restricting units.
- **Importance of agritourism to the project's financial sustainability.** The inclusion of agritourism units generates additional revenue to balance the project's finances and ensure the long-term sustainability of operations.
- **Importance of engaging farmworkers in housing design.** OHT has engaged local workers in the design process to ensure it builds homes that meet workers' needs. This effort has impacted the design of the homes, such as offering design features (e.g., ventilation and outdoor hoses) to support mud and moisture management.
- **Benefit of flexible code.** Jefferson County code allows residential development in agricultural land (including ADUs, single-family residences, duplexes, short-term rentals, farmworker housing, and co-housing) subject to a Planned Rural Residential Development (PRRD) overlay that includes all rural residential and agricultural districts in Jefferson County. The PRRD overlay enabled OHT to permit a bonus density unit, along with a single-family residence and an accessory dwelling unit per five acres permitted in the agricultural zone. The overlay also allowed OHT to cluster units in a single area of the property, which helped preserve farmland in other parts of the property and concentrate utility service delivery. OHT noted that this code is relatively unused in Jefferson County, but that its purpose is to support projects like Chimacum Commons.

Case Study 2. Worker and Farmer Labor Association: Casa Grande

Background

Casa Grande is a four-story farmworker housing project in a converted hotel in downtown Mount Vernon. The project was opened in 2024 by the Worker and Farmer Labor Association (WAFLA), a nonprofit organization focused on labor-intensive agriculture and the H2A worker program. WAFLA works predominantly in Washington and Oregon, with additional work in seven other states across the US.

Casa Grande offers 140-145 beds spread over 35 units. Units range in size from studios to two-bedrooms, with the number of beds per unit based on square footage requirements for farmworker housing. Each unit has a kitchen and bathroom that is shared by tenants within the unit. The building has onsite laundry available on the first floor and an onsite bilingual property manager. Beds are available for seasonal or year-round leases. In the off-season, WAFLA leases out the beds and units to local organizations with short-term needs.

Because the project was opened in the past year, many of the seasonal beds in Casa Grande are vacant as of writing. Two farms currently have leased beds for their H2A workers. WAFLA developed Casa Grande with H2A workers in mind, but the housing is currently open to anyone, including non-farmworkers. Because funding came from a private investor, WAFLA has more flexibility in who can occupy the units and is not limited to solely leasing it to seasonal farmworkers. WAFLA's priorities in selecting tenants is to broadly first serve the farming community, then to specifically serve farmworkers, whether H2A or domestic, and finally to find tenants with long-term leases.

WAFLA develops and operates regional housing hubs across Washington. Some farmers in northeast and southeast King County have asked WAFLA to explore farmworker housing in King County, where it does not currently operate any units.

How It Was Developed

A private investor approached WAFLA, interested in making a cash investment in a farmworker housing property. WAFLA and the investor identified the Casa Grande property, which was a dilapidated hotel at the time, and purchased it in 2012. The investor funded substantial improvements to bring the property up to code, and WAFLA managed the improvements. WAFLA now leases the property from the private investor, and has a three-year lease on the property. The Department of Health inspected and licensed the building to qualify the units as H2A housing.

Reflection / Lessons Learned

WAFLA shared some recommendations for farmworker housing development:

- **Site farmworker housing in urban areas.** WAFLA noted that in-town housing typically offers a better work-life balance for workers than on-farm housing. WAFLA's perspective is that in-town housing offers farmworkers better integration into a community and access to needs,

like shopping or healthcare. This is especially true for H2A workers, for whom employers provide transportation to work, as it allows them to avoid owning a car and instead use a bike or transit for in-town transportation.

- **Develop flexible housing units.** WAFLA recommended that when developing farmworker housing, especially in an urban area, do so in a way that it can be easily converted back to market-rate housing to support resale value if the market changes.
- **Address potential community pushback with transparency.** WAFLA encountered some community concern about the H2A program and the housing conditions in Casa Grande. To address this, WAFLA hosted an open house and invited community members for a tour of the renovated housing units to successfully build community trust in their operations.
- **Value of a dedicated nonprofit focused on farmworker housing.** Most individual farms would have been unable to develop this project due to its large scale, but that scale is part of what makes Casa Grande so valuable. As a nonprofit with experience in farmworker housing, WAFLA facilitated the involvement of a private investor and manage the large-scale improvements for this project to add substantial capacity to Skagit County's affordable farmworker housing stock.
- **Value of a public-private partnership.** Because the project was fully privately funded, WAFLA and the investor have increased leasing flexibility than if they had received public grant funding. In the off-season, WAFLA leases the units in the short-term to those who need short-term housing e.g., church groups.

Case Study 3. Skagit County Seasonal Farmworkers Housing

Background

The Skagit County Seasonal Farmworker Housing is a five-building housing development in Burlington, Washington in Skagit County, north of King County. Completed in 2020, it consists of 14 two-bedroom townhouse units, with a total of 105 beds. Shared amenities include communal kitchens and bathrooms; a community room with laundry, office, and storage areas; and outdoor amenities including well-lit play spaces and grills spaces. It also has a fully accessible site with three two-story townhouses and a one-story duplex designed for universal access.

Its location in Burlington provides access to public transportation, with two bus stops within a half-mile. The project is adjacent to two permanent farmworker housing projects, also managed by the Housing Authority of Skagit County (HASC). The project aligns with Skagit County's broader effort to increase affordable housing, particularly for farmworkers in the area.

How It Was Developed

HASC collaborated with the Office of Rural and Farmworker Housing (ORFH) on development of the Skagit County Seasonal Housing project. Other partners involved include the RMC Architects as project architect and Faber Construction as general contractor.

This development represents the third phase of a multi-phased farmworker housing effort across multiple parcels. In 2002, HASC acquired the land for the project site, located adjacent to two permanent farmworker housing projects built in the first two phases. When HASC first acquired the parcels, they were zoned for Agricultural-Natural Resource Land and located in rural Skagit County but on the edge of the Burlington UGA.

In 2017, HASC entered into an interlocal agreement with Skagit County and the City of Burlington to extend sewer and water to the properties. To justify service extension, the City required that the development have a high number of units (e.g., 100 units). Working closely with the City, HASC secured sewer extensions for this project and the two neighboring sites.^{xxix} To support infrastructure costs, the development team obtained a \$625,000 loan from the State Legislature. Skagit County later amended the Burlington UGA to include the parcel, which enabled a zoning change that permitted multifamily housing.

The parcel is also next to the Skagit River and at risk of flooding. With the project in the FEMA 100-year floodplain, the project construction plans included elevating the building slab above the base elevation and using imported fill to meet floodplain requirements.

Total development costs for the project cost approximately \$7.2 million. Primary funding sources included USDA Rural Development Section 514/516 Program, USDA Section 521 Rental Assistance, the U.S. Department of Labor, the Washington Housing Trust Fund, and the Federal Home Loan Bank of Des Moines Affordable Housing Program. Because the project serves seasonal farmworkers, it was not eligible for LIHTC or CHIP funding, which apply only to permanent housing.

Total annual operating expenses are \$280,000, with \$60,000 for maintenance. These annual costs are covered by rental income and USDA Section 521 rental assistance. HASC estimates an average 12% vacancy rate during the season, and an average annual vacancy rate of 40% when factoring in the four months of off-season vacancy. To remain financially feasible, the units must be occupied for at least six months each year.

Project goals emphasized providing affordable, dignified, accessible, and sustainable housing. Appliances in common areas were selected for durability and high-intensity use. The architect prioritized energy-efficient design, and the project earned certificates in Enterprise Green Building Communities and the Evergreen Sustainable Development Standard. The project received an Honor Award from the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Northwest Washington in 2021.

Reflection / Lessons Learned

The Skagit County Farmworker Housing project showcases a collaborative approach to addressing farmworker housing needs; design that focuses on livability, sustainability and community; and the value of accessibility and a strategic location to meet seasonal farmworker community needs.

- **Collaborative approach:** The housing development highlights the value of collaboration. The Housing Authority of Skagit County provided the land and coordinated with the City of Burlington and Skagit County to make the parcel suitable for multifamily development, including extension of sewer services and adjustments to the City UGA. As one of the leading farmworker housing development organizations in Washington State, ORFH provided

necessary expertise in navigating financing and development of the seasonal farmworker housing. HASC also collaborated with RMC Architects in its project design to ensure the units were functional and accessible, as well as sustainable and energy efficient. The project design includes some units with universal design concepts to maximize inclusivity of its residents.

- **Community amenities and local access:** The parcel site has amenities that foster community among its residents. These amenities include outdoor play areas, a community room with laundry facilities, office space, storage, and sidewalks. The development is also located near two bus routes, providing farmworkers and families with multimodal connectivity to the City of Burlington.
- **Site preparation:** It took more than 10 years of coordination with the City of Burlington and Skagit County before the project site was prepared for development. Key actions included extending sewer infrastructure and enlarging the City of Burlington's urban growth area (UGA). The project also included structure elevation design to ensure the development meets floodplain regulations and ensures resident safety.
- **Flexibility of USDA section programs:** To cover annual costs, the housing development receives a rental assistance subsidy through USDA Section 521, which has increased flexibility when used in the context of seasonal housing. When Section 521 rental assistance is used as rental assistance for permanent housing, it is tied to a specific household. Given that the occupants are seasonal, Office of Rural and Farmworker Housing found that the rental assistance subsidy could be used for operating assistance. This flexibility provides more revenue certainty throughout the year.
- **Length of stay of seasonal housing:** When evaluating feasibility of seasonal housing, the length of stay of occupants is a critical consideration. As a feasibility rule as described by ORFH, full occupancy for about six months is needed. If there is a short length of occupancy (e.g., less than six months) or few farmworkers, it impacts the development's feasibility. The longer the units are vacant, the more that annual cash flow is impacted.
- **Bed and room distribution among families:** With the housing development open to seasonal farmworkers and families, it can be challenging to distribute beds and rooms among single farmworkers and farmworkers with families. When farmworker families arrive at the housing development, they often share apartments with other families as well as have shared amenities with all tenants. Effective management relies on the property manager maintaining an active on-site presence and paying close attention to community dynamics. The property must regularly engage and communicate with residents to ensure there is shared understanding and respect among households, especially given the close proximity of residents.
- **Maintaining vacant units in the off-season:** The seasonal housing units are unoccupied for four months in the winter, and the Housing Authority is not allowed to open the units to non-farmworkers during that time due to restrictions placed by the funding. While the units are vacant, there is required upkeep and necessary regular inspections, including winterization of the units and utility maintenance. The vacant housing development also requires routine security checks and site inspections to protect against crime, trespassing, and vandalism by non-residents during the off-season.

Case Study 4. People's Self-Help Housing Corporation: People's Place

Background

People's Self-Help Housing Corporation (PSHHC) is a nonprofit housing organization that develops permanent affordable housing across four counties along California's Central Coast. Founded in 1970, it serves over 10,000 residents, including farmworkers, and it owns and manages more than 2,000 rental units. These units are in rural, urban, and coastal areas in California.

One such project is People's Place, located in Santa Paula, California. Santa Paula is a city in the Greater Los Angeles area, located among high-priced urban areas including Santa Barbara, Malibu, and Los Angeles. It is located in Ventura County, which has an estimated farmworker employment population of 25,000, as of 2022.^{xxx}

Developed in August 2024, People's Place is a housing development that provides affordable housing for farmworkers and low-income households. It has 69 affordable units of varying sizes that are 1-, 2- and 3-bedroom units, with AMIs (area median incomes) that vary from 0-30% up to 30-60% AMI. Of the 69 units, 21 units are for farmworkers and their families at a 30% AMI.

How It Was Developed

People's Place had total construction costs of \$35.4 million, including \$2.4 million for land acquisition and approximately \$28 million in hard construction costs. This equates to roughly \$513,600 per unit, or \$364 per square foot. Annual maintenance expenses are estimated at \$480,000 total, or \$7,000-\$9,000 per unit per year, with an expected 3% annual escalation.

PSHHC developed People's Place using a mixture of federal, state, and local funding mechanisms. It receives an annual federal tax credit of \$2.4 million. Additional funding came from state and county-level funding mechanisms. From the state, it received \$3.8 million from the California HCD Joe Serna Farmworker Housing Grant program; PSHHC used this funding to support development of its 21 farmworker units. It also received funding from Ventura County, including \$1.08 million from the Ventura County HOME Investment Partnership program, and \$380,000 from a Ventura County Farmworker Housing Grant, funded by the County's general funds. The development also received \$1 million from a one-time Community Development Block Grant for disaster relief. The remaining funding sources came from tax credit equity funding. For this development, PSHHC applied 9% tax credits, which included \$2.26 million for construction financing and \$22.5 million for permanent financing.

Reflection / Lessons Learned

- **Value of County Support:** The support from Ventura County helped make People's Place a viable project. Ventura County voted and approved a one-time allocation of \$1 million from the General Fund to be used towards the construction and development of farmworker housing. This funding helped support three development projects that included affordable

housing for local farmworkers, including People's Place, which received \$380,000 in funding. In addition, Ventura County provided funding support by distributing HUD grants (CDBG and HOME programs) to support the development of People's Place.

Case Study 5. People's Self-Help Housing Corporation: Cleaver and Clark Commons

Background

PSHHC is finalizing development of Cleaver and Clark Commons, anticipated to be completed in Q1 2026. Cleaver and Clark Commons has 53 units across two residential buildings, with 52 low-income units and 1 unit for its property manager. Of its total units, 14 of the units are for farmworkers and their families. These units range from 30-50% AMI to align with farmworker wages in the area. Other amenities include a community room, office space, play spaces, shared laundry, an outdoor area, and bike parking. There is also parking to allow for 1-2 parking spaces per unit.

Cleaver and Clark Commons is located in Grover Beach in San Luis Obispo County, in the San Luis Obispo area. It has a high level of cost burden for renters, with farmworkers needing to earn 2.5 times the minimum wage to afford the average asking rent in San Luis Obispo County.^{xxxi}

How It Was Developed

Cleaver and Clark Commons will cost nearly \$41 million to develop. Its hard construction costs are nearly \$30 million, with \$3 million for land acquisition, and its soft construction costs are \$11.2 million. This is approximately \$774,000 per unit, or \$495 per square foot to construct. Its maintenance costs are estimated at \$7,000-9,000 annually per unit, with 3% escalation per year.

PSHHC developed Cleaver and Clark Commons in partnership with the Housing Authority of San Luis Obispo, support from the City, and a variety of funding mechanisms. It receives an annual federal tax credit of \$2.2 million. From the state, it received approximately \$10.8 million, including \$2.8 million from the state-based Joe Serna Farmworker Housing Grant program, which helped develop 14 of its farmworker housing units. It also received \$1.6 million from the Housing Authority of San Luis Obispo. The City of Grover Beach also provided \$4.75 million to help support the development of six units for at-risk and the unhoused population. The remaining funding sources are from LIHTC tax credit equity funding at 9%, with permanent financing at \$18.6 million.

Reflection / Lessons Learned

- **Value of partnerships and land:** The development of Cleaver and Clark Commons was supported through fortuitous land acquisition. Its land is composed of four neighboring parcels. The City previously owned three of the parcels. A community member donated the fourth lot through a competitive process, provided the land was developed for affordable housing. PSHHC and the Housing Authority of San Luis Obispo entered into a joint

partnership and applied for the lot together, with the Housing Authority bringing 21 project-based housing vouchers to ensure the development supports affordable housing. Through this process, they were awarded the parcel and worked with the City to acquire the three other properties to develop affordable housing.

BERK Appendix B: Requirements of Farmworker Housing in King County

Regulatory requirements for on-farm farmworker housing in King County vary depending on what the farmer is providing – permanent housing, temporary farmworker housing that has been licensed by Washington Department of Health (WADOH), or temporary farmworker housing that is under the WADOH licensing threshold need and therefore does not need to be licensed by WADOH. Below are details on each housing type and a side-by-side comparison of regulation requirements.

Permanent Farmworker Housing

Permanent farmworker housing offers a means to address farmworker housing need within Agricultural and Rural Area zones while upholding existing limits on general residential development. Otherwise known as an AEDU, this housing is intended for agricultural employees who are employed by a farm owner or farm operator on a year-round basis. All occupants must be agricultural employees. An AEDU must comply with K.C.C. Title 16 Building and Construction Standards. It must have a license requirement prior to construction, must have an approved sewage disposal system and water supply source approved by Public Health – Seattle and King County.

WADOH-Licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing

WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing provides a mechanism to address seasonal farmworker housing need in Agricultural and Rural Area zones. Temporary housing must be licensed through the Washington Department of Health if there are five or more temporary housing units, ten or more occupants, or if the occupants are H2A migrant workers. A farmer may also choose to license a temporary farmworker housing unit through the Department of Health. Chapter 246-358 WAC and Chapter 246-359 WAC detail the regulation requirements for WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing. In addition, King County Department of Executive Services, Records, and Licensing must also license the unit through a Temporary Farmworker Housing notice.

WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing offers increased building flexibility than permanent farmworker housing and non-WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing. It expands permitted housing structures to include yurts, manufactured homes, recreational vehicles, and the conversion of nonresidential structures, like a barn. It also allows housing on skids or a temporary foundation. Construction standards can be found at [WAC-245-359](#).

Other requirements include:

- **Waste disposal:** Waste disposal options must be approved by Public Health – Seattle and King County. It can include a 3,000-gallon concrete vault or a composting toilet.

- **Water supply:** Water requirements vary based on the number of temporary farmworkers. If serving more than 25 temporary farmworkers, the farmer must provide a Group A Water System. If serving less than 25 temporary farmworkers, a farmer must provide a Group B Water System. Then, the WADOH conducts water quality testing prior to issuing the temporary farmworker housing license.

WADOH Water System Requirements

Group A Water System - Intended for a large farmworker housing camp (15+ connections; 25+ people), it has higher requirements for comprehensive monitoring and operations, and extensive water quality testing requirements.

Group B Water System - Intended for small clusters of seasonal housing, (less than 15 connections and less than 25 people), it requires some level of monitoring and water quality testing limited to bacteria and nitrate.

Non-WADOH-licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing:

If a farmer has fewer than five temporary housing units or fewer than ten occupants, a farmer may opt to not license its temporary farmworker housing through the Washington Department of Health. Through this option, a farmworker can provide temporary farmworker housing that follows local code compliance with King County and state building requirements outlined in RCW 19.27.031. This code allows stick-built homes, mobile homes, and ADUs. Per state building requirements, onsite housing must be built on a permanent foundation. Regarding waste disposal, non-WADOH-licensed farmworker housing follows the same requirements as licensed temporary farmworker housing. Regarding water supply, non-WADOH-licensed farmworker housing must be approved by Public Health – Seattle and King County, with potable water as a requirement.

Comparison of Regulations by Housing Type

Exhibit 5 provides a side-by-side comparison of regulatory requirements for on-farm farmworker housing:

Exhibit 5. Regulatory Requirements for Farmworker Housing in King County

	Permanent Housing	WADOH-Licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing	Non-WADOH-licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing
Description	Considered an Agricultural Employee Dwelling Unit (AEDU). Intended for employees who are employed by farm owner or farm operator on a year-round	Applies to temporary housing that is 5 or more units, 10 or more occupants, or for H2A housing.	Applies to temporary farmworker housing that are 1-4 units, less than 10 occupants, and is not used as H2A-Migrant housing.

	Permanent Housing	WADOH-Licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing	Non-WADOH-licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing
	basis. All occupants must be agricultural employees.		
Units	Dependent on farm size: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Less than 20 acres: 1 AEDU (agricultural employee dwelling unit) ▪ 21-50 acres: 2 AEDUs ▪ 51-100 acres: 3 AEDUs ▪ 100+ acres: 4 AEDUs + 1 AEDU per 100 additional acres 	Varies.	Less than 5 temporary housing units
Occupants	No more than 8 occupants per AEDU.	Varies.	No more than 9 occupants across all units.
Parking Requirement	One off-street parking space per AEDU	Not defined	Not defined
Building Permit	Must comply with King County building code (Title 16)	The following options must comply with construction standards in WAC-246-359 and be inspected by WA DOH Construction Review Services based on structure type. A Certificate of Occupancy is required at the time of application.	Non-WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing units may elect to comply with WAC 246-359 (temporary worker building code), used for WADOH-licensed temporary farmworker housing. See WADOH-Licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing for requirements. Otherwise, the housing is subject to RCW 19.27.031 and King County Building Code Title 16.
License Requirement	Farmer must file with the Department of Executive Services, Records, and Licensing prior to construction. Certificate of occupancy is required.	It must be licensed with the Washington Department of Health and a Temporary Farm Worker Housing Notice filed through King County Department of Executive Services, Records, and Licensing.	All building permits must be obtained and reviewed with King County for local code compliance within its normal permitting process.

	Permanent Housing	WADOH-Licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing	Non-WADOH-licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing
Permitted Structures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stick-Built. Mobile homes. ADUs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stick-Built. Mobile Homes. Yurt Manufactured home Recreational vehicle Conversion of existing nonresidential structure (e.g., barn) with “Change of Use” permit. <p>It may allow for housing on skids or temporary foundation.</p> <p>Requirements of each option vary.</p>	<p>If following RCW 19.27.031:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Stick-Built. Mobile Homes. ADUs Housing on permanent foundation if constructed onsite.
Zoning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agricultural Zones Rural Area Zone <p>Limited to non-farmable areas. The land should be already disturbed, non-farmable areas.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agricultural Zones Rural Area Zone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agricultural Zones Rural Area Zone
Unit Size	Max size of 1,000 sq. ft	Minimum 50 sq ft per person in sleeping rooms. Bunks are allowed, with ceiling height of a minimum of 7 ft.	Minimum of 50 sq ft per person if shared.
Waste Disposal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must have approved sewage disposal system. It must be discharged to either a public sewer system or an onsite sewer system (e.g., septic system) approved by King County. Permit needed for new septic installations from Public Health – Seattle & King County 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must be hooked up to a suitable sewage disposal system; possible options include a 3,000-gallon concrete vault or a composting toilets. Must be approved by Public Health Seattle and King County 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must be hooked up to a suitable sewage disposal system. Possible options include a 3,000-gallon concrete vault or a composting toilets. Must be approved by Public Health Seattle and King County.

	Permanent Housing	WADOH-Licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing	Non-WADOH-licensed Temporary Farmworker Housing
Water Supply	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must be approved by Public Health Seattle and King County. Requires water testing within 90 days. Potable water required. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must be approved by Washington Department of Health and tested within 90 days of occupancy. If servicing more than 25 people or 15+ service connections for 60+ days per year, it requires a Group A Public Water System, which requires routine testing and frequent water monitoring, If servicing fewer than 25 people, it requires a Group B Public Water System requirements. This requires basic, periodic testing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Must be approved by Public Health Seattle and King County. Requires water testing within 90 days. Potable water required.
Other		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May be used for H2A housing if licensed and meets H2A requirements. Exempt from county zoning code (except for setbacks and floodplain development permit where appropriate) if farmer has WADOH Temporary Farmworker Housing License. Site must be adequately drained and at least 200 feet from all surface water. Minimum of 1 toilet per 15 occupants. 1 shower per 10 occupants. Facilities may be shared. 	Non-WADOH licensed temporary farmworker housing cannot be used for H2A housing.

BERK Appendix C: Zoning in Agricultural and Rural Areas

Farmland in the APDs in King County are primarily located in the Agricultural and Rural Area zones. These are also the only two zones in King County that permit permanent and temporary farmworker housing.

These zones focus on the prioritization and protection of farmland and have very low residential density limit. This priority is reflected in very low dwelling units per acre requirements, which limits the number of farmworker housing units on and near farmland. To further protect these lands, residential development in agricultural and rural area zones must use individual wells and septic systems, as public utilities do not extend to these areas. There are also setbacks from neighboring resource lands to reduce conflict.

Agricultural Zones

The purpose of the agricultural zone is to preserve and protect limited supplies of farmland. Residential density limits are low, with residential development allowed for farm owners, onsite agricultural employees, and their respective families. Most commercial farmland is located on parcels zoned Agricultural-10 and Agricultural-35, which have a minimum lot size of 10- or 35-acres. The base density and dimensional standard for agricultural zones vary based on minimum lot size. See below:

- Agricultural-10: 0.1 dwelling units / acre – or one dwelling unit per 10 acres
- Agricultural-35: 0.286 dwelling units / acre – or one dwelling unit per 35 acres.

The allowed residential uses in the agricultural zones include single detached residences, residential accessory uses, home occupation, and farmworker housing. These residences may only be located on parts of the agricultural lands unsuitable for agricultural use, and occupation must be only by the farm operator, their families, or their employees while employed on-site. Residential accessory uses are accessory dwelling units (ADUs). In the rural area, one ADU is allowed per lot. If detached, the ADU cannot exceed 2,000 square feet (1,000 square feet of heated floor area and 1,000 square feet of unheated floor area). Permanent and temporary farmworker housing are also allowed on agricultural land.

The agricultural zone does not allow for clustering of dwelling units.

Rural Area Zones

The purpose of the rural area zone is to “provide for an area-wide long-term rural character and to minimize land use conflicts with nearby agricultural... districts.” It also includes limits on residential densities and uses compatible with rural character. The base density and dimensional standard for Rural Area zones vary based on minimum lot size. Lots zoned for Rural Area (Rural Area-2.5, Rural Area-5, Rural Area-10) are adjacent to the APDs and on a 2-5-acre, 5-acre, 10-acre, or 20-acre minimum lot size.

- Rural Area – 2.5: 0.4 dwelling units / acre – or one dwelling unit per two and half acres
- Rural Area – 5: 0.2 dwelling units / acre – or one dwelling unit per five acres
- Rural Area – 10: 0.1 dwelling units / acre – or one dwelling unit per ten acres.

The allowed residential uses in the rural area zones include single detached residences, residential accessory uses, home occupation, and farmworker housing. The rural area zone also conditionally allows low-density middle housing. Rural Area zones allow for clustering of residential units.

BERK Appendix D: Floodplain Development Details

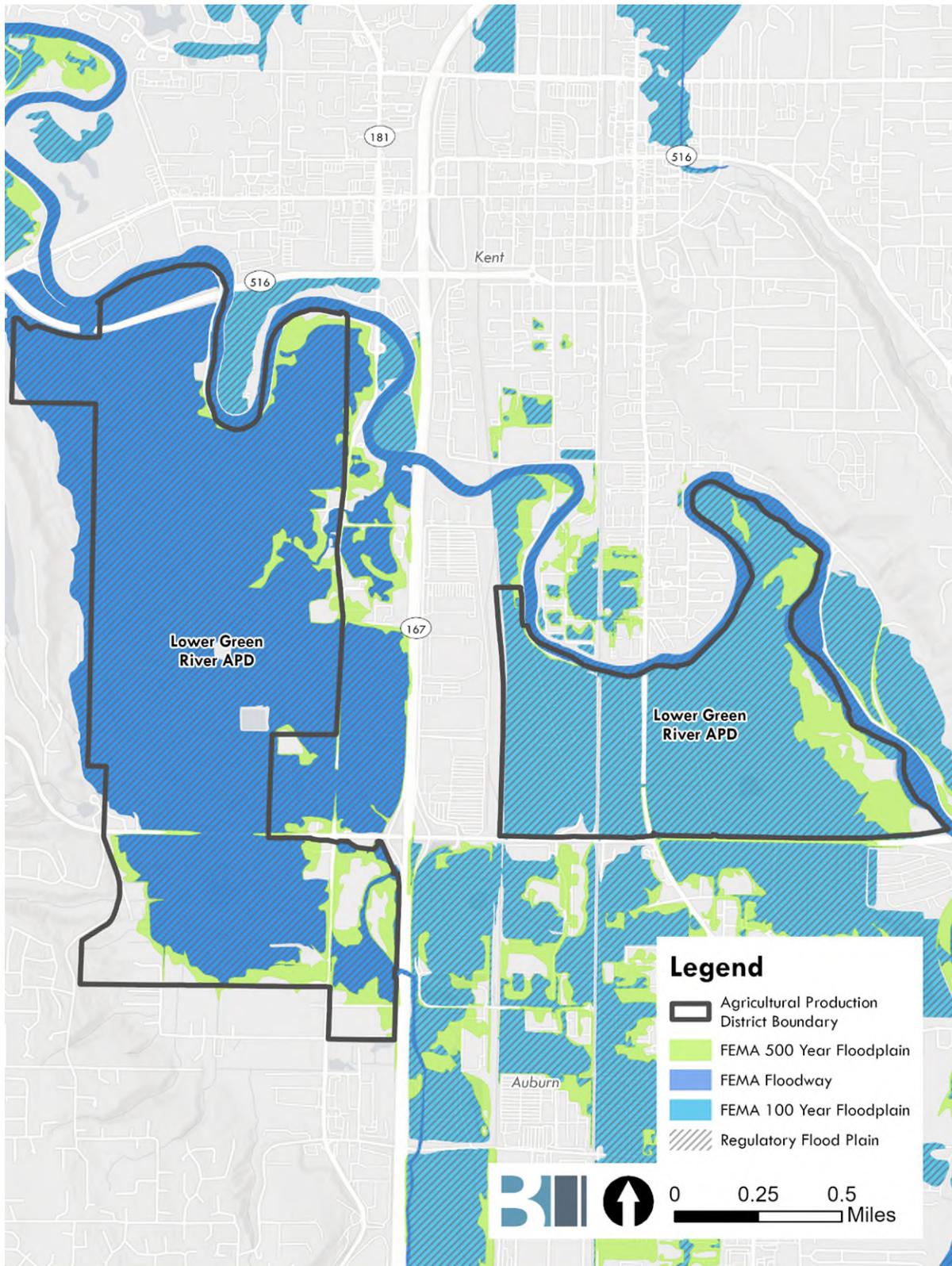
Mapping of the Floodplain

King County maps its floodplain based on the FEMA floodway, the FEMA 100-year floodplain, and the FEMA 500-year floodplain. These include federally mapped floodplains. There are also regulated floodplain maps to help understand areas in flood hazard areas. To note, the regulatory floodplain map includes both the mapped floodway and the FEMA 100-year floodplain map. It is for informational purposes to provide a qualitative approximation of flood hazard areas in relation to the APDs. See **Exhibit 6, Exhibit 7, Exhibit 8, Exhibit 9, and Exhibit 10** for the extent of the floodway and floodplain in the King County APDs and Vashon Island. In addition, some of these areas are mapped and regulated as channel migration zones, which has additional regulations.

Comparison of APDs in Flood Hazard Areas

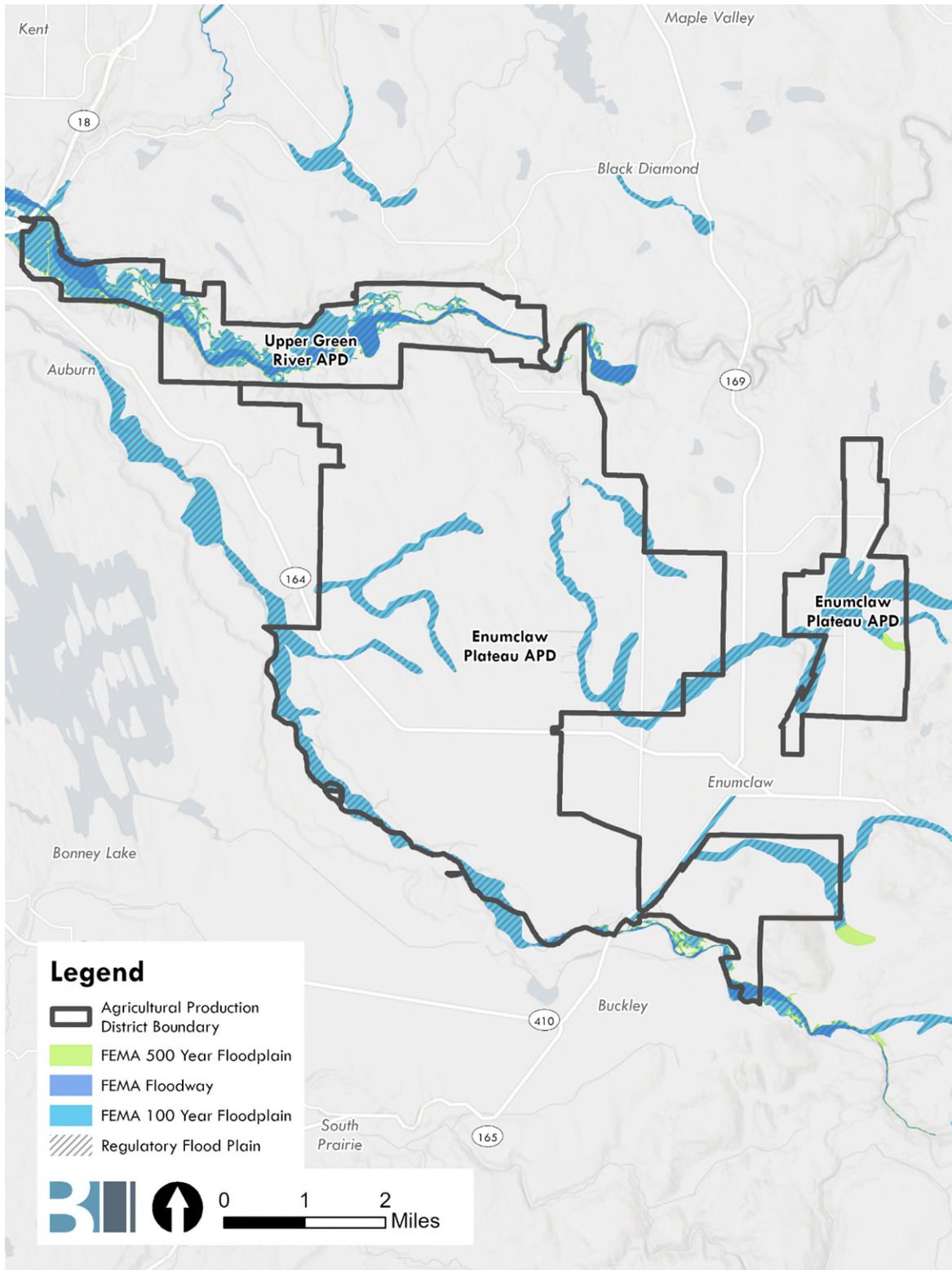
Much of the farmland in the APDs in King County is located in flood hazard areas. The Snoqualmie Valley, Sammamish Valley, and Lower Green River APDs are largely in the regulatory floodplain, with limited farmland outside of the floodplain. The Upper Green River APD also has a significant amount of its APD farmland located in the floodplain, but with some land outside of the floodplain. In comparison with these APDs, the Enumclaw APD and Vashon Island have the least amount of land located in the floodplain. However, there are floodplain areas in these locations that limit new residential development, including housing for farmworkers.

Exhibit 6. Extent of the floodway and floodplain - Lower Green River APD



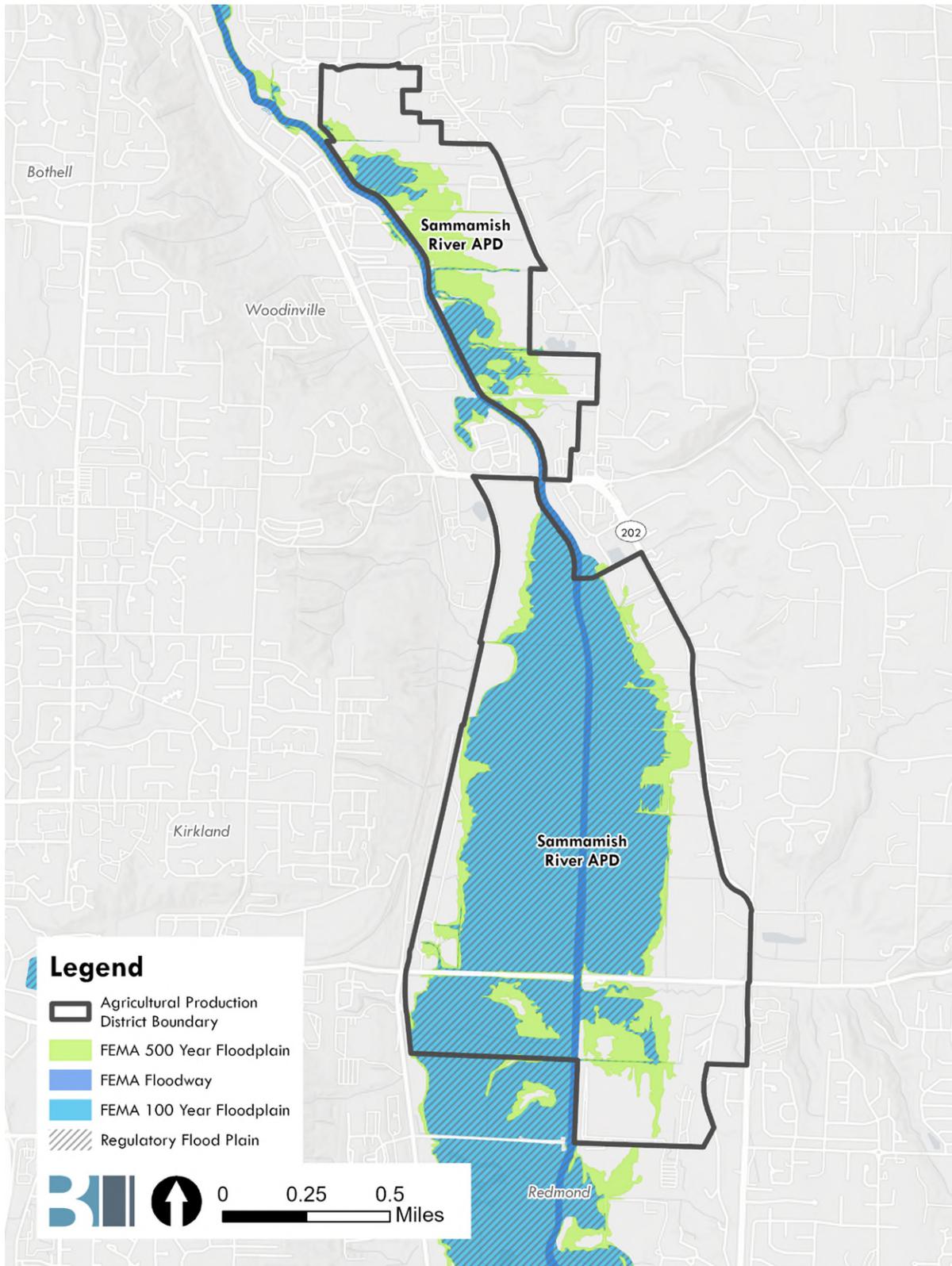
Source: King County GIS, 2025

Exhibit 7. Extent of the floodway and floodplain - Enumclaw Plateau and Upper Green River APDs



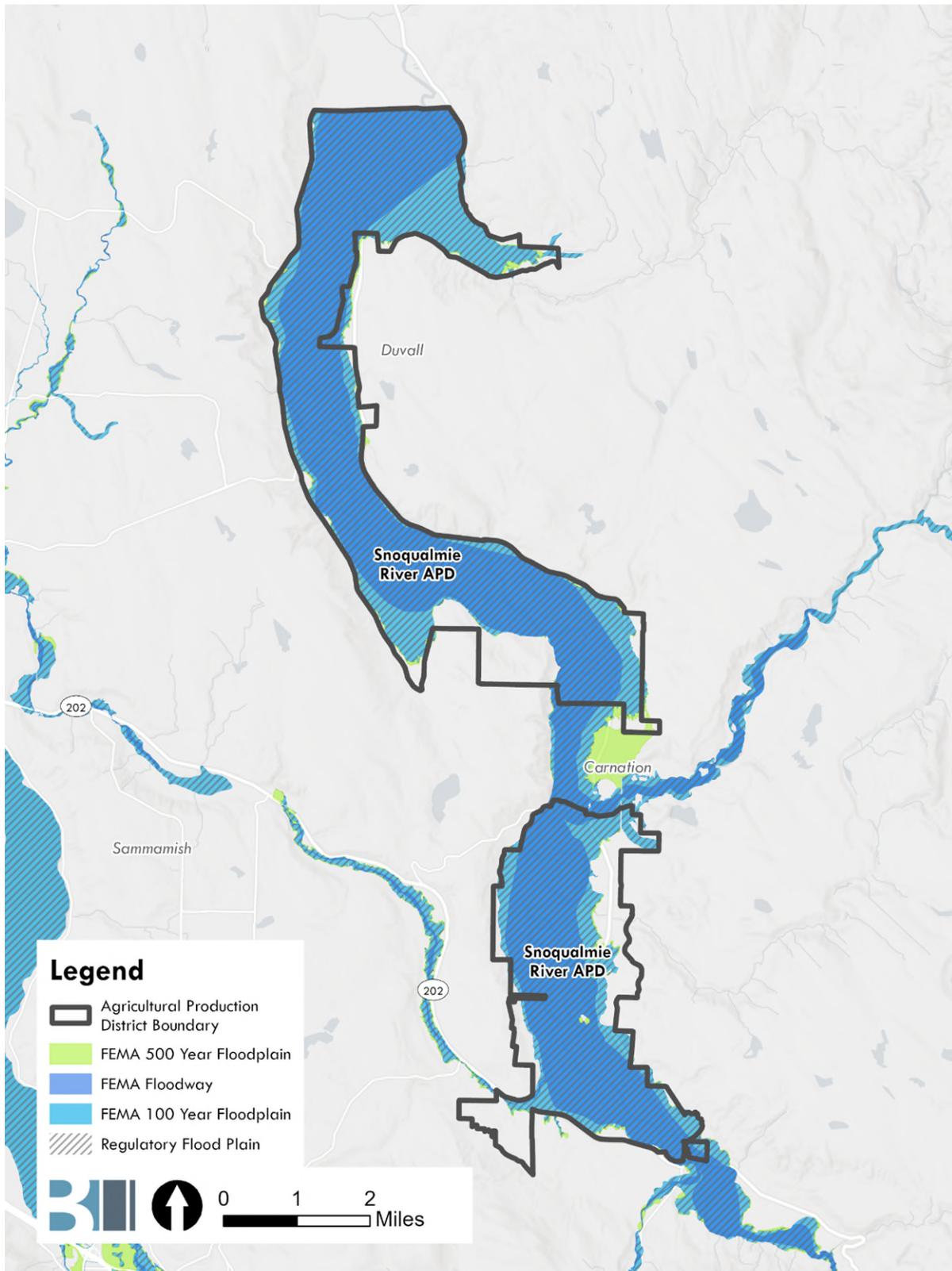
Source: King County GIS, 2025

Exhibit 8. Extent of the floodway and floodplain - Sammamish River APD



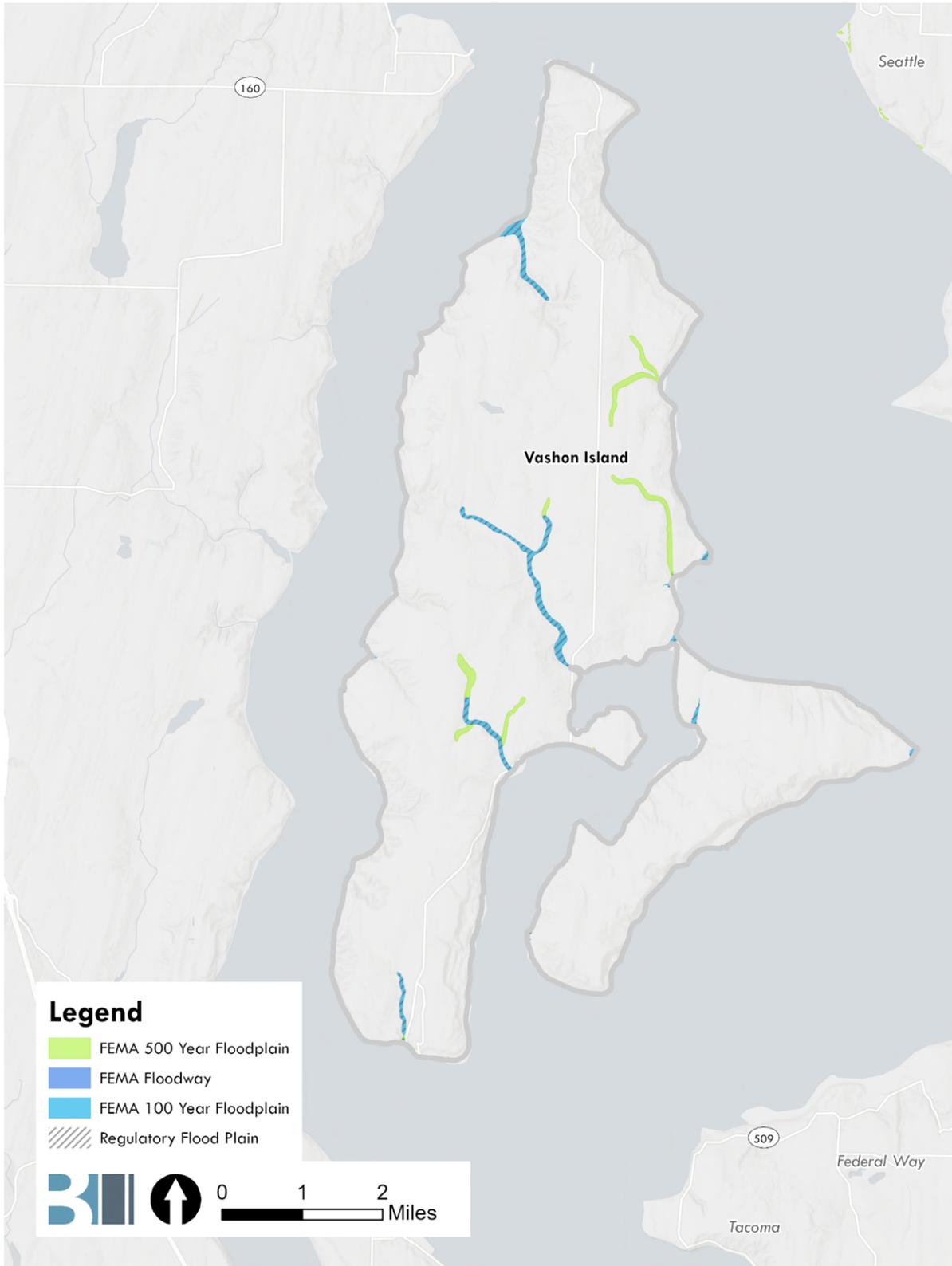
Source: King County GIS, 2025

Exhibit 9. Extent of the floodway and floodplain - Snoqualmie Valley APD



Source: King County GIS, 2025

Exhibit 10. Extent of the floodway and floodplain - Vashon Island



Source: King County GIS, 2025

Floodplain Development Restrictions

In King County, floodplain development restrictions apply to various structures, including residential buildings (defined as a building used for overnight human occupancy), recreational vehicles; it also applies to nonresidential buildings, structures, and utility systems (See K.C.C. 21A.24.224). The development restrictions for residences vary depending on if the farm is located in a zero-rise flood fringe area, a zero-rise floodway, or in a FEMA floodway. Per K.C.C. 21A.06.505 and FEMA definition,^{xxxiii} definitions of these terms are below:

- **Zero-rise floodway:** the channel of a stream and that portion of the adjoining floodplain that is necessary to contain and discharge the base flood flow without any measurable increase in base flood elevation. A measurable increase in base flood elevation is a calculated upward rise in the base flood elevation equal to or greater than 0.01 foot.
- **Zero-rise flood fringe:** that portion of the floodplain outside of the zero-rise floodway. The zero-rise flood fringe is generally associated with standing water rather than rapidly flowing water. It is still subject to base-flood regulation
- **FEMA floodway:** the channel of a river or stream and the portion of the adjoining floodplain that must be reserved in order to discharge the base (100-year) flood without cumulatively increasing the water surface elevation more than a designated amount.

Exhibit 11 provides a summary of development restrictions in the floodplain based on farm and parcel location; however, King County should be contacted for full details. In addition, a floodplain development permit must be obtained from King County before starting development (See K.C.C. 21A.24.271).

Exhibit 11. Summary of Floodplain Development Restrictions

Restrictions by Residential Development			
If located in...	General Restrictions	Permanent Housing	Temporary Housing
Zero-Rise Flood Fringe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Development shall not reduce the base flood storage volume of the floodplain. ▪ Compensatory storage is not required for grading or fill within the foundation of an existing residential building. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New, converted, or improved permanent homes must be elevated above the flood protection elevation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ RVs can be used for housing, but only temporarily (less than 180 days) or if licensed and highway-ready with no permanent attachments (see K.C.C. 21A.24.240(N)).
Zero-Rise Floodway	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Development shall not increase the base flood elevation. ▪ Buildings that use posts and piling construction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New, converted, or improved residential buildings are permitted only on lots in existence before 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Temporary farmworker housing is not allowed in the zero-rise floodway during flood season (Sept 30-May 1).

Restrictions by Residential Development

If located in...	General Restrictions	Permanent Housing	Temporary Housing
FEMA Floodway	<p>techniques are permitted and are not considered to increase base flood elevation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If a building does not use posts or pilings, a critical areas report is required. 	<p>Nov 27, 1990, with less than 5,000 square feet of buildable land outside the zero-rise floodway, with a total building footprint less than 2,000 square feet.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Must be located the farthest distance from the channel. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>King County code does not specify if temporary farmworker housing is allowed from May 1 - September 30.</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Most restrictive development standards of the floodways. ▪ Floodplain development shall not increase the base flood elevation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ New, improved, or expanded residential buildings are prohibited, except for existing homes under specific conditions. (see K.C.C. 21A.24.260(F)) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ To the maximum extent practical, temporary farmworker housing [...] should not be located in the floodplain or in a critical area buffer (See K.C.C. 21A.08.090(B)(14)(a)(3)). This includes the floodway.

The floodplain development regulations on location, elevation, and lot eligibility make it challenging to construct new permanent farmworker housing for farms in floodplain areas. Farms in the floodplain that lack existing housing have limited on-farm housing options; these farms are primarily limited to temporary housing in the non-flooding months. With that said, there are limited seasonal housing options that permit RVs and seasonal housing, with limitations on timing and the capacity to be moved or removed during the flood season (September 30-May 1).

King County Agricultural Sector Assessment
Category D: *Transportation Report*

November 15, 2025



King County

Executive Summary

Five agricultural production districts (APDs) in King County protect farmland in an urban county. These areas produce mostly organic food and generate farm interest through agritourism and wine, and provide dairy and cattle, among many other economic and food system impacts. This report assesses the transportation options available to farm workers and farmers within each APD. The findings have been generated from an assessment of transportation data and interviews with farmers, farm organizations, and King County Metro.

Current Conditions

The below table provides a summary of the transportation current conditions findings within each of the APDs. Themes across the board center on the reliance of private vehicles as a primary transportation option for farmers and farm workers. Due to the relatively removed nature of the APDs from population and housing centers, farmers and farm workers are faced with long public transit routes and a final “last mile” challenge from public transportation stops to farms. King County Metro has existing programs to address some aspects of these issues. Vanpool and Vanshare are two cost-effective programs offered to King County residents. With greater direct marketing and support through farm organizations in the APDs, these options could address many of their work transportation needs. Driving vehicles, whether carpooling or alone, requires ensuring that rural roads are maintained and safe from flooding.

Agricultural Production District	Primary Transportation Challenges
Sammamish River	Limited public transit access that adds significant time to commutes; high ride-share costs; last-mile gaps from Redmond light rail.
Snoqualmie River	Several public transit options within APD (<i>SVT, Metro, Shuttles</i>), but distance from population centers and last-mile gaps limit reliability of public transit for regular commuting; Flooding and road maintenance create private vehicle challenges
Lower Green River	Strong transit nearby but does not provide direct access to farms; Unsafe or long last-mile walks.
Upper Green River	No direct transit service through APD; Flooding and poor rural road resilience.
Enumclaw Plateau	Isolated; Limited DART service; High vehicle costs for long commutes.

Best Practices and Recommendations

Best practices for safe, affordable farm worker transportation include strong communication and partnerships between program staff of existing Metro programs and farm organizations, as well as learning specifically from farm workers and farmers what the needs are for transportation. Examples include California’s CalVans and Green Raiteros. Two on-demand, electric vehicle-focused, cost-effective solutions for farm workers, developed from engagement and direct asks by farm workers.

The following opportunities build upon successful models from other regions, such as California’s CalVans and Green Raiteros programs, to create practical and equitable mobility solutions for farm workers.

Recommendation	Action Summary
Strengthen Outreach, Marketing, and Awareness of Existing Programs	Partner with trusted community organizations (e.g., SnoValley Tilth, VIVA Farms) to raise awareness of Metro programs and support farm worker participation.

Build Direct Connectivity with King County Metro and Agriculture Sector	Establish regular engagement between Metro and agricultural organizations to tailor services, schedules, and pilot programs to farm needs.
Support Community Partners as Mobility Hubs	Invest in local organizations to coordinate vanpools, carpooling networks, and mobility resources for farm workers.
Pilot Transportation Projects in High-Priority Areas	Fund small-scale pilots—such as seasonal shuttles, on-demand zones, or vanpool clusters—to test scalable solutions within specific APDs.

These are actionable items that will lead to a clear understanding of what can make a positive difference for farm workers getting to and from work and providing a necessity to the County.

Improving transportation access for farm workers is an economic and equity issue. Reliable, affordable mobility supports the stability of King County’s agricultural economy by ensuring that farms can retain and attract workers, continue producing and connecting with the land, and contribute to local and beyond food systems. Farm workers face barriers related to income, geographic limitations, and schedule flexibility, which can make traditional transportation solutions less effective. With targeted, farm-worker community-informed transportation programs, King County can strengthen its commitment to the long-term viability of local agriculture.

Assessment Scope

The transportation and mobility section of Category D of the King County Agricultural Assessment was developed in response to mobility concerns for farmers and farm workers, particularly in rural areas where transportation options may be limited for accessing healthcare services, reaching employment opportunities, or daily commuting to farms for work. The task for this section is to: *Assess and Provide Recommendations That Improve Transportation Programs and Support Mobility for Farm Workers.*

There are three aspects to this task:

- Assessment of current conditions for transportation infrastructure serving the five Agriculture Production Districts (Enumclaw Plateau, Snoqualmie River, Sammamish River, Upper Green River, and Lower Green River) and identification of gaps and areas of mobility constraint.
- Exploration of best practices that have emerged locally or in other regions for transportation and mobility for agricultural workers, particularly community-based and cross-stakeholder solutions.
- Evaluation of the feasibility of expansion of transportation options in King County to better serve rural and agricultural areas.

The overall aim is to provide actionable recommendations that improve farm worker mobility, reduce transportation barriers, and support labor stability across the County's agricultural sector.

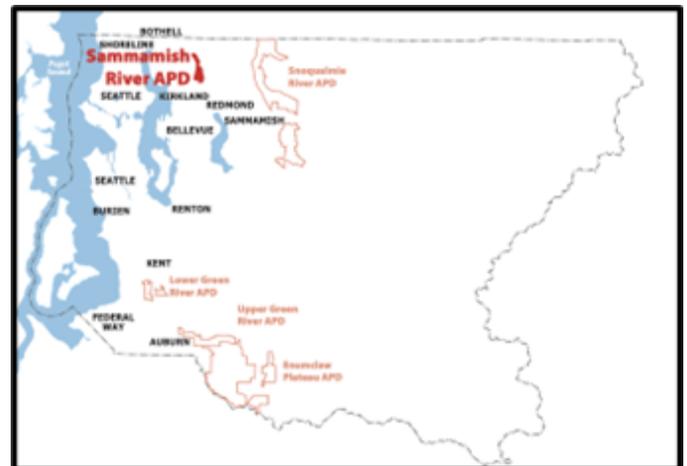
Note: The primary sources informing this analysis and report are from King County Metro's data and transportation maps. Additional insights were provided through direct interviews with King County Metro, farm organizations, and farmers.

Current Conditions Assessment

Sammamish River APD

Overview

The Sammamish River Agricultural Production District is home to vineyards, nurseries, livestock, and equestrian operations. Many of the farms are small-scale and locally focused, contributing to the area's agricultural character and the regional wine industry. Located approximately 15-20 miles from central Seattle, the valley is accessible from the urban core but is still a far commute for workers traveling from South Seattle and other lower-cost neighborhoods.



Interviews with farmers and farm organizations in the APD reported that most farmers and farm workers are not living directly in the APD, but are commuting from Seattle. They expressed challenges with commute times, both for driving and public transportation:

Currently, there is little access to public transportation to the farm. A 30-minute to 45-minute drive from Seattle becomes a 2 to 3-hour commute via public transportation. If you don't have your own vehicle it is hard to be a reliable farm worker in Sammamish.

– Anonymous Interviewee

Reports from interviews also expressed that many farmers in the area have a second job, whether seasonally or alongside farm work. Farm workers are therefore making multiple trips a week, or potentially daily in the growing season.

Private Transit

For most workers, private vehicles remain the most reliable way to reach farms in the Sammamish River. Driving from downtown Redmond Station takes 10–20 minutes, depending on farm location, and is far less than the time required for public transit. Commutes from Seattle range from as little as 20 minutes to over an hour, especially during high traffic times.

While private vehicles remain the most practical and consistent form of transportation to Sammamish Valley, the costs of fuel, insurance, and vehicle maintenance from regular commutes add to the overall financial burden for workers, particularly those with lower wages or seasonal employment.

Public Transit

Transit access to the Sammamish Valley is limited and often impractical for farm work.

- *From downtown Seattle:* At least two buses plus an 18-minute walk, totaling just over an hour.
- *From Ballard or Rainier Beach:* Three buses and roughly two hours each way, with transfers between multiple bus operators.
- *From Redmond Light Rail (new extension):* Routes 222 and 930 connect from Downtown Redmond Station to Woodinville but require 17–30 minutes of walking to reach farms. Route 224 provides coverage toward Duvall, with some stops serving the valley’s eastern edge. Metro’s DART 931 currently provides service on weekdays during the a.m. and p.m. peak period between Duvall, Woodinville, and Bothell. As part of a bus network restructure related to 2 Line extensions, a new route is planned between Woodinville and downtown Redmond along Woodinville-Redmond Rd NE.

These options require significant walking, long travel times, and coordinated transfers that are not always reliable for early morning or late evening farm shifts.

Other public transportation options, such as vanpool or vanship, may be an impactful option for the region. As commutes to Sammamish River are largely from urban regions, overlap between farm workers regularly taking the same commute is likely, though with secondary jobs, there may be a limitation in flexibility for farm workers who would potentially engage in these programs. This was not reported to be used on a large scale during interviews. A further discussion of vanpooling throughout the County is [located below](#).

Ride Share

Ride-hailing services (Uber, Lyft, taxis) are available, but costs make them prohibitive for daily commutes. A one-way trip from South Seattle neighborhoods such as Rainier Beach can cost \$60–\$80 under normal conditions, higher during peak hours. This makes ride-sharing more realistic as a backup or emergency option than as a routine solution.

Community Priority & Worker Needs

Farm workers in the Sammamish Valley face challenges of affordability, distance, and reliability in their transportation options. Current conditions limit accessibility for workers from lower-cost neighborhoods, forcing reliance on private cars or long transit commutes with significant walking distances. The expansion of the Redmond light rail improves regional connectivity, but the last-mile gap to farms remains unresolved.

Community priorities consistently point to the need for:

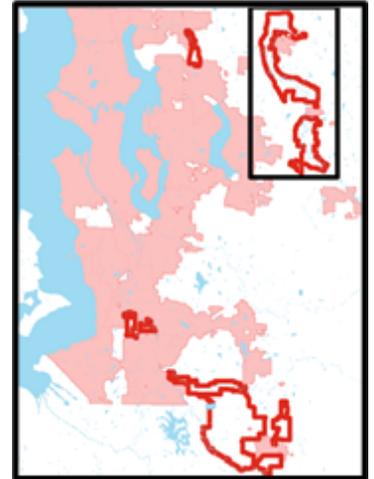
- Improved transit connections between Redmond Light Rail and farm clusters.
- Flexible shuttle or demand-response services to reduce last-mile travel burdens.
- Support for connecting workers to the carpools and rideshare networks to make commuting affordable and reliable for them, such as connecting employees with Metro vanpool information and other farm workers to utilize the service.

Without such interventions, farms in the Sammamish Valley will continue to face labor access barriers, and workers will remain burdened by long, costly, or impractical commutes.

Snoqualmie River APD

Overview

The Snoqualmie River Agricultural Production District covers nearly 14,931 acres, with about 7,400 acres actively farmed as of 2023. It is home to more than 200 commercial farms, including dairies, livestock operations, nurseries, and row-crop farms. About 75% of farms are owner-operated, while the remaining 25% are leased—many by Hmong and Mien farmers. The valley is also one of King County’s largest agricultural zones, yet its rural character and dispersed settlement patterns make transportation access a continual challenge for farm workers and residents alike.



Snoqualmie River APD is located relatively near the Seattle core, though further than Sammamish. Mileage ranges from 20-30+, depending on the location that farmers and farm workers may be commuting from within the Seattle region and the APD. From reports in interviews with farmers and farm organizations in the APD, one of the primary challenges experienced is the lack of affordable housing options in the area. This again leads to many farm workers commuting from the Seattle area. While there is a variety of farm sizes in the area, many farmers and farm workers were again reported to have secondary jobs, leading to commuting multiple times a week, or daily in the growing season.

Private Transit

Private vehicles remain the dominant mode of travel for both workers and residents. Without traffic, drive times can be relatively short. However, regular commuting times from Seattle to the APD can range from 40 minutes to well over an hour.

One of the primary challenges experienced in the Snoqualmie River APD, as it pertains to private vehicle transportation, is road maintenance and conditions. The 2024 Snoqualmie River APD strategic plan documented these challenges extensively:

“There are over 40 miles of unincorporated King County roads in the Snoqualmie Valley APD. There are 27 King County bridges in the Snoqualmie Valley APD (see Map 16), one of which is owned jointly with the City of Duvall. There are only four roads that cross the valley... The quality, reliable traffic flow, and routine maintenance of these roads and bridges, providing year-round access to heavy farm vehicles and their suppliers is critically important to maintain operations and food and farm supply chains... However, ‘King County continues to experience a roads funding crisis.... Conditions on the road system will continue to deteriorate, and Roads must focus resources on critical safety needs.’”

— Snoqualmie Valley Agriculture Strategic Plan

Farm worker interview participants emphasized these concerns:

“Flooding has significant impacts on transportation here. There are major corridors that cannot be crossed during a flood. It makes it really difficult to get around.”

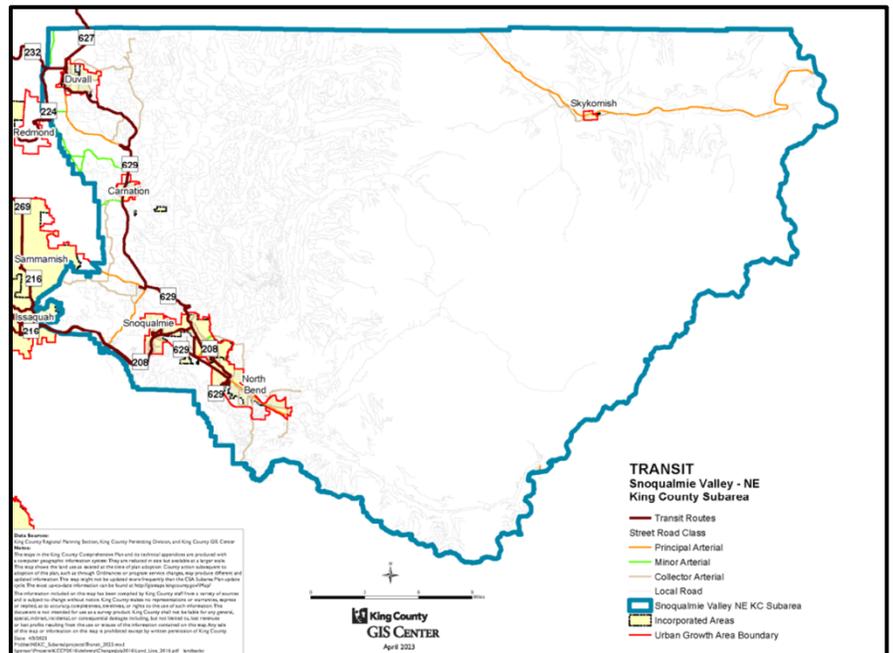
— Anonymous Interview Participant

These factors make reliance on private vehicles both costly and unpredictable. Snoqualmie community members advocated for enhanced maintenance of rural roadways, which is now a priority in the Snoqualmie Subarea plan.

Public Transit

Transit service in the Snoqualmie Valley is limited due to low population density and policies that restrict rural transit investment to levels that protect rural character. Still, several services are available:

- **Snoqualmie Valley Transportation (SVT)** – Offers fixed routes, deviated fixed routes, and door-to-door service. Fixed routes run every 90–100 minutes on weekdays, connecting North Bend, Snoqualmie, Fall City, Carnation, and Duvall, with stops near major destinations such as Remlinger Farms. Door-to-door rides are available by reservation within North Bend, Snoqualmie City, Preston, Carnation, Duvall, and Monroe.
- **King County Metro** – Route 208 connects North Bend and Snoqualmie with Issaquah on weekdays (50–70 minute frequency at peak, 120 minutes off-peak). DART 224, a Dial-a-Ride Transit (DART) line, links Duvall with Redmond Ridge and Redmond on weekdays every 60 minutes. DART 931 links Duvall with Woodinville and Bothell weekdays during the a.m. and p.m. commute periods. As part of a bus network restructuring related to 2 Line extensions, a new Route 215 is planned to replace Route 208. Route 215 will follow the same pathway in North Bend and Snoqualmie to Issaquah Highlands, but from there will continue directly on I-90 to the Mercer Island Station on the 2 Line. Route 215 will have 90-minute headways, all day, seven days a week.
- **Shuttles** – Several local shuttles, partially funded by Metro’s Community Access Program (CAP), run weekdays only. These include the North Bend–Snoqualmie Shuttle, the Cedar Falls Loop, and the Duvall–Monroe Shuttle (connecting to Community Transit routes 270 and 271).



Vanpools and vanshare are additional options for commuters in the area. Similar opportunities and challenges exist as in Sammamish Valley. This is discussed further below.

While these services provide coverage across the valley, infrequent headways, weekday-only schedules, and reliance on transfers limit their utility for agricultural workers with early, late, or seasonal shifts.

Ride-Share

Ride-share services are available in the Snoqualmie Valley but face the same cost and distance barriers as in other APDs. Long travel times to Seattle or Bellevue drive up fares, making them impractical for daily commuting. Driver availability is also very limited in the Valley. This was noted as a challenge during interviews with farmers and farm organizations in the area.

Community Priority & Worker Needs

Community members and farmers consistently identify transportation as a major barrier to sustaining agriculture in the Snoqualmie Valley. Key needs include:

- Enhanced maintenance of rural roadways to support safe and reliable travel.
- More accessible transit connections, particularly linking southern Snoqualmie Valley communities to Maple Valley, Covington, and to future light rail in Redmond.
- Support for farm-specific mobility solutions, like carpools or farm worker shuttle services, to bridge the “last-mile” gap between bus routes and dispersed farm sites.

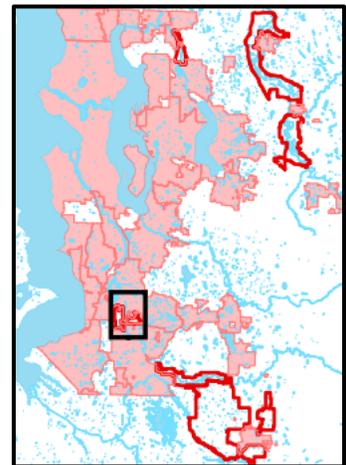
Without targeted interventions, farm workers will continue to face long, unreliable, and expensive commutes, and farms will remain vulnerable to labor shortages driven by transportation barriers.

Lower Green River APD

Overview

The Lower Green River Agricultural Production District is in South King County, primarily around Kent and Auburn. This APD is shaped by its proximity to dense urban and industrial zones while still hosting a mix of farmland. It is intersected by major highways and surrounded by commercial centers, which makes transportation access better than in other APDs. However, despite its location near transit-rich areas, the farms themselves often sit beyond walking distance of bus stops, creating challenges for workers who rely on public or shared transportation.

Commute distances and frequency are generally less of a challenge than in other APDs since the farms are surrounded by urban infrastructure and are close to the greater Seattle area. The APD is also closer to lower-cost neighborhoods in South Seattle.



Private Transit

Road access is strong in the Lower Green River APD. The area is bordered and intersected by major corridors such as State Route 167 (SR 167), 68th Avenue S, East Valley Highway S, and South 277th Street. These roads provide direct access to Kent’s major transit hub and regional highways. For workers with private vehicles, travel is relatively straightforward compared to more rural APDs, though congestion on SR 167 and other arterials can cause delays, especially during peak commuting times.

Public Transit

The Lower Green River APD is one of the best-connected agricultural districts in the county in terms of proximity to public transit. Key routes include:

- *Sound Transit Route 566*: Runs between Auburn, Kent, and downtown Seattle, with a major stop at Kent Station, adjacent to the APD. While it passes near the agricultural district, it does not stop directly at farm sites.

- *King County Metro Route 150*: Connects Kent with downtown Seattle, traveling along West Valley Highway. It provides frequent service and is a primary commuter bus for the area.
- *Other Kent-based transit services*: A variety of additional bus routes and Sound Transit converge at Kent Station, creating strong regional connectivity.

Despite this robust transit network, the challenge is the last mile. No buses serve the interior of the APD itself, so workers must walk or bike from the nearest stops, which can be unsafe or impractical given the distance from transit corridors to farm fields.

Ride-Share

Ride-share services such as Uber and Lyft are more available in this area than in more rural APDs, due to its proximity to Kent and other suburban centers. Costs are still higher than public transit, but they are lower and more feasible than in remote districts like Snoqualmie or Enumclaw. For some workers, ride-hailing may fill occasional transportation gaps, though it remains too expensive for daily commuting.

Community Priorities & Worker Needs

Farm workers in the Lower Green River APD face different transportation challenges than those in more rural districts. Here, the problem is not the absence of transit, but rather the disconnect between existing routes and farm locations. The community’s main transportation needs include:

- Improved first/last-mile connections from Kent Station and major bus routes to farm sites.
- Safer walking and biking infrastructure along roads such as East Valley Highway and South 277th Street to connect workers from bus stops to fields.
- Expanded carpool, vanship, or vanpool programs, leveraging the high concentration of bus and train services in Kent.

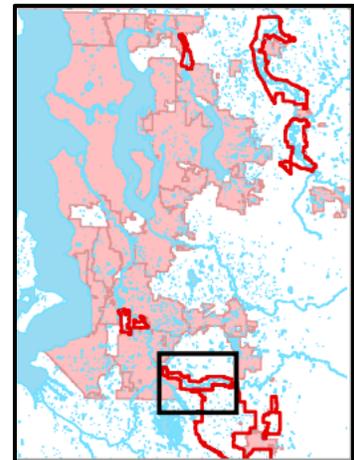
Because the district is in a heavily urbanized area, solutions such as shuttle loops, Metro Flex or vanpool expansions, and improved multimodal connections could be particularly effective here. Addressing these gaps could make the Lower Green River APD one of the most accessible agricultural areas for farm workers in King County.

Upper Green River APD

Overview

The Upper Green River Agricultural Production District lies north of Enumclaw and follows the Green River corridor. The APD is shaped by a single primary roadway—SE Green Valley Road—which provides access to farms and residences throughout the district. The APD is rural, with no major freeway cutting through it and relatively low population density.

As there is little housing available within the APD itself, farmers and farm workers who do not live on-site are largely commuting from nearby urban areas such as Auburn, Kent, or Seattle. Seasonal fluctuations are similar, but trips are likely taken multiple times a week or daily in the growing season.



Private Transit

As SE Green Valley Road is the main travel corridor, private vehicles are the primary way to reach farms within the APD. Workers must drive, as road conditions and long distances make walking or biking

impractical. Like other rural areas, these roads are vulnerable to flooding and storm damage, creating occasional reliability issues.

Commute distances and trip times to Upper Green River APD are highly dependent on location. As this APD is relatively small compared to areas such as Snoqualmie River Valley, fewer farmers and farm workers are commuting from across Seattle. Travel distances from Auburn can be as short as a few miles, about 10 miles from Kent, and 30 miles or more from downtown or further north in Seattle. Traffic conditions are less of a concern, though they are more significant the further towards the urban core that commuters are coming from. For farmers and farm workers coming from the Enumclaw side of SE Green Valley Rd, distances are 10-15 miles, depending on farm location.

Public Transit

Unlike some other APDs, the Upper Green River Valley has no bus route running directly through it. The closest public transit option is in Auburn, which serves as a regional hub with Sound Transit's Sounder commuter rail and several bus lines. To reach Auburn by transit, workers may come from Federal Way, Seattle, Kent, or Renton; from there, only private transport (car, vanpool, or ride-share) can carry them the last several miles along SE Green Valley Road to farm sites. The only public transit option for workers without vehicles for daily commutes is vanpool or vanshare.

Ride-Share

Ride-hailing services like Uber and Lyft may be available at the edges of the APD, particularly closer to Enumclaw or Auburn. However, coverage is inconsistent, and costs rise quickly given the rural distances involved. For most farm workers, ride-share is not a realistic daily solution, though it may serve as a backup or emergency option.

Community Priorities & Worker Needs

The Upper Green River Valley APD highlights the most acute transportation barriers among King County's farming districts. Key worker needs include:

- Last-mile (or multi-mile) solutions from Auburn or Enumclaw transit hubs into the valley, such as shuttles or vanpools.
- Flexible demand-response services that can accommodate dispersed farm sites along SE Green Valley Road.
- Improved rural road resilience to ensure reliable year-round access during flood or storm events.
- Carpool or employer-sponsored ride programs that reduce costs for low-wage or seasonal workers who cannot afford to own a vehicle.

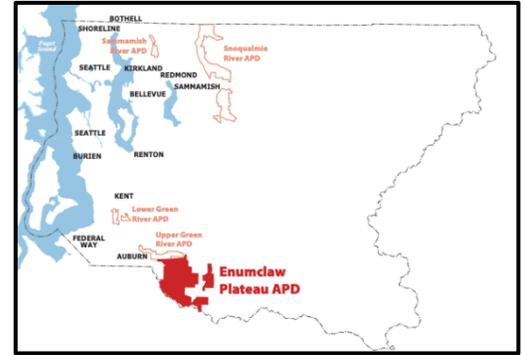
Without direct transit, access to the Upper Green River Valley heavily depends on private vehicles, carpools, or specialized services. Developing community-based transportation solutions will be essential to sustain farm viability and ensure equitable access for workers.

Enumclaw Plateau APD

Overview

The Enumclaw Plateau Agricultural Production District is in southeast King County and is notable for its concentration of dairy farms and livestock operations. The area also supports a growing agritourism economy, with berry farms, pumpkin patches, and Christmas tree farms drawing seasonal visitors.

The Enumclaw Plateau APD is a relatively isolated district and is the furthest from the urban core of Seattle of all the APDs. The APD is located 40+ miles from downtown Seattle, depending on the specific farm location. However, due to challenges with housing availability and affordability in the region, interviewees reported that there are still farmers and farm workers who regularly have to commute from other areas in the County.



Private Transit

Private vehicles are the only practical way to access farms in the Enumclaw APD. The rural road network connects to Enumclaw's town center, but farms are dispersed, often along corridors without sidewalks or safe biking infrastructure. Seasonal agritourism traffic places additional strain on these roads, especially on weekends and during peak harvest or holiday events.

Commute distances and trip times for those coming from outside of the APD can be significant. Nearby towns of Auburn and Kent are 25–40-minute drives from the APD without traffic or adverse road conditions, and can potentially be further depending on farm location. For those who are commuting from Seattle, drive times are at a minimum of nearly an hour, and can be well over. As these drives are covering the furthest distance of the APDs, gas costs are also considerably higher.

As with the other APDs in the County, these driving times and costs of private vehicles are a considerable strain on farmers and farm workers.

Public Transit

Enumclaw is served by King County Metro DART 915, which connects the city to the Auburn Transit Center. This route provides important regional connections, linking Enumclaw residents to the Sounder commuter rail and several other Metro and Sound Transit routes. However, the usefulness of DART 915 for farm workers is limited:

- *Farms lie outside the service coverage area:* Most farm sites are at least a 20-minute walk from the last stop, along rural roads with limited pedestrian infrastructure.
- *Narrow service window:* DART 915 operates weekdays between about 9 a.m. and 5 p.m., which does not align with early-morning or late-evening farm shifts. Riders can request rides between 5 am and 11 pm on weekdays, with additional weekend options, on a first-come, first-served basis at least 2 hours prior to and up to 30 days in advance through the DART reservation system.
- *Dial-a-Ride Transit (DART):* Allows off-route trips within the service area; this coverage does not extend to the farm areas where most workers need access.

Ride-Share

Ride-hailing services are available in Enumclaw, but their reliability diminishes outside the city center, and fares increase quickly for rural trips. For farm workers, daily reliance on ride-share would not be financially feasible, though it may serve as a fallback for occasional use.

Community Priorities & Worker Needs

Given the lack of farm-adjacent transit, Metro's carpooling and vanpooling are among the most realistic strategies for connecting workers to farms in Enumclaw. There are five park-and-rides available in southeast King County, with two being the most practical for Enumclaw workers:

- From the west: Auburn Transit Center and Park & Ride, which links to numerous routes (160, 181, 184, 915, 917, ST 566, ST 578, Sounder rail). This hub is the best western meeting point for carpools heading toward Enumclaw farms.
- From the east: Maple Valley Town Square Park & Ride, served by Route 168, which operates daily from early morning until late at night. This is the best eastern meeting point for carpools.

Farm worker priorities and community needs include:

- Expanding DART service area beyond Enumclaw's city center to serve farm corridors, especially during the summer.
- Organized vanpool or shuttle programs from Auburn or Maple Valley to clusters of farms.
- Improved walking and biking infrastructure to connect existing transit stops with rural farm roads.
- Seasonal shuttle services that could serve agritourism events while also benefiting farm workers.

Without dedicated last-mile solutions, Enumclaw farms will continue to depend heavily on private cars and carpools. Future transportation planning in southeast King County (slated for 2029) will be critical to addressing these concerns.

Other King County Programs & Background

As mentioned in the above current conditions analysis, King County offers transit support through vanpool and vanshare programs (first or last mile connection to public transportation) throughout the County. Discussion of these options is addressed separately from the above, as it applies largely to all the APDs. As detailed above, each of the five APDs relies heavily on private transportation. Public transit options are available in some form for each of the APDs, whether that be buses that run through major roadways or, at the very least, drop off near the start of the APD, such as in Upper Green Valley. However, these options remain impractical for regular use due to long commute times, hours, frequency, operational fluctuations, and especially the last-mile challenge of reaching farms from bus stops. While this is discussed further below, these are challenges that are expensive and difficult to overcome for traditional public transportation options such as buses and trains.

One of the primary solutions is to focus on creating carpooling connections. King County offers multiple programs that support this by providing vehicles and cost-effective ways of creating consistent shared rides. King County Metro offers two programs for commuter vans available to the public:

Vanpool

The vanpool program is intended to support a group of commuters who share a common route to work with a few central meeting locations to pick up participants. The commute can be anywhere in the region as long as it starts or ends within King County. The vanpool program cost depends on various factors such as the number of participants and the distance traveled. It does require at least five people to use. For example, a 50-mile total commute (25 miles each way) split between five participants, working three days a week, totals \$596.00 per month, or \$119.20 per commuter. The monthly fare

includes the van, fuel, maintenance, insurance, tolls, roadside assistance, and emergency ride home services. This is a cost-effective solution compared to driving separately with gas, insurance, and vehicle upkeep costs. The program becomes increasingly cost-effective with more commuters participating in the vanpool.

The vanpool program could be particularly impactful for the agricultural sector since there are no limitations on route or distance. This allows commuting groups to form within a variety of locations and to a variety of end farms if needed, so long as they are within a reasonable distance to share rides. The core aspect of this program to successfully work for the sector is to coordinate these groups through a central community hub. APD and regional farm organizations can support making these connections of farm workers.

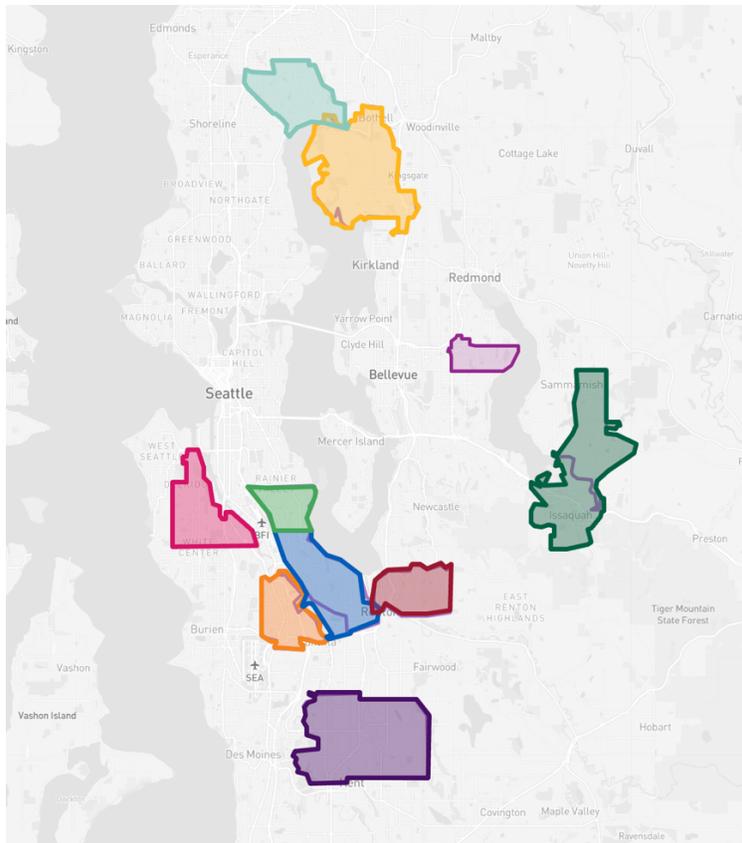
Vanshare

The vanshare program connects commuters who have similar routes and schedules between central transportation hubs (buses, trains, or ferries) but need a last connection to work of up to 20-miles round-trip (10 miles each way). The monthly fee covers the van, insurance, maintenance, tolls, fuel, an emergency ride home program, and roadside assistance. The vanshare program is meant for groups of commuters and is structured around a flat fee of \$200 per month, split between participants. Assuming a group of five commuters, the monthly costs would be \$40 per commuter.

The vanshare program is relatively less applicable to the agricultural sector in King County, though there are cases where it could be impactful. For commuters who already take public transit to nearby hubs to their APDs and farms, and their last-mile commute is within the 10-mile requirement, this would be an effective mode for connecting the last mile.

Metro Flex

A final King County program that is necessary to address, although it currently has no impact on the agricultural sector, is Metro Flex. A relatively new program, Metro Flex is an on-demand transit service that provides short-distance rides for a low rate. The program is primarily focused on mid-density areas where there is no efficient mode of transportation to connect short distances. The map of Metro Flex operational areas is shown below:



<https://kingcounty.gov/en/dept/metro/travel-options/metro-flex>

These areas currently do not overlap with any of the five APDs in King County. This is important to consider, however, because the challenge that Metro Flex seeks to address: short distances to support other public transit options such as buses and trains, is the same challenge that the agricultural sector faces in last-mile connections. On-demand ride-sharing services are one option, and a best practice discussed below. Expanding the Metro Flex program to APD areas where it may be effective, such as Upper Green Valley APD, for example, may be a relevant strategy to support farm worker mobility. In an interview with King County Metro staff, the most important factor of success to creating these programs is a close understanding of worker needs and transportation patterns. One challenge for Metro Flex serving agricultural sectors is that the cost of service per ride in low-density areas can be high.

Best Practices

Improving farm worker mobility in King County is not simply a matter of new investments or additional transit lines, but of stronger partnerships between King County Metro, community organizations, and farm worker networks within each APD. These partnerships are essential for ensuring that farm workers' needs are understood and considered when it comes to transit line changes or new programs. They are also critical in developing local solutions from Metro's perspective because farm organizations and farmers themselves have the closest understanding of their worker movements, hours of operations, seasonal changes, and overall transit needs.

Themes of Metro Discussions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For specific populations and worker segments, intimate knowledge of transit patterns, challenges, needs, etc., is essential.

- This understanding is **not currently in place with the agricultural sector**— outreach, relationship building, and input are needed.
- Major service changes can happen and take a lot of time. **Often, major impacts can be made with small adjustments** that are easier to implement. These can be uncovered with outreach and input from community partners.
- The rural areas of the county are challenging and costly to serve comprehensively and efficiently. With investment trade-offs, this will not change soon. So, **the key for this sector will be community-driven solution building that Metro can support financially** (*community access transportation program and job access reverse commute*), or **partner with organizations that can provide funding**.

These points are critical to developing effective transit solutions for farmers and farm workers in King County, where trade-offs between various stakeholders and highly urban zones will often lead to lower prioritization of smaller populations and rural areas. This has been observed nationally as transportation infrastructure has been largely underfunded in rural areas. A 2017 report from the Rural Health Research Center concluded that “transportation is an issue of significant concern for rural health stakeholders nationwide.”ⁱ They cited common challenges including infrastructure, geography, funding, accessibility, and public awareness.

While funding is a critical part of the solution, other regions’ agricultural transportation solutions emphasize the fact that local and community insights are a key pathway to transit solutions that are directly responsive to the needs of farmers and farm workers themselves. For example, the California CalVans program is a strong, agricultural-specific, self-funding, and self-sustaining transportation program that emerged from direct engagement with the agricultural sector’s needs. They cite program formation to direct requests from state agricultural employees and later engagement with agricultural workers in the program creation. Now the program operates over 600 agriculture-specific vanpools.ⁱⁱ

Another example of a strong grassroots transportation program for agriculture is the Green Raiteros program in California’s Central Valley. This program provides “free and discounted rides to farm workers and other low-income workers in the area,” all in electric vehicles.ⁱⁱⁱ It operates with a central dispatcher and coordinator to monitor and respond to ride requests and effectively offers transportation for a rural agricultural community.

Both programs address similar challenges facing agricultural workers in King County: limited last-mile transportation infrastructure and unique, shifting ride demands due to seasonal requirements. King County has the structures in place to effectively respond to the challenges identified in the analysis above through its vanpool and vanshare program, as well as community-based funding programs in the Community Access Transportation and Job Access Reverse Commute programs.

Recommendations

The following five best practice recommendations build on these existing structures and identify specific ways King County can support mobility within the agriculture sector.

1. Strengthening Outreach, Marketing, and Communication of Existing Programs

First and foremost, farm organizations and farm workers must be fully aware of the transportation resources already offered by King County. For example, while vanpool programs are available and can

significantly reduce commuting costs, many farmers are unaware of these options. Others may know about them but lack the connections or organizational support needed to form and sustain a vanpool that requires at least five participants. As a result, programs with real potential often remain underused.

Part of this gap concerns effective marketing and outreach. To succeed, outreach needs to flow through two channels:

- *County-to-community partners*: The County must establish direct communication with trusted organizations that operate in each Agricultural Production District. These groups—such as SnoValley Tilth, Friends of Sammamish Valley, and Viva Farms—are organizations that farmers already trust. By making them the central touchpoints, the County ensures its programs are introduced in ways that are relevant and accessible.
- *Community partners-to-farmers*: Once equipped, these local hubs can actively rally participation. They can coordinate information sessions, in-language communication, and peer-to-peer networks that show farmers and workers how to use programs in practice. This step is critical to transforming awareness into action.

Without these layered connections, even well-designed programs can appear distant or irrelevant to farm workers. Building a robust outreach system means not only raising awareness but also creating pathways for adoption, where community partners bridge the gap between County services and the realities of agricultural work. By investing in both outreach and organizing capacity, King County can ensure that existing resources are not just available but actively used and valued by those who need them most.

This recommendation is confirmed by our conversations with King County Metro, which emphasized that rural and agricultural contexts are challenging to serve effectively without local information about APD characteristics and farmer needs. Nationally, a strong transportation initiative highlighted in the Agricultural Communities Transportation Technical Assistance Brief from the National Rural Transit Assistance Program is the Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency’s (HIRTA) “Do You Have Transportation?” campaign.^{iv} This campaign was wide-reaching across seven counties and distributed pens, notepads, infographics, and data to support individuals in engagement with public transportation initiatives.^v

2. Build Direct Connectivity Between the Agricultural Sector and King County Metro

Currently, King County Metro’s service planning rarely engages with the agricultural sector, meaning farm workers’ needs are not being thoroughly considered in transit changes or route design. Establishing regular engagement channels between Metro, APD representatives, farm worker organizations, and farmers themselves would help refine services over time. This would enable small but meaningful adjustments, such as adjusting stop locations, aligning bus schedules with farm shifts, or piloting seasonal shuttle loops. Long-term, stronger connections would ensure that agriculture is recognized as a key sector in regional mobility planning.

This further builds on the first recommendation, as there may be aspects of the vanshare and vanpool programs that need adjustments to better fit agricultural workers’ needs. For example, the analysis above identified the challenge of many farm workers having to work a second job, which may create unique schedules that inhibit their ability to participate in a vanshare or vanpool. Additionally, there may be affordability challenges for farm workers who can take cheaper transportation options and have individual solutions for last-mile challenges. This is information that King County Metro can internalize and potentially design solutions or adjust programs to support.

3. Support Community Partners as Hubs for Coordination & New Programs

In both the above recommendations and in any new programs that may be created to support farmer and farm worker mobility, it will be critical to identify, cultivate, and bolster the capacity of community partners. Organizations embedded within APDs, such as SnoValley Tilth, Friends of Sammamish Valley, and Snoqualmie Valley Preservation Alliance, are positioned well to be able to convene farmers, identify needs, and organize worker participation. By supporting these groups as mobility hubs, the County can ensure transportation solutions are efficient, well-utilized, and equitable. Community-based coordination also builds the relationships necessary for long-term success, helping services adapt as agricultural and workforce needs evolve.

The model of community organizations as hubs of support for coordinating is backed by national practices. The Green Raiteros program discussed above, for example, was driven by the Latino Equity Advocacy & Policy (LEAP) Institute, an organization working closely with agricultural workers, and funded in part by local government.

4. Pilot APD Specific Mobility Projects for High Priority Areas

In addition to strengthening relationships and supporting community-led solutions, King County can actively seed small-scale pilots within individual APDs to test mobility ideas tailored to farm worker needs. Rather than attempting a large-scale rollout immediately or waiting for community partners to engage with the County, pilot projects such as a seasonal shuttle, farm worker vanpool initiative, or on-demand mobility zones offer a way to test coordination models, funding mechanisms, technology platforms, and outreach strategies.

By investing direct County capacity and resources into these pilots (e.g., staffing support, seed funding, technical assistance), the County can empower community partners who may otherwise lack bandwidth to launch such efforts on their own. Over time, successful pilots can be scaled or adapted across additional APDs.

Endnotes

ⁱ Henning-Smith, C., Evenson, A., Corbett, A., Kozhimannil, K., Moscovice, I., POLICY BRIEF Rural Transportation: Challenges and Opportunities. (2017). https://rhrc.umn.edu/wp-content/files_mf/1518734252UMRHRCTransportationChallenges.pdf

ⁱⁱ History - CalVans. (2024, September 12). CalVans. <https://calvans.gov/history>

ⁱⁱⁱ Perez-Bobadilla, N. (2023, April 21). Green Raiteros: Sustainable and Affordable Transportation in California's Central Valley - Shared-Use Mobility Center. Shared-Use Mobility Center. <https://sharedusemobilitycenter.org/green-raiteros-sustainable-and-affordable-transportation-in-californias-central-valley/>

^{iv} Agricultural Communities Transportation Technical Assistance Brief. (n.d.). Retrieved November 7, 2025, from https://www.ccam-tac.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/Agricultural_Communities_Transportation.pdf

^v HIRTA Public Transit. (2025). Ridehirta.com. <https://www.ridehirta.com/doyouhavetransportation>

King County Agricultural Sector Assessment
Category D: *Workforce Development Report*

November 15th, 2025



King County

Workforce Development

Executive Summary

King County’s agricultural sector remains a vital part of the County’s identity, local food system, community, and economy. Yet, operating in one of the most competitive and high-cost economies in the country creates significant challenges for the farms and people who sustain it. High land values, low margins, and limited access to affordable housing and benefits make it difficult for farms to compete with urban industries for labor. These pressures have resulted in a shrinking and aging workforce and a shortage of skilled farm labor across the County’s five Agricultural Production Districts.

This report assesses the current workforce landscape, highlighting the key challenges facing King County’s agricultural sector and identifying strategies and case studies that demonstrate how to strengthen the pipeline of skilled agricultural workers—from early education and training through to farm ownership and management.

Key Challenges Summary

King County farms face overlapping challenges that make farm work and farm ownership increasingly difficult to sustain:

Theme	Challenge Summary
Land Access & Cost	Farmland averages over \$38,000 per acre, ten times the U.S. average, pricing out new and aspiring farmers.
Low Wages, No Benefits, & Thin Margins	Farms face limited pricing power, making it difficult to raise wages or offer benefits in line with the high cost of living.
Housing & Transportation	Affordable housing is distant from farm areas, increasing commute costs and reducing workforce accessibility.
Urban Job Competition	Nearby urban industries offer higher wages and benefits, drawing workers away from agriculture.

Despite these pressures, many people in King County continue to pursue agricultural work. Farming provides significant community and personal value, including connection to land and community, Opportunities to produce healthy, local, and affordable food, a way to educate and engage residents in food systems, and a means of preserving open space and local identity. For the County, supporting this sector is not only an economic goal but also a cultural and environmental one. Farming sustains community wellbeing, resilience, and the region’s long-standing relationship with the land.

Case Study Overview

Focus Area	Key Takeaway for King County
Case Study 1: Existing Pathways in King County	
Local Training, Apprenticeship & Incubation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highlights the strong network of local programs—such as Viva Farms, WSU Extension, and SnoValley Tilth—that already provide essential training, mentorship, and early-career pathways for new farmers. Underscores the need to strengthen and scale these programs through long-term investment and coordination.
Case Study 2: UCSC Pathways for Students into Skilled Agriculture Work	
Higher Education &	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates how university-based programs in connection with farm systems can connect academic study with hands-on agricultural experience,

Experiential Learning	<p>creating clear career pipelines into skilled farm management and food system roles.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • King County can partner with regional colleges and universities to develop similar experiential training programs that align with local workforce needs.
Case Study 3: Scaling Farm Businesses	
Business Growth & Workforce Expansion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examines how mid-scale farms can build internal capacity to create jobs, increase wages, and retain skilled workers through business incubation, cooperative models, and diversified revenue strategies. • Recommends County support for technical assistance and business incubation programs that help farms grow, hire, and retain skilled workers.
Case Study 4: Employment Courses Within Agricultural CDFI	
Financial Empowerment & Workforce Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explores how community development financial institutions (CDFIs) integrate employment training and small business lending, linking financial literacy with job creation and farm sustainability. • Expanding access to agricultural finance programs in King County that include employment readiness and small business development components.
Case Study 5: Alternative Agricultural Sector Pathways	
Nontraditional Careers & Food System Resilience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifies pathways beyond production farming—such as, education and food sovereignty—that strengthen the agricultural workforce and engage new and diverse participants. • Encourages the County to invest in community food programs and value-chain enterprises that create additional agricultural employment opportunities.

Key Takeaways

To build a resilient agricultural workforce, King County should:

- **Provide multi-year, stable funding** for local training and workforce organizations.
- **Expand access to land, facilities, and shared infrastructure** for education, incubation, and apprenticeship programs.
- **Strengthen coordination** between workforce boards, community colleges, and farm organizations to align training with employment opportunities.
- **Support organizational capacity** through staffing, technical assistance, and sustained planning resources.
- **Promote equitable and culturally relevant pathways** that engage new, underrepresented, and historically excluded farmers.

Workforce development in agriculture is not only an economic issue—it is a matter of sustainability, equity, and connection to place. By investing in the programs and partnerships that already form the backbone of its agricultural ecosystem, King County can ensure that farming remains a viable, rewarding, and enduring part of the region’s future—supporting both the livelihoods of those who work the land and the broader wellbeing of the communities they nourish.

Assessment Scope

This component of the agricultural sector assessment focuses on farm worker recruitment and retention in King County. The scope includes the development of five case studies that document effective and sustainable solutions for addressing labor challenges faced by the agricultural sector in King County. The case studies emphasize strategies across four key areas:

- **Recruitment** — Attracting a diverse and skilled workforce, particularly in the face of seasonal labor fluctuations and other barriers.
- **Retention** — Improving farm worker retention through competitive wages, job stability, working conditions, professional development, benefits, etc.
- **Internship & Apprenticeship Programs** — Examples of strong educational programs that integrate partnerships between farms, educational institutions, and local organizations.
- **Innovative Workforce Development Models** — Innovative solutions for long-term farm worker recruitment and development that integrate partnerships with farms, workforce development agencies, educational institutions, and government programs.

The intent of these case studies is to highlight approaches that both respond to current barriers and support long-term workforce stability and farm business sustainability. Together, these case studies will provide the County with practical insights and models to inform recommendations for strengthening the agricultural workforce.

Key Workforce Development Challenges in King County

Current Conditions

King County's economy is among the largest and most urbanized in Washington, shaped by high-wage industries like technology, professional services, healthcare, and retail tradeⁱ. The county's food system reflects this urban character with most of the food and agricultural economy being consumption-based. Agricultural production, by comparison, accounts for only a small fraction of the overall food economy. In the second quarter of 2023, for example, \$11 billion was spent at King County restaurants, bars, food, and beverage stores. In the same time period the agricultural, forestry, and fishing sector generated only \$84 million in incomeⁱⁱ.

Despite this modest economic impact, farming remains an integral part of King County's identity and land base. The county supports about 1,600 farms across roughly 46,000 acres, producing around \$103 million in agricultural products in 2022, more than half of which were food cropsⁱⁱⁱ. The sector is diverse, spanning horticulture, dairy, vegetables, and aquaculture, with horticulture alone representing nearly half of total sales. However, farmland values are among the highest in the nation, averaging \$38,000 per acre, ten times the U.S. average. Additionally, operating within one of the most competitive and high-cost economies in the country, King County farms face particularly thin profit margins. The combination of high input costs, limited acreage, and price competition with lower-cost producers elsewhere in Washington constrains their ability to raise prices or absorb cost increases. As a result, many farms struggle to offer wages that can compete with urban employment opportunities or to adjust to periodic increases in the state's minimum wage. Even well-established farms operate with narrow margins, limiting their flexibility to expand benefits, hire additional labor, or invest in workforce stability.

Together, these dynamics illustrate an agricultural sector operating within one of the country's most competitive and high-cost economic environments. While King County's farms contribute to food security, open space, and community identity, they do so in an economy and labor market driven by urban growth, high land values, and alternative employment opportunities.

Expanding on the data above, primary interviews with local farms, farmers, and farm organizations in King County revealed a set of highly interconnected challenges that limit the development of a stable, long-term agricultural workforce.

Overall, the primary challenge is that farm work is not a viable career option for many potential farm workers and owners due to a variety of barriers: high cost of land, low wages, limited access to healthcare and benefits, and unaffordable housing near agricultural areas. These workforce challenges are closely linked with broader issues like farmland preservation, housing affordability, healthcare access, and transportation, many of which are addressed elsewhere in this agricultural sector assessment. These challenges are additionally compounded by the fact that King County offers a variety of alternative lucrative career paths within the urban areas of the County. For those that are committed to farming, many choose to move away from King County to cheaper areas of the state. Together, these factors shape the conditions under which farm owners can recruit and retain workers and point to the need for coordinated solutions across multiple policy areas.

Theme	Key Challenge	Implication
Barriers to Land Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farmland in King County is prohibitively expensive. Many farm owners seek to sell land at market prices rather than transfer to aspiring farmers. Aspiring farmers are often priced out and must leave the County. 	Prevents new farmers from entering the sector and limits generational renewal of farm ownership.
Lack of Housing Near Farm Areas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Housing in areas like Snoqualmie River, Sammamish River, and other APDs is scarce and expensive. Affordable living areas are largely in urban areas in the County. 	Farmers are forced to work far from their homes, making the work less appealing.
Distance from Population Centers to Farms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Areas where farmers can find housing and afford to live are further from farm areas. While commuting from these areas is possible, distances are far, and costs can be high. 	Financial stress and time of commute makes farm work less appealing.
Low Wages & Margins	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farm profit margins are thin, and farm owner and worker incomes are generally limited. Farm businesses face high volatility. 	Incomes are low and uncertain, providing low stability for farm workers.
Healthcare Access & Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farm businesses are often unable to provide healthcare to their workers. For farm workers and owners, health access can be prohibitively expensive. Other benefits such as PTO are also less common and limited by seasonal fluctuations. 	Farm workers have to find healthcare through alternative avenues or take on the cost of healthcare themselves.
Instability of Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many farm jobs involve long hours during growing season, and limited hours in the off-season. 	Farm workers often have to have a second source of income, whether through partners or second jobs.

Stacked Viability Pressures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The above areas together created an overlapping pressure on farm work viability. 	Multiple overlapping pressures make farming a difficult and unattractive career path.
Pull of Urban Job Markets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Competing job opportunities in urban centers offer higher wages, benefits, and stability. Urban jobs are generally closer to affordable housing and transit. 	Agriculture struggles to compete with other employment options in the region.
Small Scale of Many Farms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many of King County’s farms are smaller operations. These farms employ very few, if any, employees. 	There are not as many farm jobs or management positions due to owner-operated and small scale farms.
Shortage of Skilled Labor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Few H2A workers in King County. Farms often rely on youth labor, which is less productive. Without skilled labor, farms face volatility and financial strain. 	Farms lack the workforce capacity needed to grow, diversify, and remain competitive.
Losing Experienced Workers to Other Industries or Regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experienced workers leave for regions with cheaper land, stronger markets, or more stable H2A pipelines. Some exit the industry entirely after years of experience. 	Loss of skilled workers reduces future farm ownership potential and weakens sector stability.

While these challenges are each unique and nuanced, the general takeaway is clear: sustainable recruitment and retention of farm workers is not going to be possible unless the viability of farm careers is improved. In this context, viability refers to the ability for people working in agriculture to earn a stable living, access essential benefits like housing and healthcare, and build a long-term livelihood in the sector. This applies to all aspects of the agricultural work industry, from farm owners to farm workers and managers. The below quotes from local King County farm industry professionals illustrate these challenges and the importance of robust farm industry support to solving them:

<p><i>“Washington and California have the highest cost of labor, housing and healthcare is extremely expensive, and profit margins in the agricultural industry are already slim. So if we are really going to support the folks that want to become farmers, and create the farm industry we want in our County, farm businesses will need even support than the traditional business, which already needs a lot of support”</i></p> <p><i>- Anonymous Agricultural Educator</i></p>	<p><i>“The reason why we have a shortage of agricultural workers, and why most people entering the sector are working towards farm ownership, is because most people can’t see farm work or management as a viable occupation. It is not that the programs we have aren’t working towards it — it is a result of the way King County’s agricultural sector is. It is related to difficulty in accessing housing, healthcare, plus all the other cost-of-living aspects.</i></p> <p><i>- Anonymous Farm Organization Employee</i></p>
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Another aspect of the agricultural workforce challenge in King County that is important to address before the case studies is the question: *What draws people toward agricultural work in the first place?* Given the challenges already discussed, and the urban character of King County as a whole, it is striking that many people continue to pursue and value this work. There continue to be about 1,600 operational farms in the County and farmer incubation and apprenticeship programs continue to have participants

seeking to create their own farm businesses. The reason is deeply tied to the broader value of agriculture itself, which was revealed through interviews with farmers and farm organizations: farming provides a tangible connection to the land and to the County’s food system, offering opportunities to produce healthy food, steward the environment, and strengthen community ties. For many individuals, the motivation to farm is grounded in passion and purpose rather than profit. Even when margins are generally slim, the work carries personal and community meaning. While there are certainly farm businesses that are thriving and economically impactful, and supporting and scaling farm businesses is an important goal, part of the strategy for agricultural workforce support may lie in providing pathways within the sector that are outside of the typical route of farm ownership or management.

Workforce Development Model

In order to work towards a sustainable and thriving agricultural workforce in King County, a robust system of workforce development needs to be built and supported. To help guide the understanding of the case studies below, and the various ways that they provide insights for the County to bolster the agricultural workforce development system, it is important to understand the framework of the workforce development system in greater detail.

Following the County’s guidance, there are four key areas being considered: *recruitment, retention, internship and apprenticeship programs, and innovative workforce development models*. These aspects fit within the flow of the workforce development cycle, as illustrated below.



The nature of the agricultural sector, especially in King County, where most farms are small-scale and owner-operated, does not lend itself to clear distinctions in these phases. For example, apprenticeships and internships programs could be viewed as recruitment strategies, but many of these programs are better fit as educational programs that are meant to off-load into direct farm ownership rather than skilled workers for existing farms to recruit. Additionally, as stated, many farms are owner-operated and do not have the scale or funds to consistently recruit and hire skilled farm workers. Still, this model provides a way of isolating and identifying strategies to improve the agricultural workforce development system for King County.

The case studies below seek to address aspects across the full range of this workforce development model. It is important to recognize that workforce development efforts must create viable pathways for both aspiring farmers as well as skilled workers who face structural pressures on their long-term career viability. They also must provide workable tools for local farmers as they seek to retain skilled workers.

The case studies also recognize that many farmers pursue agricultural work part-time, supplementing their income through secondary jobs, seasonal work, or additional household earnings. They additionally highlight how existing local resources are already making major impacts on the sector and should be supported, invested in, and built upon.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Existing Pathways in King County



Background & Challenges

The first case study in this report begins by highlighting the strong programs and resources that already exist within King County. It is essential to acknowledge that the County is already a leader in providing innovative workforce development, education, apprenticeship, and internship opportunities for the agricultural sector. There is a strong and dynamic network of organizations that support aspiring farmers in gaining the technical skills, hands-on experience, and business foundations necessary to succeed in a high-cost, largely urban region. Examples include the organizations profiled below as well as the Highline Institute, WSU Extension, Northwest Agricultural Business Center, Snoqualmie Valley Preservation Alliance, Business Impact Northwest, Vashon Island Growers Association, and others.

It is particularly important to begin by highlighting these programs because the local organizations already engaged in agricultural education and workforce development are not only successful, but are also the key platforms through which future strategies must be built. They hold deep connections with farm communities, educational institutions, and emerging farmers, and are already implementing practical, on-the-ground solutions that respond to local needs. Supporting and investing in these existing organizations will be essential for scaling successful models, coordinating new programs, and ensuring that any County-led initiatives build upon—rather than duplicate—the strong infrastructure that is already in place.

The current programs that exist in King County are particularly strong in the areas of early education and training, apprenticeship and internships, and early support pathways into farm ownership. These are programs that directly respond to some of the biggest challenges facing farmers in the County. Due to high costs and the volatile nature of farming, it is critical that aspiring farmers have strong education and support networks as they enter their careers. This is true both in the early stages of education that can be gained through short-term classroom-based education and hands-on field education, as well as longer-term, multi-month or multi-year programs that continue to provide education and support as farmers continue in their career development.

This continuing and lengthy support is a particularly important aspect for the agricultural sector. Starting a business on its own is a significant challenge, and adding the complexities and slim profit margins of farming makes agricultural businesses even more complex to attain success.

Industry	5-Year Survival Rate	10-Year Survival Rate
Agriculture, forestry, fishing, and hunting	15.60%	15.80%

Data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics:

(<https://www.commerceinstitute.com/business-failure-rate/>)

To give an illustrative overview of the current network of programs that exist across King County, we have selected two programs to highlight for this case study: VIVA Farms and SnoValley Tilth. These programs are strong in early apprenticeship and internship programs, incubation of farm businesses, and support structures for pathways into farm ownership. These are not the only programs that are active and supporting the agriculture sector in King County. Other programs, such as the WSU Extension and Highline Institute, are also providing similar support. However, the strengths and relative focuses of the VIVA and SnoValley Tilth programs are illustrative of the ways organizations are responding to the challenges faced in King County, as well as the gaps and needs that continue to exist. Together, they provide a strong grounding for the case studies that follow.

Program Highlights & Impact



VIVA FARMS Apprenticeship and Internship: *VIVA Farms*

Viva Farms is a nonprofit farm business incubator and training organization serving western Washington. Its mission is to “empower aspiring and limited-resource farmers by providing bilingual training in holistic organic farming practices, as well as access to land, infrastructure, equipment, marketing and capital.” VIVA Farms operates over 100 acres in Skagit and King County, and has educated over 1,000 farmers.

Below is a breakdown of VIVA Farms’ primary programs:

Program	Duration	Content Focus & Structure	Eligibility & Progression
Practicum in Sustainable Agriculture	~8 months (April – mid -November)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hands-on course in organic production and small-farm business management Topics include essential farm production skills (<i>seed propagation, irrigation, etc.</i>) as well as business management (<i>business planning, profitability analysis, etc.</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offered at Skagit and King County sites Participants are eligible to apply to Farm Business Incubator program upon completion
Farm Business Incubator	Multi-year / ongoing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Robust incubation support for farmers to build viable, independent, and successful farm business Support with land, capital, training, infrastructure, marketing, and community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants come from Practicum, or may apply directly in certain cases
Begin to Farm Network	Ongoing / network support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A regional support network connecting aspiring or existing farmers to resources and technical assistance Collaborative effort with VIVA, WSU Skagit Extension, and Northwest Agricultural Business Center 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Variety of resources provided Can connect to multiple classes, VIVA practicum, and VIVA incubator

Viva Farms’ model stands out for its comprehensive, progressive approach to early farm training into business incubation. At the entry level, the Practicum in Sustainable Agriculture provides participants with a full season of hands-on training in both farming and business skillsets. This structure is engaging and comprehensive, and while there are limitations to what can be learned in a year, the progression into the incubator is a strong way to provide ongoing support and continue to fill gaps in knowledge over time. Once in the incubator, participants lease land from VIVA and benefit from their market access and business support while taking on operations of an independent business. A critical strength of this program is the way that participants are brought into community, and peer collaboration is facilitated.

Farmers in the practicum and incubator work side by side, sharing resources and fostering a supportive environment. This aspect is not something to underestimate. In our interviews with farm organizations and farmers across the county, we heard numerous times the importance of building community networks for the long-term success of farm businesses. This is both from tangible aspects, such as equipment sharing, and intangible aspects, such as feelings of connection and networks for hiring.

Interview Response to the Question: What enables pathways to farm work careers?

“Community building! Those networks open up opportunities for land access and other resources that are key to being able to work in this industry. And it is important because farming can be an isolating career.” (Anonymous)

That said, VIVA Farms faces challenges that temper its reach and long-term sustainability. Resources such as land, infrastructure, and staff capacity are limited. Not all Practicum graduates are guaranteed a spot in the incubator program. As with many organizations in this industry, the organization has historically relied on grant funding, creating vulnerabilities when funding priorities shift. Access to long-term land and capital remains a hurdle once farmers move beyond the incubator. Finally, replicating the VIVA model in other areas of the county would be challenging.



Pathways to Farm Ownership: SnoValley Tilth

SnoValley Tilth is a farmer-led nonprofit serving the Snoqualmie and Snohomish watersheds, with a vision of “more farmers on more farmland, growing more sustainable food and fiber for our community.” The organization works to unite farmers, protect farmland, strengthen local food systems, and reduce barriers faced

by under-resourced growers.

Program	Duration	Content Focus & Structure	Eligibility & Progression
Experience Farming Project	Farmers can participate for up to 5 years, with annual renewal of leases.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provides skilled farmers with affordable land, infrastructure (irrigation, wash station, cold storage, dry storage), and community support to launch a farm business 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farmers with skillsets prepared to take the next step into farm business ownership
Farmland Network	Ongoing <i>(Matches are made as opportunities arise)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Goal is to connect farmland owners with farmers seeking land, facilitate secure leases, sales, or other tenure agreements Staff support meeting with land owners, assessing sites, and connecting with potential farmers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Farmland owners and seekers in King County, particularly those pursuing sustainable and regenerative farming.

Both the EFP and Farmland Network program fill distinct roles in addressing land and infrastructure access for upcoming farmers in King County, and in a distinct way from VIVA Farms. The SnoValley Tilth programs are particularly strong in the later aspects of the workforce lifecycle model: retention of farmers in the County, continued development for skilled workers, and pathways to farm ownership.

The EFP provides a ready-to-use platform for individuals who already have farming experience to begin or expand their operations with critical supports like irrigation, wash stations, walk-in coolers, dry storage, and ground preparation. By lowering barriers to essential infrastructure and offering a five-year runway, the program allows participants to test and grow their enterprises in a supportive environment. Participants come from diverse backgrounds—former farm managers or employees, college-educated individuals in adjacent fields, and even career changers from other industries—demonstrating the program's adaptability and appeal to a wide range of participants. Its strengths lie in creating a peer-based community of growers, reducing start-up costs, and fostering collaboration through shared facilities and market access. These are all aspects that are responsive to the key challenges faced in King County.

The Farmland Network, on the other hand, addresses the more systemic challenges that aspiring farm owners and workers face in trying to develop their careers. Land access is one of the key aspects affecting the viability of farm work. Through outreach and connection of landowners and aspiring farmers, the programs create matches and facilitate land access that otherwise would not have occurred.

Despite these strengths, challenges remain for both programs. The EFP is not an entry-level incubator. It is designed for people with some existing skills, which means that absolute beginners often need to look elsewhere, such as VIVA Farms or Cultivating Success, before joining. Graduates of the EFP also face uncertainty in securing long-term land tenure, as well as other aspects impacting cost of living and viability—transportation, healthcare, and affordable housing. Additionally, the primary funding source for these programs is grant funds. These grants are limited and particularly volatile in the face of priority shifts and funding cuts.

Takeaways for King County

Taken together, Viva Farms and SnoValley Tilth (along with other regional partners) demonstrate that King County already has a strong network of programs and support services for aspiring farmers. These organizations offer accessible entry points into agriculture through education, hands-on experience, and incubator models, while also working to secure land and build community networks among farmers and with landowners. Their efforts are building resilience in the local agricultural system and sustaining opportunities for the next generation of farmers.

To strengthen this foundation, King County should prioritize supporting the growth and long-term stability of the organizations already working within its agricultural ecosystem. Programs like VIVA Farms and SnoValley Tilth have proven models but remain constrained by limited resources and reliance on competitive grant funding. Building capacity for these groups requires both financial support as well as other resources, such as access to land, technical support, and stronger institutional partnerships that connect them to educational and workforce systems. Multi-year funding

Key Takeaways:

- King County already has a **strong foundation of agricultural training and support organizations** that provide accessible education, incubation, and land access for aspiring farmers.
- This **existing network can be strengthened** through coordination and capacity-building, including shared resources, technical support, and stronger institutional linkages with education and workforce systems.
- **Long-term, stable funding is essential** to sustain and scale these programs, reducing reliance on short-term grants and ensuring consistent support for the next generation of farmers.

commitments paired with these practical resources would magnify their impact and allow them to serve more farmers over time. The strategies explored in the following case studies highlight potential pathways for achieving this: from university partnerships that expand access to hands-on training, to professional development programs that help established farms grow and create new jobs. Strengthening these existing programs and connecting them to broader systems of support will be key to creating a resilient agricultural workforce in King County.

At the same time, their limitations highlight the systemic barriers that remain. Affordable housing near farm sites is scarce, healthcare coverage is prohibitively expensive, and thin profit margins leave farmers highly vulnerable to shocks. Rising transportation costs, competition from more lucrative career paths in King County, and continued pressure from regional growth and development all weigh heavily on the sector. In addition, the funding landscape is precarious: many of these programs rely on grants and shifting political priorities, creating uncertainty for both the organizations themselves and the farmers they support.

In short, despite the impressive work being done, the farm workforce development system in King County remains fragile. To move from precarity toward sustainability, there must be broader efforts to reduce the pressures on farm careers, stabilize funding for farmer-serving organizations, and provide pathways for farm businesses not only to launch but also to thrive long term. As we turn to case studies from outside the county, these local realities offer a crucial lens: new approaches must directly address these systematic challenges if farm work is to be a viable and enduring livelihood in King County.

Case Study 2: UCSC Pathways for Students into Skilled Agriculture Work



Background & Challenges

One of the key issues identified through interviews with King County staff, community farm organizations, and local farmers is the shortage of skilled workers to support existing farm businesses. While it is true that the majority of farms in King County are small-scale operations, one of the limitations to increasing scale and expanding employment is the challenge of finding productive workers.

This challenge is closely linked to other systemic barriers already discussed above:

- Many aspiring farmers and potential farmworkers are forced to pursue other careers or pursue farm work outside of the County.
- Because King County’s agricultural sector is primarily small-scale, there is not a large H-2A worker pipeline.
- Most aspiring farmers are oriented towards becoming farm owners rather than employees or managers.
- Farms, especially small-scale, are unable to provide competitive wages or benefits compared to other job opportunities in the region and are limited in hiring potential from the minimum wage.

These challenges were reported consistently across the APDs. An interview with a farmer illustrates the challenge:

“Many farms are faced with this situation. H-2A workers are inaccessible for us, and we cannot provide housing. So you have to find someone who has secure housing, but also can choose to work for minimum wage and commute out here.

This means most of our potential labor pool is youth—they have secure housing and can work for minimum wage. But when we have attempted to employ local youth, they have no experience they have a tough time meeting the minimum outputs required to reach profitability.”

- Anonymous Farmer

This is a challenge that is common throughout many of the APDs. However, within this challenge there is a potential opportunity for the sector. Outside of simply seeking work, many youth that are interested in farming are pursuing it from a passion and interest in the field. A report from the National Young Farmers Coalition that surveyed over 10,000 individuals, over 3,000 of which self-identified as under 40, touched on this motivation:

“By and far, the majority of young farmers we surveyed named that one of their farm’s primary purposes for existing is stewarding and regenerating natural resources... Eighty-three percent of young farmers were motivated by environmental conservation. For BIPOC young farmers that number is 87%, and it is 88% for Black young farmers.”

- National Young Farmers Survey^{iv}

These young farmers further cited local food production and systems, food sovereignty, land protection, community building, community resiliency, and knowledge preservation and sharing as primary reasons they pursue farming. This is relevant and similar to many of the pursuits of farms and farm organizations in King County.

While there is an obstacle within the productivity levels of youth in farm work, there is also a significant potential opportunity for the sector. Cultivating this enthusiasm and supporting youth in building careers in the agricultural industry points to a chance to strengthen both the labor supply and future farmer pipeline. If youth employment can be made feasible and productive for local farms, the impact is twofold: farmers gain access to affordable labor to sustain their businesses, and young workers receive training that can prepare them to become the next generation of farm managers and business owners.

This case study explores an approach to a one such potential model: the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC) Center for Agroecology, which has developed innovative approaches to engaging and training youth in farm work.

Program Highlights & Impact

The UCSC Center for Agroecology and its apprenticeship program is an international recognized program designed to support and develop young farmer skill sets^v. The focus of the Center is the advancement of agroecology and equitable food systems through experiential education, participatory research, agricultural extension, and public service. The Center manages a 30-acre farm and 3-acre Alan Chadwick Garden on the UCSC campus and offers a mix of undergraduate and graduate coursework, hands-on training, internships, and field-based learning opportunities. The programs blend of theoretical and practical instruction has served as a model for many other programs across the Nation.

The Center for Agroecology offers four aspects of their program^{vi}:

- **Internships:** For-credit internships throughout each academic year. Interns learn about farming and the food system while working hands-on in the field.
- **Agroecology courses:** Students can enroll in agroecology classes, major in agroecology, and participate in the residential Agroecology Field Quarter during the summer. Many of these courses have a hands-on component on the campus farm, gardens, farm stands, and cafes, allowing students to learn by doing.
- **Employment opportunities:** Student employees help conduct research, grow, harvest, and distribute produce for our farm stands and food pantries, prepare and serve meals to fellow students, and with outreach and administrative support.
- **Fellowships and funding opportunities:** Enables students to undertake projects that advance a more sustainable, equitable campus food system or participate in agroecology internships, technical training, career coaching, and research opportunities.

The UCSC model is notable for its broad and dynamic set of offerings, supporting students in a variety of ways and building strong varied skill sets. One aspect that is particularly relevant for King County to consider is the Center’s for-credit internship model. Students earn academic credit by working on UCSC’s production farm, affiliated gardens, or partner farms. This work gives them direct field experience that complements their classroom studies. Internships are available during both the academic year and summer sessions and are fully integrated into student degree pathways. This structure provides students with practical training while giving farms access to enthusiastic labor and a direct pipeline of future employees and managers.

In an interview with one UCSC program graduate, a student described working an internship with a local farm for college credit and later being hired on as the manager of the farm:

“Farms in this area don’t hire you if you don’t have experience. They were only willing to take a chance on me because I was able to work at no cost to them while earning college credit. But this is the pathway that led me to getting the experience I needed to be hired as the farm manager.”

- Anonymous Organic Farmer

For the farm, the internship program has proven equally important: the farm that the student went on to manage had hired its past three managers from UCSC’s internship and apprenticeship programs. While most of the UCSC internships and apprenticeships take place on the campus farm and gardens, this example underscores the program’s dual impact—meeting labor needs for farms while preparing the next generation of skilled agricultural professionals. Particularly with the programs strong standing and influence in the community, the pipeline into farm work is well established.

Evaluations of the UCSC model have shown its impact. In 2010, an evaluation^{vii} and alumni survey^{viii} was published. Over 350 alumni responded to the survey, 87% of which were currently or had been involved in the field of sustainable agriculture and food systems work, 54% reported owning or operating a farm or garden at some point since graduating, and 86% reported that the program itself had provided significant knowledge and skills for their careers.

Takeaways for King County

King County has parallels to this model. One of these is the University of Washington farm (through the Botanic Gardens and Center for Urban Horticulture). The farm offers internships tied to urban farming and food systems education. The Dani Elenga Organic Farming Internship is one example of a paid internship at the UW Farm. These opportunities are tied to on-campus production sites. Another

example is the WSU Extension program which offers classes through the Cultivating Success Program^{ix} and other programs within King County such as 4-H Youth development, master gardening, SNAP-Ed, and Puget Sound Forestry^x. Additionally, Highline College operates the Sustainable Agriculture Program^{xi}. This program operates technical assistance and community workshops, supporting King County’s farm properties. Finally, there are non-profit community organizations, such as SnoValley Tilth and VIVA Farms highlighted in the previous case study.

Key Takeaways:

- **Higher education partnerships can expand the agricultural workforce pipeline**, creating for-credit internships that connect students with farm work opportunities.
- **Educational internships can support local farms** by providing a low-cost way to bring on untrained workers while helping students build the practical skills and experience needed for future employment in the agricultural sector.
- **County facilitation and support are critical**, including transportation assistance, stipends for low-income participants, and standardized frameworks that make farm-based internships legally and logistically feasible for both schools and producers.

However, while these programs are operating individually and through informal networks, there are not channels that are connecting a comprehensive set of courses, apprenticeships, internships, employment opportunities, research, and fellowships for agriculture in the County. While it may not be necessary to have once central institution connecting all resources—in fact, King County’s dispersed and APD/community-based support network is a strength of the sector in many ways—there could be established a greater connectivity between available programs and especially between student educational opportunity and on-farm learning.

The UCSC model shows how for-credit farm internships can bridge a critical gap: farms receive motivated student labor, and students gain the degree credit, experience, and credibility needed to transition into paid farm roles and management. For King County, this model is promising and addresses existing gaps and challenges for youth and farm businesses alike. However, it may need adaptation or further research to fit local realities.

One important consideration is who makes up King County’s farm workforce today. The lessons experienced from past programs and institutions in the region are insightful for this point. Interviews and internal data from the Highline Institute enlighten this challenge. They found that the majority of their participants were coming from immigrant or refugee backgrounds, and there many barriers for them attending classes in a traditional fashion. A survey of program participants found that 60% reported tuition costs being too high, 50% reported having to work during class hours, and 42% reported they did not have enough time in their schedule. This led the Highline Institute to adjust programs to focus on certification-based teaching and technical assistance training on a year-round basis with no tuition costs. Demand for their program increased significantly and they were able to support many new farmers and farm businesses.

A takeaway from this is that credit-based internships cannot be a sole solution, and it must be developed alongside continued investment in and support for non-academic training routes that are more accessible to immigrant and working populations. This also points to the importance of continuing to build connectivity between institutions, farm organizations, and farmers throughout the APDs.

At the same time, there is an untapped pipeline of college students—both within the University of Washington system, other four-year colleges in King County, and community colleges in King County—who are eager for experiential learning opportunities in food systems and agriculture. These students often express interest in sustainable farming, but without clear pathways to earn credit or structured farm placements, their potential remains unrealized. With effective program design, marketing, and the removal of barriers like tuition costs or rigid course structures, these students could form a new generation of farm workers, managers, and business owners. This may also lead to the removal of barriers and support for immigrant, refugee, and worker populations to pursue college or advanced degrees, furthering the workforce development impact for the sector.

Practical challenges would also need to be addressed. A major barrier is distance: many farms are located far from urban campuses such as University of Washington in Seattle, making transportation a limiting factor for students. Solutions could include vanpools, mileage stipends, or clustering placements with farms in geographic hubs to make commuting feasible. Another barrier is ensuring equity: stipends or county support would be essential to make these internships accessible to low-income students, so that participation is not limited to those who can afford unpaid work.

Another critical set of considerations for King County involves the institutional and legal framework for creating for-credit internships. Universities and community colleges may require formal affiliation agreements with host farms that spell out liability, supervision, and learning goals. Farms would need to comply with Washington’s evolving labor and safety standards^{xii}. If internships are unpaid, they must satisfy the federal “primary beneficiary” test to avoid misclassification under wage law, which can be complex for small farms^{xiii}. International students working off-campus typically require Curricular Practical Training (CPT) authorization, which adds administrative coordination. On the administrative side, credit-bearing internships may require faculty oversight, documented learning plans, and alignment with academic calendars—structures that are feasible but require coordination. These institutional and legal requirements do not make the model impossible, but they do highlight the need for county-level facilitation, standardized paperwork, and possibly stipends or grants to ensure compliance while keeping participation accessible to students and workable for farms.

Taken together, these dynamics suggest a two-pronged approach for King County. First, leverage higher education institutions to build a student pipeline modeled on UCSC, providing credit and structured pathways into farm work. Second, continue investing in and expanding community-based programs that serve immigrant and non-college populations, ensuring that workforce development strategies are inclusive of the farmers who already form the backbone of King County agriculture. By aligning these parallel tracks, the County could build a more resilient, diverse, and sustainable agricultural workforce.

Case Study 3: Scaling Farm Businesses



Background & Challenges

The previous two case studies have focused on the early stages of agricultural workforce development: education, training, and entering the agricultural sector through programs such as internships, apprenticeships, and incubators. At the core of these case studies is the takeaway of strengthening and building upon the network of programs that already exist within King County, and identifying ways to bolster educational outcomes to prepare farm workers for the challenging, complex, and high-cost environment of farming in King County.

However, while there are opportunities for improvement and coordination across training programs, King County is generally strong in this area. Organizations such as VIVA Farms and SnoValley Tilth, among others, are providing nationally recognized models of farm education and incubation. The greater challenge facing the County’s agricultural system lies in what happens *after* those training stages: *How do we support individuals to move from educational and training programs to long-term careers that pay a living wage, whether as farm owners, managers, or skilled employees?*

This question sits at the intersection of workforce development, business development, and land access. It touches on issues of farm viability, scale, and profitability, as well as the economic and infrastructural conditions that make career growth possible. Still, workforce development has a clear role to play, particularly in supporting professional development and career advancement pathways that help farmworkers and owners build sustainable livelihoods.

This is important for numerous reasons. One of these is to support retention. Farm workers that are able to continue professional growth are more valuable to potential employers, and farm owners that continue to grow and sustain their businesses are retained within the agricultural sector. Another reason why this is critical to the sector is that the growth of existing and future farm businesses allows these farms to increase in scale, creating more agricultural jobs.

This final point touches on something important for the King County agricultural system. Farm business ownership is not the only or best path for every individual pursuing farm work. It is extremely challenging to make a living wage farming on a small-scale, and this volatile environment may not be the goal for every individual in their career. Many individuals may prefer or thrive in roles such as farm managers, laborers, production specialists, agricultural business staff, or positions in nonprofit and food-system organizations. Supporting professional development across this broader spectrum of agricultural careers can expand job creation and stabilize the workforce. This theme is something that will be touched on again in the following case studies.

Pathway	Example Roles & Stages	Description / Local Context
Farm Ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small-scale owner-operator • Mid- and large-scale operations • Cooperative or collective ownership models 	Represents the long-term goal for many aspiring farmers. In King County, high land and housing costs make ownership challenging, so innovative approaches such as incubator farms (e.g., Viva Farms) and land-link programs are critical for enabling entry and succession.
Farm Management & Labor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seasonal laborer • Crew lead or assistant manager • Full-time farm manager 	Encompasses daily roles that sustain farm operations. Many begin as seasonal or part-time laborers and advance to supervisory or management positions as they gain technical experience. Stability and advancement depend on wages, benefits, and year-round employment opportunities.

<p>Farm Systems Support</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agricultural educator or trainer • Nonprofit program coordinator • Government or Extension staff 	<p>Essential support functions across the agricultural ecosystem—training, technical assistance, land-use planning, and policy support. Local examples include WSU Extension, SnoValley Tilth, and County agricultural programs that connect producers with education, resources, and workforce pipelines.</p>
<p>Value-Added & Agri-Business</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Food processor or product developer • Farm-to-market coordinator • Agritourism and direct sales manager 	<p>These positions bridge production and market development, expanding farm income through product diversification, direct marketing, and tourism.</p>
<p>Environmental & Technical Services</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conservation district technician • Sustainable agriculture consultant • Water, soil, and habitat restoration roles 	<p>These careers connect agricultural practices with environmental stewardship. In King County, agencies such as the King Conservation District and nonprofits working on regenerative agriculture provide employment that supports both working lands and ecological health.</p>

This case study focuses on the Burlington, Vermont-based Intervale Center^{xiv}. Specifically, it addresses the Intervale Center’s professional development models that help farm businesses scale, enhance management and technical capacity, navigate farm business volatility, and—importantly—create new employment opportunities. It highlights strategies that move beyond entry-level training to support growth, specialization, and long-term workforce stability.

Program Highlights & Impact

The Intervale Center is one of the most dynamic and robust farm support organizations in the country. They operate a variety of programs that support both individual farms and the agricultural system of Vermont as a whole.

Their Farm Business Services programs focus on farm and food systems, land conservation and ecology, and community support and education:

- **Resources for Farmers^{xv}**: Collection of resources, both from Intervale and partners, for understanding navigation of the agricultural industry, financial management, and other areas.
- **Land Access Support^{xvi}**: Direct support to farmers in identifying, evaluating, and securing land. This work is complemented by the Vermont Land Link program^{xvii}—an online matching and education platform that connects farm seekers and landowners.
- **Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program^{xviii}**: Two years of direct support to farmers within three tracks—*Business Planning*, *Transfer/Succession Planning*, and *Short-term In-Depth Planning*.
- **Farm Business Planning & Coaching^{xix}**: Robust business planning and support for farmers at all stages.

In addition, they operate three other streams of programming:

- **Conversation Nursery^{xx}**: Growth of native riparian trees and shrubs for conservation and restoration projects across Vermont.
- **Land Stewardship^{xxi}**: Stewardship of a 360-acre plot of land in the Intervale.

- **Food Hub^{xxii}**: Serves as a central point of connection in the food system, providing market access for farmers, value-add infrastructure and storage, delivery networks, a place for institutional and individual buyers, and free food to community members.

There are numerous aspects of these programs that are critically supportive of farmers and farm businesses in Vermont. For their farm business services, the programs are robust and build upon the foundational skills that farmers may have gained in college, apprenticeship, or other educational programs. As the Intervale Center’s mission is to support a food system that is inclusive, sustainable, accessible, and full of diverse, thriving farmers, they focus efforts towards ensuring that new and established farm businesses are able to create stability and navigate the volatile market. Both in their Farm Business Planning & Coaching and Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program, they are providing comprehensive business services: business planning, financial analysis and coaching, succession and transfer planning, land access bookkeeping, marketing, and loan preparation.

The Vermont Farm & Forest Viability Program is specifically designed for established businesses, grossing over \$15,000 annually, with two years of operating experience, and that source most of their products in-state. This program supports these farms with two years of hands-on support in the above listed areas, accelerating growth and ensuring a stable foundation moving forward. This is a critical stage for farm businesses, and this support enables these businesses to scale and in some cases hire additional employees.

Resources and publications available on the Center’s website illustrate the type of support they are providing. For example, their “Vermont Grass-Feed Beef Profitability” guide goes through all aspects of creating profitable grass-fed beef operations, including business management, marketing, production practices, and steps to profitability^{xxiii}. Another example is the “Down in the Dirt Farm” sample business plan, developed with funding from the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Grant^{xxiv}. This is another robust example for farmers that shows how to analyze a market, assess and establish business strategy, and create financial models.

These services and the direct support that the Intervale Center provides is essential, but a further aspect that separates out the essential impact that their programming has is the Food Hub network. The Food Hub enables farmers to have access to the infrastructure needed to grow their businesses, and directly connects them to a consistent, well-rounded, and community supportive market. To the first point, infrastructure share for value-added agriculture is an incredibly valuable tool for farmers that are looking to scale and expand their businesses. Value-added agriculture is an important path towards potentially generating higher returns and accessing higher-value markets^{xxv}. By providing both the technical business services as well as the infrastructure, farmers that interested in this path have a robust network of support. Regarding the connection to the marketplace, we know that one of the primary challenges that farmers face is seasonal fluctuations and volatility of the market. The Food Hub provides critical consistency:

“We appreciate how transparent and clear the Intervale Food Hub is with us as a vendor for wholesale and as a customer through their services. IFH’s ability to be flexible with us allows us to rely on them for regular, in-season orders in addition to giving us the opportunity to serve Burlington’s food system.”

- Quote from 2024 Impact Report, Eli Hersh, Honey Field Farm^{xxvi}

In total, the Food Hub works with over 80 farmers, producers, and distributors. This network is strengthened by the level of support and integration it has within the local food system.

Another aspect of the Food Hub, and the value of the Intervale Center as a whole, that is increasingly important to note is that it provides stability and support through climate change and climate crises. This was experienced directly by the Intervale Center and their local farmers during the Great Vermont Flood of July 2023^{xxvii}. These floods affected most of the 350 acres that the Intervale Center manages directly, and many other farms in the region. According to interviews with the Intervale Center’s staff, the community-support model and farm network were critical to the recovery and continued strategies to mitigate the impacts of these crises in the future^{xxviii}.

Takeaways for King County

King County has a variety of strong programs and organizations that offer similar programs as the Intervale Center. The WSU Extension’s Cultivating Success Program offers classes and workshops that cover critical business considerations for farmers. SnoValley Tilth’s programs are targeted towards individuals that have a foundational skill set and are prepared to establish and grow a farm business, while additionally offering a farmland access network.

However, King County is still strongest in the areas of farming education, internship, and apprenticeship. Most current programs serve as entry points and technical training for beginning farmers. What is still missing is a robust, coordinated, and advanced-stage system of professional and business development, paired with community resources and market connections, that can help existing farms stabilize, grow, and expand at a level comparable to the Intervale Center.

The Intervale Center’s model demonstrates the value of integrating personalized business coaching, ongoing technical assistance for established and growing farms, land access and linkage programs, and market infrastructure that supports stability in growth stages. This creates a wholistic, well-rounded system that farmers can engage with and grow within. It is critical that such services in King County be provided in a coordinated and comprehensive way, through strong partnerships among existing organizations. This coordination helps remove barriers for farmers, reducing the administrative and logistical burden of navigating support systems.

The Intervale Center also offers a direction for long-term resilience and workforce retention. Strengthening farm businesses not only helps them remain viable through market or climate shocks, but also enables them to scale and create new employment opportunities for farm managers and skilled workers. Vermont’s experience with the 2023 floods illustrates how consistent relationships between farmers and technical-assistance providers build adaptive capacity and recovery readiness. King County faces its own climate-related risks, and a comparable business-support structure could help farms prepare for and recover from these challenges more effectively.

Key Takeaways:

- Advanced professional and business development programs are essential to help **established and growing farms in King County stabilize, expand, and create new employment opportunities.**
- **Coordinated partnerships among existing organizations** can streamline support, reduce administrative barriers, and create a more cohesive, comprehensive system for farm business growth.
- **Integrated business support and market infrastructure strengthen resilience**, helping farms adapt to economic and climate pressures while generating new, skilled positions in management and production.

Ultimately, the key takeaway for King County is threefold.

First, robust and coordinated professional development for existing farms is strong strategy for workforce development. It ensures farmers continue to develop skill sets, maintain viable businesses, and scale in ways that create more employment opportunities.

Second, a cohesive system of support is essential. While King County may not rely on one single institution, developing greater cohesiveness, partnerships, and connections between programs operating in the APDs is essential to removing barriers to participation and creating a more comprehensive support network for farmers.

Finally, a system of market support that allows farmers to stabilize and grow collectively would provide lasting workforce benefits. Existing CSA and food network programs could be expanded and integrated into a countywide hub model that strengthens both market access and workforce opportunities.

Case Study 4: Employment Courses Within Agricultural CDFI



Background & Challenges

An important aspect of workforce development that is outlined in this assessment scope is retention strategies for employers, such as competitive wages, job stability, working conditions, professional development, benefits, etc. This theme came forward additionally in interviews with King County staff, and farmers and farm organizations in the region.

Retention in the King County agricultural sector is a multifaceted issue. One sense of retention is ensuring that farmers and farm business owners choose to stay in King County, or continue farming and operating their businesses at all. Another is supporting farm owners that are able to hire employees in retaining them. The above case study focused on professional development and supporting the skillsets required to scale a farm business, both to continue operating and grow to hire employees. This case study focuses on the other aspect of retention: creating a healthy employment environment to retain managers and skilled workers. California FarmLink^{xxix} offers a variety of unique courses that provide insight on this topic for King County.

Program Highlights & Impact

California FarmLink is a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI). Their primary function is to provide access to loans and give support to underserved farmers. While this case study is generally focused on their unique employer courses, they are an organization that is generally insightful for supporting agriculture for King County.

California FarmLink has three tracks of programming:

- **Lending & Loans^{xxx}**: Offers low-barrier lending for operating, land, housing, disaster relief, and conservation loans. Additionally, supports farmers and ranchers find land through connecting landseekers and landholders.
- **Equity & Conservation on Working Lands^{xxxi}**: Supports farmers who have historically faced barriers to land access and ownership.
- **Resilience & Wealth Building^{xxxii}**: A set of educational courses and technical assistance support to farmers, ranchers, and fishers focused on legal, financial, and human resource management for their businesses.

The California FarmLink approach is significant for its ability to provide both technical and educational resources to farmers, as well as financial support. This approach enables them to a robust and long-term support institution for farmers as they navigate their careers. In total, they have made more than \$70 million in loans since 2012^{xxxiii}. Insights from this approach are insightful for the previous case study as well, building upon the Intervale Center’s system of support by offering financial resources as well.

However, the focus for this case study is on the courses that they offer within the Resilience & Wealth Building program. These courses multilingual, presented in Spanish and English, have refundable fees upon completion of the course, and graduates of their courses are eligible for discounts on FarmLink loans. They offer three courses:

- **The Resilerator (El Rersilerador)**: Focused on business acceleration from a lens of long-term resilience.
- **The Employment Resilerator**: Focused on providing knowledge and tools to be able to be a good and legal employer.
- **Bookkeeping in Practice**: Focused on building and refining a QuickBooks system.
- **The Regenerator**: Focused on designing an effective succession plan for family farms.

While each of these are valuable, the one that is particularly unique is the Employment Resilerator. This course is significant because it goes beyond business skills to focus on the human side of farm management. This is an area where many farmers are unprepared. The challenge is twofold: first, legal and regulatory compliance, which in Washington and California includes worker safety, wage and hour laws, insurance, and documentation requirements; and second, creating a positive workplace culture that supports retention. Farmers often lack training in areas such as recruitment, onboarding, conflict resolution, compensation design, benefits administration, and providing pathways for growth. It is important to acknowledge that are other aspects to these challenges, such as affordability of healthcare.

The Employment Resilerator directly addresses the educational gaps. It is a 10-week advanced course that trains agricultural employers to “go beyond legal compliance toward creating a supportive and respectful work environment.” Participants learn about labor law, workplace safety, conflict management, audits and inspections, recruitment, compensation, and employee benefits. The goal is not only to make farms legally compliant but also to help owners develop strong employer practices that improve retention and reduce employment-related stress. The course reports outcomes of decreased absenteeism, stronger team cohesion, and greater productivity as a result of implementing these practices.

As farms mature and expand, the need for strong human resource and management capacity becomes central to long-term success. Many small and mid-sized farms begin as owner-operated enterprises,

where the farmer is both the laborer and the decision-maker. However, as these businesses grow, scaling up often means hiring employees for the first time. This is a transition that requires new skill sets. Tasks such as drafting employee handbooks, establishing pay structures, ensuring compliance with wage and safety laws, and developing equitable workplace policies can be daunting for producers whose expertise lies in production and farming.

This is where the California FarmLink model becomes critical, and insights from the Intervale Center case are important as well. By providing loans and education, as well as resources and examples like the Intervale Center does through their Resources for Farmers program, it lays the groundwork for farmers to successfully manage the challenges that emerge in managing their workforce as they grow. When employers understand how to create and maintain high-quality jobs, they are better positioned to expand operations, delegate tasks, and retain experienced workers who contribute to productivity and institutional knowledge. These are the foundational conditions that allow farms to move from small-scale, owner-driven operations toward enterprises that generate stable, long-term employment within the agricultural sector.

Takeaways for King County

The California FarmLink model demonstrates how workforce development can extend beyond training new farmers to supporting existing farm owners in becoming quality, legally compliant, and equitable employers. This approach could be impactful for King County's agricultural workforce ecosystem.

As more farm businesses in King County are positioned to mature and grow with support from community organizations, the ability of these farms to effectively hire will be critical to creating more workforce pathways for individuals coming out of educational, internship, and apprenticeship programs. As discussed above, the right choice and preference for some individuals may be thriving in management and skilled labor positions, rather than farm ownership. The Employment Resiliator course illustrates how practical, structured education on human resources, legal compliance, and workplace culture can strengthen the entire agricultural workforce system.

To emphasize an above point, the value of a course like this is increased by the system of resources and support around it. Both the Intervale Center and the California FarmLink program provide a further system of loans, personal coaching, learning resources, land access, infrastructure share, and market access. King County could adapt a similar model by identifying critical partnerships and cohesions among agricultural organizations, educational institutions, and workforce development agencies to create employer-education initiatives, tailored towards local realities and paired with a broader system of support.

Key Takeaways:

- **Employer education is a critical component of workforce development**, helping farm owners and managers build skills in human resources, legal compliance, and equitable employment practices.
- **Courses like California FarmLink's Employment Resiliator model strengthen the entire agricultural workforce system**, ensuring that growing farm businesses can hire, manage, and retain workers.
- **King County can adapt this approach by fostering partnerships among CDFIs, educational institutions, and agricultural organizations**, creating coordinated "employer readiness" programs supported by access to financing, coaching, and business services.

Case Study 5: Alternative Agricultural Sector Pathways



Background & Challenges

The above case studies have focused on identifying ways in which the King County agricultural sector can grow and support workforce systems, particularly through inter-governmental, educational institutions, and non-profit organizations across the workforce development model. The focus has primarily been on the systems that support traditional agricultural businesses and workforce growth: cultivating agricultural careers, supporting future farm owners, scaling farm operations to support increased employment, and retaining farm employees at established farms.

However, there is still an important gap and set of questions that remain within this analysis. Namely, is the traditional path the only option for individuals interested in pursuing farm work or passionate about food and agricultural systems? Are there individuals who do not see this as their career path, but want to participate in the food system, market gardening, or agricultural education in another way? Are there alternative ways in which the County can cultivate a healthy, sustainable, and thriving agricultural and food system that allows for workforce participation outside of traditional employment pathways?

These questions are important to the King County agricultural system because as has been discussed, the majority of farms are smaller and owner operated. Many of the farm organizations in the APDs have missions that are rooted in preserving sustainable organic farming and supporting healthy local food systems. On the whole there has been an increasing movement in creating food system, food sovereignty, and small farmer nonprofits. The primary goals of this work are not necessarily profit margins or viable food businesses, though that is an important part of it. Rather, they are focused on fostering connection to local food production and environment in the community.

This is a legitimate path for individuals interested in entering the agricultural sector to pursue. As it pertains to workforce development, there are two aspects that this final case study seeks to address.

First, there may be gaps within the skill sets that individuals in the agricultural sector are gaining as it pertains to running or participating in non-profit or alternative agricultural organizations. This is something that is immediately relevant to King County as the County supports non-profits in the food and agricultural systems with grants and land^{xxxiv}. It is important to be cultivating the skill sets for this avenue of work to support these alternative conservation goals for the County, which still contribute significantly to the food system and agricultural sector.

Second, there may be other agricultural models that the County can support that may be reflective of other values than viable farm businesses that individuals in the sector are interested in. For example, an American Farmland Trust survey of the Puget Sound found that in addition to profitability, farmers listed sustainability and community as critical aspects of what farm viability means to them^{xxxv}.

This final case study addresses this through consideration of a highly successful and national recognized Tribal food sovereignty program in the region: Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project.

Program Highlights & Impact

The Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project (MFSP), led by the Muckleshoot Indian Tribe in Auburn, Washington, is a landmark example of a community-based food sovereignty project that intertwines culture, food systems, community resilience, and agriculture. Founded in 2010, the goal of the project is, “to promote a return to traditional foods and food practices.”^{xxxvi} The core of this project is to support Tribal food sovereignty—a Tribal community deciding what foods they will use to sustain themselves and their cultures in the face of colonization removing access to healthy indigenous foods^{xxxvii}. Since its founding, the project has emerged as a comprehensive food sovereignty model that blends education, community and workforce participation, security of food systems, and community wellness. In doing so, MFSP creates a living, locally rooted food system with tangible workforce and educational impacts.

The MFSP pursues their goals through a three-pronged approach: hands-on workshops that share traditional knowledge around culturally important foods like elk, salmon, and plant foods; assisting with traditional feasts for community events; and management of three gardens that serve as food production as well as educational spaces^{xxxviii}. With these three prongs, the MFSP educates and engages community members in numerous ways, partially focused on traditional knowledge around food systems, and partially through the skill sets that goes into their traditional agricultural and food production. Sites like the Muckleshoot Tribal School gardens and community orchard serve as living classrooms where youth, elders, and families learn together. These activities have become a major hub of community involvement, fostering a multigenerational exchange of knowledge while cultivating a sense of shared responsibility for the land and food system.

In addition to cultural revitalization, the MFSP also supports economic and workforce engagement. The 2014 First Nations Development Institute report *The Power of the Tribal Dollar*^{xxxix} documented how the Tribe’s Food Purchasing Program can leverage tribal food spending to strengthen local economic systems. By shifting procurement toward tribal food producers and local vendors, the MFSP was projected to stimulate the regional food economy and created part-time and permanent jobs within the food system—from farmers to value-add manufacturing positions to purchasing coordinators and logistics staff. This approach not only localizes food spending but also keeps economic and workforce impact circulating within the community, a key component of tribal self-determination.

In this way, the MFSP has generated and will continue to generate diverse workforce opportunities beyond traditional farming roles. Employment emerges around education, cultural coordination, and program management, as well as seasonal and part-time farm and garden work tied to food production, distribution, and educational programming. These positions often combine cultural, agricultural, and educational responsibilities. They offer new, meaningful pathways for community members who want to work within the food system without pursuing conventional farm ownership or large-scale production.

In addition to its educational, economic, community, and workforce impacts, the project’s broader outcomes extend into resilience and sustainability. Locally based food production—especially when supported by a broad network of community organizations and governmental partners—provides critical insulation against both market and climate disruptions. This kind of system helps ensure that communities maintain access to healthy foods during disasters and have a plan for long-term food production as the regional food economy continues to shift under the pressures of climate change.

The MFSP also has profound health and wellness impacts for the community. By reconnecting people with traditional foods, ecological stewardship, and land-based education, these programs promote both physical and cultural nourishment. Increased access to locally grown, fresh, and culturally appropriate foods directly supports improved nutrition and food security, particularly for communities that have faced systemic barriers to healthy food access. In addition, the act of growing, harvesting, and preparing food in community settings has been shown to improve mental health outcomes by fostering connection, purpose, and collective resilience. The Muckleshoot program's emphasis on traditional foodways and intergenerational learning reinforces this, linking health not only to diet but to identity, culture, and community well-being. These benefits reduce long-term public health disparities and strengthening community capacity to sustain health from the ground up.

Together, these outcomes illustrate how the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project advances a mission-driven yet economically and socially impactful model of agricultural development. It builds a system that supports local employment, creates educational and training opportunities for youth and adults, and restores cultural and ecological health. This kind of integrated, community-centered food system demonstrates a legitimate and replicable path for regions like King County—one that values education, local participation, and workforce diversity as foundational components of a healthy agricultural economy.

Takeaways for King County

The Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project offers a model that reflects many of the recommendations and considerations from the above four case studies. It demonstrates how a locally rooted, sustainable food systems project can integrate community, economy, ecology, and workforce impacts into a cohesive framework. It reflects many of the same values being expressed by farmers and farm organizations in King County: stewardship of land, food access, community well-being, and long-term sustainability.

Much like the Intervale Center's Food Hub in Vermont, the Muckleshoot model connects food production directly to community consumption. Both systems localize food economies, build shared infrastructure, and create jobs across multiple tiers—from farming and food handling to program coordination and education. For King County, this model could offer a framework for developing regional food hubs or sovereignty networks that pair market stability with mission-driven goals. Such hubs could link small farms, community organizations, and consumers, while also offering a platform for value-added production, local purchasing, and workforce development initiatives. As was discussed in Case Study Three, the impact of these networks are immense, creating stability and resilience through market shocks and enabling farm businesses to grow and expand workforce impact.

The project also aligns with the educational directions seen in local programs like VIVA Farms and SnoValley Tilth, as well as the UC Santa Cruz Agroecology Program and similar internship models. Integrating experiential learning into food systems can engage youth, college students, and community members broadly in hands-on education while directly supporting local food production. As discussed in Case Study Two, partnerships between institutions like the University of Washington, WSU Extension, and community colleges could allow students to earn academic credit while working with community farms, food sovereignty programs, and nonprofits. These placements could mirror the success of UCSC's for-credit internships but expand participation and systemic impact for King County. Importantly, and as discussed in Case Study One, the existing organizations doing this work like VIVA Farms, SnoValley Tilth, and other APD-based organizations are central vehicles through which these programs can be built.

The MFSP also underscores that agricultural workforce development need not be confined to full-time farm work or ownership. A vibrant food system requires a wide range of ancillary and part-time roles—educators, garden managers, cultural coordinators, youth mentors, event organizers, food processors, and logistics specialists. Supporting these diverse opportunities not only broadens entry points into the sector but also reflects the reality of King County’s agricultural economy, where many individuals balance multiple forms of work throughout the year. These jobs also build local capacity and deepen community connection to land and food.

Case Study Four discussed aspects of business and employer training offered through California FarmLink. The importance of these courses becomes even more apparent when considering what it takes to build a system such as the MFSP. As community-based food systems expand, so does the need for leadership, administrative, and organizational management skills. Skill sets such as the following become critical:

- **Nonprofit and cooperative management training:** Preparing individuals to manage mission-driven food and farm organizations.
- **Land access and legal education:** Including conservation easements, cooperative ownership models, and land trusts.
- **Administrative and grant management skills:** Ensuring that community-led organizations have the capacity to sustain long-term operations.

Expanding on the insights from Case Study Four—and the courses that California FarmLink offers—while maintaining strong financial and institutional support is a powerful strategy for lowering barriers and continuing to build the capacity of farmers and farm organizations. Developing similar resources in King County could help farm owners, nonprofit leaders, and community educators alike acquire the administrative and regulatory competencies necessary to function in the developing agricultural sector of King County.

In the context of King County as a whole, achieving the impacts illustrated by the MFSP will rely on cultivating community partnerships and organizational networks. As has been emphasized throughout each case study, investing in and strengthening the network of existing and future farm organizations that are dedicated to on-the-ground work within the APDs is the central vehicle through which broader impacts can be achieved. The goal is not simply to create more jobs or to expand traditional agricultural businesses, but to foster a diverse ecosystem of work that reflects the cultural, environmental, and community values that define King County agriculture.

Key Takeaways:

- **Community-based food systems create multifaceted workforce opportunities**, expanding beyond traditional farming roles to include education, coordination, food processing, and non-profit leadership.
- The Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project offers an example model for integrating food production, education, and community impact, demonstrating how **local networks can link farms, institutions, and consumers through shared infrastructure and community goals.**
- **Building leadership and organizational capacity is essential, including programs supporting nonprofit management, governance, and administrative skills** will enable community-led food and farm organizations to grow sustainably.
- King County can strengthen its agricultural resilience by investing in and connecting **existing organizations within the APDs to form an integrated ecosystem of education, production, and workforce development** rooted in local values and long-term sustainability.

Ultimately, the Muckleshoot Food Sovereignty Project demonstrates that community-based food systems are not merely social or cultural programs—they are viable workforce and economic strategies. By investing in food system networks, education, infrastructure, nonprofit leadership and organizational development, and sustainable agricultural production itself, King County can cultivate a more equitable and resilient agricultural workforce system. This model creates multiple pathways for participation and builds a regional food system rooted in connection, shared stewardship, and long-term sustainability.

Endnotes

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King County Agricultural Sector Assessment
Category D: *Healthcare Report*

November 15, 2025



King County

Healthcare

Executive Summary

Current Conditions

Farmers and farm workers in King County face burdensome and complex healthcare challenges. Although King County has an extensive network of clinics, hospitals, and mobile health services, most agricultural workers experience significant barriers to affordable and timely care. The most severe and persistent challenge identified in this report, and consistently reported by farmers interviewed for the analysis, is the cost of health insurance. As the majority of farms in King County are small operations, owners are to provide health insurance, and workers are not able to receive health insurance as a benefit.

Monthly premiums, deductibles, and out-of-pocket costs are extremely high relative to farm income. For self-employed farmers, marketplace insurance through Washington Healthplanfinder can easily consume 20–30% of annual income, especially for those who do not receive subsidies. When enhanced federal premium tax credits decrease or expire, these costs rise even further. As several interviewees emphasized, healthcare can be the biggest barrier to staying in farming and in many cases farmers take off-farm jobs solely for access to employer-sponsored insurance. Meanwhile, uninsured and underinsured workers delay preventive care until health issues become acute, increasing long-term physical and financial risks.

These affordability pressures are compounded by the nature of farm work itself. Farmers and farm workers experience high physical strain, rising mental health stressors, and long or unpredictable hours that make it difficult to schedule appointments. While many APDs are within 20–35 minutes of clinics or hospitals, distance is far less of a barrier than cost, eligibility, and lack of comprehensive coverage. Community health centers such as Sea Mar, HealthPoint, and International Community Health Services provide vital safety-net services, but they cannot fill the structural gap left by inaccessible insurance.

Taken together, these factors create a healthcare landscape where many farmers and farm workers are excluded from affordable coverage, despite working in an industry that is physically demanding, high-risk, and essential to the County’s food security. Addressing healthcare affordability is critical to supporting a sustainable agricultural sector and workforce in King County.

Opportunities and Recommendations

To create a more equitable and sustainable healthcare system for King County’s agricultural workforce, the County can play a role in coordinating outreach, direct financial relief, and service accessibility. The following recommendations reflect actionable, near-term steps that build on existing community infrastructure.

Recommendation	Action Summary
1. Expand Mental Health and Stress Support	Fund farm organizations to lead mental health awareness campaigns and connect farmers with free or low-cost counseling through partner networks.
2. Support Mobile and On-Farm Health Clinics	Partner with SnoValley Tilth, VIVA Farms, and other APD-based organizations to coordinate mobile clinics offering basic screenings, preventive care, and health education during off-season months.
3. Create a Farmer Healthcare Relief Fund	Establish a County fund that reimburses farmers who spend significant percentages of income on healthcare premiums or out-of-

	pocket costs, modeled after programs like California’s Farmer Relief Fund.
4. Advocate for State and Federal Premium Subsidies	Work with state legislators to expand premium assistance under Cascade Care and advocate for the continuation of enhanced federal premium tax credits for farmers and small business owners.

Reliable, affordable healthcare is a cornerstone of a sustainable agricultural economy. Supporting the physical and mental well-being of farmers and farm workers ensures not only the resilience of the agricultural workforce, but also the stability of King County’s food system as a whole. By connecting healthcare access with trusted agricultural partners and funding targeted relief, the County can help ensure that farming remains viable, healthy, and enduring for generations to come.

Assessment Scope

The healthcare access assessment includes an analysis of the availability of health services and coverage options for agricultural workers and farm owners, including public programs such as Medicaid ("Apple Health"), the Washington Healthplanfinder online marketplace, and community-based or nonprofit health resources. The study examines gaps in coverage or service and identifies barriers that may prevent farmers and farm workers from obtaining timely and adequate care. The scope also includes exploring opportunities to expand access through policy changes, outreach programs, and innovative service delivery models, including examining the role of local agricultural businesses or agriculture support organizations in providing healthcare solutions.

The intention is to provide the County with actionable recommendations to reduce barriers, strengthen health access, and support the overall well-being and sustainability of the agricultural workforce.

Current Conditions

Demographics & Common Health Challenges

Agricultural workers are an older population facing many difficulties within the industry. Land and housing costs are high, the climate is changing, the workforce is limited, time is precious, and healthcare is expensive. Their workdays are long, and many tasks may rely on the weather. These are demanding jobs that require a lot of physical, mental, and emotional energy from workers.

According to the *2022 Census of Agriculture*, there were 3,067 farmers in King County. Most farmers have other jobs, with 43% who reported farming as their primary occupation. Yet 80% of farmers live on the farm.ⁱ The average income was \$69,227, with average expenses totaling \$85,833. The average farm's net cash flow was at a loss of \$4,196.ⁱⁱ Median earnings in 2023 for the industry in King County were \$54,461 with a margin of error of \$13,566.ⁱⁱⁱ

Women are equally represented in agriculture, and the data is limited to males and females. Nearly 60% of farmers are over 55 years old, with farmers in their late 70s still working. Almost as many farmers are working after the age of 65 as under age 45. The majority, 92%, are white, and the remaining farmers are Asian, multi-racial, Pacific Islanders, Native American, and Black, in that order. Over 90% of the 1,604 farms in King County are small farms under 50 acres.^{iv}

Physical Health

Of the Health Centers providing care to agricultural workers with federal funding, common health problems were high levels of obesity, hypertension, type II diabetes, and anxiety or other mental disorders.^v These symptoms relate to the impacts of chronic stress, which can be linked to high blood pressure, or hypertension, higher incidences of cardiovascular issues, depression, anxiety, and detrimental behaviors.

Locally, limited data exists on the health of farm workers. Much of the data in the region is regarding Latino workers, and the published reports are from over three years ago. This information, however, does inform about the experience of immigrants or other language speakers who face barriers within healthcare, such as cultural competency, language ability, transportation, and concern about immigration status, in addition to costs.^{vi}

Additionally, as the climate changes and average temperatures increase, farmers are facing decisions about when to work in the summer. From conversations with farmers who work with other farmers, local agricultural workers struggle with the heat, while those more familiar with higher temperatures tend not to mind. Depending on climate change, heat and drought may become larger issues for farmers.

Mental Health

High stress is common for farmers according to the *Western Regional Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Project*. Agricultural workers face stress-related health issues at higher levels than the public. In 2022, *Washington Agricultural Producers* reported the following issues leading to stress in 2021: lack of time, production costs, and COVID-19, followed closely by workload, work/family balance, increased labor costs, financial worries, and legislative issues related to agriculture.^{vii} Interviews with local farmers confirmed these findings. The quote below from a local farmer illustrates the mental health challenges that arise from the taxing nature of agricultural work.

“The normal routine of a farm worker is very restrictive—early days, very physically demanding. That affects health significantly. Mental stress, inability to get to a doctor’s appointment, etc. There isn’t much time for hobbies, especially in the summers.”

- Anonymous Farmer

Healthcare Accessibility

Health centers, hospitals, clinics, and private offices that offer medical or dental services are plentiful in King County. Someone who lives on the farm at any of the five Agricultural Production Districts (APDs) has access to a hospital within a twenty-minute to thirty-five-minute drive with traffic, and telehealth is common since the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the relative proximity of health services, there still exist transportation and scheduling challenges. Depending on the APD, such as Enumclaw Plateau, Snoqualmie Valley, or the Upper Green River Valley, farm access is restricted to two-lane highways, limited public transportation, and few rideshare options. With busy schedules, especially in peak seasons, making health care appointments can be difficult. Depending on the time of day, it can be made more complicated by busy roads or limited transportation options.

Many hospitals and clinics offer financial assistance or sliding fee scales for services. Some do not require insurance, and many offer insurance assistance or enrollment. Additionally, mobile van services populate public spaces, e.g., at Seattle Library locations, Auburn Valley YMCA, Kent YMCA, or Renton Viet-Wah, and can be requested. Mobile health clinics, such as those offered by the International Community Health Services, CarePoint, or Washington State Department of Health, provide blood pressure screenings, glucose checks, diabetes testing, mental health screenings, and additional preventative care. Insurance is not required to access these services, nor is immigration status. They offer flexibility in pay with sliding scale fees or no-cost, as well as working with insurance. Mobile healthcare may be particularly helpful for farms with many workers, or at hubs where farmers already attend, to provide screenings for blood pressure, glucose levels, mental health, vision, and vaccine and general health education. They cannot provide primary care visits or address health issues as one may do when visiting a doctor.

Mental health services are provided throughout King County. Specifically for farmers, AgriSafe is an available resource to call or text for mental health support. Washington State University (WSU) Skagit County Extension developed the Farm Stress Counseling Program to offer free mental health vouchers to farmers. They can receive six free telehealth or in-person sessions with psychologists. The WSU

Extension has a webpage dedicated to bringing awareness to the topic and offers resources such as stress management tools. Mental health services can be easily scheduled online if the individual has data or internet service, which is available in the majority of the APDs. There are also dedicated online resources for farmers looking for mental health information, such as ruralminds.org. Peer-to-peer support has also been targeted as a specific approach for farmers to connect with people who understand their situation. The Farm Bureau launched the Farm State of Mind campaign with free peer-to-peer support on togetherall.

King County has supported healthcare organizations in providing care to individuals who may be more difficult to reach due to limited income, English-speaking abilities, or lack of health insurance. The following table lists organizations or programs that offer low-cost health services or support in various locations across the County. In addition to this list, hospitals aim to help individuals access healthcare by providing financial, insurance, and language assistance.

The following are the most prominent health centers or clinics in the County that provide service to anyone regardless of immigration status or ability to pay, with sliding scale fees. The Community Health Access Program is a phone service for anyone in King County to help anyone find services and assist with insurance questions and enrollment. All the health options listed below offer language interpreters. Additionally, the clinics and general health services include dental care.

Name	APD Closest to Services	Sliding Fee Scale	Insurance Assistance	Insurance Enrollment	Behavioral Health	Service Provided to
Sea Mar Health Clinics	All	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Anyone
Seattle Roots Community Health	N/A: Central Seattle	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Anyone
Neighbor-Care Health	N/A: Seattle	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Anyone
HealthPoint	Sammamish River, Lower Green River Valley	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Anyone
International Community Health Services	Upper Green River Valley	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Anyone
King County Public Health Centers (Medicaid-eligible focus)	Upper Green River Valley; Home visits for maternal health.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Anyone, with focus on Medicaid-eligible
Valley Cities Behavioral Health	Lower & Upper Green River Valleys, Enumclaw Plateau, and a Rural Mobile Clinic	Yes	No	No	Yes	Anyone
Community Health Care	Enumclaw Plateau, based in Tacoma	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Anyone

In addition to these services, there are low-cost mental health services such as Give an Hour, Lahai Health for families, LightHeart Mental Health, Lutheran Counseling Network, Northwest Family Life, and Open Path Psychotherapy Collective.

Health Insurance

Within the healthcare system, Washington ranks #17 in affordability and #15 in healthcare.^{viii} King County has a high average of 94.1% of employed 19–64-year-olds with health insurance coverage.^{ix} In Washington, health insurance options for agricultural workers and most people are:

- Apple Health, or Medicaid
- Medicare, for those 65 years or older
- Employer-related health insurance, including association plans
- Individual health plans purchased through Washington's Marketplace, Healthplanfinder
- Small businesses can purchase directly from an insurance company or broker

Businesses can offer health insurance coverage to themselves and employees through plans purchased from an insurance agent or broker, an association plan, or health reimbursement agreements. They can qualify for tax credits if they provide health insurance to employees.

In interviews with King County farmers, they shared that health insurance provided through a spouse's employer or second jobs providing health insurance are the most familiar options farmers choose outside of Washington Healthplanfinder.

<i>"One of the main reasons farmers have secondary off-farm jobs, even when their farm business is profitable, is to retain healthcare benefits from the off-farm employment." - Anonymous Farm Organization Employee</i>	<i>"Most farmers that I know have other jobs, or their partners have other jobs, and that is how they get health insurance." - Anonymous Local Farmer</i>
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Health insurance costs and options for plans depend on a person's age, location, household income, household size, and tobacco use. Premiums (the monthly cost of health insurance) are based on the factors above, as well as the provider network and the benefit plan one chooses. 100% of the 2025 federal poverty guideline is \$15,650 for an individual and \$26,650 for a family of three. The Department of Health and Human Services annually reviews and updates the FPL guidelines based on the Census Bureau poverty thresholds, which account for inflation. There are no separate figures for states or cities besides Alaska and Hawaii.

Health insurance premium subsidies offered by the federal and state governments are based on the federal poverty level (FPL). Enhanced premium tax credits offered through the federal government's Affordable Care Act extension are set to expire at the end of 2025 and provide tax credits lowering the cost of premiums for individuals who purchased a plan in the marketplace with incomes over 400% of the FPL, or more than \$62,600 for an individual. Without extension, the premium tax credits will only be offered to those making below \$62,600. Of the 286,545 Washington residents enrolled in qualified health plans, insurance offered by Washington's Marketplace (Healthplanfinder), 216,375 enrollees were eligible for premium tax credits.^x Nearly all eligible for enhanced premium tax credits are over the age of 50.^{xi}

The Washington Office of the Insurance Commissioner approved up to a 38% premium rate increase for 2026 based on numerous factors impacting health insurance providers, such as higher medical costs, more people using health insurance, etc. These rates were actuarially justified and thus approved.^{xii} Overall, average premiums could rise by over 75%. This is projected to result in many people losing coverage due to a lack of affordability.^{xiii} The increase in premium costs, in addition to the loss of Medicaid coverage due to recent federal legislation, may encourage healthy people to opt out of paying high monthly costs, and people who previously had access to Medicaid may lose the ability to cover their health costs, resulting in even higher health insurance premiums.^{xiv}

Medicaid and Medicare

Farmers in King County are working into their 70s and 80s if they can; 40% of farmers are 65 years old or older.^{xv} These farmers are eligible for Medicare. There are more variables involved for working people over age 65, such as how long they have been employed and paying Medicare taxes, if they are on a spouse's plan, or if they purchased insurance through the Marketplace. Most people are eligible for Medicare at 65 if they are still working and will pay a premium (the monthly cost of health insurance) for medical care of \$185 or higher, depending on income.

Washington's Medicaid, Apple Health, uses a percentage of the FPL to determine gross income limits annually in April. These limits incrementally increase over the years, and those income limits are too low for many small business owners to qualify. The median household pre-tax income in King County is \$116,300.^{xvi} Farmers have been experiencing a decline in net gains, with negative farm income averaging a loss of \$4,196. Of all the agricultural production districts, the Lower Green Valley census tracts report the lowest median household income, averaging at \$82,100, or \$6,841 a month, pre-tax. This area is the most urban and more racially diverse than any other APD. None of the farm workers interviewed said they qualified for Apple Health or knew other farm workers who did, because the income limit is too low.

Adults

Adult Medical (N05):

Effective April 1, 2025	
Household Size	Monthly Income Limit
1	\$1,800
2	\$2,433
3	\$3,065
4	\$3,697
5	\$4,330
6	\$4,962

Figure 1. Apple Health Income Limits^{xvii}

State Subsidies

Some states offer state-funded subsidy programs for those who purchase health insurance through the Marketplace. Maryland, Massachusetts, and New Jersey provide subsidies to households with incomes between 400% and 600% of the federal poverty level. Maryland targets adults aged 18-37. Washington offers Cascade Care Savings, made possible by legislation in 2021 and launched in 2023. The premium assistance program is for individuals at 250% of the federal poverty level, or \$39,125.00 for an individual and \$52,875.00 for a household size of two. Washington Healthplanfinder offers Cascade Care plans that

include extra savings, in addition to federal premium tax credits. Self-employed agricultural workers can purchase health insurance on Washington Healthplanfinder. Based on average incomes, few would qualify for State savings.

In 2024, more than 100,000 customers benefited from Cascade Care plans. Their goals include reducing the number of uninsured in Washington, softening the impact for customers most affected by the potential loss of federal enhanced premium tax credits, and maximizing the effect of state investment into affordable individual market coverage, among others. The Cascade Care Savings program is available to all Washington State residents. Residents who are eligible for an Advanced Premium Tax Credit will get \$50.00 per month per member. Residents who are not eligible for Advanced Premium Tax Credits are eligible for \$250.00 per month per member. Other eligibility requirements include not being enrolled in Medicare or eligible for Apple Health and utilizing all advanced federal premium tax credits one is eligible for.

Cascade Care plans include Cascade and Cascade Select. They provide more preventative services before the deductible is met (deductibles are the cost an individual must pay for services, if they're not covered by insurance, before the insurance plan starts to pay). Cascade Care Savings has limited funding each year, which they meet early after enrollment. These savings only apply to Silver or Gold plans, all of which must have the "Cascade Care" logo and designation. American Indians or Alaska Natives can get these savings for any plan type.

In 2024, they shared policy options for feedback for the 2026 Plan Year. The updated policy change encourages customers to use other coverage opportunities to maximize state investment. The budget for the Cascade Care Savings Program has been about \$55 million each year. Assuming the average 21.4% premium rate increase approved by the Office of the Insurance Commissioner, along with the expiration of enhanced federal premium tax credits, they are expecting savings to not stretch as far in 2026.^{xviii}

Small Farm Owner Plan Options

90% of farmers in King County are small farm owners. They often do not hire workers and have other jobs, particularly to obtain health insurance. They are unable to obtain affordable health insurance for themselves or any potential employees as employers. According to data from 2022 and 2023, farmers' gross income was between 325% and 450% of the federal poverty level.

Individual Health Plans from Washington Healthplanfinder

In a 2024 review of health insurance coverage for farmers in the ten leading farm states, health insurance marketplaces and Medicaid were important sources of health insurance.^{xix} Nearly all qualified for advanced premium tax credits if enrolled in the marketplace, which are currently set to expire this year.

According to Salusion, a health insurance administration company, in 2025, a 30-year-old in King County pays an average of \$408 each month for a Bronze plan.^{xx} They found that prices increase as Washington residents age, with 50-year-olds in the State paying \$636 on average for a Bronze plan, or \$7632 annually. This doesn't include the cost of health appointments and services, which vary depending on the person's health and tend to increase as age does.

The percentages listed are estimates of the plan's share and your share of costs when you get covered services. The actual costs you pay vary by plan.

Plan Category:	Plan pays:	You pay:	Deductible is generally:
Bronze	60%	40%	High
Silver	70%	30%	Moderate
Silver with extra savings	73-96%	6-27% (Depends how much savings you qualify for)	Low
Gold	80%	20%	Low
Platinum	90%	10%	Low

Figure 2. Health plan categories^{xxi}

In 2023, 10% median household income for families went toward combined premium payments and deductibles, which does not include additional out-of-pocket costs.^{xxii} Housing costs accounted for 33% of total consumer expenditure, and 13% consumer expenditure went towards food. This puts the necessities of housing, food, and health insurance costs at around 56% of income.

Using the Washington Healthplanfinder, estimated premium costs depend on income, age, location, tobacco use, and sex. These are cost estimates and include the lowest and highest possible prices for each "individual" in 2026. For an agricultural worker, using characteristic information, some estimates for health insurance from October 2025 are below.

Characteristic Farmer Profiles	Male, age 57, \$70,000 income + female spouse, 55 years old, \$50,000 income; combined annual income of \$120,000		Female, age 45 \$50,000 annual income	
Agriculture Production District	Snoqualmie River (Duvall through Carnation)		Lower Green Valley (South Kent)	
Type of Insurance Plan	Gold plan	Bronze plan	Gold plan	Bronze plan
Premium (monthly cost)	\$2,797.89	\$1308.79	\$608.69	\$147.95
Individual Deductible	\$500	\$6,000	\$500	\$6,000
Primary Care Visit Cost	\$10	\$40	\$10	\$40
Generic Drug Cost	\$3	\$32	\$3	\$32
Federal Tax Credits	No	No	\$257/month	\$257/month
Minimum Annual Premium Cost	\$37,055	\$22,086	\$8,655	\$4,136

% of income	31%	18.4%	17.3%	8.2%
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Health insurance is expected to keep climbing. Health care costs for farmers purchasing from the marketplace will require at least 10% of their income, especially with additional services and visits not covered by insurance. Health insurance in the marketplace is the last option for many farmers. For those without a spouse or enough time to take another job, these costs are formidable.

Small farm owners can obtain health insurance

- From a spouse’s employer-provided health insurance plan, which often covers some of the cost
- Through Washington Healthplanfinder, with minimal cost savings
- Through Medicare if they are 65 years or older

Of these three options, purchasing directly in the marketplace is the most common source of health insurance for farmers and can cost 30% or more of their income.

Large Farm Employer Plan Options

10% or 152 farms in King County are over 50 acres. 90 farms sold \$100,000 or more in 2022. For those with large operations, employer-provided health insurance is a benefit to offer workers. Providing insurance may qualify the business for tax credits and has been seen to increase productivity and net profits on California farms, after accounting for the cost of offering insurance.^{xxiii} We do not have data on King County farm employers providing health insurance, so this is an overview of the options available to them.

Association Plans

The Washington Farm Bureau Healthcare, established in 2004, is an association plan for farms with two or more full-time employees. Multiple employer welfare arrangement plans, or association health plans, are typically issued by an insurer to an independent trust established by professional groups or trade associations for the benefit of their employees. These are plans that allow small employers to join to buy coverage like large employers can and often do, to take advantage of cost savings. The keyword being "employer" – whereas small farm working owners often do not employ anyone or provide insurance benefits to their few employees. Association health plans are fully insured and backed by licensed insurance companies, thus subject to review and oversight by the state insurance commissioners and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Insurance providers set the requirement that farms in the Washington Farm Bureau Healthcare plan have two or more employees working at least 20 hours a week, which is common for fully insured association health plans. Farms must become Farm Bureau members to obtain health insurance through the Farm Bureau’s association plan but can receive a quote if they are not members.

Other states' Farm Bureaus have collaborated, mostly in the South and Midwest, to move legislation through their state governments to "Exclude certain agricultural entities from insurance regulations" and offer health plans in recent years. These health plans are exempt from regulation and not subject to the Affordable Care Act guidelines, containing few consumer protections. Often, they exclude individuals with pre-existing conditions and delay maternity care.^{xxiv} The Tennessee Farm Bureau Health Plans company provides health plans to many of the other states' Farm Bureaus through its State Alliance. Established in 1947, Tennessee is the oldest farm bureau health plan option, claiming a 98% retention rate.

Health Insurance Reimbursements

Farm businesses with any number of employees can utilize tax-exempt health insurance reimbursements for employees. The Individual Coverage Health Reimbursement Agreement and Qualified Small Employer Health Reimbursement Agreement are options for employers to provide healthcare reimbursements to employees rather than manage a group insurance plan. Many companies exist to help employers set up and understand these health insurance reimbursement options. These options can also offer more flexibility for staff to choose their own plans in the Marketplace. These are tax-free reimbursements for both the employer and employee, and employees may qualify for additional state or federal subsidies depending on income.

Alternatives

Direct Primary Care Model

Direct health care practices, boutiques, or concierge medicine are medical providers that charge a monthly fee for unlimited access to doctors for primary care, rather than taking insurance, Medicaid, or Medicare. They must be registered with the Washington State Office of the Insurance Commissioner. They become one's primary care provider and do not count as required coverage under the Affordable Care Act. They also do not cover hospital visits, prescription drugs, or dental. These practices still recommend obtaining health insurance, such as a high-deductible plan to cover hospitals, emergencies, etc. Some monthly fee examples for these direct services, provided by Capitol Hill Medical in Seattle, are \$95 or \$99 per month, depending on the doctor. They can provide care for chronic conditions and work with the patient to determine a care plan. If an agricultural worker has many health issues, this option is not ideal since it requires two monthly payments for healthcare. Farm workers living in cities may find this a good offer for regular medical care, as there are more providers in more populated areas.

Trade Farm Products for Alternative Medicine Services

While costs for health insurance and health care within the insurance system are increasing, some health services are preventative and low-cost compared to disease management. A farm hub for BIPOC farmers hosted a bodywork session for cupping and massage therapy. In shared spaces with bodywork practitioners, bartering and low-cost care opportunities can arise. Farmers can access acupuncture, massage therapy, cupping, nutrition, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and other safe and proven options to improve health and prevent chronic conditions. These services range from \$50 to \$150 an hour without insurance and are included in some insurance plans. They are often implemented to have a direct impact on the body.

While not ideal, farmers with good health can be informed about strategies to combine low-cost health insurance for unexpected emergencies or prescriptions, direct primary care services for regular, consistent medical support, and/or bodywork that alleviates sore muscles, tired limbs, and uses food as medicine.

Gaps & Barriers: Affordability, Immigration Status, and Schedules

Current options detailed above leave farmers with limited, expensive healthcare choices. Interviews with King County farmers show that their biggest healthcare challenge is affordability. Many cannot afford to provide health coverage for their workers or even themselves, working second, off-farm jobs to get insurance. Small farm owners working for themselves purchase health insurance through Washington Healthplanfinder if they have no other options. If they have a spouse, they are likely to join their spouse's employer-provided health insurance plan. Another issue small business owners face with the marketplace is estimating annual income and paying the difference in costs during tax season.

Government-provided subsidies are based on the federal poverty limit, but agricultural workers often fall between 3 and 4.5 times the federal threshold. This creates a large gap for those who earn too much to qualify for subsidies yet still cannot afford health insurance due to the high cost of living. This is a consistent issue in King County where median incomes are relatively high and living expenses, especially rent, are even higher. Within the health insurance system, the State and County have done great work to reach those most at risk of losing insurance. However, these efforts still face limitations as insurers often determine costs that are most beneficial to shareholders.^{xxv}

In addition to costs, if any agricultural workers are immigrants, their access to healthcare is being targeted by the federal administration by limiting free or low-cost health insurance to immigrants.^{xxvi} Despite these changes in the federal government, state policies allow immigrants to utilize Apple Health and receive premium savings, and many local nonprofits and health clinics do not ask about immigration status. However, due to federal law enforcement tactics, many immigrants are choosing to stay close to home and with trusted individuals. For these workers, trust is key. Mobile health clinics with unfamiliar

staff and impersonal settings are not the best option for immigrants and farmers of color.

Key Takeaways

- Affordability is the biggest barrier to healthcare
- Income fluctuations create challenges when purchasing on the marketplace
- Immigrant agricultural workers face language and cultural competency barriers, along with federal targeting that makes obtaining healthcare more difficult.
- Demanding schedules leave little time for healthcare.

Farmers also shared stories of working through injuries, wrapping cuts, drinking water, and taking brief moments to readjust after physical injuries, just to stay on schedule. With higher temperatures in the summer, they're avoiding midday work and staying later to accomplish a task or avoid traffic. Their demanding schedules, especially during peak growing seasons, leave little time for healthcare.

Overall, the landscape for health insurance is limited and largely offered as a benefit by employers, making alternative options more costly in comparison. For small farm owners and agricultural workers, healthcare is an extreme cost burden. Demanding schedules and cultural or language barriers make it even harder for farm workers to get the care they need.

Opportunities & Recommendations

Outside of finding insurance through health insurance companies, there are some opportunities in the healthcare industry that farmers could benefit from.

Cooperatives

Healthcare Cooperatives are owned and operated by the patients they insure and are very rare. There was a surge in co-ops after the Affordable Care Act, and now only three remain. Their errors were premiums that were too low, benefits that covered more than they could consistently pay, and the risk adjustment payments required by the federal government in 2016.^{xxvii} A difficult aspect that many of the failing co-ops opted to bypass was creating their own network of providers. Instead, many of the co-ops rented networks from other insurers. All existing co-ops created their own provider networks.

Health cooperatives do not exist in the state of Washington and struggle to keep up with the rising health costs, though when offered, they charge lower premiums. Mountain Health Co-op serves Idaho and Montana and provides some of the most affordable rates in those states.^{xxviii} Yet they were serving just over 9,000 enrollees in Wyoming and recently ended coverage due to the planned ending of the enhanced premium tax credits this year.^{xxix}

With the support of dedicated individuals advocating for King County farmers, co-ops could be an option for them. There could be potential for the closest existing healthcare co-op, Mountain Health CO-OP, to extend services to Washington residents. They currently serve about 38,500 people. Noting their recent exit from Wyoming, this may be a long-term and complicated process to find cost-effective providers in the state. Their premiums are also increasing by double digits to accommodate expected higher healthcare costs.

Direct Primary Care Expansion

Direct primary care services with a high-deductible insurance plan are another strategy that may be more realistic for younger adults who do not live on the farm and are closer to these services. Direct health care practices are not common throughout King County or the State. Yet advocating and offering incentives to rural practices to offer direct primary care services would give farmers more affordable healthcare options.

Healthcare for Immigrants

Regarding barriers relating to immigration status or cultural and language familiarity, healthcare facilities and providers already provide continuous support to ensure healthcare for everyone. Increasing this knowledge and awareness, specifically the "Health Care Options for Immigrants" information and policy updates from Washington's Healthplanfinder, would help make immigrants feel welcome. Seattle and many cities throughout King County offer interpreters and healthcare providers of various backgrounds. The area may have some of the most culturally competent healthcare providers in the state. Insurance customer service can help plan holders identify a provider by language, gender, location, and specialty. Snoqualmie Valley Hospital is expanding its physical space and offering more services for rural residents. Outreach staff are interested in collaborating with and providing service to farmers, with the understanding that trusted farm partners and staff have a role in extending trust.

To increase farmers' healthcare access with the possibilities and limitations that exist, these opportunities are realistic suggestions. The following recommendations are specific to the King County Council in providing expanded support to agriculture workers. Considering the top health issues diagnosed in agricultural workers and cost as the largest barrier, these are the recommendations.

Agricultural Workers' Barriers to Healthcare	Recommendation
Targeting high stress & the stigma of receiving mental health support	Allocate funds to farm organizations to create a detailed and meaningful mental health awareness campaign for King County agricultural workers, including in-person events at farms and farm organizations to foster connection and share data on farmers' mental health with available resources to help.
Available time off & Scheduling	Provide funding to farm organizations to coordinate and market mobile health clinics to farmers, including scheduling a variety of mobile clinics in familiar, easily accessible locations, especially during the off-season.

Costs	<p>Establish a healthcare fund for farmers.</p> <p>Advocate for additional state premium subsidies specifically for agricultural workers and extended federal tax credits.</p>
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1. Allocate funds for farm organizations to create a detailed and meaningful mental health awareness campaign for King County agricultural workers, including in-person events at farms and farm organizations to foster connection and share data on farmers' mental health with available resources to help.

Farm organizations in King County, funded by the County, can act as central organizers to reach farmers in all five agricultural production districts. The Pacific Northwest Agricultural Safety and Health Center (PNASH) is a University of Washington-affiliated center and collaborator of The Western Regional Agricultural Stress Program (WRASP). WRASP has offered small grants since 2021, targeting professional development, outreach, and education, and translation specific to stress management. With more awareness of the stressors and ideal interventions for farmers, farm organizations can ask for targeted funds from WRASP, as well as other health-focused programs, to continue offering mental health support and stress prevention and management techniques for farmers. While mental health concerns and topics are much more common in 2025, some people may still be uncomfortable discussing mental health. Continued communication in farm and agricultural spaces to share about the high stress and its impact on people can help reduce any shame or fear around the topic. Working with the Western Regional Agricultural Stress Assistance Program, data regarding the state and county can be shared and monitored to reduce stress levels in farmers and potentially reduce physical stress-related symptoms.

2. Provide funding to farm organizations to take the lead on coordinating and marketing mobile health clinics to farmers, including scheduling a variety of mobile clinics in familiar and easily accessible locations for farmers, especially during the off-season.

Farm organizations that have trusted relationships with agricultural workers can receive funding and support to establish the connection and coordination for mobile health services to be offered to small farm owners and agricultural workers in King County. In partnership with SnoValleyTilth, Northwest Ag Business Center, International Rescue Committee, Tilth Alliance, or Viva Farms, mobile clinics could be offered semi-regularly in the less busy months throughout King County, allowing farmers to access basic preventative healthcare when their schedules allow, rather than finding time in their busy schedules. They are largely barrier-free and can be requested at specific locations, and have scheduled site visits. This coordination could allow for up to 3000 farmers and farm organization staff to receive monitoring for blood pressure, mental health, and glucose levels. With continued interactions, these organizations strengthen and build upon their networks and offer farmers access to healthcare professionals when they may not otherwise take the time to seek care.

3. Establish a healthcare fund for farmers.

Costs are going to increase in Washington. The most immediate support for farmers in accessing healthcare and easing financial worries is establishing and maintaining a healthcare fund. Most counties provide funding to health care facilities to extend services to specific populations. While this could be a valid option for rural clinics and country doctors, it would be much easier to offer funds directly to self-

employed farmers or agricultural workers in general. Some foundations make direct payments to health insurance providers, and if unable, provide reimbursements to the recipient of funds. Considering the average costs of premiums and out-of-pocket payments for employer-based health insurance, 3.9% of household income could be the expected costs for agricultural workers to pay for healthcare.^{xxx} Farmers who pay more than 3.9% of their income towards healthcare could apply for funds. Tiered funds could allow those with the highest premium payments to receive more support, while those paying slightly more than 3.9% receive less funding.

The Community Alliance with Family Farmers administers the California Farmer Relief Fund. Established in 2020, they provide direct financial support to small-scale family farmers impacted by rising costs. They have provided over \$1.2 million to small farmers in partnership with over 25 grassroots organizations. King County would be on a much smaller scale, making logistics easier and requiring fewer funds. HealthierHere, a nonprofit dedicated to advancing health equity in King County, collaborating with a farm organization, could be a realistic partner to communicate and distribute funds.

4. Advocate for additional state premium subsidies specifically for farmers and farm workers and enhanced federal tax credits.

Advocating additional state premium tax credits specifically for farmers and farm workers would have a huge impact on the agriculture industry. By offering premium tax credits specifically to farmers, you are ensuring they have healthcare and the support needed to keep farming. Additionally, in the long term, advocating for federal enhanced premium tax credits to reach those over 400% FPL, rather than under. To make healthcare affordable to farmers and farm workers, tackling the costs of health insurance must remain a priority, especially as health insurance companies continue to prioritize profits.

Conclusion

Many people work to make healthcare more affordable, and the evidence is clear. King County has around 315 hospitals and clinics. They offer sliding fee scales, insurance assistance, payment plans, and free or low-cost mobile clinics. The Washington Farm Bureau addressed the problem of healthcare for farmers in 2004, establishing the association plan for health insurance for farm employers. Federal premium tax credits were extended in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cascade Care Savings launched in 2023 to ensure people in the State can keep their health insurance. Dedicated individuals and groups have increased accessibility to healthcare. Yet there are still gaps and barriers in the healthcare system.

In 2022, nearly 8 out of 10 farms had net losses in King County. Compared to 2017, farmers are doing worse. Land costs are increasing, food costs are increasing, and healthcare costs are increasing. Farmers provide a necessity for all people. King County residents value fresh, local produce, and some rely on the organic produce provided by King County farms to hunger relief organizations to access whole foods. To uplift these vital workers and continue providing King County residents with access to fresh food, agricultural workers need affordable healthcare.

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