



Chapter One: Introduction

The Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA) was adopted by the Washington State Legislature in 1990. The GMA provides for citizens, communities, local governments, and the private sector to cooperate and coordinate in comprehensive land-use planning. The GMA requires county and local governments to adopt development regulations that protect critical areas.

In 2011, the Legislature amended the GMA with the intent to protect and enhance critical areas in areas where agricultural activities are conducted, while maintaining and improving the long-term viability of agriculture. This amendment established the Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP), a new, non-regulatory, and incentive-based approach that balances the protection of critical areas on agricultural lands while promoting agricultural viability. VSP presents a unique opportunity to address an important environmental topic that has been a source of controversy in recent decades—how to protect and restore critical areas on agricultural lands while keeping agriculture economically viable.

1.1 Frequently Asked Questions



What is a Voluntary Stewardship Program?

VSP is a new, non-regulatory, and incentive-based approach that balances the protection of critical areas on agricultural lands while promoting agricultural viability.

VSP is allowed under the GMA as

an alternative to traditional approaches to critical areas protection, such as “no touch” buffers. Columbia County is one of 28 counties that has “opted in” to VSP and received funding to develop a VSP work plan.

What is meant by “Voluntary Participation” in VSP?

VSP is voluntary; agricultural landowners and operators (commercial and noncommercial) are not required to participate. Agricultural producers who choose to participate are free to withdraw at any time without penalty (Revised Code of Washington [RCW] 36.70A.760). Separate from VSP, landowners are expected to comply with any new or existing contractual agreements under government or other programs for which they have obligated themselves for implementing a practice.

Agricultural producers who do not formally participate in VSP are not required to take actions to protect critical areas. The Columbia County VSP Work Plan (Work Plan) can remain viable at the County level, even without full landowner participation, if the County is meeting protection goals and benchmarks (see Chapter 5). However, agricultural producers are encouraged to avoid impacts to critical areas, and other applicable laws and regulations still apply (such as federal wetland protections and state hydraulic project approvals).

What is a “Farm Stewardship Plan?”

A Farm Stewardship Plan is an implementation tool developed by the Columbia VSP Work Group (Work Group) to help technical leads and agricultural producers identify the potential presence of critical areas on a farm and develop a plan to protect critical areas on a farm, based on voluntary participation. A Farm Stewardship Plan Checklist is included as Attachment A to help facilitate the development of Farm Stewardship Plans by identifying examples of practices and programs that further the goals and benchmarks of this Work Plan.

Conservation practices included in a Farm Stewardship Plan do not necessarily need to meet Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) or other government-based standards for practices, unless enrolled in a specific agency

program or agreement. Farm Stewardship Plans should:

- Identify the potential presence of critical areas
- Identify existing practices that may protect critical areas
- Identify additional opportunities to protect critical areas
- Identify additional opportunities to enhance critical areas

Additionally, Farm Stewardship Plans will help assist the Work Group report progress on the Work Plan goals and benchmarks for VSP participation and critical areas protection.

What is meant by “Baseline Conditions?”

The effective date of the VSP legislation is July 22, 2011. Under the law, this is the date that identifies the baseline for protecting critical areas functions and maintaining agricultural viability. Under VSP legislation:

- Implementation of this Work Plan must prevent further degradation of critical areas functions as they existed on July 22, 2011, while maintaining agricultural viability. Goals for enhancement of critical areas functions must also be identified.
- Failure to meet the goals and benchmarks for critical area functions will represent failure of the Work Plan and trigger a regulatory approach to critical areas protection under the GMA.

What are the Critical Areas we are concerned with?

There are five critical areas: Wetlands, Geologically Hazardous Areas, Frequently Flooded Areas, Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas and Priority Habitats. Definitions and a fuller explanation of these are provided in Chapter Two. Under VSP, critical areas on lands where agricultural activities are conducted are managed under this voluntary program. Lands used for non-agricultural purposes are regulated under the County’s Critical Areas Ordinance.

What does it mean to “Protect and Enhance Critical Areas?”

VSPs require creation of measurable benchmarks that are designed to protect and enhance critical area functions and values (e.g., shade, cover, or water flow into a wetland) through voluntary actions by agricultural producers while maintaining agricultural viability. Per VSP definitions:

- Protection requires prevention of the degradation of functions and values of baseline conditions (conditions existing as of July 22, 2011, when VSP legislation was passed).
- Enhancement means to improve the processes, structure, and functions of baseline conditions for ecosystems and habitats associated with critical areas (RCW 36.70A.703).

What does it mean to “Maintain Agricultural Viability?”

To receive approval, the Work Plan must protect critical areas in a way that maintains agricultural viability (RCW 36.70A.725). Activities or methods that protect critical areas must also be neutral to or benefit farm operations, such as

reducing input costs or reducing soil erosion. Further, the VSP will not require an agricultural producer to discontinue agricultural activities that legally existed before July 22, 2011 (RCW 36.70A.702). Agricultural viability is discussed further in Chapter 3.

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



Agriculture is widely recognized as a pillar of the Washington State and Columbia County economies. The VSP law is explicit that critical areas are to be protected while, “maintaining and improving the long-term viability of agriculture” (RCW 36.70A.700). Both objectives, critical areas protection and maintaining agricultural viability, have to be met in our Work Plan.

Agricultural viability in the County includes regional and individual farm elements. These are defined, respectively, as the region’s ability to sustain agricultural production over time and an individual farm’s ability to meet financial obligations and make a profit.

Agricultural viability can be defined as the ability of a farmer or group of farmers to:

- Productively farm on a given piece of land or in a specific area
- Maintain an economically viable farm business
- Keep the land in agricultural use for the long-term, and
- Steward the land so it will remain productive into the future

At the regional level, agricultural viability is the support system that helps individual farms to succeed. This system also helps to mitigate against potential threats and supports local producers in their operations and their ability to take advantage of business opportunities.

1.2 Background and Purpose

In 2012 the Board of County Commissioners of Columbia County (County) passed a resolution to “opt-into” the VSP.

The commission came to the following conclusions:

- Farming is vital to the economy of the County.
- The County watersheds provide critical and economically important functions that may be impacted by farming.
- Biological diversity within the County watersheds is important to water and habitat quality and viability.



1.3 Work Plan Elements

The Work Plan is intended to fulfill the state requirements outlined under the RCW 36.70A.720(1), which includes several elements. These elements are addressed in the following major components of this Work Plan:

- Evaluate existing information and resource conditions.
- Establish protection and enhancement goals and measurable benchmarks for critical areas while maintaining agricultural viability.

- Establish participation goals by agricultural producers to meet measurable benchmarks.
- Provide a framework for monitoring and reporting.
- Facilitate landowner participation and outreach.

1.4 Work Plan Goals

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

Producer participation is a key component of Work Plan implementation and program success. Failure of the Work Plan in meeting production goals will trigger a regulatory approach to protecting critical areas under the Growth Management Act, such as applying buffers and setbacks along streams or wetlands. Additionally, the regulatory approach for protecting critical areas on agricultural lands would not have the equally important VSP goal of maintaining and enhancing agricultural viability. Neither would it necessarily encourage outreach or technical assistance for agricultural operators. Therefore, producer participation will be encouraged as a central component of the Work Plan, through new and continued implementation of stewardship strategies and practices, to help ensure the success of VSP and protect agricultural viability.

1.5 Work Plan Organization

This Work Plan, including its appendices, contains detailed information intended to fulfill the state requirements outlined under the Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 36.70A.720(1)(a through l), which requires Work Plans to include critical area protection and enhancement goals with measurable benchmarks, and an implementation, reporting and tracking framework. Below is a summary description of the Work Plan organization.

Columbia County VSP Work Plan Organization

- **Section 1 – Introduction:** Background on VSP Legislation and how it applies to the County.
- **Section 2 – Columbia County Regional Setting:** Overview of County conditions, including descriptions of critical areas.
- **Section 3 – Baseline & Existing Conditions:** Description of county-wide critical areas presence and functions and values as of 2011.

- **Section 4 – Protection and Enhancement Strategies:** Description of currently implemented stewardship practices that protect and enhance critical areas functions and values.
- **Section 5 – Goals, Benchmarks & Adaptive Management:** Description of VSP goals for critical area protection and enhancements, measurable benchmarks, and indicators and methods for adaptive management.
- **Section 6 – Implementation:** Detailed plan outlining implementation of VSP actions by the VSP Coordinator and Work Group.
- **Appendices** – Additional detailed information referenced by the above sections.

1.6 Work Plan Development – Roles and Responsibilities

RCW 36.70A.705 identifies roles and responsibilities for state agencies, counties, and VSP work groups. The table below provides a summary of these roles and responsibilities, adapted to the Work Plan development process, and including participation by producers, conservation districts (CDs), local and state agencies, and others. The Work Group developed this Work Plan. Implementation roles and responsibilities are further described in Chapter 6.

State - Approval and Administration	
Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC)	Administers VSP statewide; approves/rejects locally developed work plans
VSP Technical Panel ¹	Provide technical reviews of draft work plans; makes recommendations on whether to approve or reject the work plan
VSP Statewide Advisory Com. ²	Works with the WSCC to revise rejected draft work plans
Local - Administration and Work Plan Development	
Columbia County	Administers VSP funding/grant for work plan develop't
Columbia VSP Work Group	Develops and proposes work plan for approval by WSCC
Conservation District	Provides technical info to support work plan development
Other Technical Providers	Provides technical input during work plan development
Agricultural Producers - Outreach Focus	
Landowners/Operators/Others	Provide input to the draft work plan

Notes:

1. The VSP Technical Panel members include representatives from Washington State Departments of Ecology, Agriculture, Fish & Wildlife and the WSCC.
2. Committee includes two representatives each from environmental interests, agriculture, and counties; two tribal representatives are also invited to participate.