

Project Information Sheet

Applicant: *Thurston Conservation District*

Strategic Initiative: Habitat protection and restoration

Priority Near-Term Action: *Bringing Together Farms and Fish for Water Quality Restoration and Habitat Protection*

PSP Strategic Initiative Sub-Strategies: A2, A2.2, A5.3, A5.4, A6.1, C2.1, C2.2, C2.3, C2.4, C2.5, C3.1, C3.2, D5.2, D5.3, D6.1, D6.2

Ecosystem threat summary:

Farmers and fish often find themselves at odds, while the larger enemy of water quality, salmon habitat, and shellfish – development – degrades the watershed. This grant seeks to unite the interests of fish, functioning natural stream processes, and farms in a manner that is advantageous for all. Agricultural lands run adjacent to fish-bearing streams throughout Puget Sound. In Thurston County, for instance, 50% of working lands in Thurston County occur adjacent to salmon-bearing rivers and streams. Managed properly, these lands can provide benefits to the water quality and fish. However, farmland in Thurston County is at serious risk of conversion to other uses. With the median age of farmers in the area at 57 years old, an additional 170,000 people expected to reside in Thurston County by 2040, and 75% of the farmland within three miles of an urban growth boundary - development pressure on these critical lands is tremendous. Strategies are needed to ensure the continued viability of local agricultural activities while providing support and guidance on management techniques that work to protect and enhance water quality.

Project Description:

Working across the entire county and utilizing an approach that can be applied throughout Puget Sound, this proposal employs change at a landscape level. Despite the risks facing farmland and local farmers, Thurston County has a significant farmland base and local farm economy, with 68,247 acres of farmland represented by 3,338 parcels and 1,518 ownerships (Fisher and Mitchell, 2009). Although the higher quality soils and larger tracts of farmland tend to be in the southern and eastern part of the county, farmland is dispersed throughout Thurston County on a variety of soil types. With a broad coalition of partners, this project will continue the effort to identify and match farmers owning fallow land with new farmers ready to turn dirt (Thurston Farmlink) as well as providing training and technical assistance to foster stewardship of our water resources.

The partnership to date has yielded the need for work to inform the potential ecological production based on the natural attributes of the landscape, matched with natural resource concerns. Building upon both Department of Ecology's and Thurston County's Watershed Characterizations, mapping of natural physical attributes that are matched with soil type, micro-climates, etc. to graphically describe the diversity of agricultural production available to producers. This Ecological Site Asset mapping will add to the proper matching of farmers in need of land with farmers wanting to lease property and open

the door to the diversity of alternative and higher value crops that may help producers retain their land and keep their operation economically viable. Options to keep that farmland in production for future generations, protected from development with a conservation easement, while infusing the landowner and local economy with dollars and guidance to keep the riparian areas productive, bridges the chasm between fish and farms. An example of how this blend might play out on the landscape could be: install a fence and 100' buffer – the first 50' is native vegetation, the next 25' is a blend of natives and fruit and nut trees, and the final 25' consists of fruit and nut trees. This blend allows for shade, natural wood recruitment, forage and refugia generation onsite, while also allowing the landowner to retain some of the economic and productive potential of their property.

To match existing landowners with those looking to begin or expand their operations, an interactive public database will be built upon that identifies accessible farmland, farmers ready to plant, and existing farmers desiring to expand. This work will generate 15 matches. Additionally, this grant will provide award-winning farm marketing / business training, workshops and farm tours to new and existing farmers. In total, this project will hold eight workshops per year (24 total) in conjunction with three on-farm tours (nine total). Collaboration with project and community partners will provide outreach to the producers within the community. Producers will also receive technical assistance to facilitate resource stewardship and support for implementing productive riparian buffers. These efforts will be focused on helping landowners and producers implement management techniques that protect and enhance water quality. In all, a minimum of 200 participants over three years will improve their knowledge of agricultural practices, business management and access to land for production. These will be in addition to the restoration / conservation efforts on private properties in priority areas.

The fruits of this project and partnership extend beyond these individuals to the entire community in the form of reduced stormwater runoff, improved health of shellfish beds, stream process restoration, carbon sequestration, local secure food, and rural economic development. The project stakeholder group is also working with Thurston County and Thurston Regional Planning Council on the Science to Local Policy grant that seeks to focus development in certain watersheds while protecting others. Many additional stakeholders are giving input into this discussion. Concentrating growth in this manner will increase urban density and allow for the protection of undeveloped rural lands.

Major Tasks:

Task 1: Project Administration/Management;

Task 2: Farmland Preservation (Farmlink database, 15 farmer to landowner matches);

Task 3: Ecological GIS Mapping (interactive map of soils and resources);

Task 4: Riparian/Perennial Agriculture Restoration Implementation (buffer planting, project development and implementation);

Task 5: Outreach and Training (24 workshops, nine on-farm tours, one expert speaker series, etc.).

Budget:

Task 1: \$3,500;

Task 2: \$90,000 (TCD staff - \$60,000; Capitol Land Trust - \$20,000; South of the Sound Community Farmland Trust - \$10,000);

Task 3: \$13,000;

Task 4: \$153,500 (South Puget Sound Salmon Enhancement Group - \$30,000; on-the-ground implementation - \$83,500; Jim Freed - \$5,000; Michael Dolan - \$5,000; riparian and conservation planning - \$30,000);

Task 5: \$90,000 (Enterprise for Equity - \$15,000; TCD staff - \$75,000).

Total Budget - **\$350,000**

Project Schedule:

Three years from grant agreement (if necessary, this could be modified to a two-year program; 67 producers receiving on-farm training/year; eight workshops/year; three farm tours/year; annual marketing and business training (June); implementation throughout.

Project Partnerships and Roles:

Task 1: The TCD staff – vouchering and reporting.

Task 2: TCD staff – farmer/producer connections; Capitol Land Trust – conservation easement negotiations; South of the Sound Community Farmland Trust – conservation easement negotiations.

Task 3: TCD staff – GIS work with assistance from Thurston Regional Planning Council, Thurston County and Squaxin Island Tribe.

Task 4: TCD staff – riparian and conservation planning, landowner outreach; Michael Dolan, owner of Burnt Ridge Nursery - consultation; Jim Freed, WSU Natural Resources Extension Professor – consultation; and South Puget Sound Salmon Enhancement Group – riparian and perennial agriculture restoration project development and implementation.

Task 5: Enterprise for Equity in partnership with WSU Thurston County Extension - marketing and business training.