

San Juan County
Voluntary Stewardship Program
Biennial Report, 2021 – 2023



SAN JUAN ISLANDS



CONSERVATION
D I S T R I C T
SAN JUAN COUNTY, WASHINGTON

by the San Juan Islands Conservation District, on behalf of
the San Juan County Voluntary Stewardship Program Work Group
www.sanjuanislandscd.org

Summary

This biennial report was written by the San Juan Islands Conservation District (SJICD) on behalf of the San Juan County Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) Work Group. SJICD serves as the Technical Service Provider responsible for the implementation of the San Juan County VSP Work Plan (Work Plan). This is the third biennial report submitted to date since the Work Plan was formally adopted by the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC). The purpose of the report is to provide the status of plans and accomplishments to the county and to the WSCC. It is prepared in compliance with WSCC *Policy Advisory #05-18: Approved VSP Work Plan Implementation Reporting Requirements and Procedures* and includes a summary of how plan implementation is affecting the following:

1. The protection and enhancement of critical areas within the area where agricultural activities are conducted;
2. The maintenance and improvement of the long-term viability of agriculture;
3. Reducing the conversion of farmland to other uses;
4. The maximization of the use of voluntary incentive programs to encourage good riparian and ecosystem stewardship as an alternative to historic approaches used to protect critical areas;
5. The leveraging of existing resources by relying upon existing work and plans in counties and local watersheds, as well as existing state and federal programs to the maximum extent practicable to achieve program goals;
6. Ongoing efforts to encourage and foster a spirit of cooperation and partnership among county, tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests to better assure the program success;
7. Ongoing efforts to improve compliance with other laws designed to protect water quality and fish habitat; and
8. A description of efforts showing how relying upon voluntary stewardship practices as the primary method of protecting critical areas does not require the cessation of agricultural activities.

This report is different from the San Juan County VSP Five-Year Report, submitted in December 2020, that specifically reported on progress toward the protection and enhancement goals and benchmarks in the Work Plan. The Work Group used the five-year reporting process as an opportunity to reflect on and refine the Work Plan, and as a result, adopt an Adaptive Management Plan (AMP) in May of 2021. The AMP clarified the goals, benchmarks, and metrics used to monitor and report on VSP progress, and guided programmatic changes to meet the goals of protecting and enhancing critical areas on farmland while maintaining agricultural viability in San Juan County. In contrast, this biennial report summarizes accomplishments over the last two years of Work Plan implementation, including recent changes resulting from the AMP and building upon the previous Biennial Report of 2021. Reporting is not restricted to the goals and benchmarks of the Work Plan, but rather the eight elements listed above from Policy Advisory #05-18.

More information about San Juan County's Voluntary Stewardship Program and key documents referenced above can be found online at www.sanjuanislandscd.org/voluntary-stewardship-program.

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1. Progress on the protection and enhancement of critical areas within the area where agricultural activities are conducted

San Juan County achieves its VSP protection and enhancement goals through the development of Individual Stewardship Plans (ISPs), which recommend Best Management Practices (BMPs) to agricultural producers, and the subsequent implementation of these recommended BMPs. BMP implementation is often financed through cost share assistance programs provided by the district.

Benchmarks and metrics for achieving protection and enhancement goals are defined in the San Juan County Adaptive Management Plan (2021).

Progress towards achieving protection and enhancement benchmarks is measured through monitoring, which is separated into two categories across each of the five critical areas:

1. Monitoring of “implementation” metrics, whose purpose is to track how many instances and amounts of BMPs have been implemented where and whether they are still in operation; and
2. Monitoring of “effectiveness” metrics, whose purpose is to determine how BMPs are affecting critical area functions and values.

Progress Related to Implementation Monitoring Metrics

SJICD completed 22 ISPs for agricultural producers throughout this biennium, from July 2021 through June 2023. Over 220 BMPs were prescribed in these ISPs. Producers often work to implement the recommendations in their plans over many years. One of the methods SJICD uses to track BMPs implemented is the District cost share program. During the span of this reporting period, seven cost share projects were implemented, with nine BMPs installed. Technical assistance, farm plans, and cost share was provided for over 1400 acres of farmland. Total cost share dollars provided to support BMP installations on agricultural lands was \$131,000.

The BMPs implemented by agricultural producers through District-assisted cost share in the San Juan Islands over the past two years have focused on six unique NRCS practices. These practices and the degrees to which they have been put into place this biennium include the following:

Table 1: Amount of BMPs Installed through Cost Share 2021-2023

NRCS Practice	Amount
Fence (382)	8000 feet
Subsurface Drain (606)	2342 feet
Heavy Use Area Protection (561)	0.1 acres
Stream Crossing (578)	1 unit
Livestock Pipeline (561)	1500 feet
Pumping Plant (533)	1 unit

Because the whole of San Juan County exists in a Critical Aquifer Recharge Area (CARA), all properties are considered to be in a critical area. For the extent to which each critical area intersects with agriculture, see Appendix 1. Cost share projects directly impacted the following critical areas:

Table 2: Cost Share BMPs and Critical Area Intersects 2021-2023

Practice	Wetlands	Fish & Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas	Geologically Hazardous Areas	Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas	Frequently Flooded Areas
Project 1					
Livestock Pipeline	X	X		X	X
Pumping Plant	X	X		X	X
Heavy Use Area Protection	X	X		X	X
Project 2					
Fence					X
Subsurface Drain					X
Project 3					
Fence		X			
Project 4					
Stream Crossing		X			
Project 5					
Subsurface Drain					X
Project 6					
Fence	X				
Project 7					
Livestock Pipeline	X	X		X	X
Total	5	6	0	4	7

In addition to cost share completion data, BMP implementation is tracked through a biennial BMP Implementation Survey, which asks farmers to self-report on the BMPs they have implemented before and after 2011 (the year designated as a baseline for VSP).

Figure 1: BMP Implementation Survey Outreach Postcard



Fifty farmers completed the 2022 BMP Implementation Survey, the first survey launch of its kind in San Juan County. Farmers reported on practices implemented before 2011 and after 2011, establishing baseline implementation data and providing the first benchmark results for approximately 10% of farms on the islands where critical areas overlap with agricultural operations.

The BMP Implementation Survey focused on capturing data on fifteen key BMPs related to critical area protection and enhancement in the county. The practices respondents reported implementing and the degrees to which they have been put into place from 2011 through 2022 include:

Table 3: Self-Reported BMPs Installed since 2011—Cost Share and Non-Cost Share, based on BMP Implementation Survey results

BMP	Units Installed	Amount Installed
Waste Storage Facility (313)	Unit	11
Herbaceous Weed Treatment (315)	Acres	1170
Conservation Cover (327)	Acres	232
Residue and Tillage Management, No-Till (329)	Acres	98
Cover Crop (340)	Acres	197
Fence (382)	Linear Feet	29,100
Riparian Herbaceous Cover (390)	Acres	37
Filter Strip (393)	Acres	76
Irrigation Water Management (449)	Acres	61
Access Control (472)	Acres	126
Prescribed Grazing (528)	Acres	289
Heavy Use Area Protection (561)	Square Feet	19,000
Nutrient Management (590)	Acres	349
Upland Wildlife Habitat Management (645)	Acres	104
Wetland Enhancement (659)	Acres	64

Survey participation was incentivized through prizes such as a water meter, soil tests, and pasture sticks. SJICD continues its outreach to producers identified as gaps in the survey to increase the percentage of farms reporting on BMP conditions. The District will continue to conduct the survey every two years and with every new ISP cooperator to assess whether BMPs implemented since 2011 are meeting protection or enhancement goals.

Progress Related to Effectiveness Monitoring Metrics

Effectiveness monitoring this biennium largely focused on collecting data to establish the conditions that existed prior to the 2011 baseline year. Results will be used to compare against benchmarks identified in the 2021 Adaptive Management Plan, with findings reported in the upcoming 2025 Five-Year Report that will determine if San Juan County is meeting its enhancement and protection goals. Effectiveness monitoring is measured for all critical areas using both spatial analyses and field protocols.

Spatial Analyses

- High Resolution Change Detection (HRCD) analysis provides a baseline rate of tree canopy loss and impervious/semi-impervious surface gain across all five critical areas. Data is provided by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and analyzed for gains/losses in two-year increments.
- An additional spatial analysis is conducted to assess baseline buffer width around streams that intersect with class 'e' soils in geologically hazardous areas. A comparison of baseline buffers to current buffers is completed in two-year increments.

Field Protocols

- NRCS Biology Technical Note-14 measures the quality of habitat in wetlands, fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas, and frequently flooded areas. Field conditions are assessed for proximity to water, livestock and mechanical forage removal, and other habitat features such as distance to undisturbed cover. Results are tabulated to determine if the area meets Planning Criteria or not for habitat quality by land use area.
- Stream Visual Assessment Protocol (SVAP) measures stream quality on a scale of 1-10 and is used to inform restoration efforts. Results of the assessment tool are informed by data points including stream width, turbidity and nutrient enhancement, and habitat features such as quantity of roots, rocks, and pools. This is considered a rapid assessment for stream health in lieu of traditional water quality sampling.

An effectiveness monitoring report is not available at this time, as data gathering has focused on establishing baseline conditions first. With better baseline data in-hand and future data collection to compare to the baseline, the San Juan Islands Conservation District will be better able to report on whether the county is meeting its protection and enhancement goals in the Five-Year VSP Report (to be submitted December 2025).

Next Steps Related to Implementation and Effectiveness Monitoring

In order to improve implementation and effectiveness monitoring, a comprehensive VSP monitoring plan will be written to include protocols for all of the implementation and effectiveness monitoring tools described above (to be submitted July 2024). The plan will focus on establishing timing, testing protocols, streamlined data gathering, and more to ensure consistency of monitoring.

SJICD is also refining data management systems. In January of 2023 the District began a subscription to a new Customer Relations Management (CRM) tool, which in conjunction with GIS mapping database systems, has allowed for more efficient data processing. Additionally, SJICD developed a digital version of the SVAP to assist in field data gathering and aggregation of results.

For more information regarding implementation and effectiveness monitoring, see Appendices A-C of the San Juan County VSP Adaptive Management Plan (2021).

FEATURE PROJECT: Vegetable Farm on San Juan Island

This farm within the False Bay watershed on San Juan Island contains multiple critical areas: wetlands, a fish-bearing stream, and a critical aquifer recharge area. The farm had been experiencing major fluctuations of water quantity on site. Excessive sheet flow through the property in the winter was resulting in an inability to drain the fields in time for the vegetable season.

After working with SJICD to develop an Individual Stewardship Plan, the farmers took to implementing one of the recommended Best Management Practices by installing a subsurface drainage system. This system helped alleviate excess water flow with 1,432 feet of drainage along vegetable beds in a 3-acre growing area. Captured water not only alleviated excess water concentration, but also fed a catchment pond used in summer irrigation.

The District continues to work with the producer on irrigation water use efficiency projects to improve water usage and protect the critical aquifer recharge area. The producer is looking to future wetland enhancement projects, and the projects implemented at this farm continue to protect and enhance all the critical areas present on the property, in addition to protecting agricultural viability, as evidenced by the increased yields following project implementation. The landowners and farmers are committed to conserving natural resources on the farm, and the practices implemented model good stewardship for many other farms in the county by demonstrating methods for conserving water in a climate of increasing drought and flooding.

Climate-smart practices similar to those mentioned above are a focal point of BMPs implemented for local farmers in San Juan County.



Figure 2: Before photo of excess water

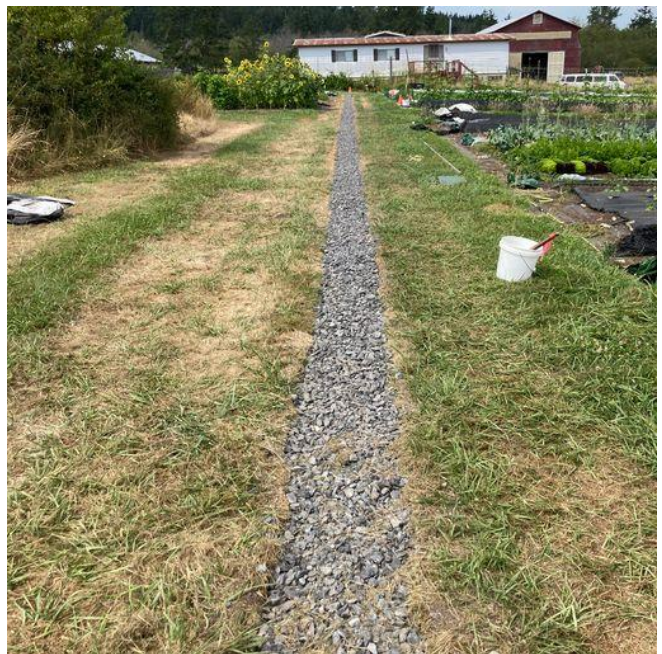


Figure 3: After photo of subsurface drainage

2. Maintenance and improvement of the long-term viability of agriculture

Agricultural viability is defined in the VSP Work Plan and displayed in the logic model shown below. Five goals support nearly a dozen strategies to help maintain the viability of agriculture in San Juan County. Goals include:

- Supportive Regulatory Environment
- Economic Prosperity
- Farm Retention and Expansion
- Farm Stewardship
- Agricultural Ethic

In San Juan County, most or all of the strategies below are in motion to achieve these goals, yet a considerable amount of work remains.

Goals are in yellow and strategies to attain goals are in blue.

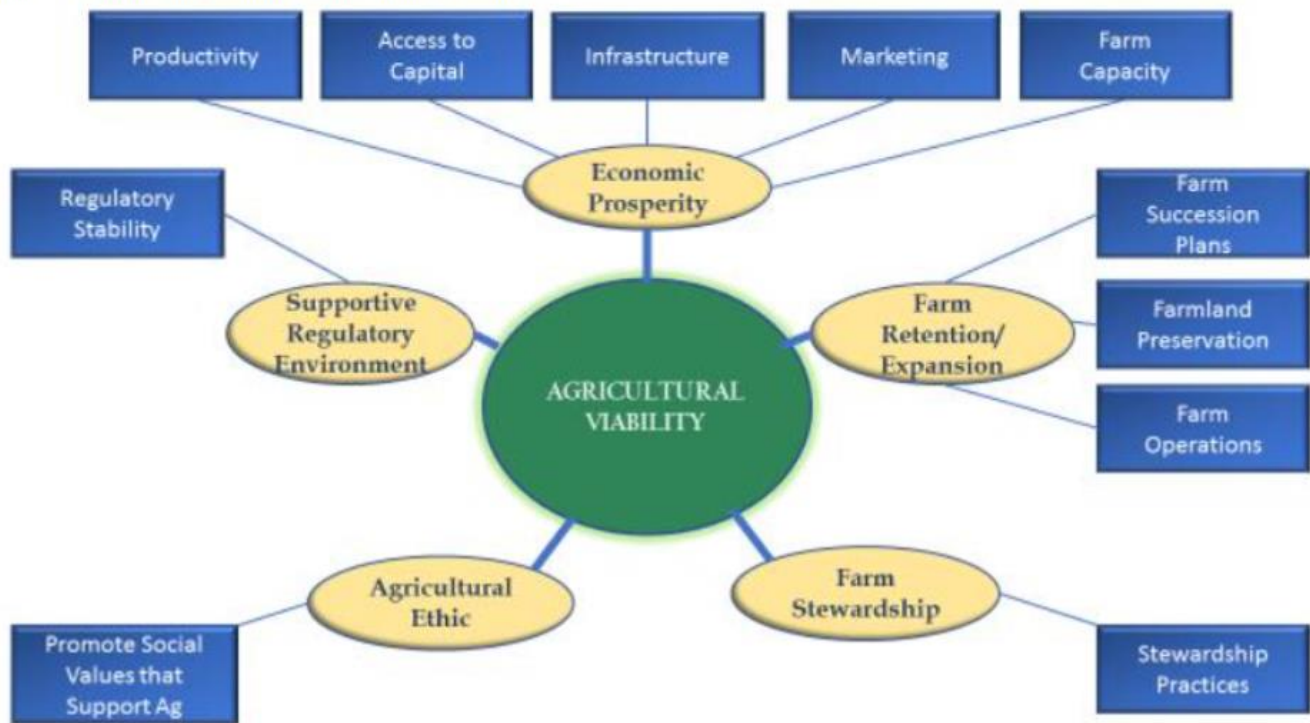


Figure 4: Logic Model: Agricultural Viability in the San Juan Islands

In order to monitor the current status and overall progress of ag viability, an Agricultural Viability in San Juan County survey has been conducted on average every three years, beginning in 2017. This survey tracks trends and comparisons that take place over a two-year period.

In partnership with Washington State University (WSU) Extension and the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild, an update of the 2017 and 2020 surveys was conducted in 2023. Four key findings of the survey report as they relate to VSP programming and overall agricultural viability in San Juan County include:

1. The number of acres farmed has remained fairly consistent between 2020-2023.

2. Hiring farm labor and housing farm workers were listed as the top challenge in 2023.
3. Sharing equipment (35%), providing mentorship (33%), and collaborative internship programs (31%) were the most commonly selected survey responses when agricultural producers were asked if they were interested in collaborating with fellow farmers.
4. Two-thirds (67%) of respondents in 2023 said their operations had been affected by climate change, and several others cited the pandemic as negatively impacting operations.

The full study is available at <https://extension.wsu.edu/sanjuan/agriculture/ag-research-reports/>.

In addition, multiple VSP partners are collaborating on initiatives to improve economic and environmental performance for farmers, providing low-cost farm equipment rentals, training new farm operators, supporting centralized commercial outlets for locally grown foods, promoting farms and responsible farm practices, as well as providing farm planning and infrastructure funding programs. Key programs that are either new or were sustained over the 2021-2023 biennium include:

No-till Drill Rental Program

The rental of the no-till drill, acquired in 2018 in partnership with a grant from the Washington Department of Ecology and Soil Health Committee (Washington State Conservation Commission), continues. SJICD provides a low-cost rental of the equipment to local farmers. Approximately six farmers rent the equipment each year, and outreach is underway to expand the user base.

Beginner Farmer and Rancher Development Project

This three-year project, involving a partnership of the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild, the San Juan Islands Conservation District, the San Juan County Agricultural Resources Committee, and WSU Extension, received USDA grant funding in 2021.

The project has facilitated entry into farming careers for beginning farmers and ranchers in the San Juan Islands, with a focus on women and the Latinx community. One beginning Latina farmer has successfully gone through all facets of the program. After receiving training, she secured a land match to begin leasing one acre for her flower and mixed vegetable farm. Since then, the Conservation District has worked with her through technical and financial assistance to help establish the operation.

Other farmers are being matched to land through the Farmer-to-Farmland program hosted by the Agricultural Guild, and the CD is helping to identify farmers looking to build their succession plans.

San Juan Islands Food Hub

The Food Hub is an online shopping platform for local food products where buyers and sellers can aggregate local agricultural products for purchase and regular delivery to centralized pick-up locations on three main islands and the mainland. The Food Hub is a producer-owned cooperative, created with support from the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild and the Northwest Agriculture Business Center (NABC) and funding from USDA.

The Farm Fund

This county-wide grant and microloan program, managed by the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild, raises money for small grants and loans to island producers.

Farmers-to-Farmland

This program connects beginning and experienced farmers with farmland owners who wish to sell, lease, or transfer their farmland in San Juan County. Though the program is still in its infancy, it has successfully matched one farmer with a lease on Orcas Island.

Orcas Community Participatory Agriculture

Orcas Community Participatory Agriculture is a network of five farms on Orcas Island working in tandem to supplement traditional agricultural streams on the islands. Participants volunteer their time in exchange for products from the farm and farming expertise. This community agricultural system models resilience and resource sharing for multiple, small farms.

San Juan Islands Ag Summit

Each year, the San Juan Islands host an agricultural summit with workshops from over thirty-five speakers and two hundred participants. The event is designed as a space for inspiration, education, and camaraderie for farmers to unite to learn and share their experiences.

Agricultural Planning and Project Funding

ISPs, cost-share, and other technical assistance help support farmers in maintaining their operations and therefore reduces the risks of land conversion. Many farms are in the Current Use Farm & Agriculture (CUFA) tax deferral program, where ISP development is tailored to the state program requirements as an add-in to standard plan development using NRCS standards and practices.

Despite the collaboration on behalf of many San Juan agencies and organizations, farmers in the county continue to face hurdles in maintaining viable agricultural operations, especially in light of the recent pandemic, climate change, and increased costs. SJICD has been involved in Ag Listening Sessions across Lopez, Orcas, and San Juan Islands, where farmers have voiced their experiences and concerns with the state of agriculture on the islands. Producers continue to find it difficult to operate given high costs of land and labor, difficulty of navigating regulatory frameworks, and a lack of access to shared infrastructure such as meat processing facilities. Many of these struggles are exacerbated due to the remoteness of the islands ecosystem, making it increasingly difficult for farmers to stay in business. Once a large exporter of fruits and grains to the mainland, the San Juan Islands now rely on 98% of food imports.

The organizations and programs mentioned above will continue to address the viability of agriculture and food production on the islands. One major next step is the development of a Food System Plan to support farmers moving forward. This plan has been developed and is in the process of being finalized to bring forth to the county. There is still more work to be done in securing an agricultural future for the islands, but collaboration across partner agencies is continuing to foster important conversations and next steps that will hopefully sustain agricultural viability.

3. Reducing the conversion of farmland to other uses

Continuing the work of ISPs, cost-share, and other technical assistance helps support farmers in maintaining their operations and therefore reduces the risks of land conversion. There are three strategies identified in the Work Plan for addressing the goal of farm retention and expansion, listed below. Results from the 2023 Agricultural Viability Survey, among other metrics, were used to measure progress toward the goal.

Farm Retention and Expansion Goal: Maintain and increase the number of acres and/or farms in long-term commercial agricultural production by making farmland available and increasing capacity of farmers.

Strategy 1: Farmland Succession: Connect new farmers to available farmland and mentorship opportunities to ensure farm succession.

- **Farmland succession.** Just over one quarter of the respondents (27%) to the Agricultural Viability Survey who indicated they needed assistance to maintain production or put land under production indicated that they would need support for farm succession.
- **Age of farmers.** The 2023 survey results when compared to those of 2020 shows a higher percentage of respondents over the age of 70 (20% in 2020 up to 30% in 2023) and between 61 – 70 years of age (35% in 2020 up to 39% in 2023). The percent of farmers in the 36 – 50 age range saw the largest decline (16% in 2020 down to 10% in 2023).
- **New farmers accessing farmland.** The number of producers who identified access to affordable farmland as an issue has increased since 2020. This issue was identified as a challenge for 20 producers in 2020 and 25 producers in 2023. The San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild manages the Farmers-to-Farmland Program, which addresses this issue by connecting farmers with farmland owners who wish to sell, lease, or transfer their farmland in San Juan County. The program assists beginning and experienced farmers and ranchers with establishing, expanding, and improving farm enterprises in San Juan County through land access, resources, and training. Additionally, the Beginner Farmer and Rancher Development project described in Section 2 seeks to facilitate entry into farming careers specifically for beginning farmers and ranchers.
- **Mentorship.** Forty-six percent of respondents identified “Providing mentorship” when asked if they were interested in collaborating with fellow farmers. Mentorship continues to play an important role in farm succession, and the many local farmers who are willing to help train new farmers will aid in their success.

Strategy 2: Farmland Preservation: Facilitate permanent conservation of farmland using conservation tools that allow for flexibility and adaptability for expansion of agriculture, including new farming practices and infrastructure.

- **Farm Conservation Plans/ISPs.** Nearly half of respondents (46%) have developed a Farm Conservation Plan with the Conservation District or NRCS (up from only 16% in 2020). The Agricultural Viability goals developed in the 2021 Adaptive Management Plan call for 30% of farmland in San Juan County to be covered by ISPs by 2025. As of 2023, approximately 26% of farmland has been covered by an ISP.
- **Conservation easements and preserves.** There are three organizations in San Juan County whose mission includes the protection of farmland: the San Juan Preservation Trust, the San Juan County Conservation Land Bank, and Lopez Community Land Trust. The Land Bank and Preservation Trust provide conservation easements, where property remains in private ownership, and preserves, where

land is owned by the organization. The Preservation Trust currently holds conservation easements on 1,665 acres and owns 717 acres of farmland preserves in the county. The Land Bank holds easements on over 1,300 acres of privately owned farmland and owns ten preserves with over 800 acres of prime farmland. Additionally, there are currently two farms owned by the Lopez Community Land Trust under the Lopez Island Farm Trust program. The Lopez Community Land Trust is also working to build farmworker housing on Lopez Island. Established in 2016, the Lopez Island Farm Trust program holds farmland in trust to support a resilient local food system.

- **Open space tax programs.** To encourage landowners to use open space for the growing of food, landowners may choose to have their land designated as farm and agricultural land. This designation allows property valued at its current use rather than at its highest and best use, resulting in a lower assessed value and lower taxes. Acreage enrolled must be actively farmed to comply with tax requirements. According to the Statement of 2022 Assessments and Taxes to be Collected in 2023 for San Juan County, there were 8,184 acres in the Current Use Farm and Agriculture (CUFA) program, and 429 acres in the Open Space Farm Conservation program. ISP development is tailored for CUFA requirements as an add-in to standard plan development using NRCS standards and practices.

Strategy 3: Farm Operations: Maintain and increase the number of commercial farm operations.

- **Commercial farms.** Over half of the respondents indicated they have a commercial farm, an increase from 2020 (2020 – 53.3% and 2023 – 62%). One-quarter indicated their farm is both a commercial and non-commercial farm (2020 – 30.7% and 2023 – 26%). These two categories represent 63 farms in 2020 and 68 farms in 2023.
- **Scope of operations.** When respondents answered the question about maintaining, expanding, or decreasing the scope of operations in the next five years, one quarter of agricultural producers (26%) responded that they plan to increase or expand operations, while 31% plan to maintain the scope of their operation.
- **Barriers.** When asked about the challenges facing San Juan County farmers over the past two years, nine out of ten respondents (93%), rated the cost of farm worker housing as a moderate to extreme challenge. Access to hiring farm workers (86%), access to farm worker housing (87%) the cost of farm infrastructure (75%) and the cost of skilled farm labor (76%) were also highly rated as a challenge to extreme challenge. Many of these numbers have increased by 10-25% from 2020 to 2023 and point to an ongoing challenge of housing farm workers. A countywide housing shortage is continuing to affect all industries and unfortunately does not have simple or low-cost remedies that can be implemented broadly.

4. The maximization of the use of voluntary incentive programs to encourage ecosystem stewardship as an alternative to historic approaches used to protect critical areas

The VSP Work Group continues to expand its outreach program in order to maximize the use of voluntary programs. Actions include:

- Incentivizing participation in the BMP Implementation Survey;
- Updating the VSP website and new public-facing StoryMap (see Figure 5 below);
- Developing a GIS database to conduct targeted outreach; and
- Developing outreach materials that serve the dual purpose of encouraging older farm plan conversions to ISPs and collecting baseline data on BMP implementation in the past.

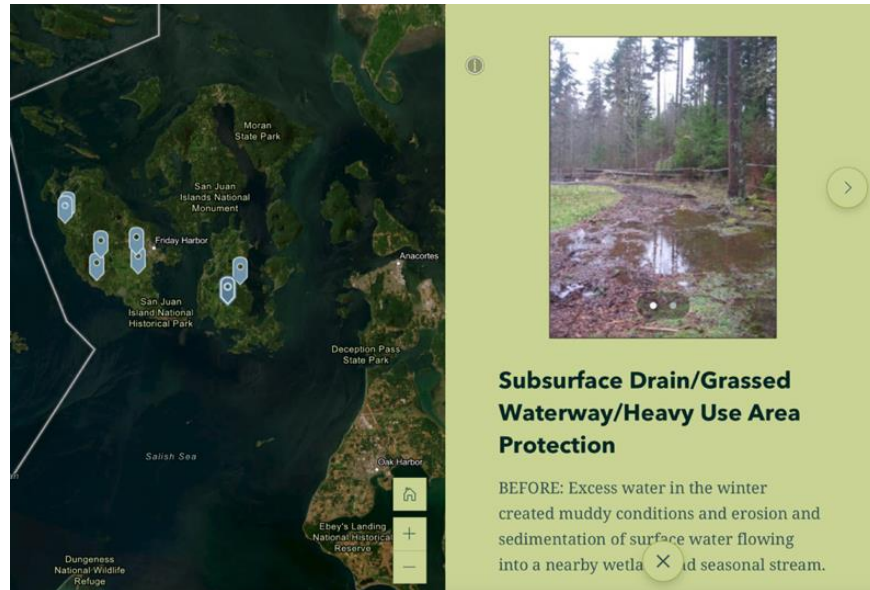


Figure 5: VSP StoryMap with county implemented BMPs-- In order to showcase BMPs implemented in the county, SJICD has developed a Storymap for its VSP website. This interactive map allows users to discover photos and descriptions of other projects implemented by San Juan County landowners. The goal is to populate this page with additional BMPs to encourage others to participate in good stewardship practices.

Additionally, to encourage good riparian and ecosystem stewardship as an alternative to historic regulatory frameworks used to protect critical areas, SJICD and partners promote cost share opportunities to all cooperators who go through the planning process and receive an ISP. Previous cost share recipients are also a valuable asset to the agricultural community as they help “sell” the results of their success to their neighbors. Word of mouth and the circles of influence that rotate around the activities of VSP are already helping transition more agricultural operators into this desirable program outcome. This keeps interest in the VSP program high and the waiting list self-propagating over time.

5. Leveraging existing resources by relying upon existing work and plans in counties and local watersheds, as well as existing state and federal programs to the maximum extent practicable to achieve program goals

San Juan County’s VSP program leverages existing resources to achieve program goals by working in close partnership with numerous stakeholder groups and state and local agencies:

- **San Juan County,**
- **Washington State Department of Health,**
- **Washington Department of Ecology,**
- **Natural Resource Conservation Services,**
- **US Fish and Wildlife Service,** and
- **Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.**

These and other partners communicate with SJICD when they feel that technical assistance or other resources may be needed to help the environmental performance of agricultural operators.

Partnership with San Juan County Department of Environmental Stewardship

SJICD works with subject matter experts at San Juan County Department of Environmental Stewardship and the Clean Water Utility to identify restoration or other water quality needs, explore funding opportunities, and conduct district-implemented projects. San Juan County's Eight-Basin Report¹ and other watershed planning documents help to guide priorities for restoration work. Recent SJICD restoration work in the Garrison Bay and Crow Valley watersheds are current examples of projects identified in San Juan County planning documents.

FEATURE PROJECT: Partnership with San Juan County and San Juan Preservation Trust

In the False Bay watershed, SJICD has been working with San Juan County and the San Juan Preservation Trust to improve water quality at a property owned by the Preservation Trust. Lower False Bay Creek is listed as a Category 5, 303d-listed waterbody for bacteria. Through a lifetime lease arrangement, a rancher runs several hundred cattle on the 750-acre property, where they have had free and open access to False Bay Creek. A restoration team consisting of representatives from the Preservation Trust, San Juan County, SJICD, Washington Department of Ecology, and the Salmon Advisory Technical Advisory Team was established. Together, they developed three main project actions: 1) to fence cattle out of the riparian zone, 2) to provide off-stream watering facilities for the cattle, and 3) to control reed canary grass and plant the riparian buffer with native plants. Multiple funding sources have been used to fund the project, which included fencing, two livestock pipelines, a pumping plant, and a heavy use area. Work continues with riparian plantings on the tributary to False Bay Creek.

¹ Rot, B., J. DeGroot, T. Waldo, J. Glasgow, K. Sundberg, R. Barsh, J. Meyer, M. Ramsey, M. Boyd, K. Dodd, M. Reaves. 2019. "San Juan Islands salmonid limiting factors and recommended actions – eight basin report." San Juan County Public Works Environmental Resources.

Partnership with Washington State Department of Health

This biennium, SJICD continued to work with a farm on Shaw Island containing cattle and streams that was believed to be the source of high bacteria readings in a local nearshore shellfish bay and upstream seasonal watershed, according to state Department of Health monitoring. SJICD completed a cost share project with the producers to fence cattle out of the streams.

Partnership with USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

SJICD is engaged with planning efforts in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) at the regional level. Outreach is conducted to identify projects as potential Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) contracts. SJICD is in discussion with NRCS to begin receiving task orders in order to complete plans and contracts on behalf of NRCS.

Partnership with US Fish and Wildlife Service

In partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, over 20 landowners and nearly a half dozen partners are working together to restore populations of the endangered Island Marble butterfly by establishing protected habitat areas in small plots across San Juan and Lopez islands. Additional partners include the National Park Service, San Juan County Conservation Land Bank, San Juan Preservation Trust, and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Partnership with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

The District continues to map and analyze High Resolution Change Data (HRCD) provided by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Work has centered around identifying where areas of change intersect with agricultural lands and critical areas. HRCD data is composed of polygon areas of change that are identified as impervious surfaces, semi-impervious surfaces, and canopy loss. Current and future rates of change will be compared to the baseline rates for the VSP five-year report.

[6. Ongoing efforts to encourage and foster a spirit of cooperation and partnership among county, tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests to better assure program success](#)

In the past two years, VSP programming has moved well beyond its startup phase, expanding its scope and reach throughout the county. By completing ISPs and cost share projects, producing outreach materials, hosting events and workshops, and formalizing a reputation within the community, VSP efforts are fostering greater cooperation across a network of partners and interest groups.

Technical Assistance

Increasing demands for technical assistance in farm planning and financial support through cost share programs indicates an increase in awareness among the community of a more concerted effort to undertake voluntary stewardship. Many producers contact the District by word-of-mouth from other cooperators.

Events

Events such as the Ag Summit and the Farm Tours in partnership with organizations such as the Agricultural Resources Committee, the Agricultural Guild, Washington State University Extension, and the Food Systems Team have also allowed the District to engage in far-reaching outreach efforts. Participants to these events numbered over 1700 people in the last two years, attesting to the demand for educational opportunities and a willingness to engage in voluntary stewardship.

County Planning Engagement

Internally, the District has worked with members of the County to organize trainings for county planners to engage deeper with VSP and better understand the relationship between the program and the Critical Areas Ordinance. SJICD continues to build a source of VSP knowledge for key partners.

VSP Work Group Membership

Since the completion of the last Biennium Report and Five-Year Report, VSP Work Group membership has remained steady. New participants were recruited to fill spots from retirees and continue to be added to represent tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests. The District also continues to provide regular updates on VSP implementation to the San Juan County Council.

7. Ongoing efforts to improve compliance with other laws designed to protect water quality and fish habitat

The Work Group recognizes that both clean water laws and the VSP should provide protection to water quality and fish habitat and that working with other agencies is an opportunity to achieve shared goals. VSP complements the protection and pollution reduction goals of federal and state clean water laws by helping to implement the best management practices needed to meet water quality standards. Examples of recent efforts in this area include:

- **Upright Channel Water Quality Issues:**

As a result of findings in the 2020 Annual Shellfish Growing Area Report for Upright Channel, where a station was listed as Meets Standards, but threatened with a downgrade in classification, the Washington State Department of Health asked San Juan County Health & Community Services to follow up with a property survey and additional sample collection of surface water drainages to attempt to identify potential sources of fecal coliform that could be contributing to high fecal coliform counts.

SJICD was contacted to provide technical assistance to help the owners limit livestock access to surface water drainages with the goal of improving water quality. An Individual Stewardship Plan was developed and paved the way for the landowners to receive State Conservation Commission funding for a fencing cost share project in 2022 to exclude livestock from riparian and wetland areas leading directly into Reefnet Bay. They have now completed their cost share project with 1200 linear feet of exclusion fencing and are actively keeping animals out of 10 acres of wetlands and streams.

- **False Bay Watershed Livestock Discussions:**

A publicly owned San Juan Island farm in the False Bay watershed was the subject of much recent debate. The property is centrally located, prominent location within a key watershed and prone to winter floods. After reports of cows grazing outside of a fenced portion of False Bay Creek, while the property was still quite wet, the County's Clean Water Advisory Committee took action to discuss the matter. The committee contested the presence of grazing animals on this property on the basis that the animals were unnecessarily contributing to water quality pollution in a critical area. They argued that the habitat and filtration potential of the 39 acres would be better suited for restoration efforts.

After long cross-partner discussions and an offer of other land to graze, the Land Bank as owners decided to give the long-term lessee a final year before terminating the current lease agreement. The Land Bank will spend the next few years determining if it is appropriate to bring back on animals, only after creating systems such as prescribed grazing, wider riparian forest buffers, and wetland plantings to safeguard critical areas. The San Juan Islands Conservation District will provide technical assistance in the form of alternatives to support the decision-making process.

8. A description of efforts showing how relying upon voluntary stewardship practices as the primary method of protecting critical areas does not require the cessation of agricultural activities.

The voluntary stewardship practices being promoted by VSP throughout San Juan County have been effective in generating interest in landowners in engaging with SJICD in the ISP process. Recent ISPs have explored the boundary and intersect of the protection of critical areas in tandem with the viability of agriculture.

On Orcas Island, a 150-acre publicly owned property contains a 50-acre prior-converted wetland. Prior to the agricultural development of the land, these approximately 50 acres were flooded year-round and hosted a perennial marsh, which remained wet year-round. Since this area was settled in the late 1800s, significant hydrologic changes to the stream and wetland have occurred as a result of ditching, draining, and clearing to promote better agricultural use of the land. The stream was historically cleaned periodically to keep reed canarygrass and other aquatic plant pressure at bay. Since the transfer of land ownership to the current owners, waterway cleaning has not occurred. At the time of the site visit in September 2022, the water was backed up the highest it has been at this time of year in several years. Water levels have continued to rise with an accumulation of reed canarygrass, which has impeded water movement and created pockets of organic matter which have begun to alter the elevation of the lower reaches of the stream. The excess water conditions have made it increasingly difficult for farming (such as summer haying) to occur within these acres. The ISP addressed stakeholder needs by balancing the preservation of the value of ongoing food production with the restoration potential of historical wetlands, which could potentially provide wildlife habitat continuity to a critical watershed area. Three alternatives were suggested to address altered stream flows while preserving the long-term viability of the farmland for the future, considering effects to wetlands, fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas, and agricultural viability.

A similar scenario was encountered on San Juan Island in the False Bay watershed and has been mentioned previously in this report. Ongoing discussions surrounding the protection of critical areas and simultaneous agricultural use have led the Land Bank as owners of the property to consider alternative methods and restoration efforts to continue farming the land. With various stakeholders involved in these discussions, there

are certainly a variety of nuanced approaches to balancing agricultural viability with critical area protection and enhancement, and the District strives to propose management alternatives that allow for both.

The District engages further in these conversations by hosting workshops such as a recent Wetlands Grazing panel as part of the Ag Summit. This panel brought in conservationists, county representatives, grazing experts, and farmers to showcase a range of perspectives on best management practices for grazing animals in wetlands and riparian areas.

Cost share rewards are also a big element of balancing critical area protection with agricultural viability, as they allow producers to maximize conservation benefits without entirely sacrificing portions of their operation. At the end of this biennium, seventeen agricultural producers are on the wait list for ISPs moving forward, and fifteen producers are in line for cost share funding. These numbers indicate steady county-wide demand for assistance with agriculture-related natural resource planning and potential cost share funding best management practices that both help protect critical areas and enhance the ease of farming in the county.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The extent to which all five critical areas are encountered on ag parcels in the islands is as follows:

Critical Area	Acres of Agricultural Intersect in 2023
Wetlands (tidal and non-tidal)	1973
Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas, Upland Habitat*	1328
Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas, Riparian**	940
Geologically Hazardous Areas	828
Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas	14903
Frequently Flooded Areas	275

*This number was derived based on consultations with habitat biologists from WDFW. Acres include Priority Habitat Species (PHS) locations with buffers, Natural Heritage Program Plant locations, and county-defined Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas including Garry Oak and Camas Prairie.

**This number was derived by calculating a 100-foot buffer along streams that intersect with ag parcels.