

San Juan County
Voluntary Stewardship Program
Biennial Report, 2023 – 2025



SAN JUAN ISLANDS



CONSERVATION
DISTRICT
SAN JUAN COUNTY, WASHINGTON

August 26, 2025
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 or the District) 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 fourth 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, and the upcoming Ten-Year Report, to be submitted in December 2025, which specifically report on progress toward the protection and enhancement goals and benchmarks in the Work Plan.

The Work Group has used the five-year reporting process as an opportunity to reflect on and refine the Work Plan, and as a result, adopt Adaptive Management Plans (AMP) in 2021 and 2024 following the submission of a Monitoring Plan. The AMPs 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 most recent AMP and building upon the previous Biennial Report of 2023. 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 in this report can be found online at www.sanjuanislandscd.org/voluntary-stewardship-program.

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1. Critical Area Protection and Enhancement

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, as defined in the San Juan County VSP Adaptive Management Plan (2024), through the successful implementation of conservation practices in critical areas. Individual Stewardship Plans (ISPs) identify resource concerns on critical areas in agricultural production and recommend practices (BMPs) to address those concerns. BMP implementation is often financed through cost share assistance programs provided by the District and WSCC.

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

Between July 2023 and June 2025, SJICD planners completed 28 ISPs for agricultural producers, prescribing over 240 BMPs (See Appendix 1 for a list of ISPs). One of the methods SJICD uses to implement and track BMP implementation is the District’s cost share program, which provides financial assistance of up to 75% of total project costs up to \$100,000 for producers to install BMPs. Producers often work to implement the recommendations in their plans over many years.

During the span of this reporting period,

- 21 cost share and District Implemented Projects (DIPs) were implemented on agricultural lands
- 47 BMPs were installed
- Over 2000 acres of farmland benefitted from technical assistance, farm plans, and cost share
- \$489,000 was allocated by SJICD for cost share and DIP projects on farms (See Appendix 2 for project information and BMPs implemented by project)

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

NRCS Practice	Amount
380 - Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment and Renovation	350 linear feet
381 – Silvopasture	18 acres
382 – Fence	14,070 linear feet
430 – Irrigation Pipeline	600 linear feet
441 – Irrigation System, Microirrigation	28 acres
472 – Access Control	3 acres
516 – Livestock Pipeline	1900 linear feet
558 – Roof Runoff Structure	2 units
561 – Heavy Use Area Protection	3540 square feet
576 – Livestock Shelter Structure	5 units
582 – Open Channel	1300 linear feet
606 – Subsurface Drain	300 feet
614 – Watering Facility	16 units
620 – Underground Outlet	300 linear feet
636 – Water Harvesting Catchment	2 units

Table 1: Amount of BMPs Installed through Cost Share 2023-2025

Cost share projects impacted the following critical areas:

- Critical aquifer recharge area – recharge
- Critical aquifer recharge area – water quality
- Wetland – water quality
- Wetland – habitat
- Fish and wildlife habitat conservation area – stream
- Fish and wildlife habitat conservation area – upland
- Agricultural viability

Progress Related to Effectiveness Monitoring Metrics

Effectiveness monitoring determines how BMPs are affecting critical area functions and values. The results of effectiveness monitoring will be more comprehensively reported on in the forthcoming Ten-Year Report (December 2025).

Effectiveness monitoring is conducted using spatial analyses and field protocols established in the VSP Monitoring Plan (2024). These tools and protocols include:

- Wetland Rating System (WRS) - Assessments were anticipated to begin in 2025; however, due to staff turnover, the high level of training involved in conducting assessments, and the seasonality of these assessments, few WRS have been conducted so far. Three new staff have since undergone training, and monitoring is anticipated to resume as planned in early spring 2026. Fifteen WRS assessments will be conducted each year on average to measure the change in wetland functions over time.
- Stream Visual Assessment Protocol (SVAP) - Nine stream Visual Assessment Protocol (SVAP) assessments were conducted this biennium. The District will continue to adjust monitoring protocols to meet the goal set out by the Work Group of fifteen per year.

- High Resolution Change Detection (HRCDD) - Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife provided its latest set of High Resolution Change Detection (HRCDD) data, which will be analyzed prior to the submission of the Ten-Year Report to assess changes in canopy cover and impervious surface in the county.

Some of these tools may change over time, through an adaptive management process. One example from this biennium is the replacement of the NRCS's Biology Technical Note-14 with Department of Ecology's Wetland Rating System (WRS) for monitoring wetland critical areas.

Due to a lack of available data from assessments conducted prior to the 2011 baseline year, planners are still collecting data to establish baseline conditions for stream and wetlands, using SVAPs and WRSs. Data gathering to determine these baseline levels of critical area functions and values is expected to be completed by 2027 for fish and wildlife habitat areas: streams and 2030 for wetlands. Results of these assessments will be used to compare against benchmarks identified in the 2024 Adaptive Management Plan, with findings reported in the upcoming 2025 Ten-Year Report that will determine if San Juan County is meeting its enhancement and protection goals.

Next Steps Related to Implementation and Effectiveness Monitoring

SJICD planners will continue to conduct in field and spatial assessments, as outlined in the Monitoring Plan.

FEATURE PROJECT: Sheep Farm on Orcas Island

A farm on Orcas Island within the West Sound watershed, a priority watershed for fish habitat restoration and shellfish, completed two large cost share projects this biennium, addressing critical aquifer recharge area, wetland, and fish and wildlife habitat conservation critical areas by installing ten total practices.

The first project addressed excess water runoff from the top of the farm and included practices in support of prescribed grazing and silvopasture to reduce the intensity of impact of grazing animals on water quality and provide much needed habitat in 18 acres of open fields.

The second project addressed excess water at the bottom of the farm, moving it away from livestock concentration areas and into future wetland enhancement areas. The practices installed will help divert excess water flow of over 24acre feet of water per year away from livestock heavy use areas.

The District's work with these producers continues into the next biennium with an exciting wetland enhancement project.



Figure 1: Sheep make use of their new shelter and keep their manure out of waterways

2. Agricultural Viability

Maintenance and improvement of the long-term viability of agriculture

The VSP Work Group has determined that a viable agricultural system in San Juan County depends on the following factors:

- An agricultural ethic that culturally and socially values local food production
- A supportive policy environment that allows and encourages farmers to begin farming and to continue farming
- A healthy natural resource base on agricultural lands that responds to climate change
- No net loss of farmland
- A thriving local food economy with ample opportunities for access to market, education, capital, infrastructure, food processing and storage, and shared resources

The image below portrays strategies that will help reach countywide goals for ag viability. Most of the strategies below are in motion at this time and supported across several organizations, yet a considerable amount of work remains. The general trend of agricultural viability is thought to be in decline due to increasing costs of land, lack of available and affordable housing, and environmental stressors.

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

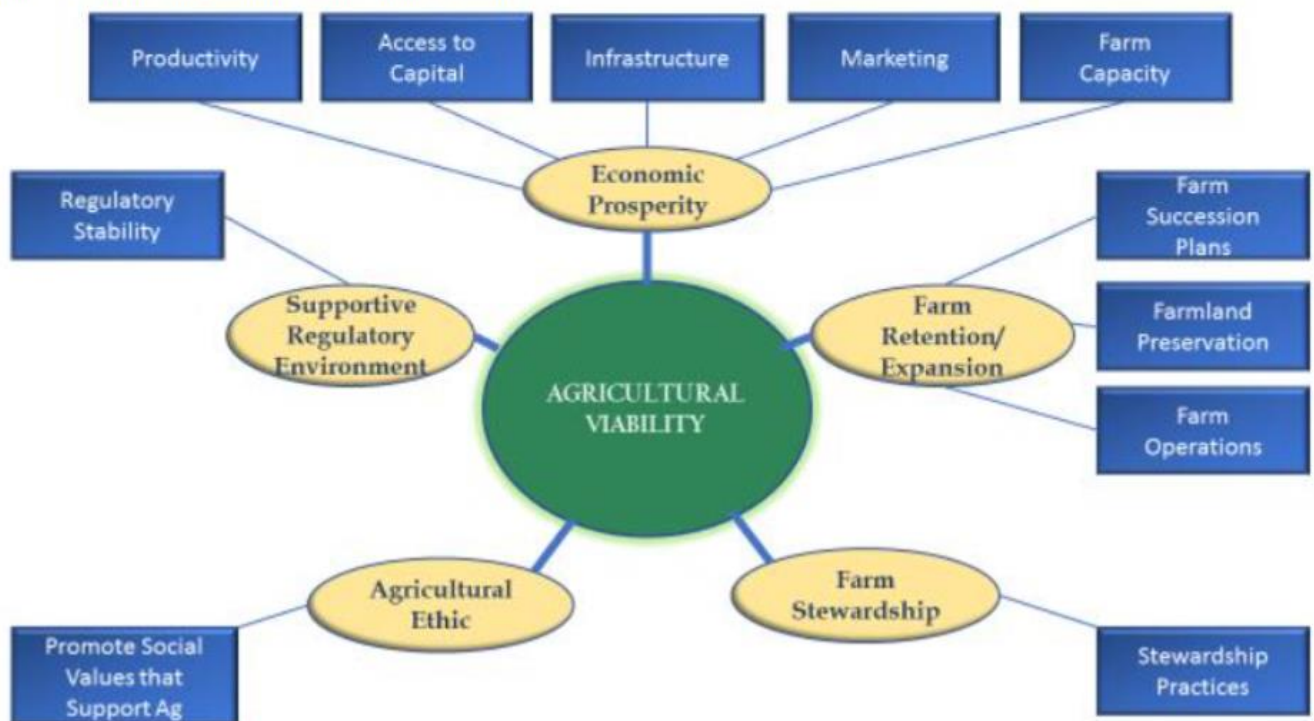


Figure 2: Logic Model: Agricultural Viability in the San Juan Islands

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 in partnership with Washington State University (WSU) Extension and the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild, beginning in 2017 and subsequently in 2020 and 2023. This survey tracks demographics, farm types, market channels, challenges/barriers, requests for support, and the effects of climate change over time.

In 2024 an analysis was conducted to examine the data over the six-year period between the first survey and the most recent. Results pointed to a taxed agricultural system, with little improvements over time.

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.

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 by the remoteness of the islands, making it increasingly difficult for farmers to stay in business. San Juan county was once an exporter of fruit, dairy, and grain in the first half of the 20th century and now imports 96% of food purchased in the county.

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

Adaptive Management of Agricultural Viability Monitoring

The VSP Work Group has discussed agricultural viability monitoring as a top area requiring additional adaptive management. At the heart of the discussion is the question of whether the Agricultural Viability Survey is the best tool to measure progress towards increased agricultural viability in the county. Shortcomings of the Agricultural Viability Survey that were identified include:

- the unreliability of a small sample size,
- an inability of the survey to answer all of the goals cited in the Work Plan,
- a significant overlap of the survey with the USDA Agriculture Census, and
- a cumbersome process requiring significant time and money for analysis.

The group recommended exploring alternatives to the current survey, focusing on leveraging existing resources across the county already working closely on tracking agricultural viability. The San Juan County Agricultural Resources Committee, for example, conducts annual Agriculture Listening Sessions and Agriculture Organizations Retreats. Other efforts supporting agricultural viability are discussed in Appendix 4.

In addition to leveraging existing efforts, an additional alternative suggested was a focus on qualitative data gathering to complement the already existing quantitative Agriculture Census. It was suggested

that a focus group of farmers could be assembled yearly to look at the question of agricultural viability and provide a report based on collected narratives of farmers across the county.

Work Group members have participated on the Puget Sound Ag Viability steering committee that was created by the American Farmland Trust in collaboration with Puget Sound Partnership. This project is developing an action plan that will serve as a roadmap for agricultural viability in Puget Sound, including a toolkit with strategies for local governments and indicators that can measure progress. It incorporates data gathered from San Juan County farmers and could be useful and relevant to the VSP.

Other proposed alternatives involve looking at the gaps of data not available through the Agriculture Census and developing alternative means of tracking metrics to answer questions surrounding VSP goals and benchmarks.

Further discussions are needed to adaptively manage agricultural viability monitoring over time.

3. Farmland Conversion

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 can reduce the risks of land conversion to non-agricultural uses, but a much broader effort is required in order to be effective. The VSP Work Plan identifies three strategies to achieve 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 61. The percent of farmers in the 36 – 50 age range saw the largest decline.
- **New farmers accessing farmland.** The number of producers who identified access to affordable farmland as an issue has increased since 2020.
- **Mentorship.** 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. Forty-six percent of respondents identified “Providing mentorship” when asked if they were interested in collaborating with fellow farmers.

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.** 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 2025, approximately 41% 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 2024 Assessments and Taxes to be Collected in 2025 for San Juan County, there were 8,144 acres in the Current Use Farm and Agriculture (CUFA) program, and 428 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, while one-quarter indicated their farm is both a commercial and non-commercial farm.
- **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.

FEATURE PROJECT: Shared Land Access Model on San Juan Island

In a county with ever-increasing property values and development demands, several local partners joined forces to increase access to stable, affordable, productive ag land for residents in a natural preserve that was otherwise being underutilized. The Overmarsh Farm Commons was created in partnership with the San Juan County Land Bank and the San Juan Grange and offers a model for improved use of conserved farmland.

The Grange and Land Bank have entered into long-term lease for 40 acres of the Land Bank's Beaverton Marsh Preserve for Overmarsh Farm Commons. The Grange will facilitate land access opportunities including community garden plots, market crops, livestock, hay, and perennial crops. Land access will be stable and affordable with shared infrastructure, tools, and equipment. An Individual Stewardship Plan with a Carbon Farm Plan element has been developed by the District, which will help guide stewardship of resources and Best Management Practices.

In its first season, the Grange has over 30 enthusiastic participants who are building garden plots on approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ acre, with the remaining leased area to be grazed, hayed, or mulch cut. Together the Land Bank and Grange are improving key infrastructure to support the project including water systems, fencing, access, greenhouse, tool shed, etc. This partnership is successfully expanding access to conserved farmland and demonstrating the ability to strengthen the local food system and community resiliency. The project complements the Land Bank's goals and other lease agreements, which help to steward conserved farmland by way of appropriate active agricultural uses.



Figure 3: Several participating growers work their plots on a community work day

4. Incentive-Based Stewardship

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 rely on incentive-based programs to encourage voluntary participation in critical area protection, principally through the District's cost share program. Demand for this program remains steady, assisted by outreach in the following areas:

- Consistent word of mouth recommendations
- Ongoing website and digital materials maintenance
- Targeted mapped outreach plans
- Utilization of placards to recognize successfully completed projects

The graph below demonstrates a growth of the agriculture cost share program over time, tripling in dollars allocated to cooperators and doubling in number of funded projects from the 2021-23 biennium to the current biennium. Growth is anticipated to continue and is expected to be limited only by the amount of available funds.

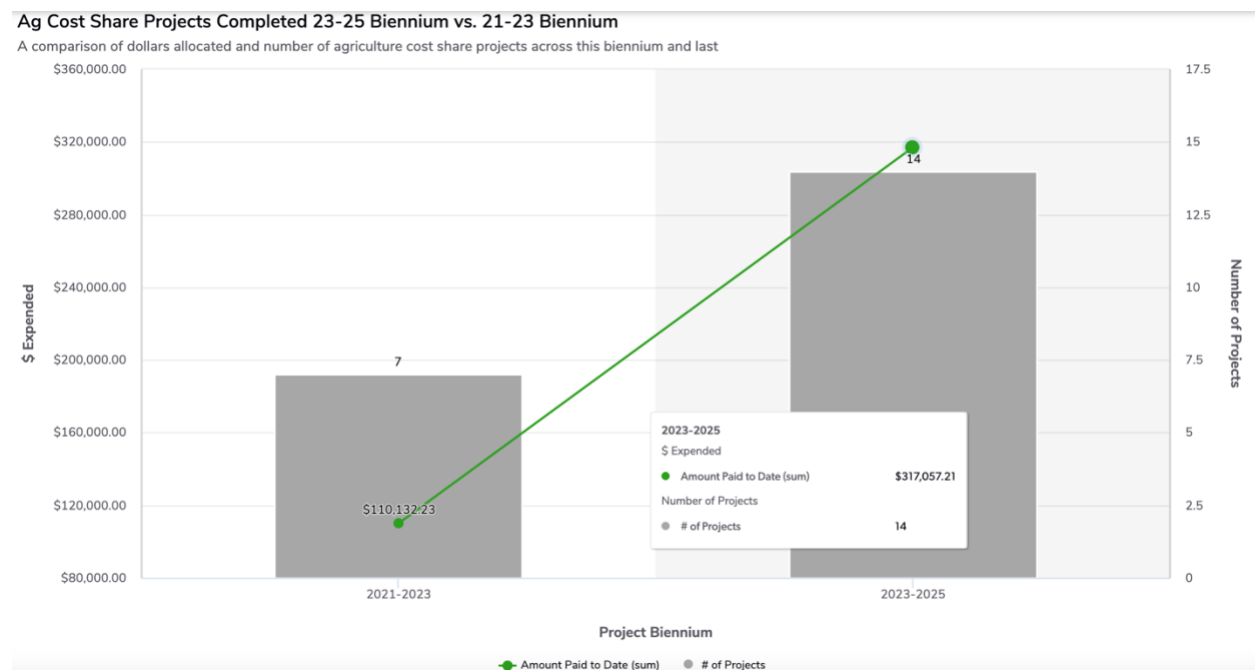


Figure 4: Ag cost share projects \$ and # completed in 2021-23 vs. 2023-25 biennia

5. Partnerships

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,**
- **US Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service,**
- **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 Salmon Recovery Plan¹ 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.

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) and Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) contracts. SJICD has also begun to conduct 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 twenty 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, many on agricultural land. Additional partners include the National Park Service, San Juan County Conservation Land Bank, San Juan Preservation Trust, and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

¹ San Juan County Salmon Recovery Lead Entity. 2022. "WRIA 2 (San Juan Islands) Salmon Recovery Chapter Update and Multi-Species Conservation Plan."

Partnership with Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

The District continues to map and analyze High Resolution Change Detection 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 Ten-Year Report.

Additionally, the District has engaged with the agency to develop habitat connectivity maps highlighting critical areas for habitat restoration work to inform future potential projects. This model allows the District to better define and protect/enhance habitat functions.

6. Community Engagement

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 facilitating 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 2000 people in the last two years, attesting to the demand for educational opportunities and a willingness to engage in voluntary stewardship.

Events such as the Ag Summit bring valuable Indigenous voices to the table through the Traditional Foodways Program, an organization dedicated to uplifting the millennia of knowledge and stewardship

of these lands. Traditional Foodways has hosted several other key events across the islands, promoting the intersection of native food systems on local farms.

This biennium, the District introduced community watershed meetings and welcomed over thirty-five people to the West Sound community watershed meeting. As a result, many landowners along Crow Valley Creek have agreed to work with the District to restore habitat connectivity.

County Planning Engagement

Internally, the District has worked with members of the County to organize trainings for county planners and other county committees 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.

SJICD relies on customer satisfaction feedback to inform the successful adoption of its programs. Responses received this biennium include:

“To work with our planner on the technical matters of soil health, forestry, and wetland protection has been a high-level education for us.”

Stephen Sullivan, Lopez Island landowner with two District guided projects underway

“The planner had a host of resource recommendations for every question we had, and has made the District our first stop for any questions or projects we have in the future.”

Anonymous Farmer

“The cost-share program has been enormously helpful in advancing our efforts to make regenerative farming viable in San Juan County.”

Zach Chan, San Juan Island vegetable farmer with two completed District guided projects

7. Coordination with Regulatory Agencies

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 in support of fish habitat. 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.

As of January 2025, the station is no longer listed as Threatened.

- **West Sound Beaver Dam Analog Installation:**

In the West Sound watershed, SJICD has been working with the San Juan Preservation Trust (Preservation Trust) to improve water availability in a critical floodplain of Crow Valley Creek. After acquiring the property in 2023, the Preservation Trust began a long-term restoration project of the creek reach that runs through the property, previously degraded due to intensive livestock use. Several riparian forest buffer plantings were implemented in partnership with a District Implemented Project. The project also included the District's pilot beaver dam analog installation, whose goal is to extend the reach and period of available water for newly planted seedlings in the riparian management zone. The project has seen a lot of success—in its first season, channel meander has already begun— and will be used as a model for future restoration sites to encourage the return of braided channels throughout wetland landscapes.

8. Co-Existence of Conservation and Agricultural Viability

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

Wetland enhancement on working farms is an area of developing interest and participation for the San Juan Islands Conservation District. The District has undertaken two new wetland enhancement projects with three landowners on Orcas and Lopez Islands. All three landowners have elected to engage in voluntary restoration projects, acknowledging that a healthy farm ecosystem must include habitat for wildlife. They have agreed to take land out of high intensity agricultural use for restoration.

On Orcas, two landowners in a critically sensitive stream floodplain wetland have partnered together to voluntarily contribute four acres of prior converted agricultural wetland to restoration in order to better protect the stream and provide habitat connectivity to wildlife in the area. As part of a design that both increases critical area protection and does not cease agricultural activities, flash grazing will still be incorporated as a strategy to manage grasses temporarily for a week at a time, instead of months, in these areas when conditions allow. This restoration model reduces but does not eliminate the impact from grazing animals to a critical area.

On Lopez, a historical fire once burned through an agricultural valley, charring many grassed acres in its path. As a landowner observed the fire travel, he noticed it stopped at the prominent wetlands onsite, a potent reminder of the value of these critical areas. The landowner has since engaged the District in a voluntary wetland restoration project to occur alongside ongoing agricultural use in abutting fields. The restoration will eventually return waterways to their original state and will increase the water saturation level of the abutting fields for increased habitat. This project aims to unite, rather than separate, existing agricultural activities with critical area enhancements.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: ISPs Completed 2023-25 Biennium

Project Number	Island	Operation Type	Acres	BMPs Prescribed
1	San Juan	Agrovoltaic; Sheep	19	11
2	Orcas	Beef; Garden	10	11
3	San Juan	Hay; Habitat	40	11
4	Orcas	Mixed Livestock; Garden	40	11
5	San Juan	Beef; Horses; Garden	40	9
6	Orcas	Mixed Livestock; Garden; Orchard	20	8
7	Orcas	Beef	20	11
8	San Juan	Beef	40	11
9	San Juan	Mixed Livestock; Orchard; Garden	5	15
10	Lopez	Sheep; Poultry; Habitat	14	6
11	San Juan	Beef; Hay; Habitat	68	8
12	San Juan	Grains; Hay	26	8
13	Orcas	Beef; Hay	45	13
14	San Juan	Mixed Livestock	4	10
15	Orcas	Beef; Garden; Hay; Orchard	21	9
16	Lopez	Grains; Hay; Sheep	48	9
17	San Juan	Garden; Mixed Livestock; Carbon Farm Plan	50	14
18	Orcas	Vegetables	18	14
19	Lopez	Hay; Nursery; Sheep	38	13
20	Orcas	Flowers; Vegetables	1	6
21	San Juan	Vegetables; Flowers; Sheep	14	17
22	San Juan	Hay; Orchard	19	9
23	Lopez	Grains; Hay; Mixed Berries; Mixed Livestock; Orchard	21	9
24	San Juan	Garden; Wine	1	5
25	San Juan	Horses; Garden; Orchard	25	8
26	Lopez	Mixed Livestock; Vegetables	18	13
27	Lopez	Mixed Livestock; Vegetables	18	10
28	Orcas	Vegetables; Hay	61	17

Appendix 2: BMPs Implemented by Project 2023-25 Biennium

Project Number	Project Name	BMPs Implemented
1	Silvopasture and Prescribed Grazing Establishment	381 Silvopasture 382 Fence 441 Irrigation System, Microirrigation 614 Watering Facility 380 Windbreak/Shelterbelt Establishment and Renovation
2	Water Management and Animal Sheltering	576 Livestock Shelter Structure 582 Open Channel 606 Subsurface Drain 561 Heavy Use Area Protection 382 Fence
3	Livestock Access Control and Prescribed Grazing	382 Fence
4	Prescribed Grazing Facilitation	576 Livestock Shelter Structure 561 Heavy Use Area Protection 614 Watering Facility
5	Crow Valley Creek Riparian Restoration DIP #1	391 Riparian Forest Buffer SCC3 Beaver Dam Analog 666 Forest Stand Improvement
6	Garrison Creek Riparian Restoration DIP #1	391 Riparian Forest Buffer
7	Prescribed Grazing Facilitation	382 Fence
8	Fencing and Agricultural Viability	382 Fence
9	Irrigation Efficiency	441 Irrigation System, Microirrigation
10	Crow Valley Creek Riparian Restoration DIP #2	391 Riparian Forest Buffer
11	Water Catchment	636 Water Harvesting Catchment
12	Livestock Access Control	382 Fence
13	Irrigation Efficiency	441 Irrigation System, Microirrigation 430 Irrigation Pipeline
14	Garrison Creek Riparian Restoration #2	315 Herbaceous Weed Treatment 391 Riparian Forest Buffer
15	Irrigation Efficiency	441 Irrigation System, Microirrigation
16	Pollinator Habitat	420 Wildlife Habitat Planting
17	Garrison Creek Riparian Restoration DIP #3	391 Riparian Forest Buffer
18	Water Catchment	558 Roof Runoff Structure 620 Underground Outlet
19	Prescribed Grazing Facilitation	516 Livestock Pipeline 382 Fence
20	Prescribed Grazing Facilitation and Access Control	382 Fence
21	False Bay Creek Riparian Restoration DIP	391 Riparian Forest Buffer

Appendix 3: Acres of Agricultural Intersect with Critical Areas:

Critical Area	Acres of Agricultural Intersect in 2023
Wetlands (tidal and non-tidal)	1973
Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas, Upland Habitat ²	1328
Fish and Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas, Riparian ³	940

² 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.

³ This number was derived by calculating a 100-foot buffer along streams that intersect with ag parcels.

Geologically Hazardous Areas	828
Critical Aquifer Recharge Areas	14903
Frequently Flooded Areas	275

Appendix 4: San Juan Organizations Supporting Agricultural Viability

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 2023-2025 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 deferment program, where ISP development is tailored to the state program requirements as an add-in to standard plan development using NRCS standards and practices.

Food Systems Plan

The San Juan County Food Systems Plan was finalized in early 2025. It outlines comprehensive goals and strategies for individuals and various organizations to support local food production. It is based on a community food assessment conducted in 2022, which outlines the obstacles and opportunities for agriculture on the islands.