



Grain harvest, San Juan Island.

Executive Summary

The San Juan County Agricultural Strategic Action Plan identifies key goals and strategies that will result in the preservation of priority farmland and strategic actions to strengthen agriculture in San Juan County. Extensive outreach to stakeholders throughout the county provided essential input in the identification of priority issues and goals. Mapping analysis was conducted to identify priority farmland for preservation.



San Juan Island Farmers' Market.
Photo: Eliza Buck

This plan has been developed collaboratively by the San Juan County Agricultural Resources Committee, the San Juan County Land Bank, and the San Juan Preservation Trust. Funding for the plan was awarded through a grant from the Washington State Office of Farmland Preservation.

The following key findings and recommended actions from the strategic planning process reveal the complexity of the task that lies ahead.

- ❖ San Juan County has ample farmland for farming, including land historically farmed that is now marginally used for hay and grazing. Providing access to farmable land owned by non-farmers is essential to maintaining and expanding the agricultural economy.
- ❖ The continued use of farmland for hay production without adding soil amendments through sustainable livestock grazing or other organic inputs has led to a serious and prevalent depletion of soil fertility. Farming practices that include sustainable management of the soil are necessary to restore productive and fertile farms.
- ❖ The islands are primarily rocks in the sea, and most of the rainfall runs directly into the surrounding waters of Puget Sound. Limited aquifers and saltwater intrusion on the shorelines make most farming dependent on catchment ponds for irrigation and livestock watering.

- ❖ The mandates of the San Juan County Land Bank and the San Juan Preservation Trust include protection of farmland, and approximately 5,000 acres have already been conserved. Continued commitment by these organizations to the conservation of active farmland will be strengthened by

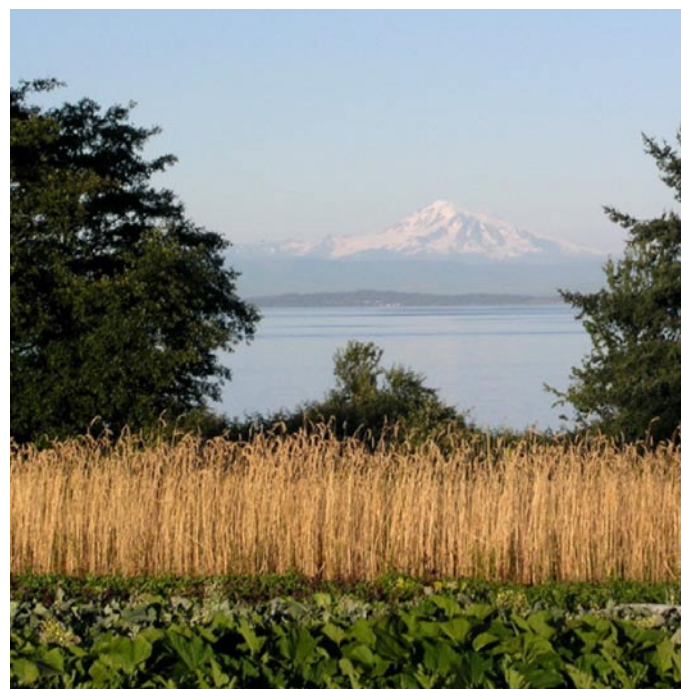
collaborative approaches to farmland management, programs to link farmers to conserved land, and funding to support these efforts.

- ❖ The average age of farmers in San Juan County is 61.8 years, higher than in other parts of the state. The majority of farmers in the county today have no plan for transferring their farm operation to the next generation, and for many, the value of their farmland as real estate is one of their greatest assets and a necessary part of their retirement plan. Appropriate state or local policies and regulations, as well as training, support, and resources are necessary to promote effective transfer, succession, and leasing of farmland for a new generation of farmers. Housing for these new farmers is a major issue as there are no code allowances for adding housing for succession farmers on existing farms, nor is there affordable housing available for new farming efforts on leased land.
- ❖ The average size of farms in San Juan County is now 20 acres, compared to 228 acres in 1964, reflecting the shift away from large farms with livestock operations to small, diversified farms growing market crops and some livestock for local consump-

tion. Conservation efforts should focus on “farmsheds”—areas with clusters of active small farms—as well as larger historic farms, thereby helping to preserve and maintain critical farm-related infrastructure and networking among farmers.

❖ The geographic isolation of San Juan County and the resulting high cost of infrastructure, inputs, and transportation act to limit the creation of infrastructure necessary for storage, value-added processing, and expansion of local agricultural production, businesses, and markets. Innovative, transportable and flexible cooperative approaches are needed to serve the needs of producers on each island. This isolation, however, also presents an opportunity. Islanders naturally place a high value on food security and may benefit from their isolation to preserve genetic diversity, for example, by establishing an organic seed industry. There is increasing concern and opposition to genetically modified organisms with islanders seeing their natural boundaries as extra protection for organic honey and seed production.

❖ Public and private land conservation organizations seek to provide public benefits through access, views, and habitat and historical preservation. These organizations could further benefit the community by encouraging opportunities such as educational programs on the farm, food production for food bank or local schools, new farmer training, affordable access for new farmers, or research by public agencies such as WSU Research Station.



**Blue Moon Produce,
Waldron Island**
Photo: Rebecca Moore

Following the countywide outreach meetings that established the above issues, stakeholders then identified the top five recommendations, which are presented in this plan. A list of the other priorities is included in Appendix 2.

The top recommendations are:

- ❖ Preserve farmland for farming;
- ❖ Adopt and promote scale-appropriate state and local regulations in order to foster farm businesses and support a thriving local farm economy;
- ❖ Promote opportunities for new farmers to establish successful farms;
- ❖ Develop adequate access to infrastructure necessary to process and maintain diverse agricultural operations;
- ❖ Expand local and regional marketing opportunities.

In order to achieve these recommendations, the first priority is to increase organizational capacity to support farming, conservation of farmland, and expansion of the agricultural economy. Successful implementation of strategic actions would involve a formalized collaborative approach bringing together committed organizations with expertise in key elements in strengthening agriculture in San Juan County.

As a result of this strategic planning process, it is clear that success in protecting farmland will ultimately be defined not only by the amount of farmland conserved, but also by the productive, profitable, and sustainable use of that farmland by local farmers, thereby contributing to a strong, diversified economy that benefits farmers and their community, while also building a viable and resilient local food system.

**“We bought the farm. We built the soil.”
~ Peter Corning, Synergy Farm,
San Juan Island**

Summary of Recommended Actions

Issue	Actions	Timeframe
Farmland	Update database to identify & map priority farmland for conservation	Annually
	Research & promote public/private collaborative strategies for conservation	1-2 yrs
	Support renewal of Land Bank charter	1 yr
	Promote incentives for farmland conservation tax programs	2-5 yrs
	Educate elected officials about benefits of protecting farmland	Ongoing
	Research feasibility of Transfer of Development Rights	5-10 yrs
Regulations	Promote and adopt scale-appropriate regulations and regulatory reform	Annually
	Promote initiatives and resolutions that support sustainable agriculture	Annually
	Promote statewide adoption of Small Farm Intern Pilot Program	1-2 yrs
Farmers	Develop and promote programs for new farmers	2-5 yrs
	Establish website and database to connect farmers with farmland	1-2 yrs
	Establish model lease documents	1-2 yrs
	Establish collaborative programs that facilitate training for new farmers on conserved farmland	1-2 yrs
	Research and propose innovative solutions to provide affordable farm housing for new farmers and workers	5-10 yrs
Infrastructure	Develop website and database to connect farmers to land with infrastructure	1-2 yrs
	Create cooperative approach for transportation of products and materials	2-5 yrs
	Research feasibility and funding opportunities for development of local processing facilities	2-5 yrs
	Promote creation of composting facility on each ferry-served island	2-5 yrs
	Research and promote collaborative approaches for funding to invest in infrastructure of conserved farmland	2-5 yrs
	Explore tax incentives or other programs to develop infrastructure	5-10 yrs
Marketing	Expand <i>Island Grown</i> program to promote and strengthen markets	1-2 yrs
	Promote opportunities for direct sales of local products	1-2 yrs
	Increase awareness through tasting events, community dinners, farm to chef	1-2 yrs
	Promote agritourism to educate consumers and to increase revenue for farmers	1-2 yrs
	Expand local produce section in island markets	2-5 yrs
	Develop and strengthen regional markets	2-5 yrs
Most importantly: Organizational Collaboration		
	Research and propose optimal organizational structure for collaborative systems approach to strengthen and advance agriculture for San Juan County	1 yr
	Conduct feasibility evaluation of proposed collaborative	1 yr
	Seek funding to support initial start-up of collaborative	1 yr
	Identify pilot project(s) for early implementation	1 yr
	Formalize organizational structure and funding to support ongoing implementation	1 yr
	Coordinate funding requests to maximize benefit for achieving mutual goals	1 yr