



# Conservation Program on Agriculture Lands

Critical Areas Ordinance

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## What is the Conservation Program on Agriculture Lands?

The well-being of farms and ranches in Whatcom County depends in part on good quality soil, water, air and other natural resources. Agriculture operations that incorporate protection of the environment, including critical areas are essential to achieving this goal.

The purpose of the Conservation Program on Agriculture Lands (CPAL) is to allow ongoing agriculture activities within critical areas and/or their associated buffers if those activities are consistent with a farm conservation plan approved by the County.

## What is a Farm Conservation Plan?

A farm conservation plan identifies the farming or ranching activities and practices necessary to avoid potential negative impacts on natural resources. Practice selection depends on the types of livestock raised or crops grown. Based on the type and intensity of an operation, some generalizations can be made about the resource concerns and remedies that apply.

Farm conservation plans are subject to County review, approval, monitoring, adaptive management, and enforcement. However, the following entities can provide technical assistance and recommendations for plan development:

- The Whatcom Conservation District

- A Watershed Improvement District (WID)
- A Qualified Planning Advisor

## What agricultural activities qualify for coverage under CPAL?

**Low-impact Agriculture Operations:** Some operations present relatively low risk to critical areas due to their nature, timing, frequency, or location. For these operations, resource concerns and remedies are relatively easy to identify and implement. To qualify as a low-impact operation, a farm must not have more than 1 animal unit per 1 acre of grazable pasture. Low-impact operations are subject to the provisions for Standardized Farm Conservation Plans.

**Moderate-impact to High-impact Agriculture Operations:** Without careful planning and management, these operations can present a potential moderate or high risk to critical areas, including ground or surface water, because the nutrients applied from manure or commercial fertilizers may exceed levels that can be easily used by the crops being grown.

*Moderate-impact Operations* include activities such as:

- Farms that exceed 1 animal unit per 1 acre of grazable pasture
- Orchards, vineyards, small fruit fields and row crops
- Drainage Improvement Districts

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*High-impact Operations* include activities such as:

- Dairies
- Animal Feeding Operations/Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (AFO/CAFOs)

Where potential impacts to critical areas are moderate or high, solutions can be more difficult to formulate and implement. In these cases, a more rigorous planning process may be required and a formal Custom Farm Conservation Plan may be needed to provide the necessary protection.

***What is an animal unit?*** An ‘animal unit’ means 1,000 pounds of livestock live weight.

## **Standard Farm Conservation Plan Requirements**

A standard farm conservation plan can be prepared by the landowner and include a basic map of the property, a standard checklist designed to protect water quality, and the following additional components where needed:

- System Siting & Design – site structures to avoid direct runoff into critical areas; establish filter strips where no trees or shrubs separate livestock areas and streams, lakes, wetlands, etc.; and retain existing trees and shrubs along streams, lakes, wetlands, etc.
- Manure Collection, Storage & Use – manage in a manner that avoids runoff of nutrients and bacteria into critical areas
- Pasture Management – manage according to “Prescribed Grazing”, NRCS Practice 528A

- Exercise or Barn Lots – stabilize and manage to prevent erosion and sedimentation
- Protection of existing native vegetation within critical area buffers

## **Custom Farm Conservation Plan Requirements**

*Moderate-impact Operations:* Where potential significant impacts to critical areas are identified through a risk assessment, then plans are to be prepared by:

- A Qualified Planning Advisor
- Through the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Services
- Whatcom Conservation District, or
- A Farmer or Rancher who directly participates in the CPAL Program and meets program requirements

*High-impact Operations:* Farm conservation plans that meet the criteria of state and federal laws. See US EPA Final Guidance - Managing Manure Guidance for Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) at: <http://epa.gov/guide/cafo/>.

## **Information**

Property owners may contact a Natural Resource Planner to answer any additional questions regarding this program.

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