

Whatcom County Rural Land Study 2019 Update: A Collaborative Report Identifying Rural Areas of Agricultural Significance and Tracking Changes Over Time



An Updated Report Presented to the Whatcom County Council,
Citizens and Landowners of Whatcom County, Washington



2019



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MEMORANDUM

TO: Whatcom County Council
FROM: Larry Davis, Chair, Agriculture Advisory Committee Chair
DATE: September 9, 2019
SUBJECT: Rural Land Study

The attached update to the Whatcom County Rural Land Study reflects a collaborative effort of the Agricultural Advisory Committee (AAC) and County Planning and Development Services. The original Rural Land Study was presented to the County Council on March 13, 2007. The updated report will be presented to the County Council on September 24, 2019.

The initial goal for the AAC during its 2018-19 calendar year workplan was to begin examining the Immediate Priority recommendations embodied in the updated County Agricultural Strategic Plan that the Council approved in August 2018. We realized that the committee and Council would benefit from reviewing the Rural Land Study of 2007 (a designated ‘Short-term Priority’). We accomplished the review and will be primed for the 2019-2020 workplan year to settle on and forward to the Council recommendations for changes to the Rural Land Study.

The primary objective of reviewing the Rural Land Study was to identify and map areas within Rural 5 and 10 zones that are of agricultural significance and may require additional protection to ensure long-term agriculture viability (important toward supporting “...a minimum 100,000 acres of land are available for agricultural use to maintain the necessary land base to support an economically viable agricultural industry.”)

The areas recognized in this update include the 2007 Rural Study Areas, which incorporated the Purchase of Development Rights program’s original twelve target areas, and adds additional areas identified by the AAC. The Rural Land Study is a research document. It is meant to provide guidance in the development of heightened agricultural protection measures for the areas identified, and supports priorities listed in the Agricultural Strategic Plan. This report includes a map for each of the proposed areas identified in the study.

If you have any questions prior to the Council meeting, please do not hesitate to contact Chris Elder, the AAC’s Planning and Development Services staff contact, at 360-778-5932.

Respectfully submitted:



Larry Davis, Chair
Agricultural Advisory Committee

Signed on behalf of the other Agricultural Advisory Committee Members:

Anna Martin	Jeff Rainey	Dave Buys	Jagjiwan Brar	Melodie Kirk
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RURAL LAND STUDY UPDATE

September 10, 2019

Introduction:

Rapid residential development of agricultural and forest lands continues to highlight the urgent need for greater protection efforts by the community. The Whatcom County Council included the Agricultural Strategic Plan Implementation in the 2019 Annual Comprehensive Plan Docket, which addresses heightened protection of agricultural lands and support of the agricultural industry (Exhibit A – 2018 Agricultural Strategic Plan).

Of primary significance in the update of the Agricultural Strategic Plan are the programs and policies contained therein that strive to 1) reduce development density, 2) reduce conversion and fragmentation of farmland, 3) preserve agricultural neighborhoods and 4) protect open space from fragmentation.

This update to the initial 2007 Rural Land Study report provides a detailed summary of the impacts of development on identified ‘Rural Study Areas’ from 2000 to 2018. Additionally this report provides an assessment of Agricultural zoned lands as well so as to provide comparable data and take advantage of the land assessment and review exercise.

Background:

The Whatcom County Council designated agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance in 1991 as required by the Growth Management Act, (RCW 36.70A.170). Land designated as agricultural was subsequently zoned Agriculture. Rural zoned lands do not include designated long-term, commercially significant agricultural land but do contain many working farms and prime agricultural soils. During the Comprehensive Plan adoption process, Whatcom County established 100,000 acres as the minimum quantity of land necessary to ensure the on-going viability of agriculture in Whatcom County. In an effort to meet the “critical mass” protection goal, Whatcom County adopted the Agricultural Protection Overlay (APO) as part of the 1997 development regulations.

Changes have occurred to the APO Chapter text since its 1997 adoption. Changes occurred in the following years: 1) 1998 – Ordinance 98-083; 2) 2001 – Ordinance 2001- 016; 3) 2002 – Ordinance 2002-060. Central to the APO ordinance is the reliance on site-specific criteria to determine whether or not APO provisions are required. APO determinations are largely dependent on whether a majority of the property is comprised of APO soils (as listed in WCC 20.38.040) or if the majority of the property is enrolled in Agricultural Open Space tax program. APO protections and requirements are initiated at the time of property subdivision. Therefore, under this approach agricultural protection is random and highly scattered.

It has been estimated that APO protection could be applied to 28,000 acres of Rural zoned land. While the County goal is to protect 100,000 acres of farmland, it is unclear as to whether the APO “protected parcels” will be in proximity to areas that are currently in agricultural uses. The usefulness of land for agricultural purposes is dependent on many factors including the quality of soils and the size of the protected parcel. Additionally, convenience and proximity to other agricultural land is important, particularly in developing areas where increasing traffic volume is making the use of farm vehicles more and more impractical and dangerous.

In response to criticisms about the “scattered” nature of protection provided by the current APO, and in response to the County Council’s Comprehensive Plan Docketed items, the Agricultural Advisory Committee met over the summer of 2006 to identify areas in Rural 5 and 10 acre zones that are most important to maintaining the agricultural sector of Whatcom County. The current Agricultural Advisory Committee reviewed these previously identified Rural Study Areas and looked at other areas in Rural 5 and 10 acre zones to re-evaluate areas that are most important to maintaining the agricultural sector of Whatcom County.

Project Objective:

The primary objective of the rural land study was to identify and map areas within the Rural 5 and 10 Zones that are of agricultural significance and may require additional protection to ensure long-term agricultural viability. The areas identified in this study are in addition to and incorporate the Purchase of Development Rights program’s original target areas, which were recognized as areas of significant agricultural importance and thusly have required additional protection.

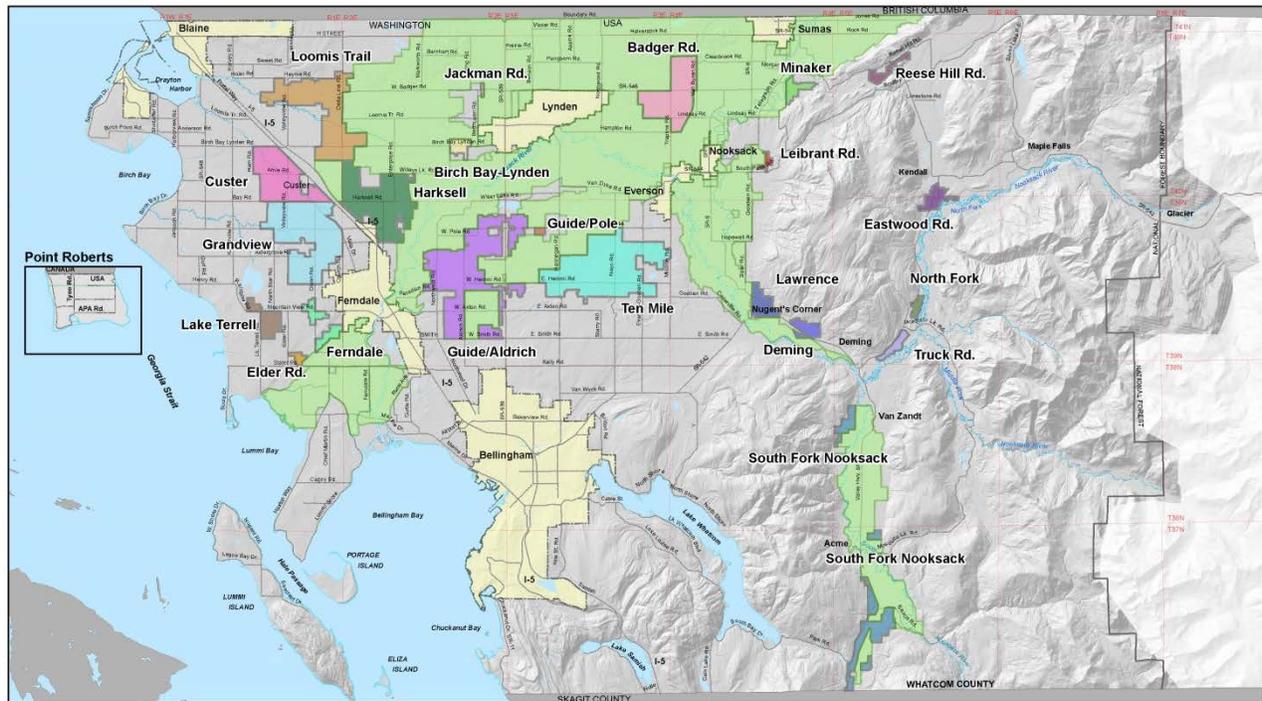
Staff used the following data to provide an assessment to the Agricultural Advisory Committee for consideration.

Project Data and Analysis:

1. Geographic Information System (GIS) Analysis and mapping
 - a. 2004 digital air photos
 - b. 2016 digital air photos (higher resolution)
 - c. NRCS SSURGO Soils layer
 - APO Soils layer
 - d. 2017 WSDA Crop distribution data layer
 - e. 2019 FEMA Flood layer
 - f. 2017 Critical Area habitat conservation area layers, Whatcom County
 - g. 2005 County Assessor data, Whatcom County
 - h. 2018 County Assessor data, Whatcom County
 - i. 2019 Zoning layer, Whatcom County
 - j. 2000 - 2018 Whatcom County PDS permit data
 - k. 2007 Rural Study Areas layer
 - l. 2018 Rural Study Areas layer

Area Selection Process:

The Agricultural Advisory Committee, in conjunction with PDS staff, has identified 22 rural areas comprising approximately 28,449 acres that have high agricultural value. This represents an increase in acreage from the original Rural Study Area report. The 22 identified areas are shown on Map 1 below.



**Whatcom County
- Rural Study Areas**

Agriculture Zone

SEE WHATCOM COUNTY'S GIS DATA ONLINE FOR MORE INFORMATION WITH THE FOLLOWING GUIDANCE:
Whatcom County disclaims any warranty of merchantability or warranty of fitness for a particular purpose, either express or implied. It represents and warrants that the accuracy, completeness or quality of the material on this map. The user of this map assumes all responsibility for use thereof, and neither Whatcom County nor its employees shall be held liable for any damages or losses resulting from the use of this map.



Map 1: 2019 Agricultural Advisory Committee Approved Rural Study Areas

The criteria for establishing these areas include a consideration of:

1. Proximity to active agricultural areas:
 - a. Adjacent to Agriculture District
 - b. In or adjacent to a PDR Target Area or previously identified Rural Study Area
 - c. Inclusion of area provides buffer between Ag zone and more intensive uses
2. Current land use characterized by agriculture – visual analysis
3. High percentage of APO and prime soils
4. Parcelization of the area:
 - a. Acreage totals by parcel size
 - i. Total acreage by parcel size is used to determine the percent of area still in large (10+ acre) parcels
 - b. Number of parcels by given size
 - i. Breakdown by parcel size indicates character of land use in the area
5. Land use as identified on Assessors records (Agricultural Open Space)
6. Evaluation of forested areas for potential ecological benefits adjacent to agricultural use.

A summary of total acreage and potential additional development units (development rights) by area is included below in Table 1.

Area Summaries:

Summaries are included for each identified rural study area with the majority of data provided on the two maps created for each area as provided in Exhibit G. Exhibit G contains maps and graphs detailing specific characteristics of each area. Exhibit D provides a table of each area’s change in land use from 2004 - 2016 and Exhibit E provides a table of the parcel size breakdown and identifies the number of existing and potential development units.

Exhibit H contains maps and graphs detailing specific characteristics of the Agriculture Zone. The Ag Zone was broken up into 6 regions to allow for a closer look at different areas of the Ag Zone. Additional data for these Ag Zone areas are included in the other exhibits as well.

Final Review and Conclusions:

This update to the Rural Land Study involved an in-depth analysis of County Rural 5 and 10 acres zoned lands, in addition to Agricultural zoned lands. The western portion of the County was depicted on maps that included the combination of air-photo, parcel layer, soils layer and other data sets referenced above. Each area of the County was carefully reviewed by the AAC and specific areas were identified as possible “keepers” or as not likely to provide significant benefit to overall agricultural productivity within the County.

The eastern boundary of the agricultural area has historically been the foothills, although there are exceptions – South Fork Valley, Minaker Road area, North Fork Road, Truck Road, and along South Pass Road that were included in this update due their continued agricultural use.

Conclusions:

The areas identified in this update comprise some of the best soils in close proximity to the heart of actively farmed land within Whatcom County and are experiencing significant development pressure and conversion to non-agricultural uses. The project’s determination of proposed areas should not be viewed as a basis to foreclose agricultural activities in other areas of the County. Rather the focus of this study is identify those lands that are critically important for the reasons noted previously in the report – quality of soils, current land use, proximity to intensively farmed areas of the County, development pressure, ecological benefits, and agricultural neighborhoods.

Area	Total Acres	Potential Additional Development Unit
Birch Bay-Lynden	249	19
Custer	2,058	114
Deming	318	46
East Badger	2,098	105
Eastwood Road	406	22
Elder Road	113	20
Ferndale	518	72
Grandview	3,682	319
Guide Aldrich	4,596	267
Guide/Pole	72	15
Harksell	2,992	236
Jackman Road	35	4
Lake Terrell	555	77
Lawrence	492	52
Leibrant	98	5
Loomis Trail	3,142	246
Minaker	282	22
North Fork	128	8
Reese Hill Road	258	17
South Fork	1,497	95
Ten Mile	4,633	320
Truck Road	227	11
Total Acreage	28,449	2,092

Table 1: 2018 Rural Study Areas

Recommendation:

The Agricultural Advisory Committee wanted to present its findings to the Whatcom County Council and recommends that Whatcom County adopt heightened agricultural protection measures for the rural areas identified by this study. Existing programs, such as the Purchase of Development Rights Program and Open Space Farm and Agriculture Current Use Assessment program, are known to be effective tools to provide heightened agricultural protection measures. The Agricultural Advisory Committee will develop and recommend additional heightened agricultural protection measures during its 2019-2020 committee season.