

December 19, 2007

Topic #5: Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program Farmland Preservation Program Evaluation Criteria

Prepared & Presented By: Kammie Bunes

Approved by the Director:

Proposed Action: Adopt Resolution 2008-04

Summary

After the first two grant cycles, the Farmland Preservation Advisory Committee along with applicants requested changes to make the evaluation instrument easier to use and to ensure it assesses the appropriate elements in support of the overall intent of the program. This memorandum summarizes proposed modifications and outlines staff's recommendation.

Staff Recommendation

RCO staff recommends adoption of revisions to the evaluation instrument as outlined in Attachment A, *Farmland Preservation Program Evaluation Criteria*. Proposed deletions are shown as ~~strikeouts~~ and additions are underlined. The revisions include:

1. Expanding the elements considered in the *Agricultural Values* criteria to minimize bias against rangeland projects.
2. Consolidating the *Threat* and *Urgency* elements to reduce confusion and redundancy.
3. Adding questions for consideration under the *Environmental Values* criteria to help clarify intent.
4. Increasing the maximum points given for the *Community Values* question.
5. Establishing a formula for awarding points under the *Term* element, which considers the length of time the farmland is protected through acquiring or leasing development rights.

Background

In 2005 the Washington State Legislature expanded the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program to include the Farmland Preservation Program, which provides grants for protecting farmland through acquisition of development rights. The Recreation

and Conservation Funding Board establishes program policies, including adoption of the evaluation criteria used for scoring and ranking projects. These policies and criteria are included in Manual 10f, *Farmland Preservation Program: Policies and Project Selection*.

This year, during the Farmland Preservation Program Advisory Committee meeting held at the end of the evaluation session, the Committee recommended modifications to the evaluation instrument. Of particular concern was the challenge of scoring and ranking projects that involved preservation of rangelands. Evaluators felt the existing criteria were potentially biased against rangelands and requested modifications to address this issue along with others outlined in this memorandum.

Discussion

1. Agricultural Values Questions. The goal in modifying this set of criteria is to level the competition between rangeland and cropland proposals. This can be accomplished with slight edits to the existing criteria under *Agricultural Values – Importance*, as shown in the evaluation instrument attached to this memorandum. The modifications include adding livestock forage to the *soil type* element, and adding comparison of rangeland to other ranches under the *economic productivity* element.

Two of the nine elements under *Agricultural Values – Viability* were identified as potentially favoring cropland projects. They are:

- On-site production and support facilities, and
- Proximity to roads and utilities.

RCO staff proposes slight modifications to the elements considered for on-site infrastructure that should help rangeland projects be more competitive. Cropland projects will still answer the question on proximity to roads and utilities, but rangeland projects will instead address carrying capacity. Carry capacity may be defined as the maximum number of animals that can graze on a site without inducing a downward trend in forage production, forage quality, or soil over time. Carrying capacity relates directly to viability for rangeland.

2. Threat and Urgency. The purpose of these two elements is to assess the threat and likelihood that the proposed property will be converted to a non-agricultural use, and to assess how urgent it is to acquire the property rights. A property may appear to be highly threatened based on a steady pattern of development in the area, but not carry a high degree of urgency if, for example, the landowner is making a good living and is committed to farming the property for the next 20 years. Another property may be further from an urban growth area thus having less pressure for

development, but could have a high degree of urgency if the landowner is anxious to dispose of the property for reasons such as poor health or financial need.

Measuring threat and urgency has been a complicated topic for evaluators each cycle. In 2006 the two criteria were paired in the *Other* section of the evaluation questions. In the 2007 cycle, the concept of threat (and associated point value) was moved to the *Agricultural Values – Viability* section and urgency remained in the *Other* section.

Evaluators still found it difficult to score these elements, and applicants found it awkward and repetitive to have to address a very similar concept in two different places in the criteria (under both *Agricultural Values* and *Other*). Staff suggests taking the urgency element from the *Other* category and combining it with the threat element under *Agricultural Values – Viability*. This criterion already has the highest possible score of any question within the evaluation instrument. Staff recommends leaving the maximum point value for the criterion at 16.

3. Environmental Values. RCO staff was asked to modify these questions to help clarify the intent and make it easier for applicants to answer and evaluators to score. Specifically, evaluators want applicants to:

- Focus on the specific environmental values of the subject farm included in their proposal when discussing or describing planning documents and priorities, rather than speaking in general about how the environmental values of the farm match or support broad goals within the documents. For example, does the document call for this reach of the creek to be protected, or does it simply say conserving riparian habitat is beneficial?
- Identify fish and wildlife species that will benefit from the habitat on the property and incorporate information about management strategies that support these species and any past restoration or stewardship efforts undertaken by the farmer.
- Describe existing environmental conditions and the benefits to be derived from implementation of the project (for projects that include acquisition and restoration).

The *Environmental Values* section consists of two sets of questions. The first is answered by applicants submitting projects focused solely on acquiring property rights. The second set is answered by applicants submitting projects that have acquisition *plus* restoration elements. RCO staff proposes several changes as shown in Attachment A.

4. Community Values. Farmland Preservation Program Advisory Committee members recommend increasing the points available under this set of questions, primarily to increase the relative value but also to provide a greater range for

differentiation from one project to another. RCO staff proposes to double the point value for “*community support for the project.*” This change simply increases the importance of community values relative to agricultural and environmental values.

Staff also proposes moving from the *Other* section to the *Community Values* section the question about the farm or ranch acting as a demonstration project. This question fits well in the *Community Values* section and moving it has the added benefit of increasing the maximum number of points available in *Community Values*.

5. **Term.** The *Other* section includes a question that focuses on the duration of easements and leases acquired. Leases and “term” agricultural conservation easements with durations of no less than 25 years are eligible for FPP funding. The RCFB, however, has indicated a preference for acquiring development rights in perpetuity and has adopted a policy requiring longer terms to receive additional points in the scoring process. Perpetual easements currently receive 10 points out of a total possible score of 125.

Earlier this year the majority of stakeholder comments on this issue indicated a preference for increasing the point value and assigning points based on a predetermined formula rather than being left to the discretion of individual evaluation team members. Staff is proposing the formula shown on Attachment A.

Next Steps

Currently staff is soliciting public comments on the proposed recommendations. Comments received will be distributed to the Board prior to its decision at the January meeting.

Any changes adopted by the Board will be incorporated into Manual #10f, *WWRP Farmland Preservation Program: Policies and Project Selection*, and will affect grant requests beginning with the 2008 grant cycle.

Attachments

- Resolution 2008-04
- Attachment A, *Farmland Preservation Program Evaluation Criteria*

RESOLUTION #2008-04
Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program
Farmland Preservation Program Evaluation Instrument Revisions

WHEREAS, Chapter 79A.15 RCW established the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP); and

WHEREAS, Chapter 79A.15 RCW authorizes the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board (RCFB) to adopt policies and rules for WWRP; and

WHEREAS, the RCFB desires to incorporate a change to the WWRP policy manual regarding the evaluation instrument for the Farmland Preservation Program; and

WHEREAS, the proposed revisions have been made available for review and comment by individuals and organizations that have expressed an interest in WWRP; and

WHEREAS, adoption of this resolution furthers the Recreation and Conservation Office's 2007-2011 Strategic Plan objective to provide leadership through policy development by considering new and updated policy recommendations (Goal 1, Strategy 1.1); and

WHEREAS, final adoption of this policy revision will be incorporated into Manual 10f: *WWRP: Farmland Preservation Program: Policies and Project Selection*;

NOW, THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, that the evaluation instrument for the Farmland Preservation Program be revised as shown on Attachment A of memo topic #5, dated December 19, 2007; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that RCO staff is directed to take the necessary steps for implementation of these revisions beginning with the 2008 grant cycle.

Resolution moved by: _____

Resolution seconded by: _____

Adopted/Defeated/Deferred (underline one)

Date: January 15, 2008

**Attachment A
Farmland Preservation Program
Evaluation Criteria Summary Table**

Proposed deletions are shown as ~~strikeouts~~ and additions are underlined.

Criteria	Points
<p>Agricultural Values</p> <p>Importance: Soil types; suitability for producing agricultural products; size; economic productivity; fit of the project to local priorities</p> <p>Viability: On-site production and support facilities; farm to market access; proximity to roads and utilities (<u>croplands only</u>); <u>carrying capacity (rangelands only)</u>; water availability; drainage; presence of other features that could hinder or restrict use for agriculture; zoning; likelihood that the farm will remain in agriculture; <u>immediacy of threat to conversion to non-agricultural uses</u>; likelihood that the region will continue to support agriculture</p>	68
<p>Environmental Values (Acquisition only projects)</p> <p>Recommended as part of a plan or strategy; benefits to salmonids, migratory birds, other fish and wildlife habitat; integration with recovery efforts for endangered, threatened, or sensitive species; existing or proposed environmental management/stewardship plan</p>	22
OR	
<p>Environmental Values (Combination acquisition and restoration projects)</p> <p>Enhancement or restoration projects must further ecological functions: Consider the benefits to fish and wildlife species, especially endangered, threatened or sensitive species; benefits to habitat forming processes</p> <p>Consider the likelihood that the anticipated benefits will be realized: Project is based on accepted methods; project is likely to achieve the anticipated benefits</p> <p>Recommended as part of a plan or strategy</p>	22
<p>Community Values and Priorities</p> <p>Community support for the project; consistency with a local land use or a regional or statewide recreational or resource plan</p> <p>Other community values: Viewshed; aquifer recharge; occasional or periodic collector for storm water runoff; floods; agricultural sector job creation; educational and curriculum potential; historic value; buffer to public lands, <u>demonstration</u></p>	8 <u>12</u>
Other	27

Urgency; Term; cost benefit; local match; sponsor's ability to acquire, manage, monitor, and enforce conservation easements; demonstration	<u>31</u>
Total points available	125 <u>133</u>

Farmland Preservation Program Evaluation Criteria

A. Agricultural values. Preservation of farmlands in order to maintain the opportunity for agricultural activity.

- a. **Importance.** How important is this farmland to the region and state?
 - a. Soil types; percent of property with important soil types. Consider presence of prime and unique soils; soils important or appropriate for the anticipated crops, and/or livestock forage, and local climatic conditions; soils important to the region *(maximum 5 points)*
 - b. Suitability for producing the current or anticipated agricultural products *(maximum 5 points)*
 - c. Size. Consider whether the size of the commercially productive portion of the property is adequate for the intended agricultural use. Give preference to larger parcels, especially as compared to other parcels with the same type of agricultural activity in the same area *(maximum 5 points)*
 - d. Economic productivity. Give preference for farms with greater incomes or potential incomes. Compare rangeland to other ranches, rather than to cropland. *(maximum 5 points)*
 - e. Fit of the project to local priorities. If the sponsor has a land preservation program that includes farmland and/or has developed a strategy for farmland preservation, consider the extent that the project addresses priorities in that program and/or strategy *(maximum 5 points)*

- a. **Viability.** The viability of the site for continued agricultural production and the likelihood it will remain in production:
 - a. On-site production and support facilities such as barns, irrigation systems, crop processing and storage facilities, wells, housing, livestock watering, rangeland fencing, livestock sheds, and other farming or ranching infrastructure *(maximum 3 points for cropland projects, maximum 2 points for rangeland projects)*
 - b. Farm-to-market access *(maximum 3 points)*
 - c. Cropland projects only: Proximity to roads and utilities *(maximum 3 points)*
 - d. Rangeland projects only: Carrying capacity (maximum 4 points)
 - e. Water availability. Does the property have legitimate water rights and adequate water to support intended or likely agriculture activities? *(maximum 4 points)*
 - f. Drainage *(maximum 3 points)*

- g. Presence of other features that could hinder or restrict use for agriculture (access, presence of frost pockets, chronic flooding, invasive species, nearby land uses or activities that could constrain agricultural activities) (*maximum deduction up to -5 points. No such features would result in zero points*)
- h. Zoning. Consider whether the property is in an Agricultural Protection District or other type of protected zone (ex. "Agricultural Natural Resource Lands" zoning in Skagit) (*maximum 4 points*)
- i. Likelihood that the farm will remain in agriculture if protected. What is the likelihood that acquiring the development rights on this property will make a difference in keeping the property in agricultural production? Consider whether there is an increased likelihood that the property will be converted to nonagricultural uses if it is not protected. What and how imminent are the threats to ongoing agricultural use? Are these new or ongoing threats? This item applies to factors ~~not already covered in items a—g~~ that could affect long-term viability, such as landowner motivation, potential for rezoning, history of farmland conversion in the area, and anticipated development patterns. (*maximum 16 points*)
- j. Likelihood that the region will continue to support agriculture. Consider the condition of local farming infrastructure; proximity to other protected agricultural lands; other farmland protection and conservation efforts; land use designations (*maximum 7 points*)

B. Environmental values (for evaluating acquisition-only projects)

1. Is the type and quality of habitat found on this property specifically A recommended for preservation as part of a limiting factors or critical pathways analysis, a watershed plan or habitat conservation plan, a ~~listed species recovery plan~~, the Washington State Natural Heritage Plan, or a coordinated region wide prioritization effort? Does the property contribute to recovery efforts for endangered, threatened, or sensitive species? What specific role does the habitat play in supporting this/these species? (*maximum -4-9 points (incorporates points from B.3. below)*)
2. ~~Benefits to salmonids, migratory bird habitat and forage area, and other fish and wildlife habitat~~ Describe the ecological and biological quality of the habitat and its benefits to fish and wildlife. What species/communities benefit from habitat on this property? How is this habitat important in providing food, water, cover, connectivity, and resting areas? Are other protected lands near or adjoining this farm managed in a manner that is complementary or compatible for these species? Is the farm property part of the larger ownership? If so, describe management of the larger ownership. (*maximum 9 points*)
3. ~~Integration with recovery efforts for endangered, threatened, or sensitive species~~ (*maximum 5 points added to B1 above*)
3. Is there an existing or proposed environmental management/stewardship plan or conservation plan for the farm/ranch? ÷ Is the farm/ranch certified under some

sort of sound environmental practices or sustainability program? Describe any stewardship activities undertaken by the landowner in the past and the results of those efforts. (maximum 4 points)

---OR---

B. Environmental values (for evaluating acquisition + restoration/enhancement projects)

1. Enhancement or restoration projects must further the ecological functions of the farmlands.
 - a. Consider the current habitat values of the property. How is this habitat important in providing food, water, cover, connectivity, and resting areas? Has the landowner already undertaken successful stewardship activities on the farm/ranch? (maximum 2 points)
 - b. Consider the benefits to fish and wildlife species, especially endangered, threatened or sensitive species, including benefits to plant and animal communities and the habitat on which they depend (maximum ~~5~~ 3 points)
 - c. Benefits to habitat forming processes, for example restoring the ability of a river or stream to transport gravel and fine sediment or restoring native riparian vegetation to provide for a future source of shade, detritus and woody debris (maximum 4 points)
2. Consider the likelihood that the anticipated benefits will be realized. This would be based on the use of accepted methods, sound project design and siting, etc.
 - a. The project is based on accepted methods of achieving beneficial enhancement or restoration results (maximum 3 points)
 - b. The project is likely to achieve the anticipated benefits. Consider siting, project type, management/stewardship plan, proposed monitoring and evaluation (maximum 6 points)
3. Does the proposed restoration or enhancement address needs or priorities identified in a limiting factors or critical pathways analysis, a watershed plan or habitat conservation plan, a listed species recovery plan, the Washington State Natural Heritage Plan, or a coordinated region wide prioritization effort? (maximum 4 points)

C. Community values and priorities

1. Community support for the project (maximum ~~3~~ 6 points)
2. Consistency with a local land use plan, or a regional or statewide recreational or resource plan. The projects that assist in the implementation of local shoreline master plans updated according to RCW 90.58.080 or local comprehensive plans updated according to RCW 36.70A.130 must be highly considered in the process (maximum 2 points)

3. Other community values provided by the property when used as agricultural land, including, but not limited to:
 - ▶ Viewshed
 - ▶ Aquifer recharge
 - ▶ Occasional or periodic collector for storm water runoff and/or providing flood capacity
 - ▶ Agricultural sector job creation
 - ▶ Educational potential
 - ▶ Historic value
 - ▶ Buffer to public lands
 - ▶ [Demonstration project](#)(maximum ~~3~~ 4 points)

D. Other

- ~~1. **Urgency.** Consider the likelihood of conversion to nonagricultural uses in the next five years if the property is not protected. (maximum 5 points)~~
- ~~2. **Term.** The minimum term for a lease or agricultural easement is 25 years. Provide additional points for longer terms, with the greatest number of points for property preserved in perpetuity (maximum 10 points)~~
1. **Cost benefit.** Consider the percentage of total acreage that is in agricultural production or set aside to preserve ecological values (versus the percentage of the property that is taken up by structures, roads, etc.; allow for acreage that is not in agricultural production for the purpose of preserving ecological values, such as protected riparian buffers, CREP leases). Consider cost per acre? Consider contributions by the landowner, for example a bargain sale? (maximum 5 points)
2. **Local match.** Consider the amount of local (non-state, non-federal) match to be provided by the grant recipient. Includes contribution of land, labor, and materials (maximum 2 points)
3. **Sponsor's ability to acquire, manage, monitor and enforce conservation easements.** Consider the history of project sponsor in acquiring, managing and enforcing easements. Consider whether the applicant has an established farmland PDR (purchase of development rights) or conservation easement program and staff devoted to farmland protection. Consider the ability and experience of any organizations or entities assisting or partnering with the sponsor. For counties and cities without an established farmland PDR or conservation easement program, consider whether the award of a grant will provide the impetus for establishing a continuing program. Consider the presence of an endowment or other dedicated funding sources for management, monitoring and enforcement (maximum 4 points)

4. **Term.** The following formula will be used to determine points for duration of lease or easement:

Duration of Conveyance	Point Value
Perpetual Easement	20
Easement or Lease of 60 plus years	10
Easement or Lease of 40 plus years	5
Easement or Lease of less than 40 years	0

5. ~~**Demonstration.** Whether the project will act as a demonstration project in the community *(maximum 1 point)*~~