

THURSTON COUNTY AGRICULTURE

*Survey Results
April 2021*



OVERVIEW

The Thurston County Community Planning and Economic Development Department, in partnership with WSU Extension, conducted a voluntary survey on thoughts and concerns on agriculture in Thurston County. The survey was available for the public to take in January-February, 2021.

The results of this survey will inform a project on the 2020-2021 Comprehensive Plan Amendment Docket, Community-Driven Review of Agriculture Policies and Programs and will help scope the priorities for County analysis and action.

Ideas and actions identified in this survey are drawn from the Thurston County Comprehensive Plan, Working Lands Strategic Plan, Sustainable Thurston, and the Agriculture Advisory Committee. This survey was developed with input from the Thurston County Agriculture Advisory Committee.

METHODS

The survey was advertised using social media outlets, press releases, and through our partners including WSU Extension, Thurston County Conservation District, and the Thurston County Advisory Committee.

There are 38 questions including multiple choice, short answer, and ranking. The complete results of the survey are available by request.

In each chart n=the number of applicable responses.

Written comments were paraphrased and similar comments were not repeated.

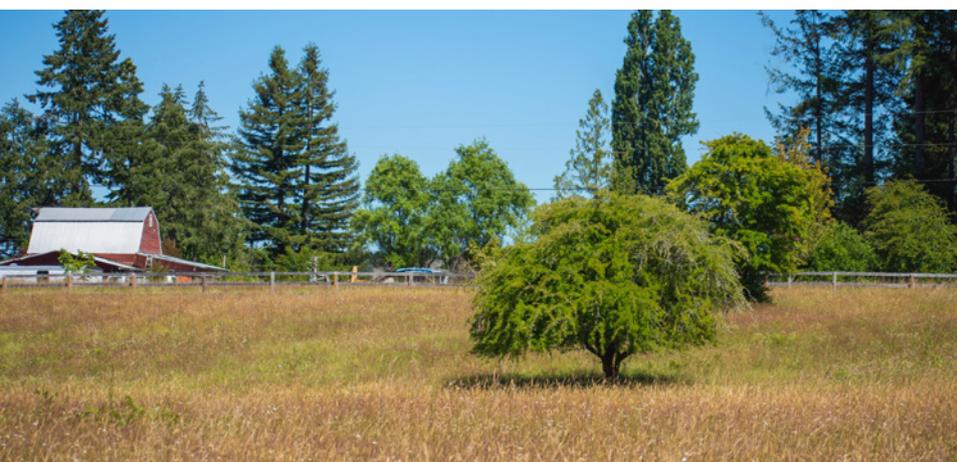
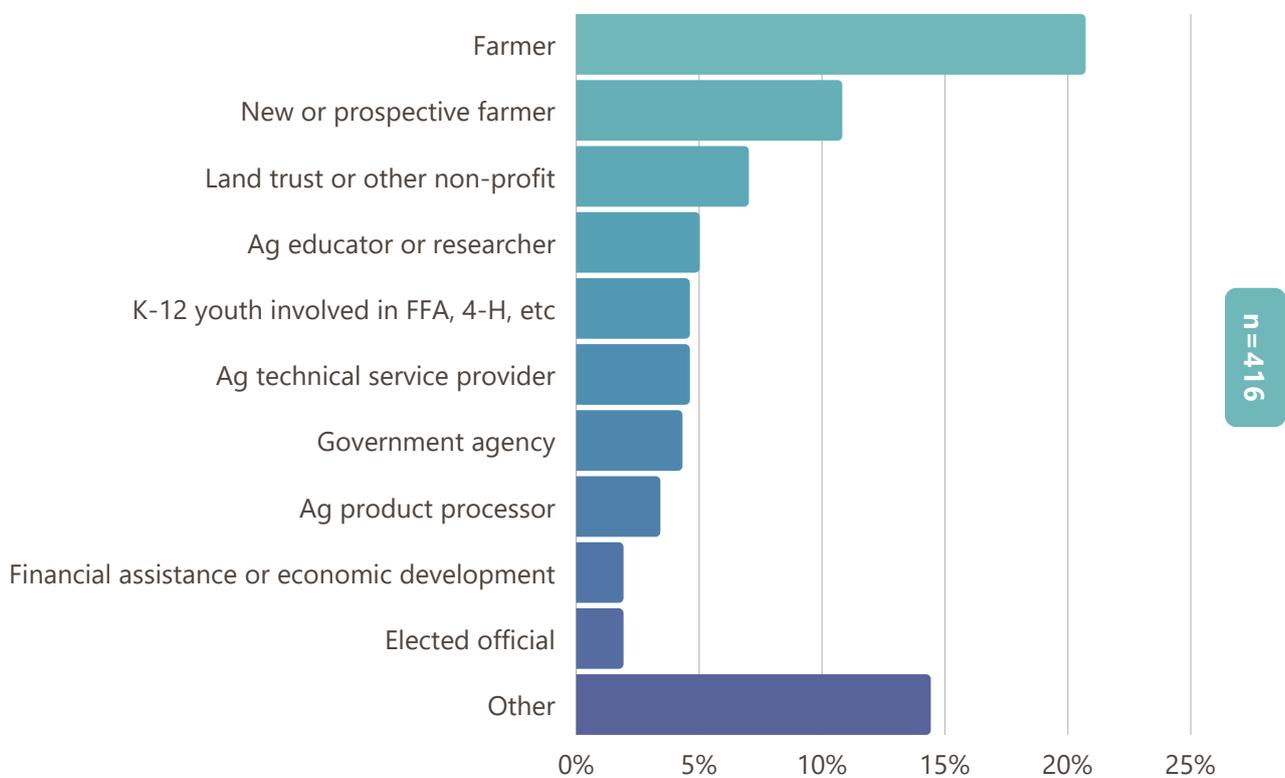
For more information please visit Thurston County Community Planning at thurstonplanning.org.



WHO TOOK THE SURVEY

420 people of varying backgrounds and interest answered one or more survey questions. Of those respondents, 99 described themselves as "currently farming", 65 described themselves as "prospective farmers", and 302 described themselves as "interested citizens". Other categories are shown in the chart below. Respondents could select all that apply.

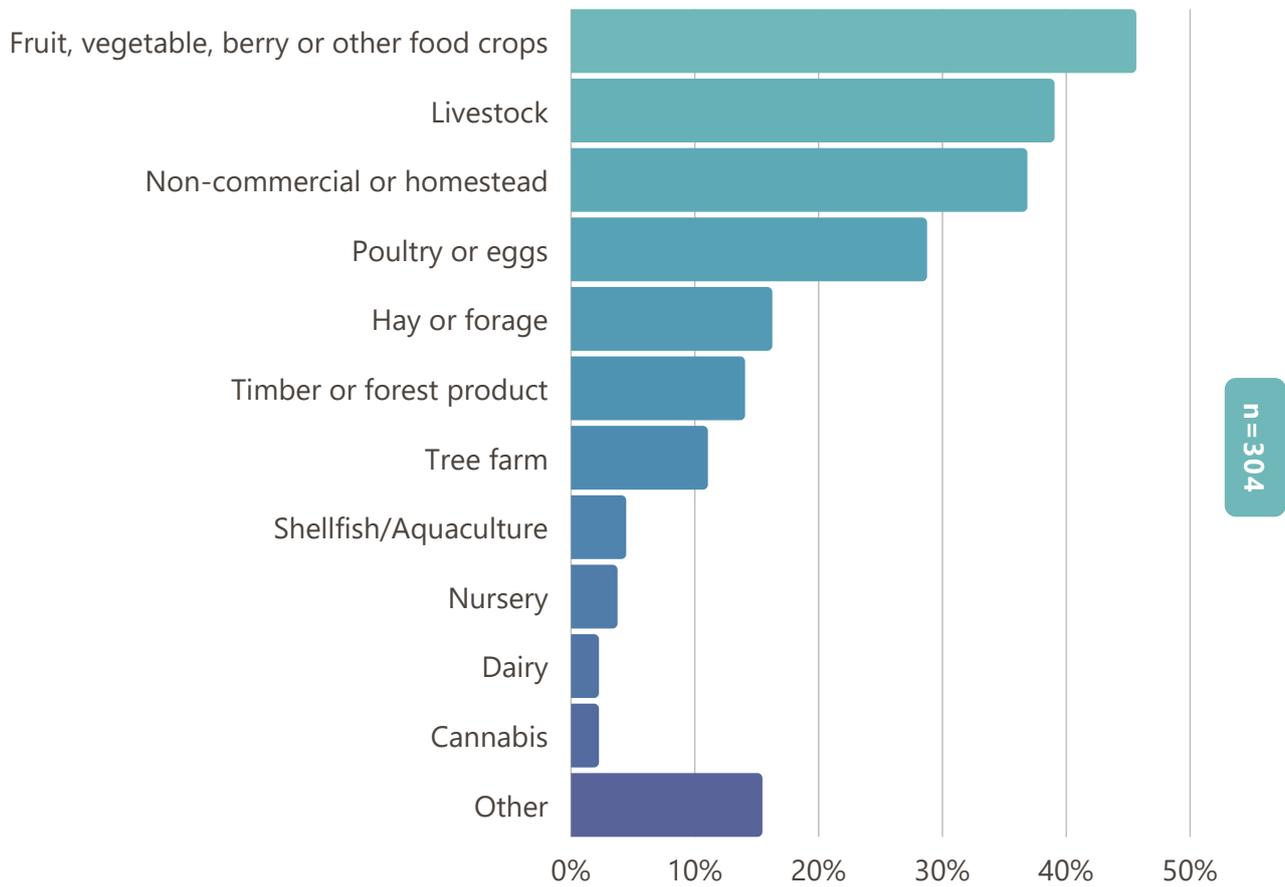
In the "Other" category, respondents described themselves as real estate brokers, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) participants, farmers market coordinator, homesteaders and home gardeners, and property owners.



164
respondents described themselves as currently farming or prospective farmers.

WHAT THEY'RE FARMING

Food crops, livestock, and poultry were the top three commercial agriculture products respondents said they produce. Respondents selected all that applied.



199

respondents said they were interested in participating in future stakeholder groups or community meetings

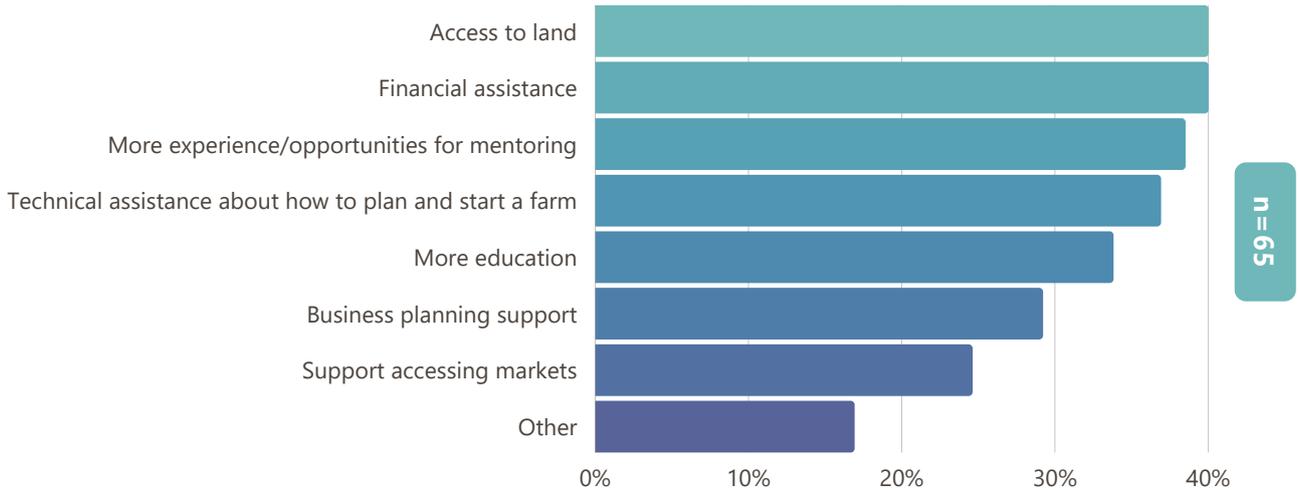


INPUT FROM PROSPECTIVE FARMERS

The survey included some questions that were answered only by people interested in becoming farmers.

WHAT DO PROSPECTIVE FARMERS NEED TO START FARMING?

Respondents could check all that apply.

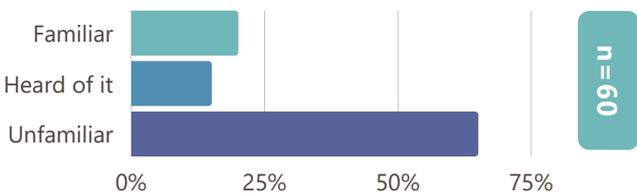


Other needs included:

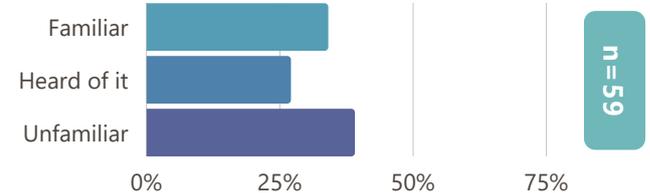
- Networking resources
- More time
- Less regulation
- Equipment sharing
- Access to small livestock processing
- Tax incentives

DO PROSPECTIVE FARMERS KNOW ABOUT AVAILABLE PROGRAMS?

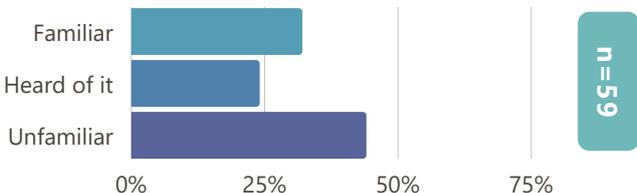
Enterprise for Equity Agripreneurship Program



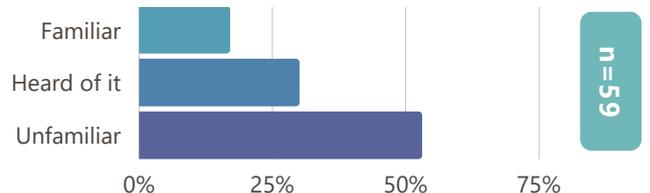
Economic Development Council



WSU Thurston County Extension



Thurston Conservation District Programs

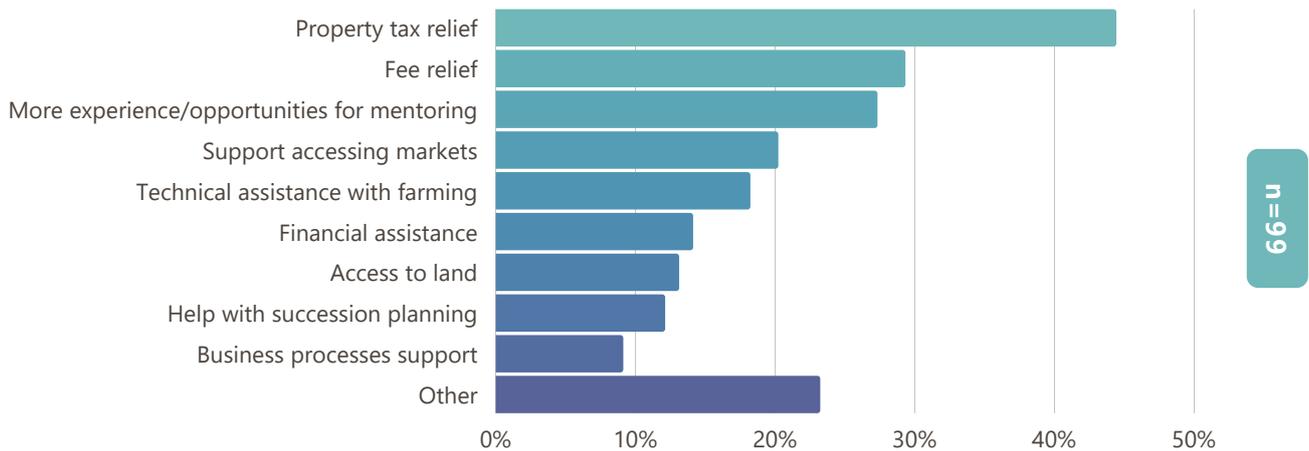


INPUT FROM CURRENT FARMERS

The survey included some questions that were only answered by people who identify as current farmers.

WHAT CURRENT FARMERS NEED TO KEEP FARMING

Respondents could check all that apply.

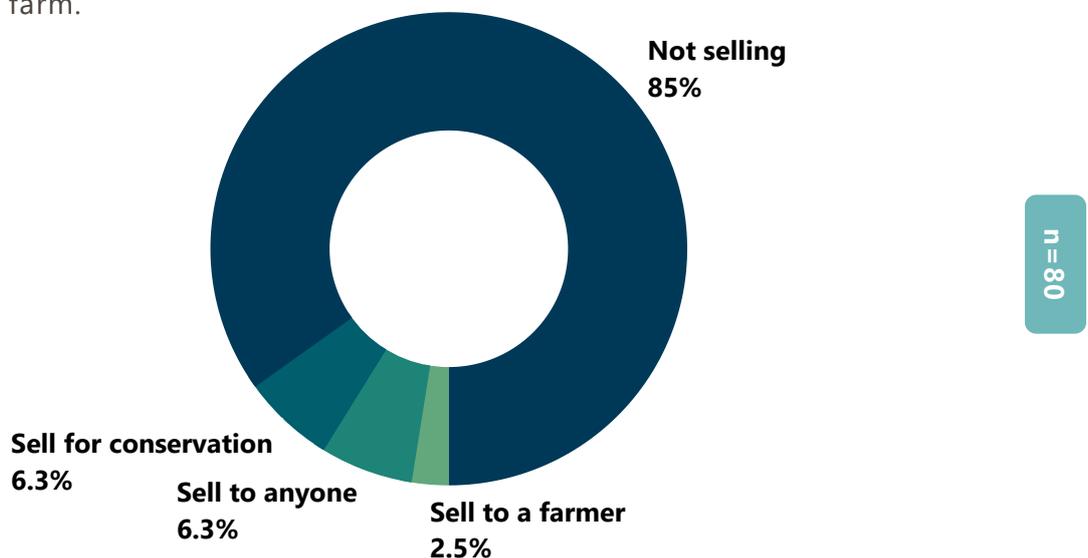


Other needs included:

- Protected long-term zoning for agriculture
- Relief from urban expansion
- Equipment sharing
- Access to processing for agriculture products
- Support for agrotourism
- Reduced regulations
- Permitting clarity and assistance

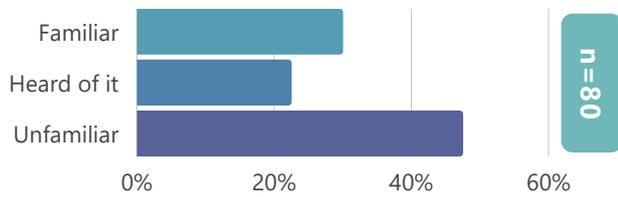
DO FARMERS PLAN TO SELL THEIR LAND?

Some farmers operate only on leased land. 82% of the current farmers responded to this question which suggests that most of the responding farmers own at least some of the land they farm.

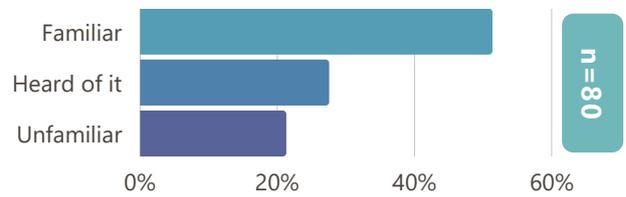


DO CURRENT FARMERS KNOW ABOUT AVAILABLE PROGRAMS?

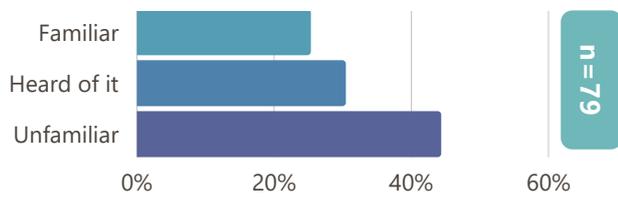
Enterprise for Equity Agripreneurship Program



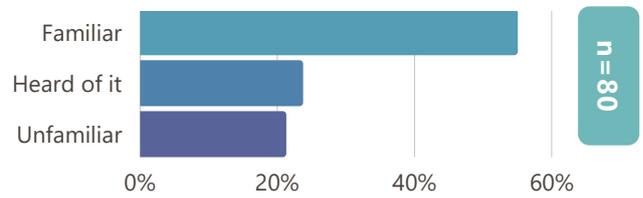
NRCS Programs



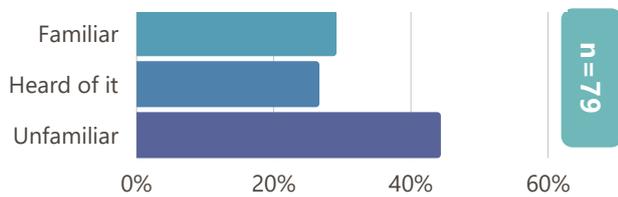
Economic Development Council Business



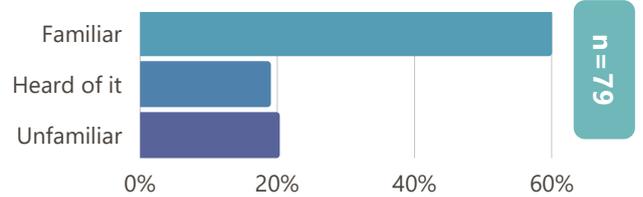
WSU Thurston Co. Extension



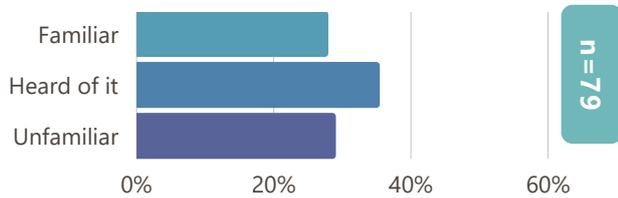
Thurston Co non-regulatory incentives



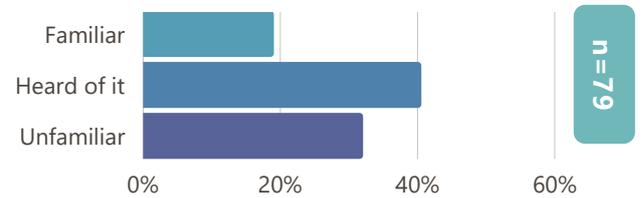
Thurston Conservation District programs



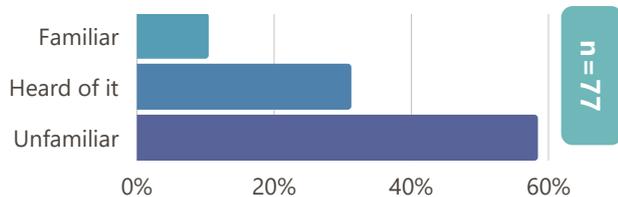
WSDA Programs



USDA Farm Loan Programs



Tenino Agricultural Business Park



INPUT FROM EVERYONE

All survey respondents were asked questions about their general concerns, thoughts, and knowledge about agriculture in Thurston County.

WHAT ARE PEOPLE CONCERNED ABOUT?

Conversion/loss of farmland to development or other land uses

n=308	Prospective farmer	Currently farming	Planning to farm
Agree	96%	86%	93%
Neutral	4%	8%	5%
Disagree	0%	6%	2%

Loss of market opportunities for local farms

n=299	Prospective farmer	Currently farming	Planning to farm
Agree	80%	75%	88%
Neutral	17%	18%	8%
Disagree	4%	7%	5%

Lack of infrastructure (processing, aggregation, storage, distribution) for farms and local businesses

n=290	Prospective farmer	Currently farming	Planning to farm
Agree	76%	75%	74%
Neutral	22%	21%	23%
Disagree	2%	4%	3%

Prospective or existing farmers don't have access to enough assistance for financial planning, marketing, or developing their business

n=296	Prospective farmer	Currently farming	Planning to farm
Agree	67%	60%	68%
Neutral	30%	35%	25%
Disagree	4%	6%	7%

Don't know what regulations exist around farming or what permits are needed for building agricultural infrastructure.

n=276	Prospective farmer	Currently farming	Planning to farm
Agree	66%	41%	67%
Neutral	24%	35%	24%
Disagree	11%	24%	9%

There aren't enough local incentive programs to keep farmers farming

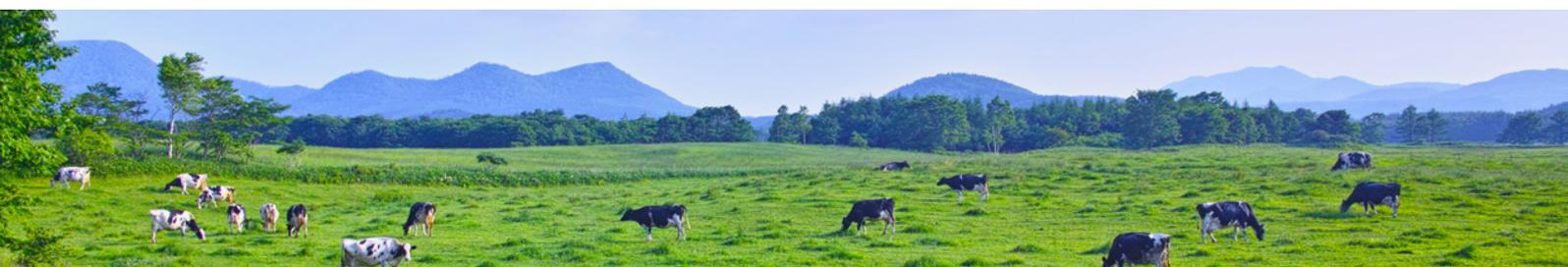
n=302	Prospective farmer	Currently farming	Planning to farm
Agree	86%	78%	76%
Neutral	13%	18%	19%
Disagree	2%	4%	6%

Having access to locally-grown food

n=302	Prospective farmer	Currently farming	Planning to farm
Agree	83%	65%	83%
Neutral	17%	18%	12%
Disagree	0%	17%	5%

Lack of integration of habitat protection and protecting working farmlands)

n=300	Prospective farmer	Currently farming	Planning to farm
Agree	77%	66%	80%
Neutral	13%	17%	16%
Disagree	9%	17%	5%



OTHER CONCERNS

Government Role, Policies, Regulations

- Access to guaranteed, high-quality health care (i.e. Medicare for All)
- Government should not be involved with the economy
- Decline of bee population
- Too many government regulations (gopher, wetland, habitat, stormwater)
- Property taxes on small farms (1-200 acres)
- Need less government involvement
- Cannabis not designated as agriculture
- Transparency in how incentive funds are used

Environmental

- Influence of farms on water table
- Soil health

Social Justice

- Diversity in agriculture. Removing barriers for BIPOC and ensuring their voices are included in the conversation
- Food security

Operations

- Not enough access to rail lines to for affordable crop transport
- Lack of agricultural processing facilities
- Agriculture workers safety, especially in regards to COVID
- Need regional supply chain resilience

Affordability

- Being forced to use and pay for city water to irrigate small homestead rather than using well
- Affordability of local ag products vs. grocery store
- High permitting fees
- Purchasing land for farms or timber is expensive

Zoning

- Conversion of farmland to mineral lands (co-designation)
- Loss of farmland to development
- Expansion of Urban Growth Areas
- More support needed for smaller farms (> 20 acres)

Education and Outreach

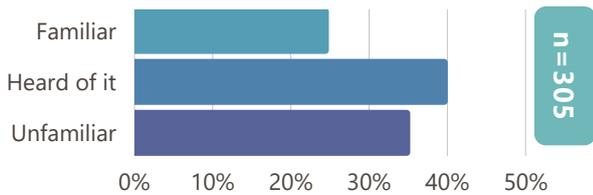
- Lack of public knowledge of agricultural issues



DO PEOPLE KNOW ABOUT COUNTY LAND USE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS?

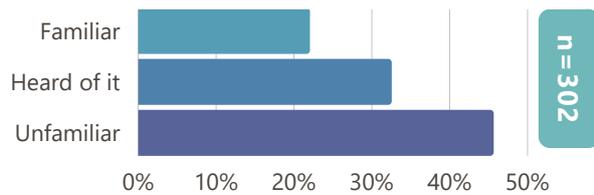
There was statistically significant differences in familiarity between groups. Those have been noted below the graph.

Thurston County Comprehensive Plan policies to protect farmland



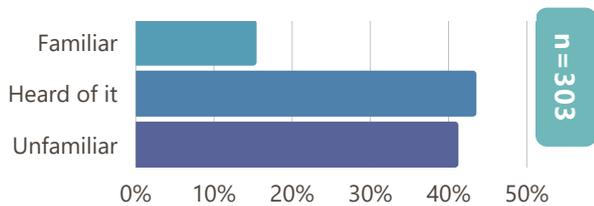
Prospective farmers are more likely to be unfamiliar than non-farmers.

Agritourism Overlay District



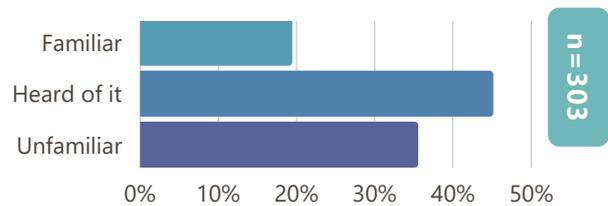
Prospective farmers are more likely to be unfamiliar than current and non-farmers.

Agriculture Code/Thurston County Development Regulations



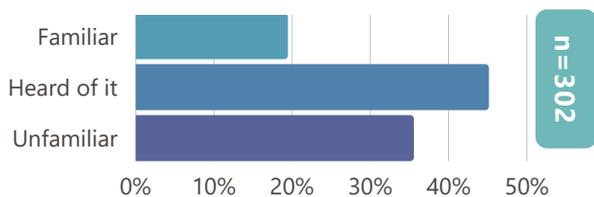
No statistically significant differences.

County Zoning for Long-Term Agriculture and Nisqually Agriculture



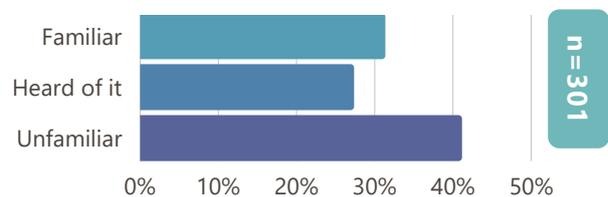
Current farmers are more likely to be familiar than prospective farmers.

Sustainable Thurston



Current farmers and non-farmers are more likely to have heard of this than prospective farmers.

Voluntary Stewardship Program



Current farmers are more likely to have heard of this than prospective farmers.



FEEDBACK ON LAND USE POLICY

Respondents were asked to rank the following land use action items in order of priority, 1 being top priority, 7 being lowest priority. On average, 62% of initial survey respondents ranked these action items. Action items were given a weighted score based on how respondents ranked them.¹

#1

n = 220

Designate/zone more land as agricultural land of long-term commercial significance (long-term agriculture or Nisqually agriculture). *Score: 4.88

#2

n = 230

Reduce the ability of important agricultural lands outside of long-term ag zones to be subdivided and developed. *Score: 4.54

#3

n = 221

Create incentives for property owners to opt-into long-term agriculture zoning. *Score: 4.33

#4

n = 239

Identify locally significant farmland on land use maps and create policies to protect it. *Score: 4.21

#5

n = 239

Review all proposed comprehensive plan/zoning amendments for potential impacts on agriculture. *Score: 3.78

#6

n = 244

Improve implementation of no net loss of farmland policy, e.g. by tracking conversion of farmland to other land uses. *Score: 3.74

#7

n = 283

Fund/create an agricultural liaison staff position to help farmers navigate County regulations and programs. *Score: 3.34



OTHER LAND USE POLICY INPUT

Government Role, Policies, Regulations

- Make organic farming easier and large, commercial farming more restrictive
- Support small farms
- Stronger local food procurement policies
- For shellfish farming, ensure SMP aligns with Federal and State regulations
- Lessen regulations on agriculture related buildings (barns, hay storage, etc)
- Data and mapping is needed to create land use policy
- County needs to push back on development
- Relax zoning codes on cannabis production
- Government accountability for policies on developing on farmland

Environmental

- Don't allow farmland to be used for tire recycling or other debris piles
- Address issue of pollutants from mining operations
- Need more funding to place conservation easements on farmland
- Make it easier for farmland to creatively integrate with conservation land

Social Justice

- Align ag policy with climate mitigation & incorporate Equity Diversity Inclusion
- Making it harder to build additional housing or subdivide large pieces of land may inadvertently be making farmland ownership more difficult for BIPOC. Smaller farms may be more inclusive

Operations

- Ease certification requirements for slaughter of small livestock

Education and Outreach

- Fund educational opportunities for youth
- Too many regulations breeds mistrust, making it difficult for farmers to approach County for help
- Mitigation policy: when farmland is developed it must be preserved elsewhere
- Current incentive programs are difficult to navigate
- Need agricultural liaison to help prospective farmers get started and get through permitting process

Incentives and Assistance

- Financial incentives
- Emphasize assistance to full-time farmers
- Lessen financial barriers to rezone land to agriculture
- Incentivize farm to market strategies
- Offer incentives for farmers to grow riparian areas (similar to CREP)
- Incentives over policy



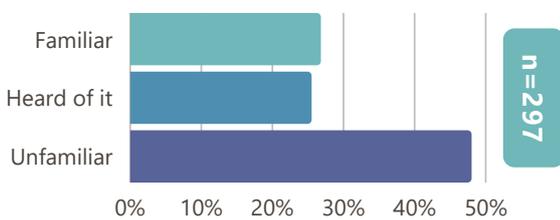
FEEDBACK ON INCENTIVE PROGRAMS

Respondents were asked about their familiarity and use of county incentive programs that support agriculture.

ARE PEOPLE FAMILIAR WITH COUNTY FARMLAND PRESERVATION TOOLS AND PROGRAMS?

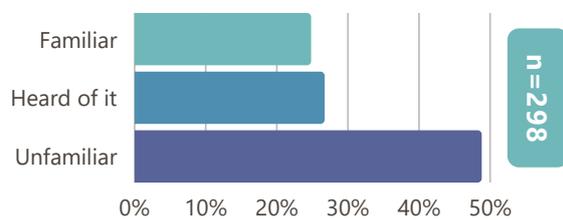
There was statistically significant differences in familiarity between groups. Those have been noted below the graph.

Conservation Futures Program



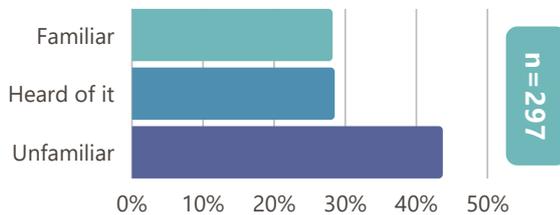
Current farmers are more likely to be familiar with this than prospective farmers.

Transfer of Development Rights Program



Current farmers are more likely to be familiar with this than prospective and non-farmers.

Open Space or Current Use Tax Programs

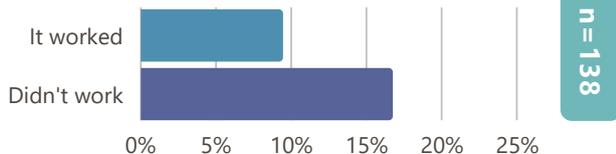


Current farmers are more likely to be familiar with this than prospective and non-farmers.

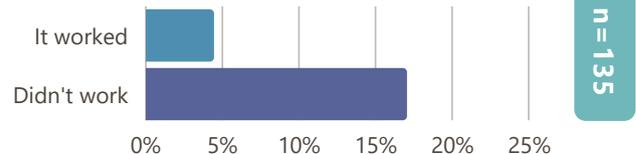
IF THEY PARTICIPATED IN OR LOOKED INTO THESE PROGRAMS, DID THEY WORK FOR THEM?

The remainder of respondents not represented in the below charts selected N/A.

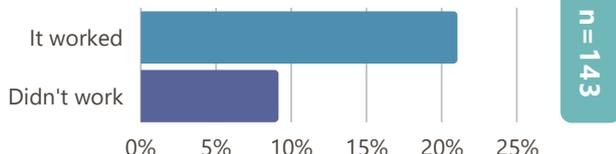
Conservation Futures Program



Transfer of Development Rights Program



Open Space or Current Use Tax Programs



IF IT DIDN'T WORK, WHAT WOULD'VE HELPED?

Conservation Futures

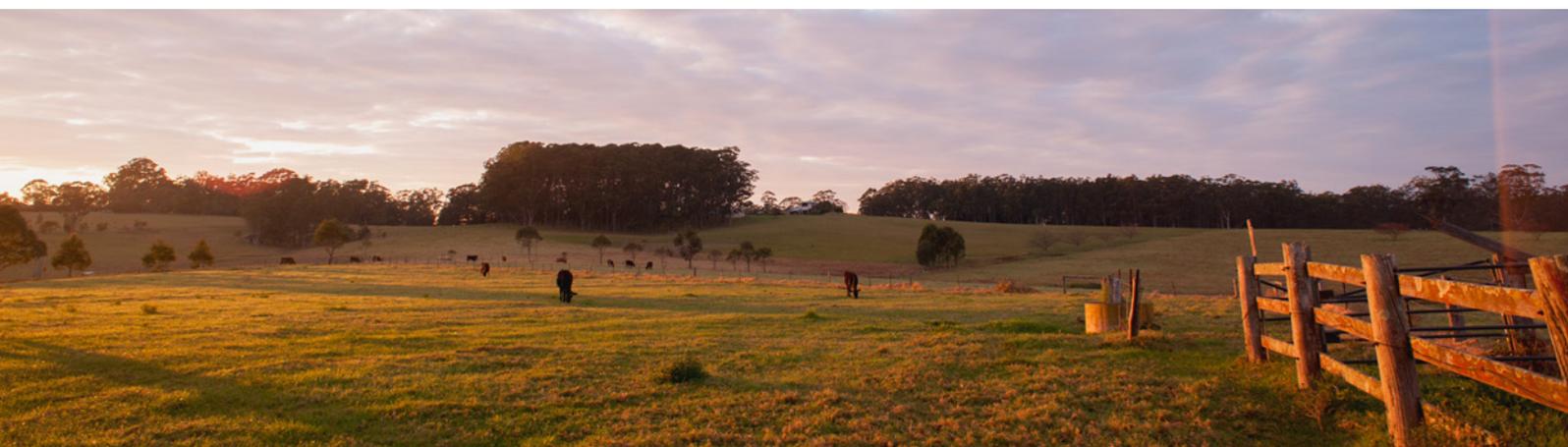
- Conservation future funds were used for gopher mitigation
- Program for large landowners in sensitive areas
- There wasn't enough money in the program
- Needed a stream on their land
- Needed staff members with more technical knowledge. Value of Oregon Ash peatlands and intent to bring back coho salmon run not considered
- Doesn't apply to homesteads
- Doesn't rank high enough: no stream and not enough land
- Unsure how to qualify
- Not ready for a long-term easement
- Needs to consider smaller parcels
- Needed a land trust or conservation district that will accept a conveyance of development rights from smaller farms and for a period of years versus in perpetuity

Transfer of Development Rights

- Not enough demand for density in UGAs
- Program not fully developed
- Not sure how to do it
- Needs more county support
- Not enough compensation

Open Space or Current Use Tax Program

- Property was too small
- Not sure how to qualify
- Not sure who pays when the land sells
- Didn't work for smaller homesteaders
- Doesn't apply to small parcels or parcels in urban areas
- County assessor can remove land from Open Space designation, subjecting land owner to back taxes



FEEDBACK ON NON-REGULATORY ACTIONS

What actions should be prioritized? Respondents were asked to rank the following non-regulatory action items in order of priority, 1 being top priority, 7 being lowest priority. Action items were given a weighted score based on how respondents ranked them.¹

#1

n = 176

Expand open space tax program (property tax relief) opportunities for smaller farms. *Score: 4.59

#2

n = 184

Provide more funding for conservation futures for land trusts or the county to purchase land or easements from retiring farmers. *Score: 4.58

#3

n = 186

Fund a purchase of development rights program specifically for farmland. *Score: 4.39

#4

n = 190

Improve outreach to farmers about how to lower property taxes in exchange for maintaining an undeveloped landscape via the open space tax program. *Score: 4.07

#5

n = 198

Do more outreach to farmers around non-regulatory options to keep farmland, including opportunities for working lands easements. *Score: 3.99

#6

n = 200

Provide more technical assistance and access to funding to protect critical areas on farms in a non-regulatory and collaborative manner (e.g., through the Voluntary Stewardship Program). *Score: 3.82

#7

n = 220

Create more opportunities for farmers to sell development rights from their land to be used in urban areas (transfer of development rights program). *Score: 3.49



OTHER NON-REGULATORY INPUT

Government Role, Policies, Regulations

- Increased inter-jurisdictional cooperation
- Encourage small ag in residential areas
- Support agritourism
- Don't merge farmland with mineral lands
- Support small farms
- Keep farms economically viable
- Revise rezoning process
- Don't attach property tax to real estate market
- Need long-term solutions
- Farmers should be able to sell their land for a profit and not have to keep farming

Environmental

- Work with partners to create a less-burdensome program similar to CREP to pay farmers to grow a functional riparian area
- Soil conservation
- Need more funding for conservation easements and development rights
- Land Trust that promote farming should be awarded funds

Operations

- Enhance markets and supply chain for farmers
- Foster direct-to-consumer investment in local farms

Taxes and Incentives

- Reduce tax burden
- Low interest loans for farmers

Education and Outreach

- Technical assistance and outreach to improve financial position of current farmers
- Outreach to farmers on programs that already exist
- Turn farm into learning/demo farm for new farmers
- Student volunteer programs for small farms



FEEDBACK ON PERMITTING AND REGULATION ACTIONS

What actions should be prioritized? Respondents were asked to rank the following permitting and regulation action items in order of priority, 1 being top priority, 7 being lowest priority. Action items were given a weighted score based on how respondents ranked them.¹

- #1** n = 177 Review impacts to farmland when considering development applications, including impacts to water rights and loss of important farmland soils. *Score: 5.38
- #2** n = 184 Make the permit process easier for beneficial conservation enhancement projects. *Score: 4.90
- #3** n = 188 Encourage the use of cluster development for subdivision of important farmland (clustering houses in one area and setting aside a larger parcel for use as farming or open space). *Score: 4.34
- #4** n = 192 Create a program(s) for developers to mitigate the loss of important farmland to development, or charge impact fees for conversion of farmland to development or recreational use. *Score: 3.91
- #5** n = 187 Do more to educate the community about the right-to-farm ordinance. *Score: 3.81
- #6** n = 210 Decrease the maximum density in long-term agricultural zoning districts (currently 1 unit per 20 acres for long-term ag zone, and 1 unit per 40 acres in Nisqually ag zone). *Score: 3.60



OTHER PERMITTING AND REGULATION INPUT

Government Role, Policies, Regulations

- Make the permitting process easier
- Reserve fertile farming land
- Don't mine gravel in farmland
- Enforce no net loss of farmland
- Minimize new wells
- More support for agrotourism
- Need small commercial ag designation
- Mitigating loss of farmland still created loss
- Allow cluster housing on farms so more than one family can work it
- Farmers are over-regulated

Environmental

- Prioritize working ag compatibility over species protection
- Reduce no-rise requirements for habitat restoration projects

Social Justice

- Consider equality issues in regulation and permitting decisions

Taxes and Incentives

- Property tax relief for farming
- No subsidies for developers

Education and Outreach

- Ag liaison to help farmers navigate regulations
- More education and outreach



FEEDBACK ON ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS

What actions should be prioritized? Respondents were asked to rank the following economic development action items in order of priority, 1 being top priority, 7 being lowest priority. Action items were given a weighted score based on how respondents ranked them.¹

#1

n = 186

Help farmers find new markets (e.g., wholesale, farm-to-school, regional branding, aggregation-distribution support). *Score: 5.75

#2

n = 183

Strengthen infrastructure for processing (e.g., recruit slaughter, storage and processing facilities). *Score: 5.16

#3

n = 190

Work with local financial institutions to find new ways to provide agricultural business support for new farmers. *Score: 4.84

#4

n = 189

Support agritourism and opportunities for the community to visit farms/farm stands, including consideration of expanding the Agritourism Overlay District. *Score: 4.57

#5

n = 186

Explore reducing or eliminating fees charged by the county and local improvement districts on working lands, including permit fees. *Score: 4.50

#6

n = 196

Expand farmer training and recruitment programs including farmer-to-farmer learning, workshops, and mentoring. *Score: 4.37

#7

n = 201

Expand teen/youth recruitment programs (e.g., 4H, FFA) to help bolster the future of farming in Thurston County. *Score: 4.32

#8

n = 216

Expand land linking programs to facilitate farmland access. *Score: 3.80



OTHER ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT INPUT

Government Role, Policies, Regulations

- Add agricultural economic development objective in Ch.8 of Comp Plan
- Help develop more markets for goods
- Continue support of Economic Development Council, WSU Extension
- Less government involvement in economy
- Help small farms
- Work regionally
- Land linking programs
- Support agritourism

Social Justice

- Support diversity in farming to include bank lending

Operations

- Connect local farms with school food programs
- Support ag products processing

Incentives and Assistance

- Offer new farmers start-up grants plus second one after two years of farming
- Provide incentives for sustainable timber and organic ag

Education and Outreach

- Expand Thurston Conservation District Farmlink program
- Extension, WSU, Evergreen, and SPSCC work together to backfill retiring farmers
- Reconsider farmer "brand". Emphasize their importance
- Increase community engagement

Other

- Vertical farming



ALL OF THE ACTION ITEMS RANKED

All action items were scored using a weighted score.¹ The scores were adjusted using a common metric. Data analyzation revealed that farmers and non-farmers sometime ranked things differently in the original categories on previous pages. The ranking below includes all survey respondents. Notes on differing rankings are included with each item.

#1

Help farmers find new markets (e.g., wholesale, farm-to-school, regional branding, aggregation-distribution support). Score: 5.0
**Ranked #6 by prospective farmers.*

#2

Designate/zone more land as agricultural land of long-term commercial significance (long-term agriculture or Nisqually agriculture). *Score: 4.9

#3

Expand open space tax program (property tax relief) opportunities for smaller farms. *Score: 4.6

#4

Provide more funding for conservation futures for land trusts or the county to purchase land or easements from retiring farmers. Score: 4.6
**Ranked #5 by farmers*

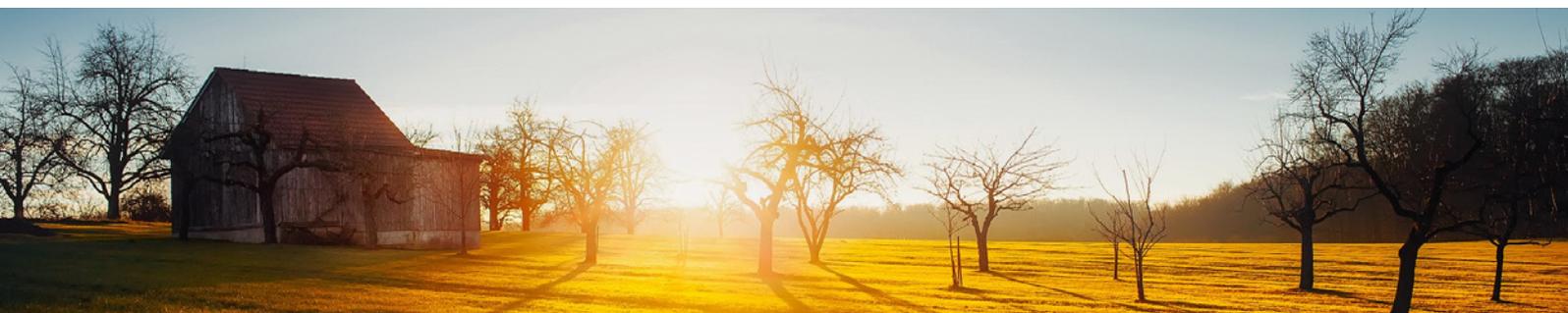
#5

Reduce the ability of important agricultural lands outside of long-term ag zones to be subdivided and developed. Score: 4.5

#6

Strengthen infrastructure for processing (e.g., recruit slaughter, storage and processing facilities). Score: 4.5
**Ranked #2 by non-farmers and current farmers. Ranked #7 by prospective farmers.*

- *Support agritourism and opportunities for the community to visit farms/farm stands, including consideration of expanding the Agritourism Overlay District was ranked #2 by prospective farmers.*
- *Create incentives for property owners to opt-into long-term agriculture zoning was ranked as #1 by farmers.*



CONCLUSION

The responses show areas where Thurston County can be putting efforts to support agriculture including increasing outreach efforts on programs already in place to support farmers and agricultural landowners; expand property tax relief for smaller farms; and review policies and incentives for ways to support diversity in agriculture. These survey results will be used to inform ongoing efforts by the County to evaluate its agriculture policies and programs. Four issues rose to the top.



Outreach and Education

Room for more education and outreach from the county to farmers and community. Farmers and non-farmers have a low level of familiarity with existing policies and programs to support farmland preservation.



Policy Changes

More policy work is needed to preserve farmland – with two policies generating most interest:

- Zoning changes to include more acres being protected, including smaller farms.
- Consider the impact to farmland when the county reviews development applications.



Incentive Programs

Explore the options to adopt changes to improve three programs: Open Space, Conservation Futures, and Transfer of Development Rights.



Economic Development

Connect farmers to markets and strengthen infrastructure for processing raw food products.

1. Scoring method: rank numbers were given scores in reverse order (#1=7, #2=6....).
w=weight of ranked position, x=response count for answer choice

$$\frac{1}{x}w^1 + \frac{2}{x}w^2 + \frac{3}{x}w^3 \dots$$

Total response count