

San Juan County  
Voluntary Stewardship Program  
Biennial Report, 2019 – 2021

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SAN JUAN ISLANDS



CONSERVATION  
D I S T R I C T  
SAN JUAN COUNTY, WASHINGTON

by the San Juan Islands Conservation District, on behalf of  
the San Juan County Voluntary Stewardship Program Work Group  
[www.sanjuanislandscd.org](http://www.sanjuanislandscd.org)

## Summary

This biennial report was written by the San Juan Islands Conservation District (SJICD) on behalf of the San Juan County Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) Work Group. SJICD serves as the Technical Service Provider responsible for implementation of the San Juan County VSP Work Plan (Work Plan). This is the second biennial report submitted to date since the Work Plan was formally adopted by the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC). The purpose of the report is to provide the status of plans and accomplishments to the county and to the WSCC. It is prepared in compliance with WSCC *Policy Advisory #05-18: Approved VSP Work Plan Implementation Reporting Requirements and Procedures* and includes a summary of how plan implementation is affecting the following:

1. The protection and enhancement of critical areas within the area where agricultural activities are conducted;
2. The maintenance and improvement of the long-term viability of agriculture;
3. Reducing the conversion of farmland to other uses;
4. The maximization of the use of voluntary incentive programs to encourage good riparian and ecosystem stewardship as an alternative to historic approaches used to protect critical areas;
5. The leveraging of existing resources by relying upon existing work and plans in counties and local watersheds, as well as existing state and federal programs to the maximum extent practicable to achieve program goals;
6. Ongoing efforts to encourage and foster a spirit of cooperation and partnership among county, tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests to better assure the program success;
7. Ongoing efforts to improve compliance with other laws designed to protect water quality and fish habitat; and
8. A description of efforts showing how relying upon voluntary stewardship practices as the primary method of protecting critical areas does not require the cessation of agricultural activities.

This report is different from the recent San Juan County VSP Five-Year Report, submitted in December 2020, that specifically reported on progress toward the protection and enhancement goals and benchmarks in the Work Plan. The Work Group used the five-year reporting process as an opportunity to reflect on and refine the Work Plan, and as a result, adopt an Adaptive Management Plan (AMP) in May of 2021. The AMP clarified the goals, benchmarks, and metrics used to monitor and report on VSP progress, and guided programmatic changes to meet the goals of protecting and enhancing critical areas on farmland while maintaining agricultural viability in San Juan County. In contrast, this biennial report summarizes accomplishments over the last two years of Work Plan implementation, including recent changes resulting from the AMP. Reporting is not restricted to the goals and benchmarks of the Work Plan, but rather the eight elements listed above from Policy Advisory #05-18.

More information about San Juan County's Voluntary Stewardship Program and key documents referenced above can be found online at [www.sanjuanislandscd.org/voluntary-stewardship-program](http://www.sanjuanislandscd.org/voluntary-stewardship-program).

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1. Progress on the protection and enhancement of critical areas within the area where agricultural activities are conducted

The primary means by which SJICD achieves protection and enhancement goals is through the development of Individual Stewardship Plans (ISPs) that encourage good riparian and ecosystem stewardship, and the subsequent implementation of recommended ISP practices, often through cost share assistance programs.

SJICD completed 18 ISPs for agricultural producers between 2019 and July of 2021, covering just over 350 acres of farmland. Six of these 18 property owners went on to participate in cost share funding programs, implementing best management practices (BMPs) recommended by the ISPs for their farms. Six more landowners are currently on the wait list for cost share funding. Total cost share dollars provided to support BMP installations on agricultural lands was \$84,000 between 2019-2021 and \$315,000 between 2017-2021.

The BMPs implemented by agricultural producers in the San Juan Islands over the past two years have focused on roughly eight different NRCS practices. These practices and the degrees to which they have been put into place this biennium include:

San Juan Islands Conservation District				
2019-2021 Best Management Practices Implemented				
BMP	2021	2020	2019	Total
590 Nutrient Mngmt (acres)	15	10	8	33
614 Livestock watering systems	3	8	7	18
382 Fencing (linear feet)	11,370	19,684	11,968	43,022
472 Access Control (acres)	18	14	8	40
528 Prescribed Grazing (acres)	962	170	31	1,163
512 Forage and Biomass Planting (acres)	7	18	9	34
561 Heavy Use Area (square feet)	501	2,444	14,485	17,430
561 Heavy Use (quantity)	2	8	3	13
317 Compost Facility (square feet)	1,050	-	402	1,452
317 Compost Facility (quantity)	2	-	1	3
Total Acres Planned (acres)	130	234	119	483
Total ISPs	5	8	5	18
ISP Wait List	9			9
Cost Share Projects	2	3	1	6
Cost Share Pipeline (wait list)	6			6

Because the whole of San Juan County exists in a Critical Aquifer Recharge Area (CARA), all 18 ISP properties are considered to be in a critical area. The extent to which all five critical areas were encountered on these lands is as follows:

San Juan Islands Conservation District				
Critical Areas (plus Seasonal Streams)	2021	2020	2019	Total
Critical Aquifer Recharge Area (acres)	130	234	119	483
Wetlands (acres)	16	82	0	98
Fish & Wildlife Habitat Conservation Areas (acres)	130	234	119	483
Geologically Hazard Areas (acres)	0	0	0	0
Frequently Flooded Areas (acres)	10	82	0	91.6
Seasonal Streams (linear feet)	11,370	10,839	-	22,209

FEATURE PROJECT: Orcas Island

A farm within the Eastsound Watershed on Orcas Island contains wetlands, a fish-bearing stream, and a critical aquifer recharge area (Figure 1).

SJICD produced an ISP and recommended several BMPs to address resource concerns that included excess water, nutrients in surface water, soil compaction, and soil erosion. The farm had poor livestock over-wintering areas and contributed to sheet flow with muddy manure run-off into a nearby stream that feeds into a commercial shellfish area.



Figure 1: Proximity of farm to critical areas



Figure 2: Before photo of excess water and mud conditions

WSCC Shellfish Program funding was used to fund several BMPs, including heavy use area protection, fencing, livestock shelter and a waste storage facility.



Figure 3: After photo of HUA and livestock shelter



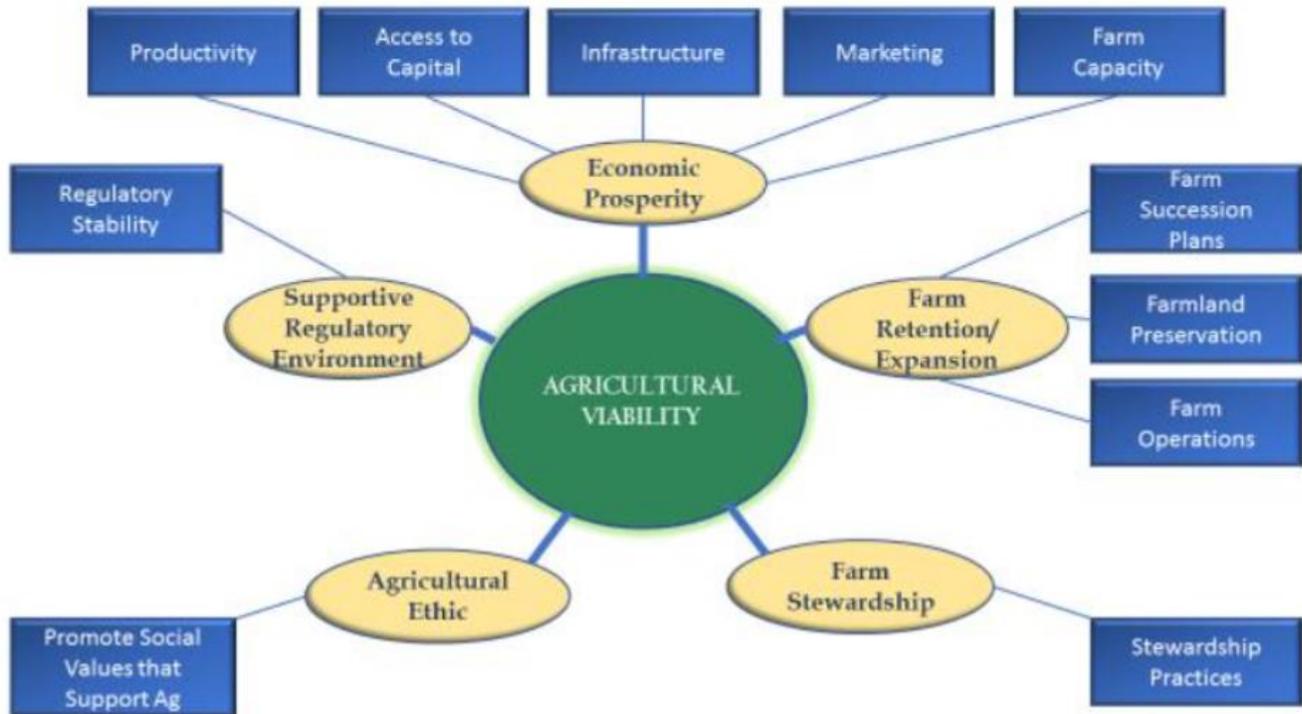
Figure 4: After photo of HUA and waste storage

## 2. Maintenance and improvement of the long-term viability of agriculture

Agricultural viability goals and strategies are identified in the VSP Work Plan according to the following model. In San Juan County, most or all of the strategies below are in motion.

Figure 5: Logic Model: Agricultural Viability in the San Juan Islands

Goals are in yellow and strategies to attain goals are in blue.



In partnership with Washington State University (WSU) Extension and the San Juan Island Agricultural Guild, an update of the 2017 *Agricultural Viability in San Juan County* survey was conducted in 2020. This updated survey tracks trends and comparisons that took place over the three-year period. Three key findings of the survey report as they relate to VSP programming and overall agricultural viability in San Juan County are as follows:

1. The number of acres farmed has remained fairly consistent between 2017-2020.
2. Cost of on-farm infrastructure was listed as the top challenge in both 2017 and 2020.
3. Providing mentorship (62%), being part of an agricultural producer's cooperative (51%), and voluntary gathering of observational data on water quality, soil health, and biodiversity (51%) were the most commonly selected survey responses when agricultural producers were asked if they were interested in collecting data on their farm or collaborating with fellow farmers.

The full study is available at <https://extension.wsu.edu/sanjuan/agriculture/ag-research-reports/>.

In addition, multiple VSP partners are collaborating on initiatives to improve economic and environmental performance for farmers, providing low-cost farm equipment rentals, training new farm operators, supporting centralized commercial outlets for locally grown foods, promoting farms and responsible farm practices, as well as providing farm planning and infrastructure funding programs. Key programs that are either new or were sustained over the 2019-2021 biennium include:

- No-till drill rental program – Through a new program in partnership with WSU Extension, with funding from the Washington State Department of Ecology and the WSCC Soil Health Committee, SJICD acquired a seed drill that is now available for low-cost rental to local farmers. Twelve farms from the major ferry-served islands participated in the pilot program to test the machinery and its efficacy. Training workshops were held during summer 2021 on all three major islands and were attended by 30 different farm operators who are now eligible to rent the drill for their use.
- Beginner Farmer and Rancher Development project – This three-year project, involving a partnership of the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild, the San Juan Islands Conservation District, the San Juan County Agricultural Resources Committee, and WSU Extension, received USDA grant funding in 2021. The project will facilitate entry into farming careers for beginning farmers and ranchers in the San Juan Islands, with a focus on women and the Latinx community.
- San Juan Islands Food Hub – The Food Hub is an online shopping platform for local food products where buyers and sellers can aggregate local agricultural products for purchase and regular delivery to centralized pick-up locations on three main islands and the mainland. The Food Hub is a producer-owned cooperative, created with support from the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild and the Northwest Agriculture Business Center (NABC) and funding from USDA.
- The Farm Fund - This county-wide grant and microloan program, managed by the San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild, raises money for small grants and loans to island producers.
- Agricultural planning and project funding – ISPs, cost-share, and other technical assistance help support farmers in maintaining their operations and therefore reduces the risks of land conversion. Many farms are in the Current Use Farm & Agriculture (CUFA) tax deferral program, where ISP development is tailored to the state program requirements as an add-in to standard plan development using NRCS standards and practices.

### 3. Reducing the conversion of farmland to other uses

Continuing the work of ISPs, cost-share, and other technical assistance helps support farmers in maintaining their operations and therefore reduces the risks of land conversion. There are three strategies identified in the Work Plan for addressing the goal of farm retention and expansion, listed below. Results from the 2020 Agricultural Viability Survey, among other metrics, were used to measure progress toward the goal.

**Farm Retention and Expansion Goal:** Maintain and increase the number of acres and/or farms in long-term commercial agricultural production by making farmland available and increasing capacity of farmers.

**Strategy 1: Farmland Succession:** Connect new farmers to available farmland and mentorship opportunities to ensure farm succession.

- **Farmland succession.** Just under half of the respondents (7) to the Agricultural Viability Survey who indicated they needed assistance to maintain production or put land under production indicated that they would need support for farm succession. It is currently unknown how many farms have succession plans, so this metric has been identified as a need for the next agricultural viability survey.
- **Age of farmers.** The 2020 survey results when compared to those of 2017 show a higher percentage of respondents under the age of 35 (2.0% in 2017 up to 9.1% in 2020) and between 36 – 50 years of age (7.8% in 2017 up to 16.4% in 2020). The percent of farmers in the 51 – 60 age range saw the largest decline (29.4% in 2017 down to 20.0% in 2020). This trend in younger age ranges for farmers is a hopeful sign that farmland succession will continue.
- **New farmers accessing farmland.** The number of producers who identified access to affordable farmland as an issue has increased since 2017. This issue was identified as a challenge for seven

producers in 2017 and 20 producers in 2020. The San Juan Islands Agricultural Guild manages the Farmers-to-Farmland Program, which addresses this issue by connecting farmers with farmland owners who wish to sell, lease, or transfer their farmland in San Juan County. The program assists beginning and experienced farmers and ranchers with establishing, expanding, and improving farm enterprises in San Juan County through land access, resources, and training. Additionally, the Beginner Farmer and Rancher Development project described in Section 2 seeks to facilitate entry into farming careers specifically for beginning farmers and ranchers.

- **Mentorship.** Sixty-two percent of respondents identified “Providing mentorship” when asked if they were interested in collaborating with fellow farmers. Mentorship continues to play an important role in farm succession, and the many local farmers who are willing to help train new farmers will aid in their success.

**Strategy 2: Farmland Preservation:** Facilitate permanent conservation of farmland using conservation tools that allow for flexibility and adaptability for expansion of agriculture, including new farming practices and infrastructure.

- **Farm Conservation Plans/ISPs.** Nearly half of respondents have developed a Farm Conservation Plan with the Conservation District or NRCS (21, or 46% in 2017, and 24, or 49% in 2020). In 2020, 15 respondents developed ISPs as part of the VSP. (Farm Conservation Plans were renamed to ISPs after adoption of VSP). The Agricultural Viability goals developed in the 2021 Adaptive Management Plan call for 30% of farmland in San Juan County to be covered by ISPs by 2025. As of 2020, approximately 22% of farmland has been covered by an ISP.
- **Conservation easements and preserves.** There are three organizations in San Juan County whose mission includes protection of farmland: the San Juan Preservation Trust, the San Juan County Land Bank, and Lopez Community Land Trust. The Land Bank and Preservation Trust provide conservation easements, where property remains in private ownership, and preserves, where land is owned by the organization. The Preservation Trust currently manages 2,155 acres of conservation easements on farmland, and owns 826 acres of farmland preserves in the county. The Land Bank manages 2,315 acres in conservation easements and eight farmland preserves with over 600 acres of prime farmland. Additionally, there are currently two farms owned by the Lopez Community Land Trust under the Lopez Island Farm Trust program. Established in 2016, the Lopez Island Farm Trust program holds farmland in trust to support a resilient local food system.
- **Open space tax programs.** To encourage landowners to use open space for the growing of food, landowners may choose to have their land designated as farm and agricultural land. This designation allows property valued at its current use rather than at its highest and best use, resulting in a lower assessed value and lower taxes. Acreage enrolled must be actively farmed to comply with tax requirements. According to the Statement of 2020 Assessments and Taxes to be Collected in 2021 for San Juan County, there were 8,173 acres in the Current Use Farm and Agriculture (CUFA) program, and 429 acres in the Open Space Farm Conservation program. ISP development is tailored for CUFA requirements as an add-in to standard plan development using NRCS standards and practices.

**Strategy 3: Farm Operations:** Maintain and increase the number of commercial farm operations.

- **Commercial farms.** Over half of the respondents indicated they have a commercial farm (2017 – 55.7%; 2020 – 53.3%). Just under one-third indicated their farm is both a commercial and non-commercial farm (2017 – 28.6%; 2020 – 30.7%). These two categories represent 59 farms in 2017 and 63 farms in 2020.
- **Scope of operations.** When respondents answered the question about maintaining, expanding, or decreasing the scope of operations in the next five years, nearly half (45%) said that they plan to

maintain the scope in 2017, but in 2020, four out of 10 agricultural producers (39%) responded that they plan to increase or expand operations.

- **Barriers.** Farm worker housing was identified as an extreme challenge in 2020 by 25% of applicable respondents, and cost of on-farm infrastructure (33.9%), cost/availability of skilled farm labor (32.8%), and cost of inputs (30.4%) were identified as a challenge in 2020 for applicable respondents. A countywide housing shortage is affecting all industries and unfortunately does not have simple or low-cost remedies that can be implemented broadly.

#### 4. The maximization of the use of voluntary incentive programs to encourage ecosystem stewardship as an alternative to historic approaches used to protect critical areas

The VSP Work Group continues to expand its outreach program in order to maximize the use of voluntary programs. Actions include:

- Updating the VSP website and including additional information for interested producers, Work Group members, and the public;
- Developing a GIS database to focus outreach in areas experiencing livestock and water quality issues;
- Developing outreach materials that serve the dual purpose of encouraging older farm plan conversions to ISPs and collecting baseline data on BMP implementation in the past.

Additionally, to encourage good riparian and ecosystem stewardship as an alternative to historic regulatory frameworks used to protect critical areas, SJICD and partners promote cost share opportunities to all cooperators who go through the planning process and receive an ISP. Previous cost share recipients are also a valuable asset to the agricultural community as they help “sell” the results of their success to their neighbors. Word of mouth and the circles of influence that rotate around the activities of VSP are already helping transition more agricultural operators into this desirable program outcome. This keeps interest in the VSP program high and the waiting list self-propagating over time.

In the False Bay watershed, SJICD has been working with San Juan County and the San Juan Preservation Trust to improve water quality at a property owned by the Preservation Trust. Lower False Bay Creek is listed as a Category 5, 303d-listed waterbody for bacteria. Through a lifetime lease arrangement, a rancher runs several hundred cattle on the 750-acre property, where they have had free and open access to False Bay Creek. A restoration team consisting of representatives from the Preservation Trust, San Juan County, SJICD, Washington Department of Ecology, and the Salmon Advisory Technical Advisory Team was established. Together, they developed three main project actions: 1) to fence cattle out of the riparian zone, 2) to provide off-stream watering facilities for the cattle, and 3) to control reed canary grass and plant the riparian buffer with native plants. Multiple funding sources have been used to fund the project, which has begun and will be finalized in 2023. Work continues toward obtaining funding for a second phase of the project which involves fencing and planting a tributary to False Bay Creek.

#### 5. Leveraging existing resources by relying upon existing work and plans in counties and local watersheds, as well as existing state and federal programs to the maximum extent practicable to achieve program goals

San Juan County’s VSP program leverages existing resources to achieve program goals by working in close partnership with numerous stakeholder groups and state and local agencies. San Juan County, Washington State

Department of Health and Department of Ecology, and other partners communicate with SJICD when they feel that technical assistance or other resources may be needed to help the environmental performance of agricultural operators.

This biennium, SJICD began working with a farm on Shaw Island containing cattle and streams that is believed to be the source of high bacteria readings in a local nearshore shellfish bay and upstream seasonal watershed, according to state Department of Health monitoring. SJICD reached out to the farm and is working as quickly as possible to provide funding for fencing cattle out of the streams.

In the Garrison Creek watershed on San Juan Island, SJICD staff have been working in partnership with San Juan County to communicate with landowners and agricultural producers with property near or directly adjacent to the creek, one of the few places where native cutthroat trout are known to still exist in the San Juans. Through this outreach, eight landowners within this relatively small watershed have acknowledged that they are interested in working to develop riparian buffers along the stream on their properties.

In partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, over 20 landowners and nearly a half dozen partners are working together to restore populations of the endangered Island Marble butterfly by establishing protected habitat areas in small plots across San Juan and Lopez islands. Partners include the National Park Service, San Juan County Land Bank, San Juan Preservation Trust, and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

VSP monitoring will incorporate existing resources, including High Resolution Change Detection (HRCDC) data made available by Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife to monitor decreases in tree canopy and increases in impervious surfaces throughout the county and water quality monitoring data in the False Bay watershed obtained through University of Washington's Friday Harbor Labs.

## 6. Ongoing efforts to encourage and foster a spirit of cooperation and partnership among county, tribal, environmental, and agricultural interests to better assure program success

In the past two years, VSP programming has moved well beyond its startup phase, expanding its scope and reach throughout the county. By completing ISPs and cost share projects, producing outreach materials, and formalizing a reputation within the community, VSP efforts are fostering greater cooperation across a network of partners and interest groups.

Increasing demands for technical assistance in farm planning and financial support through cost share programs indicates an increase in awareness among the community of a more concerted effort to undertake voluntary stewardship.

Since the completion of the last Biennium Report and the 5-Year Report, VSP Work Group membership and has declined. Work Group members are in the process of recruiting new participants, including representatives from the tribes and environmental and agricultural interests. We continue to rely on the expertise of San Juan County's Environmental Stewardship Department for guidance on natural resource issues and monitoring opportunities. We also continue to provide regular updates on VSP implementation to the San Juan County Council.

## 7. Ongoing efforts to improve compliance with other laws designed to protect water quality and fish habitat

The Work Group recognizes that both clean water laws and the VSP should provide protection to water quality and fish habitat and that working with other agencies is an opportunity to achieve shared goals. VSP complements the protection and pollution reduction goals of federal and state clean water laws by helping to implement the best management practices needed to meet water quality standards. Examples of recent efforts in this area include:

- Upright Channel water quality issues. As a result of findings in the 2020 Annual Shellfish Growing Area Report for Upright Channel, where a station was listed as Meets Standards, but threatened with a downgrade in classification, the Washington State Department of Health asked San Juan County Health & Community Services to follow up with a property survey and additional sample collection of surface water drainages to attempt to identify potential sources of fecal coliform that could be contributing to high fecal coliform counts. SJICD was contacted by San Juan County to provide technical assistance to help the owners limit livestock access to surface water drainages with the goal of improving water quality. SJICD is in the process of arranging a site visit, determining the most effective BMPs to address the issue, and assisting with finding sources to fund the project. The property owners are simultaneously beginning the process of applying for an ISP.
- False Bay Watershed restoration projects referenced above.

## 8. A description of efforts showing how relying upon voluntary stewardship practices as the primary method of protecting critical areas does not require the cessation of agricultural activities.

The voluntary stewardship practices being promoted by VSP throughout San Juan County have been effective in generating interest in acquiring an ISP. Cost share rewards are a big element of this scenario. At the end of this biennium, nine agricultural producers were on the wait list for ISPs moving forward. These numbers indicate steady county-wide demand for assistance with agriculture-related natural resource planning and potential cost share funding best management practices. In the most recent time period, 2007-2015 very little, if any, funding was available for cost share projects. This caused the post ISP developed farm cooperators a lot of frustration as they were forced to wait long periods of time until funding was allowed to flow again. Some farms waited as long as seven years for cost share. Those successes also fed into developing interest in the agricultural community for engagement in the farm planning process and (now the development of an ISP) to be able to tap into potential funding to address resource concerns on farms in the county. As farming infrastructure and inputs are expensive due to the transportation system we live with, any cost share that may be possible becomes a very valuable selling point for resource management stewardship and the development of ISP.