

# PLANNING FOR & TRACKING AGRICULTURAL VIABILITY IN PUGET SOUND

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Presentation to Puyallup White River LIO  
September 3, 2025



# BACKGROUND

- Puget Sound Partnership developing dashboard of “Progress Indicators” to measure implementation of 5-year Action Agenda
- In 2023, AFT worked with PSP to develop an Indicator to track farmland conversion and preservation
- 2022-2026 Action Agenda
  - Land Cover and Development Implementation Strategies
    - Support long-term viability of agricultural lands and working forests
- Collaborative research project to address the following questions:
  - How do we define agricultural viability in Puget Sound?
  - How do we measure it?

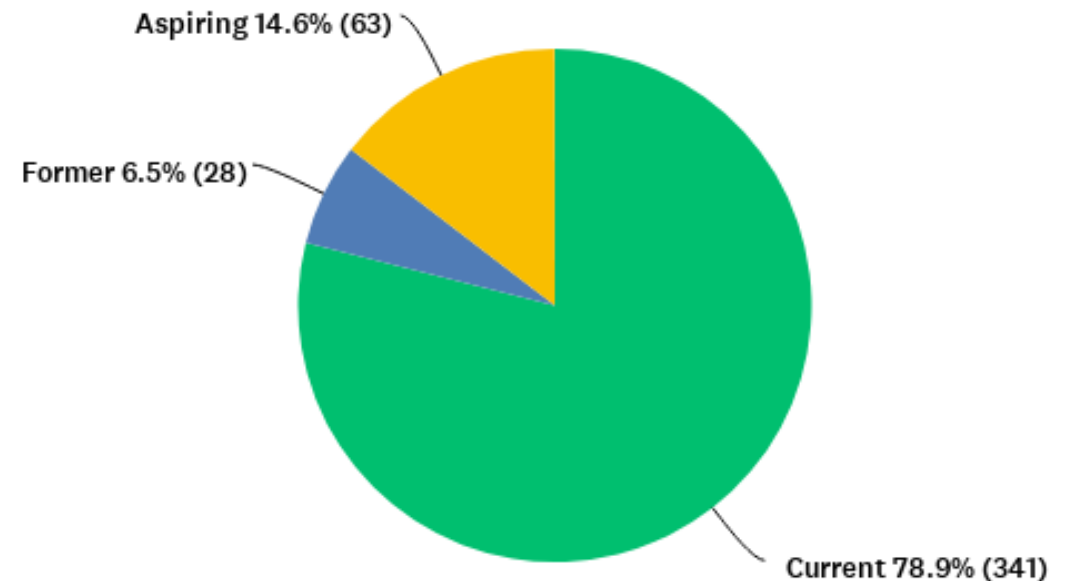


# PROJECT SCOPE

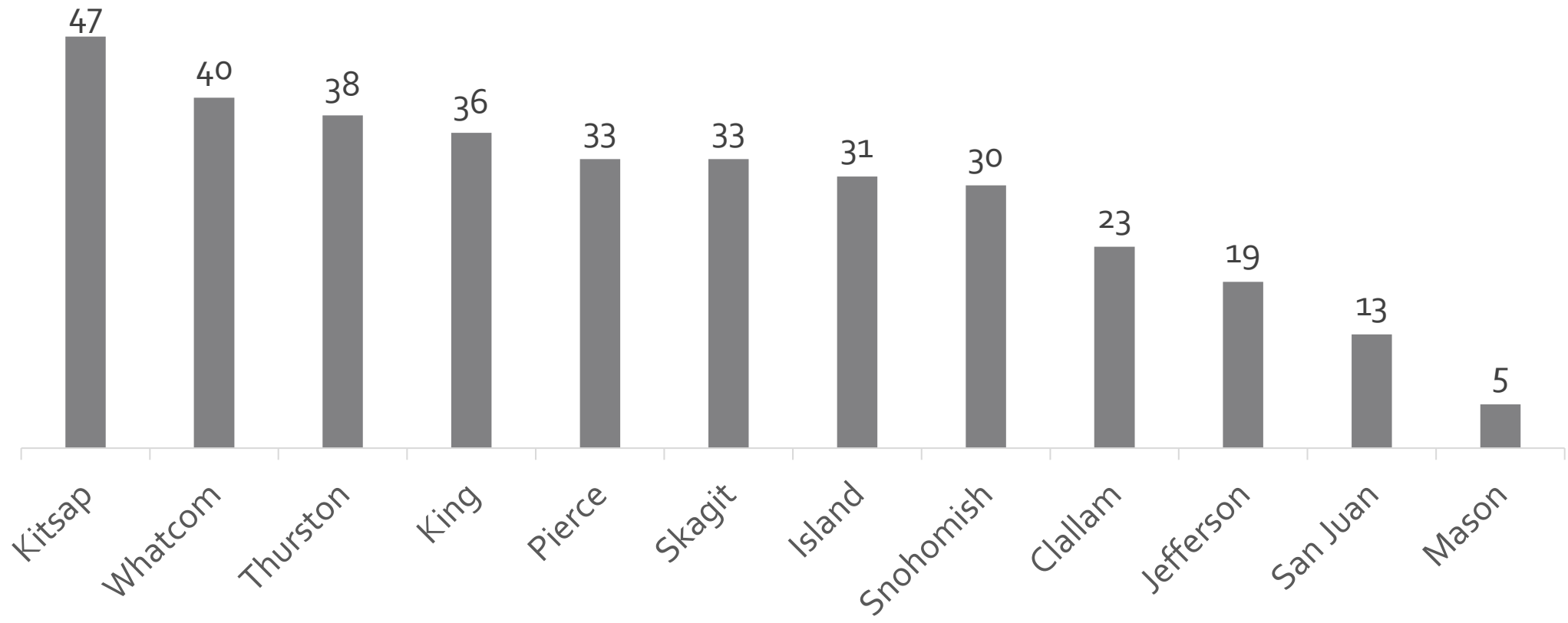
- Agricultural viability literature review ✓
- Farmer survey and stakeholder interviews ✓
- Agricultural viability “action plan”
- Agricultural viability progress indicators
- Update Protected Agricultural Lands Database for Puget Sound ✓
- Agricultural viability toolkit for local governments

# FARMER SURVEY

- Surveyed aspiring, current, and former farmers across 12 Puget Sound counties
- Distributed primarily by email and with support from many partner organizations
- 432 responses total
- A majority of respondents were current farmers; most of those identified as white, female, 35-54 years old, and first generation and/or new farmers
- Majority (76%) farm less than 50 acres



# Responses by County



# KEY FINDINGS: DEFINING VIABILITY

- 326 respondents answered the question, *“What does agricultural viability mean to you?”*

- Key themes:
  - Profitability
  - Sustainability
  - Community

- Additional themes:
  - Land stewardship
  - Land access/protection
  - Market access

*“Being able to withstand the market pressure and rising input costs while still being able to provide an affordable option for my customers.”*  
– King County farmer

*“It means that my land and business is an important part of the local economy and has the foundation needed to be successful.”*  
- Clallam County farmer

# DIGGING IN: KEY THEMES

- 52% of respondents indicated that ag viability means that farm operations are **profitable**
- Many stated that they want to pay living wages to themselves and their workers
  - *"Earn a living wage"*
  - *"Ability to support my family"*
  - *"At least breaking even!"*
  - *"Not farming at a loss"*
- Others shared that it means not having to work a second job off-farm, and not having to sacrifice values (size, affordability, practices) or work-life balance

# DIGGING IN: KEY THEMES

- 97 respondents defined ag viability as “**sustainable** farming” in terms of being able to farm into the future and farm in an environmentally friendly way
  - *“Being able to adapt to changes in farming practices and regulations imposed on our farm while still being able to make enough money to stay in business. Hoping to be able to allow my children the opportunity to farm as well if they so choose.” – Skagit County farmer*
- 86 respondents defined ag viability as reciprocal support between their farm and the **community**
  - *“Agricultural viability would make it **economically** feasible to support small and medium producers through all steps of the food production process. It would put more local food into the local community.” – Thurston County farmer*
  - *“It means that my land and business is an important part of the local economy and has the foundation needed to be successful.” – Clallam County farmer*



# LOCAL CHALLENGES

- Respondents were asked to identify and rate local challenges based on perceived severity, from “Extreme” to “Not a Challenge”
- Five categories: Land/water, profitability, infrastructure, regulation/certification, livelihood/well-being

## Land/water

- Finding affordable land to buy\*
- Certainty of future water uses
- Pressure from urban development

## Profitability

- Lack of time to do all needed farm work\*
- Cost of production compared to market prices\*
- Cost of labor\*

## Infrastructure

- Meat processing facilities
- On-farm infrastructure
- Farmworker housing

## Regulation/Certifications

- Labor wages and compensation
- Land use zoning and permitting
- Licenses, permits, and certifications

## Livelihood/well-being

- Personal or family health insurance and medical costs\*
- Reliance on off-farm work
- Finding or maintaining affordable housing



# EFFECTIVENESS OF SUPPORTS

- Respondents were asked to rate a list of 20 efforts to support farmers based on perceived efficacy, from “very effective” to “not effective”
- Top responses for “very effective” were:
  - Funding for on-farm infrastructure
  - Support for cooperative distribution and food hubs
  - Meat processing facilities
  - Conservation easements that protect farmland
  - Financial incentives for conservation practices
- Also high ranking:
  - Technical assistance for farm management and practices
  - Technical assistance business planning and management

# KEY REFLECTIONS

- Puget Sound farmers are struggling to succeed in farming due to **limited access** and **affordability** of land, equipment, labor, services, markets, and healthcare
- Need a more holistic approach to understanding and supporting ag viability that goes beyond profitability to think about community and individual well-being
- Specific challenges and needs vary by county and by industry
- Many farmers not aware of supports in their communities







# NEXT STEPS

- Developing county-by-county summaries of survey data
  - Kitsap, Whatcom, and Pierce counties complete
- Digging into action plan development
- Convening advisory committee to draft progress indicators
  - Literature review points to economic sustainability, farmer well-being, and natural resources stewardship as key measurements
- Continuing to invite dialogue in forums like these

# QUESTIONS & DISCUSSION

