

**Washington Conservation Incentives Project
Landowner Focus Group
November 6th, 2006**

Attendees:

Jim Fox, Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation's
Lynn Helbrecht, Washington Biodiversity Council
Josh Monahan
Bobby Lindemolder
Bill Knutsen
Ken Miller, Washington Farm Forestry Association
Mike Rundlett, Western Washington Agriculture Association
Sarah Hemple
Mark Clark, Washington State Conservation Commission
Stu Trefry, Washington State Conservation Commission
Jeremy Ecker, Cascade Land Conservancy
Kristi McClellan
Ted Sullivan, King County Public Benefits Rating System program
Don Theo
Antonia Jindrich, Evergreen Funding
Don Stuart, American Farmland Trust
Claire Dykman, King County Agriculture program
Larry Nussbaum, Stewardship Partners
Mary Next, Puget Sound Action Team
Fred Colvin, WA Association of Conservation Districts.

Overview

This, the first of three focus groups, was designed to bring landowners and incentives-providers together to discuss the topic of improving conservation incentives in Washington. The participants offered the issues and opportunities they see first-hand. The ideas were later grouped into thematic categories.

Defining the terms of the discussion.

Participants noted the existence of many types of incentives in play:

- technical assistance;
- education;
- easements;
- cost-share programs;
- tax incentives; and
- regulatory compliance, which can be both an alternative to incentives, as well as an incentive itself.

It was noted that we ought to be leveraging human nature, which will change for every single landowner. There should be enough flexibility in the program so that the natural resource professional has a toolbox, and can address the particular incentive for each landowner.

Many noted that it is important to define what the goal of the programs should be. Some felt we are seeking to incentivize environmental benefits for the public good. Others felt we should be incentivizing the preservation of the land base for future generations, so that it isn't converted to development.

Communication Challenges and Opportunities regarding incentive programs

Many participants noted the challenges in communicating the importance of incentives programs, both to landowners and the public. The public needs to be comfortable with how their tax dollars are being spent, and landowners need to feel good about their involvement in the programs.

There was a general discomfort with the term “landowner incentives.” Landowners would generally prefer to be left alone, and the term doesn’t specify what the goal is. Several participants expressed preference for the term “environmental incentives” because these are trying to incentivize good environmental stewardship.

A few negative perceptions were pointed out:

- Some feel that incentives are pay-outs to farmers to do things that they should already be doing.
- Farmers feel that joining the programs is an admission that they have been doing the wrong practices.
- In general, private landowners are not considered or treated with respect.

More positive ways to frame the issue were offered:

- Farmers and foresters provide many public benefits in addition to making a living. Open space, ground water recharge, and habitat are benefits to everyone, and the landowners who provide this should get some benefit from their provision. Incentives programs can be a good deal for the farmers, but they’re a better deal for the public. The farm or forest can be viewed as having two business lines. The first is wheat or cattle; the other is providing environmental benefits.
- We could talk about working lands vs idle lands. Idle lands are those acquired for preservation. Working lands are those that are in private ownership, and are managed in a way that is sustainable. We should want a majority of lands to be in this latter category.
- The state should come to an understanding about whether we want a viable natural resources industry. Washington State has a “no net loss” policy for wetlands, but not for farmland. We need to mitigate for growth in a way that doesn’t lead to a loss of farmland.

Problems with the current system

Problems with the current system were noticed both for the landowner and the resource.

Reasons identified for why landowners don’t sign up for the current programs include:

- The perception that there’s too much paperwork. It was acknowledge that this is sometimes true and sometimes not.
- Fear of government. This fear is both that in the future the requirements will get more stringent, and also that bringing government people onto the land will expose you to more scrutiny on other practices.
- Programs are often too limiting for the landowner. They may not allow them to protect a riparian buffer, for instance, in a way that also allows them to maintain use of the land to the degree they need.
- Programs are too competitive. After filling out the paperwork once, and not receiving assistance, landowners may be unwilling to go through the process again and the opportunity to improve that property may be lost.

Appendix F-1 – Focus group notes

- Landowner are busy, and don't have time to learn about the various programs available. Often, there's insufficient personal assistance to help identify opportunities and help with the application process. And for tax incentives, many programs are run through the assessor's office, and not staffed by people who have an understanding of the needs of landowners.
- Landowners may not know what they're going to do with their land in a few years. They don't know how the program will affect their future plans, or their ability to sell their property.
- Lack of knowledge about what is needed, and what is involved in resource protection.

For the resource, it was noted that there is a concern that these programs take land out of agricultural or forestry use.

Special needs of small forest landowners

There was an acknowledgement that small forest landowners had a special set of needs with regard to incentives:

- The recent trends in the industry have created a situation in which there are lots of new landowners with relatively little forestry experience. These people often need more education in general forestry practices. Meanwhile, funding for stewardship programs that would help educate landowners about what needs to be done, and fill out the paperwork, has been drastically reduced.
- While farmers have more regular interaction with providers such as conservation districts, and ways to learn about new programs, the long rotations in forestry mean that there are fewer opportunities for interaction.
- While the Conservation Districts can be a good part of the solution for farmers, there is no equivalent for foresters.

Goals for the possible solutions

Several participants mentioned that any solution would need to have an explicit decision as to the overall goal for coordinated program. These goals could include:

- Resource goals such as biodiversity or aquifer protection.
- Maintaining working lands as viable farm and forestry businesses, so that the lands are not converted to development and are maintained for the future. One participant noted that when Boeing was going to leave Washington, the state made it a line item in the budget. We don't do that for natural resources. We need to decide that we want to keep this as part of our state, and then decide how to keep it.

It was questioned whether the landowners being discussed should be confined to just agriculture and forestry owners, or broadened to include all landowners, even small ones.

Technical aspects of Possible solutions

Besides the overarching goals for solutions, many technical aspects were discussed, including:

- The need to provide a toolbox for brokers of incentives to address the needs of a variety of different landowners.
- Need for flexibility for landowners.
- Importance of one-stop-shopping and better ability for landowners to learn and apply for appropriate programs.
- Need for better communication among the service providers.
- The importance of farm plans, and figuring out what the future of the farm is going to be.

Appendix F-1 – Focus group notes

- The potential of addressing an entire reach at once to maximize environmental benefits.
- The importance of education. People are more likely to do the right thing when they're aware of what is needed and why. Using volunteer labor can be a form of education.
- Need for more technical assistance and education, which is getting increasingly underfunded.
- Need for more funding. In some areas, we have more people willing to participate than there are dollars available, and we need to be able to get people involved when they're ready.
- Need to reach the different types of landowners. There are some who prefer no incentives and no regulation, and are hesitant to take money from government. Others may be well-off, but are the first in line if there is a cost-share dollar to be had. A successful program needs to get to both types of people.

Several participants noted that besides creating the right technical solutions, an important component of getting more landowners involved is finding the right purveyor for the programs. Gaining the trust of landowners is an important issue. It was felt that:

- Government-run programs can be problematic, because there is some skepticism about government in general. It's often hard for the landowner to recognize that the incentive program may be very separate from the regulatory program.
- There can be a good role for nonprofits and third-part purveyors. Not only can they often generate more trust, but they can sometimes provide the service for less cost.

When asked how targeting these programs, which could help them to be more accountable effective, fits into the solutions, the following observations were made:

- Several participants felt that these programs need to be made available to everybody equally. Certain regions should not be given preference, because all regions have unique challenges.
- Any targeting should be tied to bottom-up approaches like watershed groups.
- The manner in which the targeting should occur depends on the desired goal. Seeking to protect biodiversity vs. working agricultural land will result in different targeting, and there are likely to be many goals.
- One risk of targeting is that while trying to get most bang for the buck, you may miss the early adopter. And that early adopter may be important in building momentum.

Several other general comments were made about the solution:

- It would be optimal to not tie funding to short-term political terms or cycles, as these issues should not be subject to whims.
- It is important to keep staffed positions over time, and not lose that expertise and connection to the community.
- We need to be talking about buying conservation as a resource. Conservation markets, wherein public environmental benefits become a commodity that has value, is an important part of the picture. This could help solve some of the funding needs. We need to put research and development funds into creating these markets.
- Need for a unified voice to take to the legislature and Puget Sound Partnership. We need a unified statewide strategy. We need to educate people. And we need to support the open space and public goods of environmental benefits provided by forests and agriculture.