

## **American Farmland Trust – Conservation Incentives Survey** **Summary**

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The recent survey by the American Farmland Trust asked landowner respondents to provide their opinions on and experiences with conservation incentives programs. The mailing was sent to 1381 landowners predominantly in the Puget Sound area on a list provided by Cascade Harvest Coalition largely from participants in previous workshops and other projects of that organization. This mailing elicited 84 responses from landowners (a response rate of 6%). In addition, a few survey questionnaires were distributed at speaking events in Western Washington. This produced 4 additional responses for a total n of 88. Because of the nature of the list and of the distribution, and because the responses were self-selected, it should be assumed that respondent landowners are somewhat more likely to have participated in incentives programs than the average and, perhaps also, somewhat more knowledgeable about them. Respondents expressed their opinions of the current structure of the incentives programs, presenting both positive and negative accounts.

### **Question by question analysis:**

#### **Question One**

**Have you used any conservation incentives programs for your land? 58 of 88 respondents (66%) indicated that they had. 15 of the 88 (17%) indicated they had not used any programs at all.**

**If so, what type of program was it?**

- 1. Conservation Stewardship - 22 of 58, or 38%**
- 2. Land set-aside for conservation - 12 of 58 or 21%**
- 3. Tax incentives for holding land in non-developed uses – 27 of 58 or 47%**
- 4. Sale if development rights – natural resource land protection – 10 of 58 or 17%**
- 5. Other conservation easement for environmental protection – 14 of 58 or 24%**

**Describe or evaluate your experience with the program:**

Most respondents had participated in some sort of conservation incentives program. However the respondents that had not participated most commonly mentioned the lack of information available.

The majority of those who had participated in a program reported a positive experience. Common responses included the tax reductions as being helpful, once qualified for the program the execution was simple, and specifically the CREP program received much praise.

Negative comments referred to paperwork/process difficulty, lack of information, restrictions on qualifying, and plot/time requirements being too stringent.

**Question Two**

**What barriers or concerns do you believe might have prevented landowners (yourself and others) from using the conservation incentives programs that may be available to them? For example, could you rate the importance of the following on a scale of 1-5:**

- 1. The program does not offer enough money to be of interest**
- 2. There is too much bureaucracy associated with applying**
- 3. Landowners do not want government working on their land**
- 4. The landowner may not qualify for the programs that would be of the most interest**
- 5. The landowner may not be aware of the relevant program**

<b>Q</b>	<b>Important 5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Unimportant 1</b>	
1	29%	14%	26%	18%	14%	n=73
2	49%	14%	14%	18%	5%	n=78
3	22%	23%	23%	14%	19%	n=74
4	25%	21%	24%	14%	14%	n=70
5	52%	10%	18%	10%	8%	n=77

80 people (91%) rated some or all of the options listed

Suggestions were made by 26 (31%) of the respondents, who noted that information is hard to find and unclear, application processes are too lengthy and confusing, requirements are too restrictive, more guidance should be available to applicants, and the time commitment was high. It was also noted that having quality technical assistance people can make a big difference.

Many landowners appear wary of government intervention, with several noting that many landowners do not seek conservation funding due to restrictions subsequently placed on their land.

**Question Three**

**What improvements can you suggest that would make incentive programs more appealing to and useful for the private landowners who use them?**

Seventy-seven percent (sixty-five people) of those surveyed provided suggestions for improvements. A general consensus among respondents is that the incentives program needs a more present and positive public image. Many complain of a lack of information available to farmers in general. People mention a complete lack of awareness, and those who are aware complain of the difficulties associated with the process.

People suggest offering a class in each region that explains relevant programs and how to apply. The class should also focus on connecting the landowners' interest with those of the government to alleviate tensions and reservations. Many request that a single database be created with links to all programs with information on qualification requirements, application materials, and where to find help. It is commonly noted that the entire process needs to have a much faster turnaround. Others mention negative experiences with the application process itself. Some have had questions and nowhere to turn, some cannot understand the lengthy paperwork, and some have applied and never heard back at all. It was also noted that having committed, well trained watershed people to deal with, and that they be available over time, was very important to the process.

Others reported that restrictions and the inability to qualify for funding have also provided a deterrent for applicants. Some mention the acreage requirements are too high, others mention the length of commitments are too long. Some request that the funding decisions be more case specific, rather than governed by general rules set forth by the government.

Money is reportedly a factor as well. Some cannot front the initial costs of these programs once qualified. Others mention that taxes should be adjusted to reward land conservation and organic farming, and that taxes should represent the externalities associated with land use, leaving conventional farmers (who use pesticide/herbicide/chemical fertilizers) and developers to bear higher taxation.

#### **Question Four**

**What benefits and advantages of these programs do you feel are the significant factors in motivating yourself and other landowners to participate? For example, on a scale of 1-5, how important or unimportant do you believe the following to be:**

- 1. Landowner's desire to protect the future productivity of the land**
- 2. Landowner's desire to be a responsible citizen**
- 3. The program may help to pay for land improvements that the landowner would like to make in any case**
- 4. The program provides money to supplement the income derived from a farm, ranch, or forest business on the land**
- 5. Landowner is concerned about future regulatory action**
- 6. Landowner learned about program from a respected source**

<b>Q</b>	<b>Important 5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>Unimportant 1</b>	
1	61%	20%	13%	2%	2%	n=83
2	45%	16%	26%	10%	5%	n=80
3	46%	24%	20%	5%	6%	n=84
4	48%	19%	16%	7%	7%	n=83
5	38%	17%	20%	16%	9%	n=81
6	28%	14%	25%	25%	8%	n=72

85 people (97%) rated some or all of the options listed

### **Question Five**

**What suggestions do you have for changes that you feel could make conservation incentives programs more effective in providing worthwhile public benefits at the lowest possible cost.**

Forty-nine percent (forty-three people) offered suggestions, however the responses for this question reflect much of what was mentioned in question three, including suggestions to simplify the process, increase public awareness of the programs, and relax applicant qualification restrictions were all reiterated ideas.

More specific suggestions include involving community youth in implementation of projects. A desire for an employee or consultant to be sent out to view each farm and make suggestions based on the visits has been expressed. People have also requested the same kind of assistant to be available during the application process, and post implementation. More public awareness could be created through mailings, perhaps including literature in tax statements.

One suggests that funding money be applied to tax payments rather than given directly to the farmer. The checks can create bookkeeping confusion. Tax reductions are commonly proposed, ranging from rewards for those who participate in conservation improvements to a complete restructuring of land values in general.

One person suggested that it was more important to select projects with strong public benefit than ones that were inexpensive. If one can show good projects, the public will support them, if we can get the information out about them.

### **Question Six**

**Are there conservation programs that do not exist that you think should? Are there specific ways you feel current conservation incentives could be improved? Are there current conservation programs that you feel do not work and should be eliminated? Could you explain?**

Thirty-five percent (twenty-nine people) responded to this question. Many of the answers overlap with highlighted points from questions one through five. Alternative suggestions include elimination of farm subsidies that help industrial farming corporations, offer more incentives to organic/small scale farms. It has been expressed that owning a wetland tends to have a negative impact on farmers, and they would like to see more funding opportunities for agricultural lands rather than maintaining such a narrow focus on wetland restoration and conservation.

Some have suggested creating a program to aid in funding seasonal farm worker housing. Cost share programs for cover crop seed, compost development/access, and manure digesters were proposed. One respondent mentioned that the Natural Resources Conservation Service should hire more employees, and that Technical Service Provider funding should be increased. One suggested the key is projects that keep land in agricultural production.