WASHINGTON APA'S GAME CHANGING INITIATIVE
SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE & HEALTHY FOOD SYSTEMS WORKING GROUP

AN OVERVIEW OF WASHINGTON'S GROWTH MANAGEMENT ACT IMPACT ON FARMLAND CONSERVATION

WOODLAND BOTTOMS, COWLITZ COUNTY, WASHINGTON (PHOTO BY GRETA HOLMSTROM, COWLITZ COUNTY)

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***NOTE**: This document provides an overview of a report researched and written by Megan Horst with support of the Sustainable Agriculture & Healthy Food Systems Working Group. The report will be published at a later date. Please contact Megan at mhorst@uw.edu for more information.*

The Sustainable Agriculture & Healthy Food Systems Working Group provides planners and community stakeholders with the information and tools to preserve agricultural land, encourage sustainable farming practices, and improve access to healthy food for all of Washington's communities.

BIG Ideas

In 1990 the Washington State Legislature passed the Growth Management Act (GMA). Among its diverse aims, the GMA instructs jurisdictions to designate and conserve farmland. As one step towards an evaluation of the effectiveness, we examined how farmland trends have changed since the GMA. We also examined the differences between the 29 counties that plan fully under the GMA and the 10 that do not, and differences between individual counties.

A challenge in answering this question is the availability of accurate farmland data. The forthcoming paper examines three sources of data: Census of Agriculture (CoA) and National Resources Inventory (NRI) data both from the United States Department of Agriculture, and aerial photo classification data from reports on changes in Washington land use by Gray et al. (2013) and Lettman et al. (2013). Each data source identifies farmland differently, and each has limits. CoA data better reflects land in farms as reported by landowners while NRI and aerial photo data reflects actual land use. Aerial photo classification has challenges at a smaller scale.

Preliminary findings:

- Overall, Washington continues to lose farmland. All data sources show annual declines in farmland both pre and post-GMA. Washington currently has between 13 and 15.5 million acres of farmland (exact number varies by data source).
- Both CoA and NRI data indicate that post-GMA, Washington state continues to lose farmland, but at a reduced pace from pre-GMA. Aerial photo data suggests that the rate of farmland loss has accelerated slightly post-GMA (to over -18 thousand acres annually, or -0.12%). Of the three sources, aerial photo data shows the lowest overall loss of farmland in terms of acres and percentages.
- Aerial photo data shows that more acres of farmland were lost annually post-GMA in the 29 counties planning fully than pre-GMA. The annual change went from about -15 thousand acres to almost -18 thousand acres, or from -0.15% to -0.17%. Per new resident, however, the rate of farmland loss slowed slightly from just over -0.2 acres to just under -0.2 acres.
- For those 10 counties not planning under the GMA, aerial photo analysis suggests that these counties also saw increased loss post-GMA, from -277 acres annually to -1,000 acres annually, or from -0.01% to -0.02%. In these 10 counties, the rate of loss worsened per new resident, from -0.083 acres farmland per new resident to -0.346 acres per new resident.
- Individual county farmland trends vary widely. CoA data suggests that some counties are gaining land in farms, and many are losing farmland. However, aerial photo analysis shows no farmland gains in any county. The difference suggests that farmland continues to be converted to other uses, but in some counties, there is increased farming activity.

The forthcoming paper is intended to be a first step towards understanding the trends. There is a need for more accurate data. The extent to which policy, along with other drivers such as land value, profitability of farming, affect observed farmland changes, is not well understood. The authors welcome comments and contributions to inform future follow-up research on this topic.