Regional level policies can help conserve resource lands

Reversing the trend of resource land conversion takes effort, at all levels of government. Focusing attention on regional, state, county, and local policies and regulations can be effective.

Vision 2040 provides regional direction for the counties and its cities of the central Puget Sound region to implement a regional growth strategy. The strategy has been effective at containing urban development in centers, but some refinements may be needed to ensure we maintain open spaces in our urban areas as well. Enabling the protection of resource lands in urban landscapes could be strengthened through modifications of the multi-county planning policies (MPPs) during the next update of VISION (such as under the Development Patterns for Land Use, Orderly Development and Design goals.)


What are resource lands?
Resource lands are working farm and forest lands. In the Puyallup-White Watershed alone there are over 20,000 acres of agricultural lands and over 360,000 acres of forest lands.

What can YOU do to help conserve resource lands?
1. Encourage state and local legislatures to conserve more resource lands through changes to regulations and policies, and to enforce those already on the books (see left and right columns for ideas).
2. Encourage local decision makers to promote the use of transfer of development rights (TDR) programs in your community to increase height or density in place of up-zoning. Promote the creation of a regional TDR program.
3. If you are a farm or forest land owner, take advantage of existing tax incentives (RCW 84.34 Open Space Taxation Act and WAC 458-30-200) to preserve your working lands and save money.
4. If you own resource lands, consider entering them into the local or regional TDR program to increase height, density and other increases for urban development.

These guidelines are based on the study “Green-Y Resource Lands: Conversion to Conservation in the Puyallup-White Watershed and Beyond”. Download at: www.openspacepugetsound.com

State level regulations can help conserve resource lands

1. Make use of existing opportunities to designate/classify resource lands as open space or open space corridors within, between, and outside UGAs to increase the likelihood of their protection (utilize RCW 36.70A.160).
2. Add protection guidelines for classified resource lands as well as adjacent uses both inside and outside of UGAs. See WAC 365-190-050.
3. Clarify resource designation criteria. Make it clear that resource lands can be designated and therefore protected both inside and outside of UGAs. This could be accomplished through changes in interpretation of existing guidelines, not necessarily new policy.
   • For agricultural lands WAC 365-190-050(3)(c) and WAC 365-190-050(4) and (5) provide opportunities for protection.
   • Policy for forest lands (WAC 365-190-060) may need similar provisions to allow for the protection of locally significant forest lands inside and outside the UGA.
4. Promote the use of land use and zoning classifications to conserve “resource lands” as such, or as “open spaces”. Improve land use regulations and implementation of current use taxation to facilitate preserving resource lands. Utilize RCW 84.34 Open Space Taxation Act and WAC 458-30-200.
Why should we conserve our urbanizing resource lands?

Economic Value: Within a 238-square-mile study area near the city of Tacoma, resource lands contribute over $200 million to the regional economy on an annual basis.

Cultural Heritage: Working agricultural and forest lands help connect us to our collective identity and history. Timber, for instance, was the first established industry within Pierce County.

Ecosystem Services: Resource lands help to clean our air, replenish our water, reduce flood waters and provide recreational opportunities—all services we too often take for granted.

Are resource lands at risk?

Yes!

Build-out Potential: Thousands of acres of resource lands are zoned to allow other uses in place of farm and forest uses. Within the Green-Y of the Puyallup watershed alone, over 6,000 working farm acres and nearly 32,000 forest acres could easily be turned into suburban development.

Regulations are discouraging: Especially in urbanizing areas, zoning policies and regulations often discourage resource lands, denying the region of the benefits provided by farm and forest open spaces. But they need not be.

Need for Financial Incentives: Owners of resource lands need financial incentives to retain their working farms and forests to counter the pressures to convert them to more developed uses. Some reports indicate that forest areas within the urban/rural fringe are worth 15 to 20 times more as developed uses than as forests, as the true value of their ecosystem service benefits are not accounted for in the economic equation.

Guidelines for Planners and Citizens

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