

Skagit County Conservation Futures Advisory Committee
Meeting Summary
May 9, 2023

Members in Attendance

Audrey Gravley	Andrea Xaver	Owen Peth	Margery Hite	Jim Glackin
Keith Morrison	Scott DeGraw	Trisha Logue (ex-officio)	Jack Moore (ex-officio)	

Members Absent

None

Staff and Others in Attendance

Kai Ottesen, Belle Bean Services
Sarah Stoner, Skagit County Public Works

Scott called the meeting to order at 7:00AM.

Review Agenda

Agenda approved.

April 11 Meeting Summary

Keith made a motion to approve minutes with two punctuation corrections and addition of “Skagit Herald”; Owen seconded. All were in favor.

Easement Status, Property Updates

The group discussed updates on the six properties currently in queue for agricultural conservation easements. The queued applicants encompass 730 acres and 15 development rights.

The group discussed status of FLP-175 currently pending a conversion request with Washington State Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO). The conversion is still pending RCO director review since February 2023.

Sarah reports that the second appraiser on assignment remains pending, with the promise to deliver by Wednesday, May 10. Delay is reportedly due to unexpected additional projects.

Marketing & Application Process

FLP Annual Report 2022

Sarah reviewed the distribution plan for 2022 Farmland Legacy Annual Report.

Distribution Summary, May/June 2023

- **May 16 (Tuesday):** inserts into *Anacortes American* (2,015 copies)
- **May 17 (Wednesday):** inserts into *La Conner Weekly* (1,000 copies)
- **May 18 (Thursday):** inserts in *The Skagit Valley Herald* (5,395 copies)
- **June 6 (Tuesday):** inserts begin distribution *The Concrete Herald* (5,000 copies)
 - Total of 13,410 copies via newspaper delivery

Additional distribution:

- **Direct mail** – with letter from Commissioners (to local and state officials); and letter from Public Works Director (to local and statewide ag-friendly partners)
- **Social media** – Facebook & Twitter posts and links
- **“Hot spots”** – stacks at brick-and-mortar locations of ag-friendly stores (ie. Farm Credit lobby, Tractor Supply, etc.)
- **Other distribution ideas?** Please share

Viva Farms Meeting, May 2023

Sarah shared that she met with Viva Farms staff Anna Chotzen. Main purpose was to explore where intersect and discuss how we might partner.

Subcommittee Reports

Program Acceptance Criteria Recommendations (Members: Jim, Andrea. Support: Sarah)

Subcommittee chair: Jim.

Purpose: make recommendations to clarify parameters for acceptance into the program, taking into considerations the mission and purpose of Farmland Legacy Program. Subcommittee work currently includes a review of farmland properties with no development rights, and the task to define recommended criteria for enrolling such properties for protection through the FLP purchase-of-ag-conservation-easement (PACE) model.

Jim opens discussion to the group regarding priority characteristics of farmland without available development rights to extinguish. Owen asks: what is the public benefit to spending Conservation Futures funds on these properties. In answer to what a conservation easement purchase buys: it buys the protection from potential change to zoning, along with impervious surface limitations, protections from fragmenting farmland parcels further, and protection as use only for ag (which prevents addition of a mother-in-law building, for example).

Andrea referred us to points the group to [Ordinance 16380](#), “... it is in the best interest of the state to maintain, preserve, and otherwise continue in existence adequate open space lands for the production of food, fiber and forest crop...” [Resolution 16766](#) follows, with the mention of “... developing a recommended program plan for use of the Conservation Futures Fund, including criteria for selection of farmland and critical areas to be preserved...”

The group discussed establishing a *minimum farmland acreage* as an acceptance criterion, and if so, what the minimum lot size would be. Discussion included consideration of the required minimum acreage is for Open Space Taxation.

Adjacency to protected land is another top recommended criterion for acceptance. Owen asks if not just adjacency to protected land should be a criterion but perhaps adjacency to a protected parcel of a certain size?

Also discussed is *adjacency to actively farmed land*, especially of a certain size. Farmers easily farm adjacent parcels; their size is of less consequence than adjacency to other farmed land. An isolated, smaller piece of farmland is less likely to be farmed. Equipment can’t be maneuvered as easily, and equipment must be driven there.

Scott points out that many of the properties in the east county won’t qualify under ‘*adjacency to protected land*’ criterion while they might qualify for *Adjacency to Farmed Land of a Certain Size*.

In the case of an existing home on the applicant's land: Jim agreed to look up the Skagit Land Trust legal verbiage used to exclude a house from an easement. It's assumed that a (costly) land survey would be needed to exclude the house from an easement unless the legal language provides a work-around to a survey. Cost of a survey would be assumed by landowner, which might create a barrier to enrollment. Also of note: 2% of a 5-acre chunk of ground is 400 sf, so, an existing house on lots this size would be a barrier due to impervious surface cap.

Margery shared that the Skagit Conservation District is seeing an increase in smaller producers coming into the county. She makes the stand that we want to continue to be a farming county, small and large. And we should be proceed cautiously regarding unintentional barriers for protecting smaller parcels.

Scott points out a concern regarding the annual monitoring of an increased amount of smaller parcel easements.

Valuation Process Review & Recommendations (Members: Scott, Margery, Audrey, Jim)

Subcommittee chair: Scott.

Purpose: make recommendations, if needed, to improve the overall valuation process (versus the appraisal process which is simply one tool for valuation. Evaluate barriers to participation: Is it our appraisal amounts that is the issue? Or do we need to have our appraisals approached differently? Subcommittee work includes a review of the FLP Property Ranking/Scoring Process Review—how the scoring process relates to valuation.

Scott explains next step is to clean up our scoring mechanism. Then, build a 'multiplier tool' based on a formula tied to the scoring. Owen points out that not just the land needs to be protected, but the farmer needs to be protected in reviewing our scoring mechanism.

Sarah will compile for next meeting, the last five years of scoring on a single data sheet for review of score ranges, and core or edge scores.

Easement Review & Recommendations (Members: Owen, Andrea, Keith)

Subcommittee chair: Owen.

Purpose: 1. Review the current FLP easement template to identify what might be obstacles to a landowner signing the Conservation Easement; recommend what might be considered for elimination, and/or not relevant to conservation of the ag land; 2. Review the current FLP conservation easement and the Subcommittee's recommended changes from a legal standpoint to ensure that the contract is watertight and ironclad.

Subcommittee chair: Owen

Owen discussed status of easement review. Trisha points Sarah to internal procedures. Sarah and Owen will follow up separately.

Monitoring Report

Kai reported on fewer than five protected properties that are flagged due to a possibility of having exceeded their impervious surface limitations or being very close to those limitations. Kai discussed how there's not always communication with the program nor County Planning regarding increases in impervious surface, nor are permits necessarily always required.

Sarah and Kai are discussing the best way to establish baselines for impervious surface calculations on new easements. Moving forward, new easements will document impervious surface at the time the easement is recorded. This will be recorded in Exhibit C 'Property Characteristics' of the easement.

Sarah and Kai are also discussing how to maximize use of the annual monitoring letter that is mailed to all existing easement holders, approximately 200 easements in total. This includes working with mail merge processes and database data to share annual reports on existing impervious with each landowner.

Member Updates

Tabled due to time constraints.

Financial Summary

The financial summary is updated for 2023.

Administrative

CFAC 2023 Meeting Dates

June 13	September 12	December 12
July 11	October 10 (tbd)	
August 8 (tbd)	November 14	

The meeting adjourned at 9:15 AM