

WHY MY COUNTY SHOULD OPT INTO THE VOLUNTARY STEWARDSHIP PROGRAM

The Ruckelshaus Center facilitated 4 years of negotiations on a Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) to create an alternative to new regulations of agriculture under the Growth Management Act.

FOR COUNTIES THAT OPT IN:

The VSP provides counties the opportunity to have stakeholders create **voluntary** programs that **protect critical areas** associated with agricultural activities **while maintaining and enhancing the viability of agriculture**.

This stakeholder process will include agricultural, tribal, and environmental interests. Protection and enhancement of critical areas will be pursued exclusively through **voluntary** programs.

Counties have 3 years to complete the local process to identify goals and create local plans, beginning **after** the county accepts funding from the state.

The decision to opt into the VSP and the subsequent plan are not subject to legal challenge. If recent history is an indicator, this could save millions of dollars in legal costs.

FOR COUNTIES THAT DO NOT OPT IN:

If a county does **not** opt in by January 22, 2012, the county must review and, if necessary, revise its Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO) related to agriculture. That update must be completed by July, 2013.

Counties must act **whether they receive funding or not**. Counties will bear the expense of the public process, identifying and including the best available science, and the legal costs of any legal challenges.

The regular update process leaves counties and agricultural activities **vulnerable to lawsuits** that could force new and unnecessary regulations.

WHAT DOES A COUNTY NEED TO DO TO OPT INTO THE PROGRAM?

- 1) The county must confer with tribal, agricultural, and environmental interests before opting into the program.
- 2) The county must adopt a resolution or ordinance to opt into the program.
- 3) The county must consider the following potential aspects of the program:
 - a. The role of farming and its economic value in the watersheds;
 - b. The importance of local salmonid resources in the watershed(s);
 - c. Significance and vulnerability of biological diversity in the area;
 - d. Presence of local leadership to make the VSP successful;
 - e. Integration of local watershed strategies and availability of data;
 - f. Presence of local watershed technical assistance;
 - g. Likelihood of success with a local effort under the VSP;
- 4) The county must opt in by **January 22, 2012** or the opportunity will be lost.

Then, it is a matter of waiting for **adequate funding before the timeline begins** with deadlines for completion of steps in the program. Efforts are underway to refocus existing federal dollars toward this new voluntary stewardship program.

BOTTOM LINE:

Washington Farm Bureau and other agricultural organizations support opting into the VSP because it is the only way to ensure that both the county and agriculture are protected from lawsuits and new regulations.

