

Thurston County VSP Workgroup (John Stuhlmiller)

Please see the attached document

Dear Department of Ecology,

The Thurston County Voluntary Stewardship Workgroup thanks you for the opportunity to comment on the Voluntary Clean Water Guidance for Agriculture.

In our review, we believe that as currently written, the BMPs are not truly voluntary, but carry the threat of mandatory practices with a regulatory backstop of enforceable violations on agricultural lands if not fully implemented. We cite the following two examples where editing the text will ensure the program is exclusively voluntary and does not **force** producers to do **voluntary** actions or set up a legal trap whereby producers who do not employ all of the voluntary practices or who do not adequately demonstrate to ecology that their alternative management is protective.

Publication 20-10-008 December 2022, on page 10

“Introduction

If an operation uses suites of practices consistent with the recommendations in this guidance and appropriate to all farm-specific pollutants and water quality concerns, Ecology will presume that water quality is being adequately protected by the operation.”

Publication 20-10-008 December 2022 on page 11

“Alternative Practices

Producers are not required to use the practices recommended here. However, using the recommended practices has the advantage of providing practice-based certainty and predictability because the practices have been specifically evaluated for their protection of water quality.

Producers may choose to demonstrate to Ecology that alternative management practices are as effective in preventing water pollution for their operation. If a producer decides to go this route, Ecology recommends they consult with the regional NRCS office or local conservation district for technical assistance. Ecology remains responsible for determining if water quality is protected.”

We believe there is a proven example of voluntary action that is working. The Voluntary Stewardship Program (VSP) has demonstrated time and again that agencies cooperating with landowners in voluntary conservation can achieve great results. Results that not only protect the environment but ensure that producers can continue to farm and help ensure our food security. We would like to see a stronger reference to the VSP program and on the ground benefits of a truly voluntary program.

Just within the Thurston County VSP program, we have had 153 landowners complete Voluntary Stewardship Checklists, 61 landowners developed individual stewardship plans, and we have completed 314 technical assistance requests on the landscape. All of this work and the accompanying environmental enhancement has come voluntarily. We are very proud of the “proof of concept” demonstrated by our county and the other 16 counties that have been in the program from the beginning.

One more county (Wahkiakum) joined the other 27 counties in the VSP fold this year. We hope to see the rest join us in protecting the environment while maintaining and enhancing the viability of agriculture, and hope all state agencies will encourage the same.

Ag viability and food security are critical concerns for our nation and the world. Most producers are struggling to make ends meet, so we need to seek additional ways to help farmers obtain the resources needed to ensure they can continue farming.

We strongly encourage Ecology to reframe the text surrounding the “Voluntary” BMPs by stressing that these are tools that may be utilized, but failure to implement the suites of practices does not in any way signal failure to meet water quality standards and thus trigger enforcement.

Not all BMPs can or should be employed on every operation. As with VSP, producers who do engage in the program are implementing practices that are valuable to both the farm and the environment. This is the theme that must be expressed in the narrative surrounding the suites of practices.

Ecology should also take great care in re-opening the riparian buffer width conversation. Bigger is not always feasible or better, and it can be devastating to food production. If a producer wishes to implement larger buffers that is great, but we need to acknowledge that small buffers can provide great benefits. These too must remain in the voluntary category as resources and wiliness of producers allows. Please focus on providing flexibility.

Above all, if Ecology modifies the document as we recommend, the credibility and acceptance by the ag community will be much greater. VSP is vivid proof that voluntary can and will work.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Sincerely,

Thurston County Voluntary Stewardship Workgroup