

## Example Frequently Asked Questions (from Adams County)

### *What is a Voluntary Stewardship Program?*

VSP is a new, non-regulatory, and incentive-based approach that balances the protection of critical areas on agricultural lands while promoting agricultural viability. VSP is allowed under the GMA as an alternative to traditional approaches to critical areas protection, such as protection buffers. VSP is not a replacement for compliance with other local, state, or federal laws and regulations, but participation in VSP will help show how much effort the County's agricultural producers are investing in meeting these requirements and document the benefits of these efforts in protecting and enhancing critical area functions and values (Figure 1-1).

**Figure 1-1**

### **Balanced Approach of Critical Areas Protection and Agricultural Viability**



### *What are critical areas and where are they in Adams County?*

The five critical areas that are specifically defined under the GMA (Revised Code of Washington [RCW] 36.70A.030) and designated through the Adams County (County) critical areas ordinance include: 1) wetlands; 2) fish and wildlife habitat conservation areas; 3) critical aquifer recharge areas; 4) geologically hazardous areas; and 5) frequently flooded areas. All five critical areas intersect with agricultural lands within the County. See Section 2 for definitions of these critical areas and Section 3 for descriptions on where these critical areas typically intersect with agricultural lands and critical area characteristics within the County. See section 3 for critical area descriptions and characteristics, and where these typically intersect with agriculture lands in Adams County.

### *Are there critical areas on my land or how might I affect critical areas?*

Critical areas are designated through the County Critical Areas Ordinance. Each critical area has specific characteristics used for identification. Additionally, critical areas maps, such as the maps included in the Adams County VSP Work Plan (Work Plan), can be used help to identify where critical areas may occur; however, presence of critical areas is determined on an individual site basis. Critical areas can be protected or enhanced through implementing farm conservation practices. Benefits to critical areas from these practices can be direct (practices implemented next to or within a critical area), or indirect (e.g., upland practice implemented that might benefit a down-gradient critical area).

### *What would participation look like?*

VSP participation includes tracking conservation practices implemented on a farm that protect and enhance critical area functions and values. There are many ways that agricultural producers can get involved, either through existing Conservation District (CD), Natural Resources Conservation Service, (NRCS) or other programs, or through self-funded improvements.

Participation in the VSP is voluntary, meaning that agricultural landowners and operators (commercial and noncommercial) are not required to participate. However, many producers already implement conservation practices that protect and enhance critical areas through government- or self-funded practices. These practices can be recorded anonymously as part of the VSP to ensure success of the Work Plan. Voluntary participation, anonymity, and privacy are all key principles that will be maintained during the reporting process. Agricultural producers who choose to participate are free to withdraw at any time without penalty (RCW 36.70A.760).

### *Why should I participate in VSP?*

Many producers may already have implemented changes to farming techniques or implemented conservation practices that protect and enhance critical area functions and values. Participating in VSP can help to document these practices and give the producer and the County credit for the critical areas protection or enhancement measures put in place, including direct and indirect benefits. Additionally, VSP can help introduce producers to other practices that might improve farming operations and potentially reduce input costs that can improve the bottom line, while also providing benefits to critical areas. There is also flexibility in agricultural operations when critical area benefits are maintained through VSP. See below for how this flexibility could be reduced or go away if VSP fails.

### *What is a "Self-Assessment Checklist," and how can it help producers participate in VSP?"*

A Self-Assessment Checklist (Attachment A) is an implementation tool developed by the Adams County VSP Work Group (Work Group). This checklist helps facilitate the documentation of

existing practices and the identification of additional conservation practices that could be implemented by producers to protect critical areas. It also provides important contact information for producers to obtain additional information on the program.

Conservation practices are implemented in a variety of ways as they are adapted to specific farm conditions. To receive credit for critical areas protection under VSP, practices do not need to meet NRCS or other government-based standards. Rather, practices need only to demonstrate a direct or indirect protection or enhancement to critical area functions and values.

### *How will critical areas be protected if VSP fails in my County?*

Failure of the Work Plan to demonstrate protection of critical area functions as they existed in 2011 will trigger a regulatory approach to critical areas protection under the GMA, applying prescriptive requirements for protecting critical areas, such as buffers and setbacks. Additionally, regulation of critical areas on agricultural lands through the GMA does not take agricultural viability into account and does not encourage outreach or technical assistance for agricultural operators. Producers can help maintain flexibility in operations and this non-regulatory approach for protecting critical areas by participating in the program. Participation helps to ensure the success of the VSP.

### *Is there funding to support VSP?*

The VSP has received statewide funding for the 2015 – 2017 biennium. Currently, there is a request to the state legislature for additional funding for the 2017 – 2019 biennium; however, future funding is contingent on additional appropriations by the state. Other funding sources, such as local CD funding, state funding programs administered by the Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC) and other agencies, federal funding through farm bills or other programs, and private funding, can also be used to support VSP protection and enhancement goals.

### *What is meant by "Baseline Conditions?"*

The effective date of the VSP legislation is July 22, 2011. Per the law, this is the date that identifies the baseline for protecting critical area functions and values while maintaining agricultural viability. Per VSP legislation:

- Implementation of this Work Plan must prevent any loss of county wide critical area functions as they existed on July 22, 2011, while maintaining agricultural viability. Goals for enhancement of critical area functions must also be identified.
- Failure to meet the goals and benchmarks for critical area functions will represent failure of the Work Plan and trigger a regulatory approach to critical areas protection under the GMA.

### *What does it mean to “Protect and Enhance Critical Areas?”*

The VSP requires this Work Plan to identify measurable benchmarks that are designed to protect and enhance critical area functions and values (e.g., water quality function and wildlife habitat) through voluntary actions by agricultural producers while maintaining agricultural viability, these benchmarks are described in Section 5. Per VSP definitions:

- Protection requires prevention of the degradation of functions and values of baseline conditions (conditions existing as of July 22, 2011, when VSP legislation was passed).
- Enhancement means to improve the processes, structure, and functions of baseline conditions for ecosystems and habitats associated with critical areas (RCW 36.70A.703).

### *What does it mean to “Maintain Agricultural Viability?”*

To receive approval, the Work Plan must protect critical areas in a way that maintains agricultural viability (RCW 36.70A.725). Activities or methods that protect critical areas must also be neutral to or benefit farm operations, such as reducing input costs or reducing soil erosion. Further, the VSP will not require an agricultural producer to discontinue agricultural activities that legally existed before July 22, 2011 (RCW 36.70A.702). Agricultural viability is discussed further in Section 3.

As illustrated in Figure 1-1, the VSP is intended to balance critical areas protection and agricultural viability at the county level through voluntary actions by agricultural producers. VSP is not a replacement for compliance with other laws and regulations, but participation in the program can often help agricultural producers comply with these requirements.