

# Preserving Farmland and Local Food Access in Clark County

March 14, 2024 Forum



**Friends of  
Clark County**

*Planting the Seeds for Responsible Growth since 1996*

We are Recording this Session

# About Friends of Clark County

## Planting the Seeds of Responsible Growth

We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization working with other community partners who share our vision for a thriving Clark County.

### **Our Work is Essential to the Future of Clark County.**

We are the only organization in Clark County that defends the Growth Management Act. We recognize the urgency we face to protect our natural and community resources such as water, local farming and forest lands, parks and trails, and wildlife habitats for future generations.



<https://friendsofclarkcounty.org/>

# Panel Format & Housekeeping

- Our panelists will present for 40 minutes in order to contextualize our conversation.
- We will have a 20 minute panel discussion. We will also be joined by Oliver Orjiako, Director of Community Planning for Clark County.
- At the end, we will have 15 minutes for questions. Please put your questions in the chat - Mo and Karissa are collecting them.
- If you need something - Mo and Karissa can help you! Please feel free to direct message them in the chat.
- Following the webinar: we will share these materials with all attendees + post the recording on our website.
- Thank you for being here!



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# Meet our Panelists



**Dani Madrone**

PNW Senior Policy and  
Planning Manager  
American Farmland Trust



**Sue Marshall**

Councilor District 5  
Clark County Council



**Zorah Oppenheimer**

Executive Director  
Clark Conservation District

# Context of our Community: Clark County Ag

## What is a Conservation District?




- Special purpose district.
- Non-regulatory and free.
- Partner with residents to voluntarily take action to keep our soil and water healthy.
- Trusted sources of natural resource **expertise** and **funding**.



*Agriculture, septic systems, streamside, forestry, native plants, livestock, and more.*

# Context of our Community: Clark County Ag

## By the Numbers: Clark County has the...

- 2nd highest **population density** (838 people/sq. mile).
- 4th **largest city** in Washington (Vancouver).
- Fastest growing cities/county:
  - 2000-23, **pop.**  **53%**. 2nd highest in WA behind Franklin County.
  - Clark County **fastest growing county** (2020-23, 4.8%)
  - Vancouver - **2nd highest numeric pop.**  (2020-23, 8,685)
  - Ridgefield - **largest %**  in WA between 2010-2020 (117%, 5,562)
- Third<sup>1</sup> highest **number of farms** (1,927)
- Second **lowest** in median farm size (med. - 10 acres, avg. - 29 acres)
- **Highest farm density**, (3.1 farms/sq.mi.) almost double nearest  
<sup>1</sup>Yakima is #1, Spokane is #2  
(Island, 1.8)



# Context of our Community: Clark County Ag

## Natural Potential and Rich Agricultural History

Natural Potential → Willamette Valley

- Incredibly fertile soils → highest NRCS soil productivity rating
  - Glacial Lake Missoula Flood deposits
- Mild climate – Mediterranean(ish)
  - Warm/dry summers, cool/wet winters.

Rich Agricultural History

- Historic: Prunes, hazelnuts, dairy
- Current: Hay, diversified crop farms, livestock



# Context of our Community: Clark County Ag

## Challenges: Isolation

**Political, cultural, and physical** separation from other agricultural centers in WA/OR.

- Columbia Gorge (WA/OR)
- Chehalis Basin (WA)
- Puget Sound (WA)
- Willamette Valley (OR)

*We're a bit of an island.*





# Context of our Community: Clark County Ag

Challenges:

Land Use Pressure & Economics

We grow buildings.



*Photo credit Justin O'Dea, Washington State University*

Portland-metro area: population: 2.5 million

**Clark Co., WA**

Size: 420K acres

Pop. density: 801/mi<sup>2</sup>

**Washington Co., OR**

Size: 465K acres

Pop. density: 829/mi<sup>2</sup>

★ Portland

Image Landsat / Copernicus  
Image © 2024 Airbus

Google Earth

NRCS NCCPI values = inherent ag productivity based on soils, climate

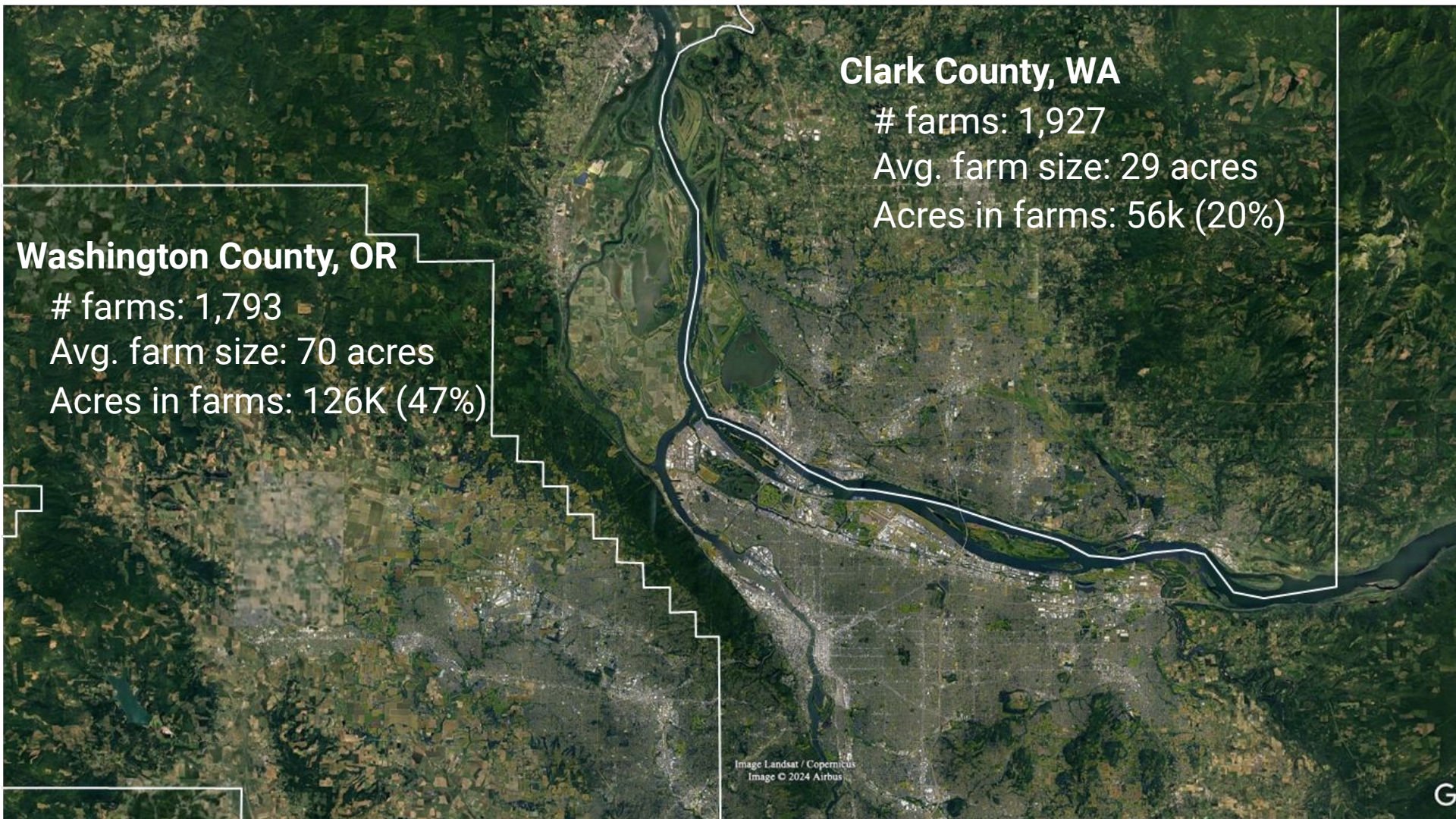
**Clark Co., WA**  
Farmland soils: 283K  
Avg. NCCPI: 59.7

**Washington Co., OR**  
Farmland soils: 269K  
Avg. NCCPI: 58.5

★ Portland

Image Landsat / Copernicus  
Image © 2024 Airbus

Google Earth



**Washington County, OR**

# farms: 1,793

Avg. farm size: 70 acres

Acres in farms: 126K (47%)

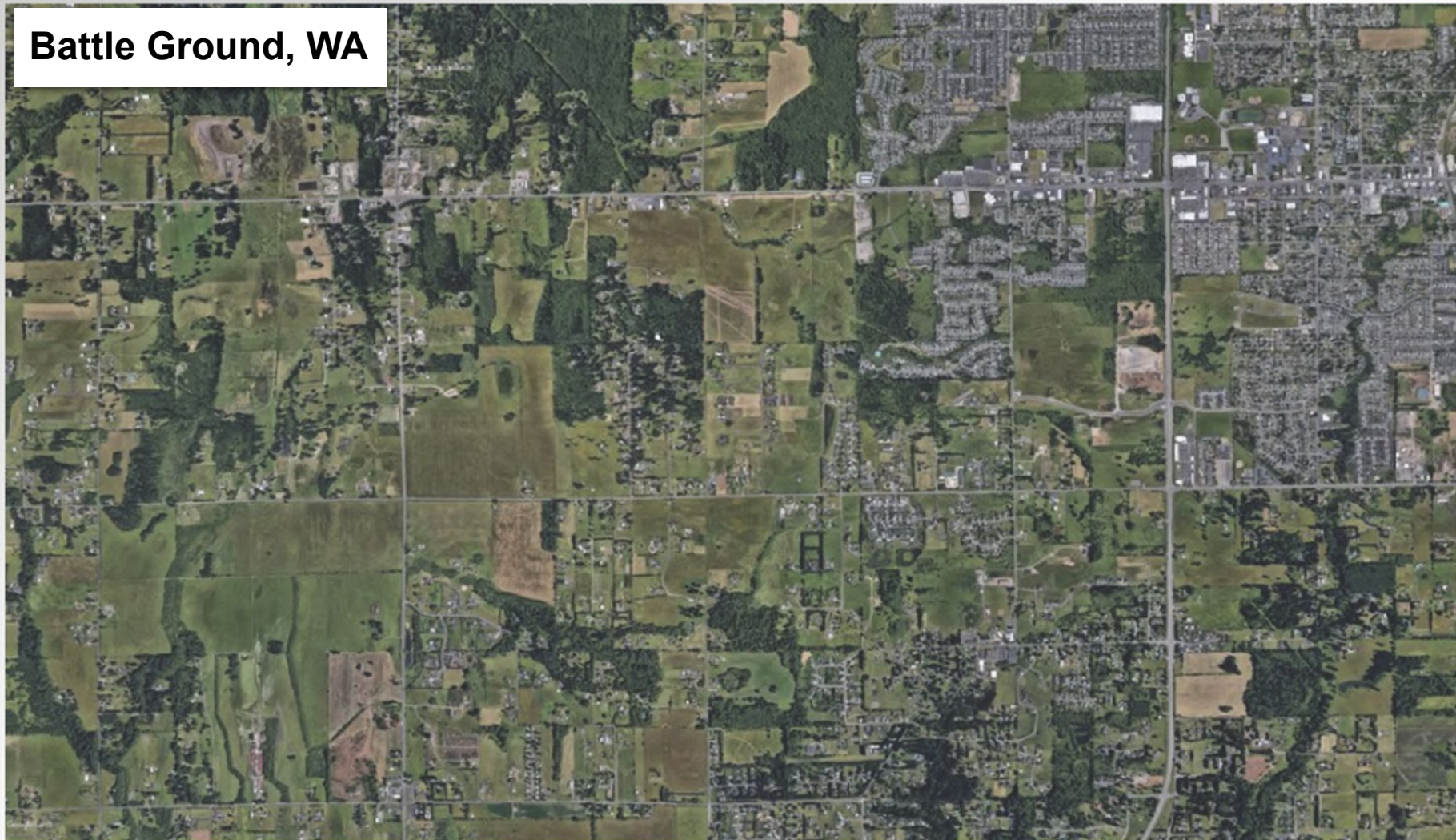
**Clark County, WA**

# farms: 1,927

Avg. farm size: 29 acres

Acres in farms: 56k (20%)

# Battle Ground, WA

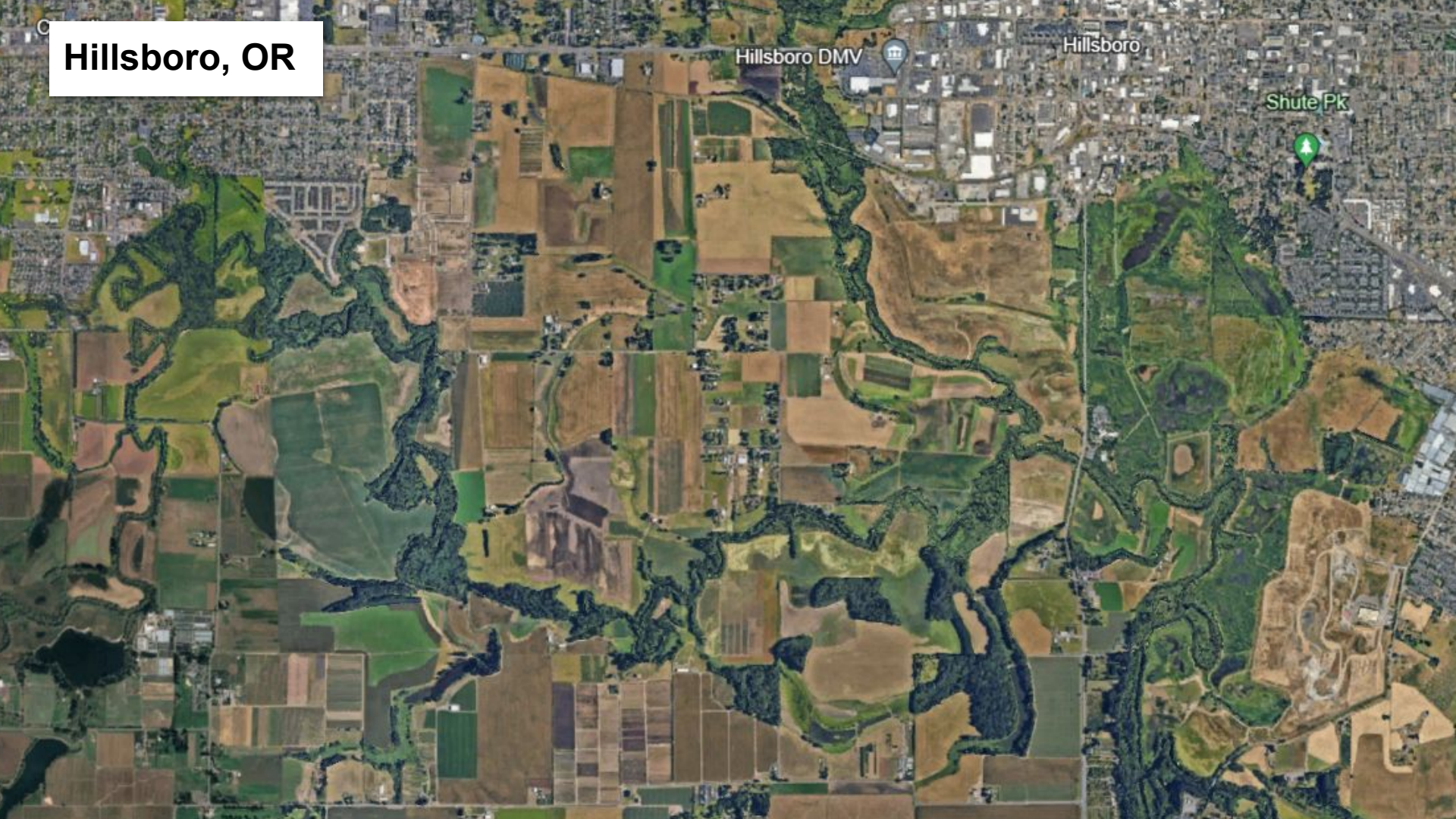


# Hillsboro, OR

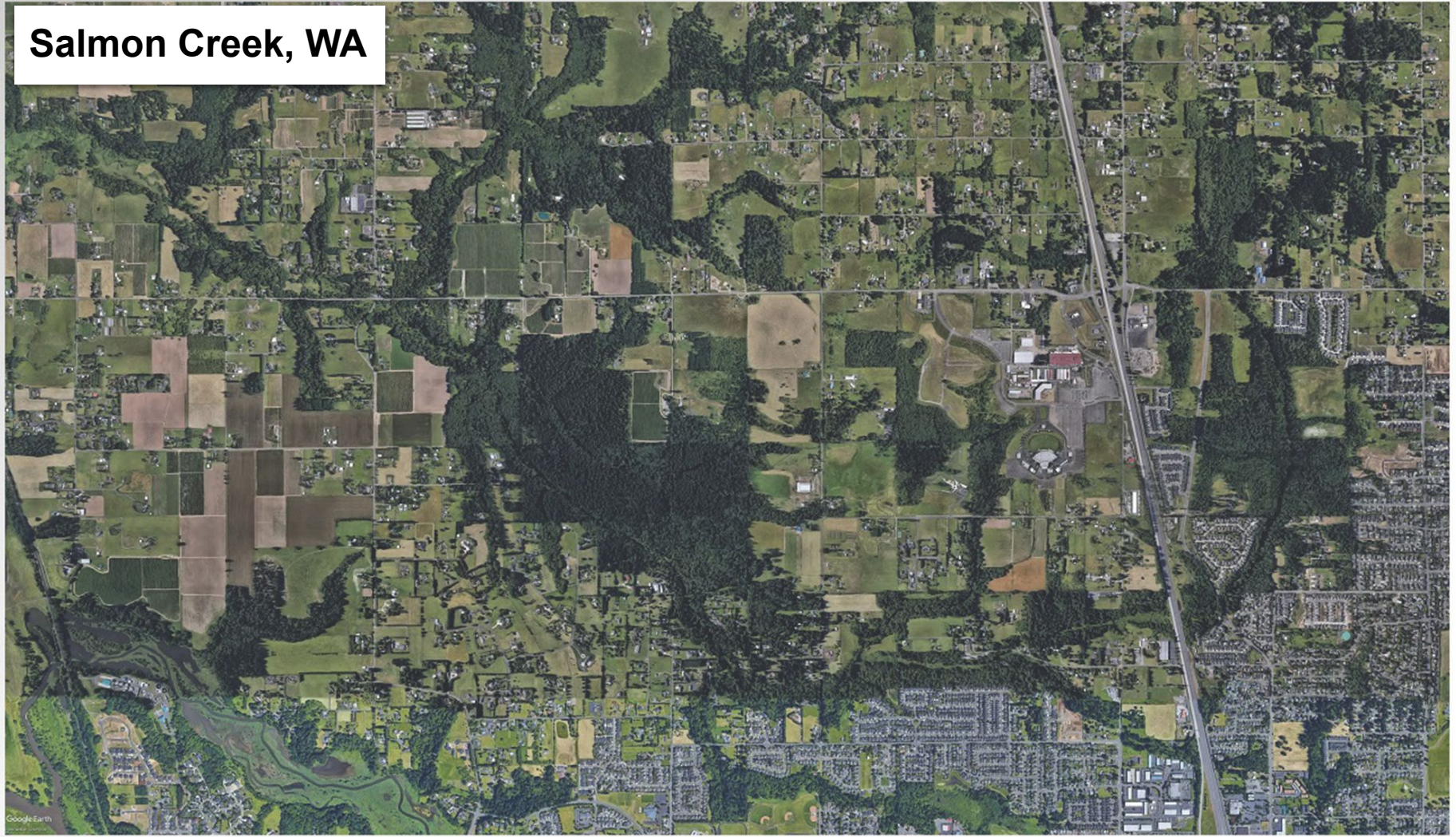
Hillsboro DMV

Hillsboro

Shute Pk



# Salmon Creek, WA



# Sherwood, OR

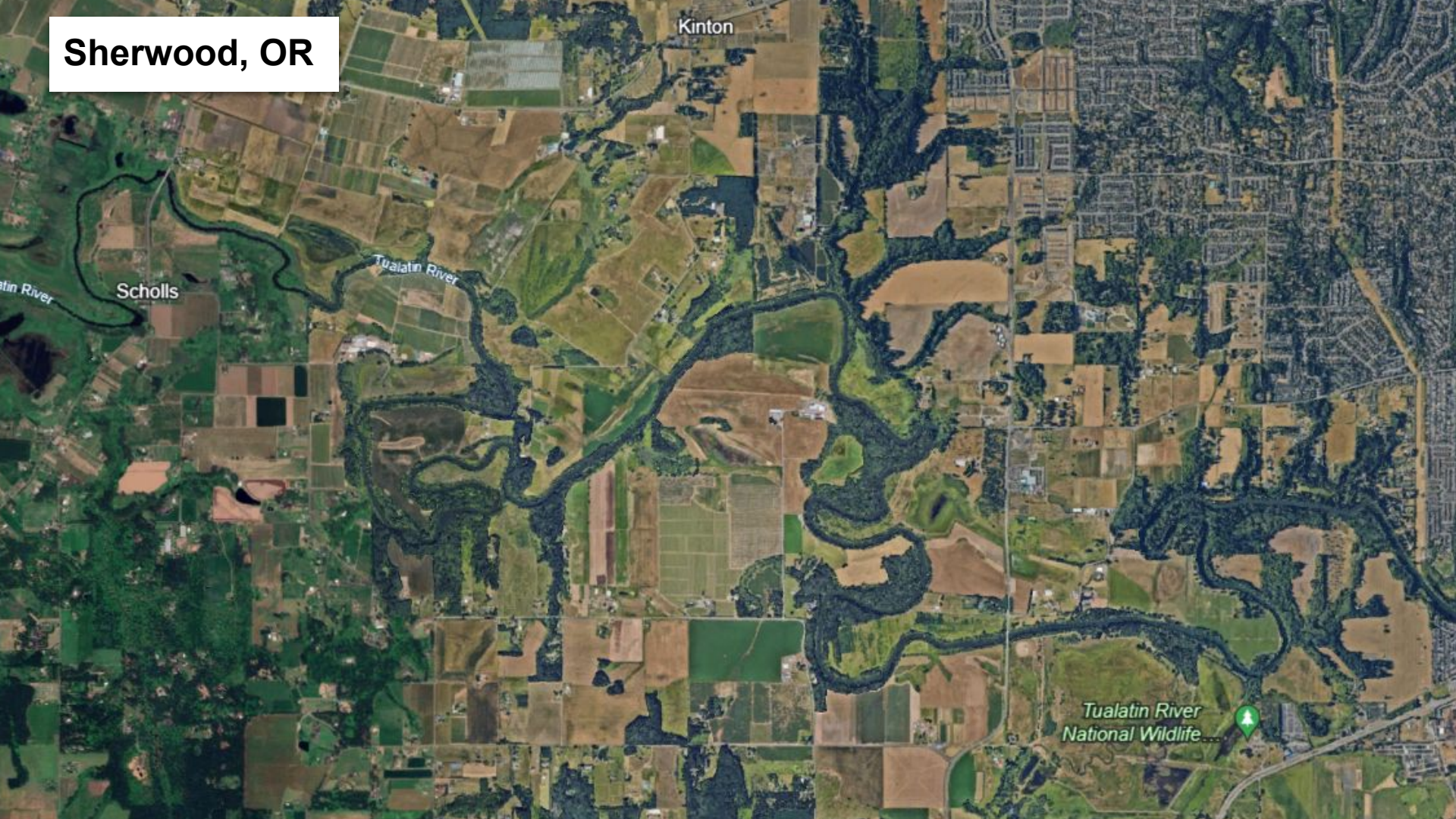
Kinton

Tualatin River

Scholls

Tualatin River

Tualatin River  
National Wildlife...





## Challenges: Unmet Economic Potential

## Clark County, WA

Avg MVP\* \$/acre: \$1,050

Avg MVP \$/farm: \$30.5K

Countywide MVP: \$59.0M

## Washington County, OR

Avg. MVP\* \$/acre: \$2,509

**2.4x**

Avg MVP \$/farm: \$176.3K

**5.8x**

Countywide MVP: \$326.0M

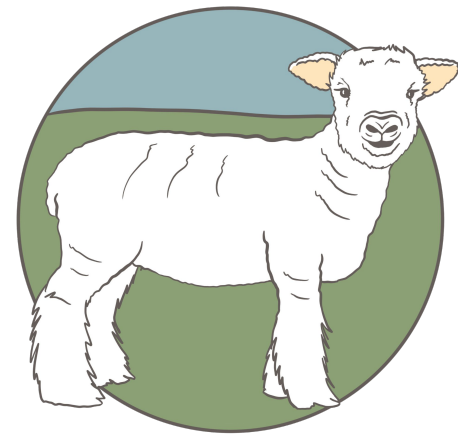
**5.5x**

\*MVP → Market value of agricultural products sold.

# Context of our Community: Clark County Ag

## More Information:

Many thanks to **Justin O'Dea**, Regional Agriculture Specialist with Washington State University for the maps and visuals, as well as the research and analysis. More information about this topic can be found at the links below:



- *Clark County agriculture is in a state of instability*  
Vancouver Business Journal Article: [tinyurl.com/vbj-food](https://tinyurl.com/vbj-food)
- *Growing Value: A Food System Community Conversation*  
Video of presentation (0:00 – 36:00, Q&A @ 1:12:05): [tinyurl.com/growing-value](https://tinyurl.com/growing-value)
- Peri-Urban Agriculture Network Website: [tinyurl.com/peri-urban](https://tinyurl.com/peri-urban)

# Best Practices for Policy and Planning



American Farmland Trust is a 501c3 national nonprofit founded in 1980 to save America's farms and ranches.

We created the conservation agriculture movement, which speaks for the land—and for the people who grow our food. As the movement's leaders, we have three priorities:

- Protecting agricultural land
- Promoting environmentally sound farming practices
- Keeping farmers on the land

# Farmland Protection Strategies

- Agriculture production districts
  - King and Pierce County
- Purchase of Development Rights
  - Skagit County: Farmland Legacy Program  
14,750 acres protected
  - Whatcom County: Conservation Easement Program  
1,900 acres protected
- Transfer of Development Rights
  - Central Puget Sound: King, Pierce, Snohomish, Kitsap
- Public-owned farmland
  - King County
  - Bainbridge Island - Friends of the Farm
- Support agriculture in remaining viable!

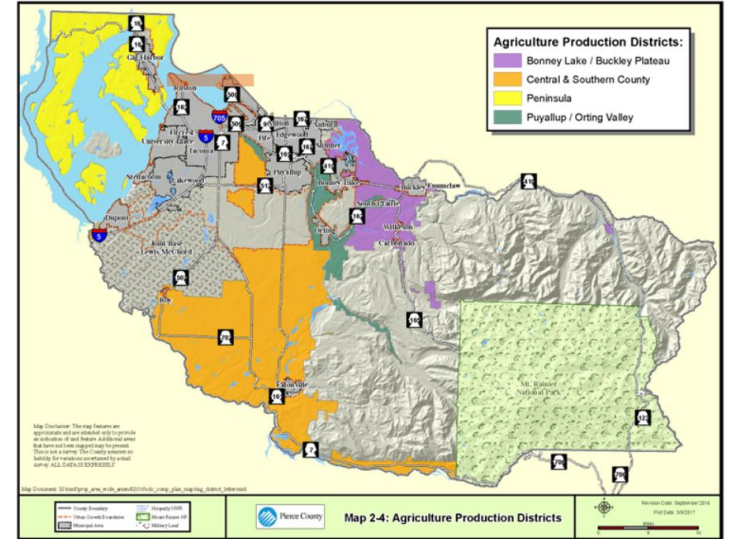


Image: Pierce County agriculture production districts.

# Agricultural Advisory Committees

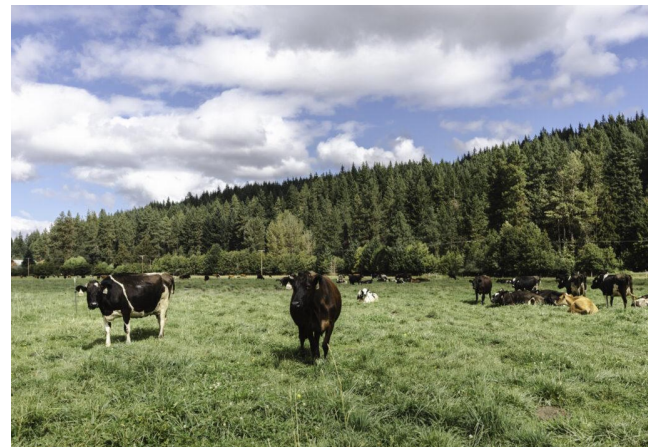
- King
- Pierce ([became permanent in 2023](#))
- San Juan
- Skagit
- Snohomish
- Thurston
- Whatcom

Needs to be staffed with someone who is familiar with agricultural in Clark County.

Should be codified through code, which should define the membership, scope, and responsibilities of the committee.

# Conservation Futures

- Property tax levy available to local governments to acquire open space and acquire development rights, including farmland
- Established in Clark County in 1985
- Initial levy rate was 0.0625 (6.25 cents) per \$1,000 of assessed value
  - \$31.25 a year for a \$500k property
- Subject to the 1% levy lid
  - Property tax value cannot grow by more than 1% each year
  - This causes the levy rate to erode over time
- Current levy rate in Clark County is 0.0274
  - \$13.70 a year for a \$500k property
  - Requires a ballot initiative to raise it back to 0.0625 cents



*Image: Cows on pasture from the Columbia Land Trust*

# Farmland and Climate Change

Clark County is required to incorporate greenhouse gas emission reductions and climate resiliency into the 2025 comprehensive plan update!

**Farmland protection:** supports local food supply, avoids future emissions by preventing urban sprawl, and preserves opportunities to support climate adaptation and mitigation practices

**Climate smart agriculture:** includes soil health practices, nitrogen management, livestock management, agroforestry, and habitat planting

**Adapting to climate change:** improving irrigation systems, collaborative water solutions, adjusting to changing temperatures and precipitation, protecting crops and farmworkers from smoke and extreme weather



*Image: A no-till tractor being displayed at Washington Soil Health Initiative's SoilCon event.*

# Supporting Agritourism

Provides an excellent opportunity and needs to be implemented responsibly:

- Can help farmers diversify income and be more viable, especially where land is expensive and development pressures are high
- Needs to be tied closely to continued agricultural productivity on the land.

Counties currently undergoing updates for agritourism:

- Clallam County
- Thurston County
- Skagit County



*Image: Thurston County's agritourism overlay.*



# Tips on Advocacy

- **Watch Local Advocacy 101: Protecting Farmland in Washington**
  - Overview of Growth Management Act and strategies for advocacy:  
<https://tinyurl.com/4wu93x38>
- **Learn about the Clark County Comprehensive Plan and periodic update**
  - What goals and strategies need to be included or strengthened?
  - Which ones were never implemented? Why?
  - Learn when key points for public engagement are occurring - sign up for updates on the county website (<https://clark.wa.gov/community-planning/2025-update>)
- **Advocacy is a community effort!**
  - Build relationships for long term success
  - Engage with your government, but reach out to the community
  - Write letters to the editor, table at the farmers market, host town halls and farm tours

# Current Policy & Comprehensive Planning



## Represents Clark County District 5

In 2015, Councilor Marshall and her spouse took over their fourth generation family farm in Ridgefield, which they co-manage, and recently planted 27 acres of hazelnuts in addition to pears, apples, plums, walnuts, and cut flowers.



*Image: Sue with her husband and grandchild*



*Image: Baur's Corner Farm*

# Agricultural Lands Under the Growth Management Act

Washington adopted GMA in 1990, 20 years after Oregon's adoption in 1970

*The GMA agricultural resource land designation criteria are established in WAC 365-190-050.*

## Lands should be considered for designation as agricultural resource lands based on three factors:

1. The land is not already characterized by urban growth.
2. The land is used or capable of being used for agricultural production.
3. The land has long-term commercial significance for agriculture.

- When classifying, designating, and de-designating agricultural resource lands, counties must conduct a comprehensive countywide analysis, and should not review resource lands on a parcel-by-parcel basis.
- Once lands are designated, fully planning counties and cities under the act, must adopt development regulations that assure the conservation of agricultural resource lands.

*Recommendations for regulations are found in WAC 365-196-815. Source: Washington Department of Commerce website*

# Zoning for Agricultural Resource Lands

- Clark County's first GMA Comprehensive Land Use Plan adopted in 1994. A countywide assessment was conducted to identify agricultural land at that time.
- Primary protection of agricultural land is through zoning. AG-20, 20 acres the minimum division for designated agricultural land.
- However, prior to adoption of Clark County's first comp plan many larger acreage farms subdivided their farmland into 5 acre parcels.

*De-designating of current agricultural resource lands, counties must conduct a comprehensive countywide analysis, and should not review resource lands on a parcel-by-parcel basis.*



*Image: 40-acre farm for sale in Clark County, WA; image from Zillow*

# Threats to Agricultural Land



**Appeal of 2007 comp plan** update challenged ~35,000 acres of land that were both Ag and Forest that had been hybrid resource lands.

The county lost resulting the entire amount reverting to Rural 5, 10, and 20 acres.



**Individual property owners** are able to make zoning requests up until March 15th as part of the Comp Plan Update. These requests are considered with the update.

There a many seeking to subdivide or rezone agricultural land.



**Each of the cities may request expansion of their urban growth boundaries** that could impact agricultural lands.



**Annual updates and amendments to the comprehensive plan**, lifting of urban holdings or other land use decisions can nibble away at agricultural lands.

# Agricultural Land in Clark County

## By the numbers:

- 30,664 acres are zoned AG-20. They vary in size 5 to 400 acres.
- 34,754 acres are in the Current Use program (property tax deferral for active farming)
- 17,183 acres of those in Current Use are designated AG-20 parcels
- 17,570 acres of non-designated agricultural lands are in the Current Use Program.

Our high quality agricultural land is currently under utilized – aging farmers, farmland escalating prices and lack of access to land for next gen. farmers, diminished supportive resources (technical, processing, labor, markets) and land speculation.

**Minimum requirements for successful local agriculture = access to land + farmers**

# What is the County Doing to Support Local Agriculture?

- Proposed standing Agricultural Commission to help develop a plan for local agriculture and advise the Council and Planning Commission on local agricultural issues and needs.
- Develop a farmland conservation easement program through the Conservation Futures/Legacy Lands Program.
- Support Heritage Farm and its role in supporting the local farming community.
- The Assessor had been developing a Public Benefit Rating System that allowed for a transition period that protected farmland.



*Image: Clark County Legacy Lands Logo*

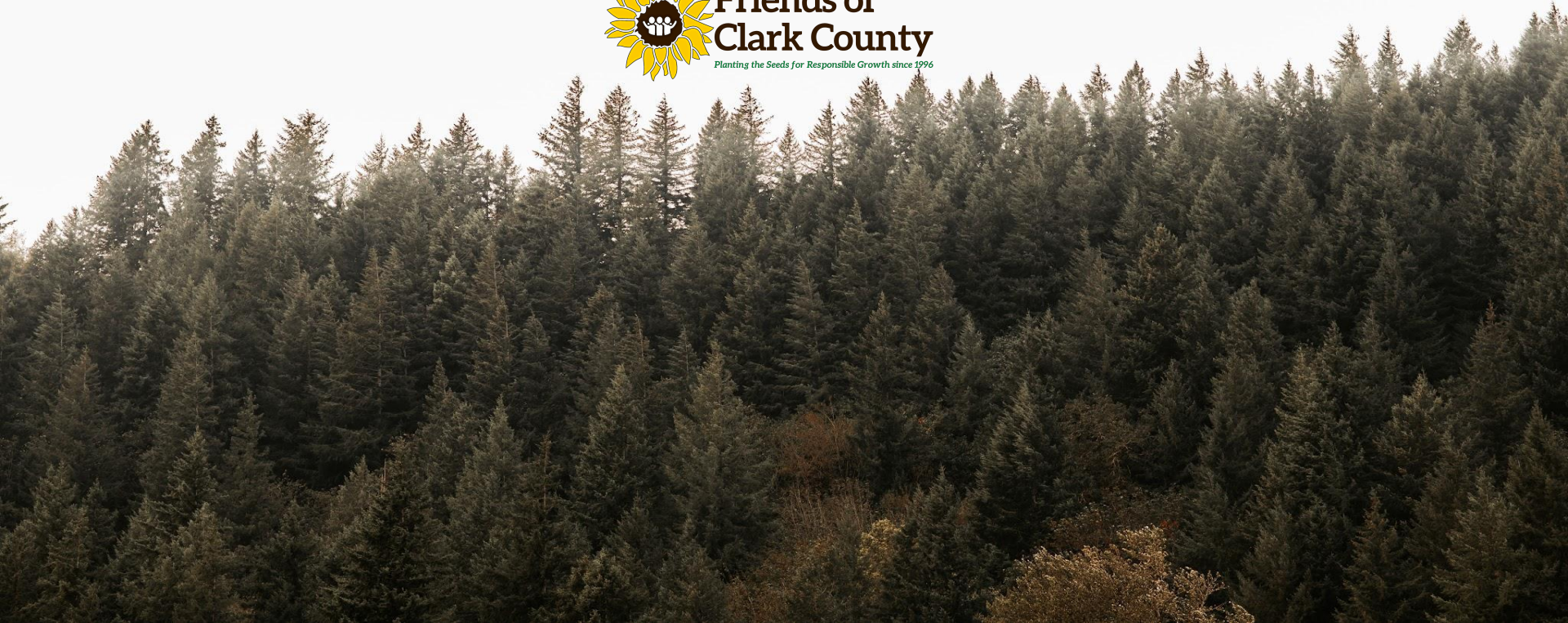
# More Information and Links

- Clark County Comp Plan Update: <https://clark.wa.gov/community-planning/2025-update>
- WAC 365-190-050 Agricultural resource lands:  
<https://app.leg.wa.gov/WAC/default.aspx?cite=365-190-050>
- Agriculture Preservation Strategies Report:  
<https://clark.wa.gov/sites/default/files/fileuploads/environmental-services/2015/08/AgPreservationText2.pdf>



# Panel Discussion & Q&A

Welcome Oliver Orjiako, Director of Community Planning



# Support Friends of Clark County

**Donate** to support our mission

**Get Involved** by volunteering or joining our board

**Stay informed** by signing up for our newsletter or following us on Social Media: Facebook and Instagram

**Engage** with elected officials and county staff on issues that matter to you



<https://friendsofclarkcounty.org/>

# Connect with Our Panelists

## **Ann Foster**

President

Friends of Clark County

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## **Dani Madrone**

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## **Sue Marshall**

Councilor District 5

Clark County Council

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## **Zorah Oppenheimer**

Executive Director

Clark Conservation

District

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<https://www.clarkcd.org/>

# Thank you!



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