



## PROPOSED: Farmland and Forestland Policy Changes

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Public Comments requested by September 8, 2025

### Background

In preparation for the 2026 spring grant round, Recreation and Conservation Office (RCO) staff worked with the Recreation and Conservation Funding Board (board) to identify and consider policy changes to [Manual 10f: Farmland Preservation Category](#) and the Farm and Forest Account. To date, there have been multiple public meetings where these policy changes have been discussed:

- [April 16, 2024 \(Item 8\)](#) – RCO staff provided an initial briefing on the key context for the effort, core issues to be addressed, and a description of the proposed approach and timeline.
- [July 24, 2024 \(Item 11\)](#) – RCO staff requested initial board direction on major themes and issues noted during the discovery process.
- [April 22, 2025 \(Item 3\)](#) – RCO staff requested board direction on options related to non-state, non-federal match.
- [April 22, 2025 \(Item 4\)](#) – RCO staff requested board direction on potential changes to farmland evaluation criteria.

### Scope of Potential Changes

Public comment is being sought on the following items:

- Options regarding the permanent status of a 10 percent non-state, non-federal match requirement in the Farm and Forest Account.

- Proposal to permanently institute a cost increase policy in the Farm and Forest Account.
- Proposed changes related to scope changes and impervious surfaces to better align with other RCO manuals and other funders.
- Proposed changes to the farmland evaluation criteria, including the removal of multiple criteria, re-bucketing of existing criteria, and addition of supporting details.

A more detailed description of policy options and proposed changes can be found in [Attachment A](#). The proposed new evaluation criteria language can be found in [Attachment B](#), and here is a link to the [current farmland evaluation criteria](#).

## How to Comment

RCO is requesting public comment on the proposed policies in this document. Comments can be submitted by completing the web form at this link: <https://forms.office.com/g/2B9p2f82k3>.

[Attachment A](#) is designed to serve as a companion guide for completion of the web form.

Comments will be accepted until **11:59 pm on Monday, September 8, 2025**.

## Questions?

Questions about the proposed policy changes can be emailed to Nicholas Norton, Policy and Planning Specialist, at [nicholas.norton@rco.wa.gov](mailto:nicholas.norton@rco.wa.gov).

## Next Steps

RCO staff will utilize public feedback to inform the final proposed policy changes and associated staff recommendations to the board. The current timeline is for the board to review public comments, receive staff recommendations, and make final decisions on these policy items during their October 28-29 meeting. The public will also have an opportunity to comment on the final proposed changes during the board meeting.

If the board adopts the proposed changes, RCO staff will incorporate the new policy language and other administrative changes into updated policy manuals that will be published as soon as possible on the RCO website.

## Attachment A

Table of Policy Options and Proposed Changes

Policy Area	Manuals	Description of Proposed Change
Non-state, non-federal match	Manual 10c Manual 10f	<b>Option 1 (Waive):</b> Permanently waive the 10 percent non-state, non-federal match requirement for the Farm and Forest Account.
		<b>Option 2 (Reduce):</b> Reduce the non-state, non-federal match requirement to 5 percent in the Farm and Forest Account. Grant the RCO director authority to waive any additional non-state, non-federal match that would be required from a cost increase for an active project.
		<b>Option 3 (Revert):</b> Return to the 10 percent non-state, non-federal match policy. The board would continue to waive this requirement on a case-by-case basis.
Cost Increases	Manual 10c Manual 10f	Permanently retain the current cost increase policy, which allows the RCO director to approve a cost increase of up to 10 percent of the total project costs limited to a parcel-by-parcel appraised value.
Scope Changes	Manual 10f	Remove the requirement to consult the Advisory Committee when a sponsor requests to add or remove parcels from the project scope. Scope changes would instead be governed by the relevant <a href="#">scope change policies in Manual 3: Acquisition Projects</a> .
Impervious Surfaces	Manual 10f	Align the RCO definition of impervious surfaces to match the definition used by the Natural Resource Conservation Surface.

<b>Criteria – Building Envelope</b>	Manual 10f	Remove criterion.
<b>Criteria - Stewardship Practices</b>	Manual 10f	Remove criterion.
<b>Criteria – Match</b>	Manual 10f	Remove criterion. Note: This criterion awarded points for bringing additional match beyond the required 50 percent minimum.
<b>Criteria – Viability of the Site</b>	Manual 10f	Split into two different criteria, one related to the land base and the other related to infrastructure and operations. Incorporate “Access to Markets” and “On-Site Infrastructure” criterion underneath the viability umbrella. Provide supporting bullets that describe key things to address. Use multipliers and adjust point scale to accommodate combination projects with an enhancement/restoration component.
<b>Criteria – Threat to the Land</b>	Manual 10f	Split into two different criteria related to short-term conversion threat and longer-term threat to agricultural use. Provide supporting bullets that describe key things to address. Use multipliers and adjust point scale to accommodate combination projects with an enhancement/restoration component.
<b>Criteria - Access to Markets</b>	Manual 10f	Remove as a separate criterion and incorporate into criteria related to the viability of the infrastructure and operations.
<b>Criteria – On-site Infrastructure</b>	Manual 10f	Remove as a separate criterion and incorporate into criteria related to the viability of the infrastructure and operations. Clarify that evaluation is focused on infrastructure that is within the easement area.

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<b>Criteria – Farmland Stewardship</b>	Manual 10f	Reframe into a criterion related to the overall fish and wildlife benefits of the site, along with aspects of the “Benefits to the Community” criterion.
<b>Criteria - Benefits to the Community</b>	Manual 10f	Split into two different criteria related to the fish and wildlife benefits, as well as community benefits. Adjust point scale to accommodate combination projects with an enhancement/restoration component.
<b>Criteria – Community Support</b>	Manual 10f	Reframe to encompass more than just letters of support.
<b>Criteria – Enhancement</b>	Manual 10f	Create a new question specific to combination projects with an enhancement/restoration component.

## Attachment B

### Evaluation Criteria Summary

Criteria	Evaluation Element	Project Type	Maximum Points Possible
<b>Scored by the Advisory Committee</b>			
1	Viability - Land Base	Acquisition Projects	20 points
		Combination Projects	15 points
2	Viability - Infrastructure & Operations	Acquisition Projects	20 points
		Combination Projects	15 points
3	Threat - Conversion	All Projects	15 points
4	Threat - Agricultural Use	All Projects	10 points
5	Benefits - Fish & Wildlife	Acquisition Projects	10 points
		Combination Projects	5 points
6	Benefits - Community	All Projects	10 points
7	Partnerships & Support	All Projects	4 points
8	Enhancement	Combination Projects	15 points
<b>Scored by RCO</b>			
9	Easement Duration	All Projects	0 points
<b>Total Possible Points</b>			<b>89</b>

### Farmland Preservation Category Detailed Scoring Criteria

**1. Viability – Land Base.**<sup>1</sup> Describe how the land supports long-term viability for agricultural production. A complete response should address the following:

- Soil suitability, including the presence, type, and percentage of prime soils, prime with conditions, or farmland of statewide significance
- Availability and applicability of water supply, including the source, adequacy, validity, and security of water rights on the property
- Acreage in production, size relative to common production approaches in the region, as well as the property's contribution to the region's agricultural land base

▲ Point Range: zero to ten points, which are multiplied later by two for acquisition projects and by one and a half for combination projects

<sup>1</sup> Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(h)(i), Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(h)(v)

**2. Viability – Infrastructure & Operations.**<sup>2</sup> Describe how the site’s existing operations and facilities support ongoing agricultural productivity. A complete response should address the following:

- Adequacy, current condition, and adaptability of on-site production facilities and supporting infrastructure in the proposed easement area
- Durable farm-to-market access, as demonstrated by current business model or evidence of past financial viability, as well as the presence of relevant processing and distribution facilities or sales outlets
- Ability to support multiple cropping systems or management approaches, as demonstrated by past practices, current yields and/or carrying capacity

▲ Point Range: zero to ten points, which are multiplied later by two for acquisition projects and by one and a half for combination projects

**3. Threat - Conversion.**<sup>3</sup> To what extent is the property at risk of conversion to a nonagricultural or more highly developed use if it is not protected? How immediate is the risk and how does the proposed project help address or mitigate those risks? A complete response should address the following:

- Non-agricultural potential of the property, as demonstrated by allowable uses under current zoning, minimum parcel size and available development rights, as well as development constraints such as floodways or wetlands
- Evidence of non-agricultural demand for the property, such as prior listing on the open market or recent above market offers on the property or adjacent farmland from non-agricultural buyers
- Location of the property relative to development or other non-agricultural use, as well as proximity to urban growth areas, city limits, or rural zones
- Ownership and management stability, as well as the role of the acquisition within a clear succession plan, pending intergenerational transfer, and/or land access effort

▲ Point Range: zero to ten points, which are multiplied later by one and a half

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<sup>2</sup> Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(h)(ii), Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(h)(iv), Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(h)(iii)

<sup>3</sup> Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(c)

**4. Threat – Agricultural Use.** To what extent do surrounding socioeconomic and land use trends threaten to undermine continued agricultural use in the region and on the property? How does the proposed project help address or mitigate those threats? A complete response should address the following:

- Population growth, rural scenic home demand, land value increases, as well as fragmentation or changes in primary uses in the region surrounding the property
- The regional significance of the property's agricultural operation
- The property's proximity to farmland or other protected lands and its importance to the success of additional working lands projects or partnerships in the region

▲ Point Range: zero to ten points

**5. Benefits – Fish and Wildlife.** How does the site, as well as any current or pending non-regulatory stewardship practices, benefit fish and wildlife, such as salmonids, migratory birds, and endangered, threatened, or sensitive species?<sup>4</sup> A complete response should address the following:

- Consistency with local, state, or regional planning efforts, such as local shoreline master plans, local comprehensive plans, watershed plans, habitat conservation plans, or limiting factors analyses<sup>5</sup>
- The long term security of stewardship practices, and consistency with recognized funding programs or published guidelines

▲ Point Range: zero to five points, which are multiplied later by two for acquisition projects

**6. Benefits - Community.** What community benefits does the property provide when used as agricultural land<sup>6</sup>, such as the following:

- Aquifer recharge or stormwater collection
- Agricultural sector jobs
- Educational opportunities, community events, or agro-tourism

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<sup>4</sup> Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(e), Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(f), Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(g), Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(i)(v)

<sup>5</sup> Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(b)

<sup>6</sup> Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(i)(ii), Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(i)(iii), Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(i)(iv), Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(i)(vi)



- Local food security and affordability
- Preservation of scenic, historical or cultural values
- Public recreational access

How are these community benefits consistent with or recommended by local, state or regional planning efforts<sup>7</sup>, such as the following:

- Coordinated regionwide prioritization effort
- Regional or statewide recreational or resource plan
- Local land-use, climate resiliency, or comprehensive plan

▲ Point Range: zero to five points, which are multiplied later by two

**7. Partnerships and Support.** What community partners are providing support for the project and how is that support being demonstrated through letters, funding, in-kind contribution, project delivery, or other means?<sup>8</sup>

▲ Point Range: zero to four points

**8. Enhancement** (combination projects only). How does the proposed enhancement and/or restoration enhance the viability and further the ecological function of the project area? Why is this work an urgent and necessary component of the overall project?

▲ Point Range: zero to ten points, which are multiplied later by one and a half

**9. Easement Duration** (applicant does not answer). What is the duration of the conservation easement?

▲ Point Range: minus ten or zero points

Zero points                      The duration of the conservation easement is forever.

Minus ten points              The duration of the conservation easement is not forever.

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<sup>7</sup> Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(d)

<sup>8</sup> Revised Code of Washington 79A.15.130(10)(a)