

Make a Difference

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A PRIMER ON FARM PLANNING: "HAVE A NEXT, SO YOU'RE NOT ALWAYS AT THE END OF YOUR LINE"

I'd like to begin this column with some quotes as pertinent to successful farm conservation planning as to any other planning.

"Few people have any next, they live from hand-to-mouth without a plan, and are always at the end of their line." *Ralph Waldo Emerson;*

"If you don't know where you are going, you'll end up someplace else." *Yogi Berra;*

"A good plan today is better than a perfect plan tomorrow." *George S. Patton.*

The purpose of farm conservation planning is to help you get where you want to go with your farm. Even if you don't identify your property as a farm, there are many benefits conservation planning can provide for the management of your rural acreage. Farm conservation planning is figuring out where you want to go, identifying the problems keeping you from getting there, coming up with alternatives to overcome these problems, and deciding which alternatives you are going to implement and how and when you will implement them.

We at Whidbey Island Conservation District (WICD) follow the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) planning process. It is a dynamic, adaptive process that has been refined and improved over years of use. NRCS supports the process with a vast array of supporting resources, many of which are available in online technical guides by the county. You can learn more about these technical guides by visiting www.nrcs.usda.gov/wps/portal/nrcs/main/national/technical/fotg/. The planning process has three phases, each broken down into steps. The graphic below illustrates these phases and steps.

Let's take a look at these steps to learn more about the farm planning process and how you might incorporate these ideas into the management of your property's natural resources when working with a conservation planner.

NRCS Planning Process



Farm Planning Phase I: Collection and Analysis

Step 1 – Identify problems and opportunities: The need for a conservation plan often starts with identification of resource problems and concerns about your property, with or without ideas of how to resolve them.

Step 2 – Determine objectives: I like to broaden this to "goals and objectives." Goals are statements about desired future conditions; they are broad, long-term, and often not particularly measurable. For your farm or rural acreage, they may pertain to quality of life, forms of production, and landscape conditions. Objectives are steps to take to achieve goals. They are specific, short or medium term, and are measurable. These are the goals and objectives of the decision maker, the land owner, or operator. Along the lines of the Yogi Berra quote, goals and objectives are expressions of where we want to go.

Step 3 – Inventory resources: This is taking stock of and documenting existing natural resource conditions on your property, together with the economic and social issues related to them.

Step 4 – Analyze resource data: In this step, the resource information gathered in step 3 is evaluated, primarily using tools and criteria from the NRCS technical guide, in order to more clearly understand your property's natural resource conditions and better identify resource concerns and potential opportunities for you as a landowner.

Farm Planning Phase II: Decision Support

Step 5 – Formulate alternatives: In this step, planners like myself can work with you to put forth alternatives (known as "practices") to achieve your goals and objectives, address your property's resource concerns, and take advantage of opportunities available to you to improve resource conditions.

Step 6 – Evaluate alternatives: We work with you to assess the alternatives presented in step 5 to better determine whether they will advance the goals and objectives and effectively address the identified resource concerns and opportunities. Economic, social, and ecological concerns are evaluated, with attention to compliance with laws and ordinances.

Step 7 – Make decisions: The decision maker (you as the land owner or operator) selects your preferred alternatives, schedules practice implementation, and works with a farm planner to develop appropriate and effective specifications for implementation of the selected practices.

Farm Planning Phase III: Application and Evaluation

Step 8 – Implement the plan: The land owner or operator then implements the selected practices, sometimes with detailed information and design assistance from WICD. In some cases, WICD is able to secure funds to pay some of the costs for expensive practices that provide public benefits, such as water quality improvement. In such cases WICD enters into a contract with the landowner in order to clearly establish the expectations and responsibilities of both parties.

Step 9 – Evaluate the plan: Few farm plans are 100 percent effective in achieving the goals and objectives for which they were developed. Glitches, unforeseen circumstances, and incompletely understood relationships often result in less than perfect outcomes. This step is to evaluate the outcomes in light of the plan and its implementation, in order to identify adjustments and improvements to make continued and future efforts more effective. Getting back to the George Patton quote, a good plan today will generally help you get where you're trying to go more effectively than a "perfect" plan sometime in the future, and carefully carrying out step 9 will make that future plan closer to perfection.

Whidbey Island Conservation District would be happy to provide you with information and direct planning assistance, within the constraints of our available resources, to help you develop and implement a farm conservation plan to better meet your goals and objectives and address natural resource concerns on and around your farm. To learn more about our farm planning services and other program offerings, visit www.whidbeycd.org or give us a call at (888) 678-4922.

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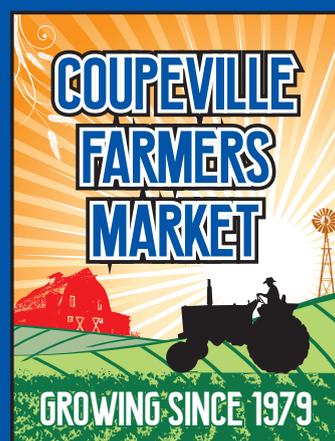
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