

## San Juan County Land Bank

### Agriculture Program Overview and Objectives

#### Purpose

This document is intended as an overview of the San Juan County Land Bank’s agricultural program, and to further define goals and objectives for conservation of agricultural lands that will guide management and stewardship efforts.

#### Outline

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#### Introduction

At its inception, the Land Bank recognized the importance of agriculture in San Juan County and included the protection of agricultural lands as a core value within its broad organizational mandate: ***To preserve in perpetuity areas in San Juan County that have environmental, agricultural, aesthetic, cultural, scientific, historic, scenic, or low-intensity recreational value, and to protect existing and future sources of potable water.***

As a San Juan County entity, the Land Bank aligns with San Juan County codes, policy, and goals. This includes the following vision statement found in the **San Juan County Comprehensive Plan**, : *“Agriculture - The San Juan Islands have a rich agricultural heritage that remains culturally and economically significant. We invest resources to ensure that agricultural lands are preserved and to maintain and enhance agricultural viability. We encourage regenerative practices and*

*recognize the integral role that agriculture plays in the stewardship of our soils and water resources. Agricultural activities are essential to the health and well-being of our community, contributing to the social, economic and environmental fabric of our islands.”*

As development pressure in San Juan County continues to rapidly increase, farms are being subdivided, and many farmers are nearing retirement without younger farmers to fill in behind them. Both new and established farmers face challenges in affording and accessing the land and equipment needed to succeed economically. With the goal of contributing to long-term agricultural viability and protection of open space in San Juan County, the Land Bank aims to protect high value agricultural lands. The preferred mechanism for long term protection of agricultural resources is conservation easements on private land. In cases of exceptional properties which are unable to be conserved through easement or have other significant conservation resources, acquisition is considered.

The Land Bank’s role in agricultural is protection of these resources and to be a leader in promoting sustainable practices, but does not extend to directly engaging in agricultural activities. Continued partnerships and collaborations between the Land Bank and agricultural agencies, stakeholders, land-owners and the farming community are essential to this goal.

## **Summary of Key Agricultural Conservation Goals**

- Protect Agricultural Resource Lands as defined by the SJC Comprehensive Plan
- Protect natural resources and support their stewardship through active agricultural management
- Implement agricultural climate mitigation strategies
- Maintain open space and rural character
- Preserve agricultural water resources and support sustainable use
- Create pathways for affordable, equitable and long-term access to farmland
- Provide compatible public access when appropriate
- Collaborate with farming community and stakeholders to strengthen agricultural viability in SJC

## **Protecting Agricultural Resource Lands**

The Land Bank endeavors to protect farmland that provides the greatest benefit to the community and the local economy while also protecting natural resources and contributing to ecosystem services. Following acquisition of a property that includes agricultural land, we evaluate and assess its core agricultural values and work toward establishing goals for their conservation. To establish baseline conditions, we document the following:

- Soil Quality
- Water availability and quality

- Health of surrounding natural areas
- Critical areas and buffers
- Resource protection opportunities
- Viewsheds
- Community benefits
- History of use
- Connectivity to other farms or conserved lands
- Development threat level
- Infrastructure condition

## **Land Bank Farmland Conservation Approaches**

The Land Bank has made concerted efforts to protect agricultural land in the County by limiting development on private lands through the purchase of conservation easements, and by the purchase of properties that are then leased to local farmers. As of September 2021, the Land Bank holds conservation easements on over **1,300 acres** of privately owned farms. In addition the Land Bank owns 10 Preserves with a combined **400 acres** of prime farmland that is being actively farmed. This represents approximately **9%** of the estimated 15,700 acres of active agricultural land in San Juan County (SJC Resource Lands Analysis 2017).

### **Conservation Easements**

Easements have been the Land Bank's primary tool for farmland protection. Easements allow for the reduction of development potential and the protection of core values while keeping ownership and management in the private sector. In theory, properties with easements are valued lower and therefore more accessible for incoming farmers; unfortunately with current real estate trends this does not seem to be the case.

### **Fee Title Acquisitions**

The Land Bank considers acquiring farmland in special instances including properties with strong public support, connectivity to other conserved lands, properties with diverse values, or for the conservation buyer program (buy-protect-sell).

Currently, the majority of Land Bank owned farmland properties have only basic infrastructure such as livestock fencing and occasionally small-scale water systems. Due to these limitations, dryland farming including livestock grazing, haying, and occasionally grain production have been the dominant uses for these lands. Coffelt Farm Preserve on Orcas Island is the one exception, containing extensive agricultural and residential infrastructure allowing for more diverse operations. . However, acquiring farm properties with significant infrastructure has proved to be a challenge for the Land Bank to manage and maintain and diverges from the primary mission of protecting and stewarding lands.

## Overall Objectives for Farmland Conservation

- Protect agricultural resource lands from non-agricultural development and uses.
- Craft farmland conservation easements to prioritize the protection agricultural values, viable operations, and natural resources.
- Engage the Agricultural Resources Committee for input and support when developing Conservation Easements and when pursuing acquisitions of lands that are zoned Agricultural Resource Land (ARL).
- Proposals for Fee Title acquisition of farmland to consider the resources necessary for managing the property for active agricultural use.
- Attempt to avoid restrictions that negatively impact agricultural viability on Preserves and conservation easements. Build sufficient flexibility into easement protection to allow for the dynamic and changing nature of agriculture
- Encourage property owners with farmland conservation easements to lease to farmers when not in active use
- Continue to develop and strengthen partnerships and collaborations that expand farmland conservation, connect farmers to farmland, and strengthen agricultural viability.

**Consider adding a table here that summarizes ag areas, leases and other details**

## Management and Stewardship of Farmed Preserves -

Healthy agricultural lands can provide benefits both for people and for the many species that depend on the remnant native habitats both within and adjacent or connected to them. Ecologically managed farms have the potential to support rural economies, restore waterways, mitigate the effects of climate change, and connect us to the natural world. When we think about farmland conservation as more than just local food and jobs, we open opportunities for creativity and collaboration.

Land Bank staff and Land Bank farmer-lessees should work together as stewards of the soil, water, and natural resources on Land Bank Preserves. As the climate continues to change, both staff and farmers must be prepared to adapt to unpredictable weather, drought, flooding, and increases in invasive species and disease.

When any property is acquired by the Land Bank, a Stewardship Management Plan (SMP) is developed. A combination of assessments and community input of the property will identify core values and goals for the Preserve. The SMP will be a guiding resource for assessing appropriate and compatible farming operations on an agricultural preserve. SMP's will be reviewed and updated over time.

### **Objectives:**

- Develop Stewardship Management Plans that emphasize the agricultural and natural resource priorities to guide agricultural activities on the land.

- Support active agricultural management to maintain and improve open space landscapes
- Support and encourage Land Bank farmer-lessees in adopting and implementing farm plans that model best agricultural practices that build and sustain healthy soil, sequester carbon and conserve water along with other conservation practices to help alleviate the impacts of climate change while reducing inputs and maintaining farm productivity.
- Prioritize water quality protection.
- Invest in long-term soil health
- Document baseline ecological conditions on all Land Bank farmland and, at a minimum, implement the agricultural best management practices needed to ensure protection of Critical Areas and other natural resources.
- Explore innovative approaches and technologies for agricultural land management towards soil health and climate mitigation.
- Maintain flexibility and adaptability in management
- Control noxious and invasive weed populations

## **Agricultural Water Resources**

Water resources in San Juan County are limited to groundwater dependent on annual rainfall for recharge and surface water that is often collected and stored in lakes and ponds. With very little rainfall during the primary growing season, water is a primary limiting resource for agricultural operations. To expand and diversify agricultural opportunities on Land Bank preserves, it will be critical to assess agricultural water potential and develop water systems where appropriate.

### **Objectives:**

- Protect existing agricultural water resources and water rights for farmland preserves.
- Develop and secure additional agricultural water rights for farmland preserves where appropriate.
- Encourage and support water conservation through efficient and sustainable use agricultural water resources.
- Balance agriculture and ecological water resources goals

## **Agricultural Infrastructure on Land Bank Preserves**

Viable agricultural operations require some level of infrastructure. This can range from simple perimeter fencing at the low end to water systems, shelter, nutrient management, storage, processing, marketing, utilities, and housing in more intensive operations.

Among the Land Bank farmland preserves, only Coffelt Farm Preserve includes infrastructure to support a year round diversified farming operation. All others are utilized as satellite farmland for operations with primary farmstead infrastructure elsewhere.

The Land Bank's ability to develop more infrastructure on its farmland preserves is limited by the mandate, organizational capacity, and often land use restrictions. Infrastructure investments generally target basic necessities for continuing active agricultural use and resource protections recommended and supported by SJI Conservation District e.g., fencing, water systems, heavy-use areas.

For the Land Bank to participate in the development or acquisition of complex farm properties and operations will require collaboration. A strong partnership would allow the Land Bank's to focus on protection of the lands and resource stewardship, with partnering entities taking on infrastructure, equipment, housing opportunities, and agriculture program development.

**Existing Farm Infrastructure** – When a property is acquired with existing farm infrastructure, The Land Bank will determine investment level for maintenance, repair, and/or replacement based on assessment of the following criteria:

1. Condition
2. Importance to operations
3. Supports agricultural viability
4. Supports natural resource protection
5. Historic quality/ character
6. Community benefit
7. Cost to repair or replace

**Housing Development** Access to affordable housing is currently a major issue in San Juan County. Housing for new farmers has been identified as a primary limiting factor towards agricultural viability. The Land Bank mandate does not directly support the development of housing, however there may be opportunities for partnerships and collaborations to develop farmer housing on Land Bank farmland preserves.

**Infrastructure Objectives:**

- Invest in infrastructure on agricultural lands to facilitate agricultural best management practices and support agricultural viability
- Priority Land Bank infrastructure investments will focus on conservation of agricultural and natural resources for current and future generations e.g. agricultural water sources, water quality, soil health, habitat protection, carbon sequestration
- When housing exists on an acquired farm property, if assessed and deemed structurally sound and habitable, it will be maintained by the Land Bank with priority as farmer housing. Lease rate will be based on fair market rental rate.

- Seek partnerships to develop agricultural infrastructure improvements to support agricultural viability and resource protection.
- Consider developing dedicated farmer housing on Land Bank farmland properties with partner organizations.

## **Leasing Farmland and Infrastructure**

In the case of fee-owned agricultural lands, the Land Bank strives to keep prime farmland in active agricultural use by renting or leasing to farmers. Short-term Rental Agreements (<2 yrs.) are used in various circumstances, e.g., during an assessment period for establishing long-term management objectives, for trial periods, and/or when agriculture is not the primary goal for a property. Long-term leases are used on preserves with dedicated agricultural areas. The stability of a long-term lease provides security to the lessee, which often promotes heightened stewardship of the land and resources and the ability to invest in necessary equipment and infrastructure to support operations.

Any lease agreement over two years requires an open public process as outlined in the SJC Code. The Land Bank typically publishes a Request for Proposals (RFP) to solicit lease proposals. An RFP will clearly outline the lease opportunity including: history of use, lease boundaries, natural resource information (soil, water), available infrastructure, restricted uses and environmental resource goals. Site visits are required by all applicants.

### **San Juan County Code: 2.104.120 Lease or rental of real property.**

A. If it appears that it is in the best interest of the County, the County council may lease or rent any real property and its appurtenances. Every lease or rental of land bank property shall be made only for uses not inconsistent with or detrimental to the purpose/rationale which justified the acquisition and only upon the recommendation of the land bank commissioners.

B. The rental of real property or real property interests for less than two years may be done by direct negotiation without publishing a notice of intent to rent or holding a public hearing, provided the rental rate reflects the fair rental value of the property.

C. The lease of real property may be done by direct negotiations. No lease shall be executed until after publishing a notice of intent to lease and holding a public hearing regarding the proposed lease. Notice shall be published at least 10 days before the public hearing.

D. Fair Market Value. Prior to renting or leasing real property, the County or land bank real estate officer shall conduct, or have conducted, a market review or rental study to determine the fair rental or leasehold value of the property. The County council shall consider the results of the study in setting the terms of the rental.

E. Proceeds. All proceeds from lease and rentals of real or personal property shall be deposited in the applicable County fund as designated by County ordinance or state law. Proceeds from the lease or rental of land bank real property shall be credited to the land bank's conservation area fund or stewardship fund. (Ord. 27-2007 § 9; Ord. 3-2002 § 12)

### **Leasing Objectives:**

- Lease conserved farmland for food production
- Prioritize long-term farm leases when appropriate
- Mitigate unfair advantage in the local agricultural economy and community by establishing a fair market rental rate.
- RFP's should identify agriculture and natural resource parameters and goals, while leaving room for well informed, diverse and creative farming proposals that fit within those parameters.
- Provide ample time for proposal development, especially for complex properties. Consider a two phase RFP approach with an initial Letter of Interest.
- Provide fair and equitable farmland access opportunities
- Assemble a lease committees to rank and select proposals, including members of agricultural agencies and organizations.
- Assure that farmland is managed responsibly and protected for future generations by having clear and enforceable metrics in the lease agreement, e.g., soil nutrient content and water quality.

### **Monitoring**

Monitoring is critical to stewardship of all Preserves and Conservation Easements to assure that core values are being maintained and to track management goals.

#### **Objectives:**

- Conduct annual monitoring of all Land Bank Preserves and conservation easements
- Conduct routine monitoring as needed based on the intensity of operations. Monitoring focuses on resource protection, i.e., overgrazing, soil compaction, weed populations, exposed soil/erosion, water quality and quantity, infrastructure, and hazards.
- When necessary and/or the opportunity arises, partner with outside entities to monitor agricultural impacts on natural resources such as soil health and water quality.
- Maintain strong communication with farm lessees to allow either party to address questions, issues and concerns in a timely manner to prevent or correct poor management.



## **Community and Communication**

Collaboration is key to maintaining and supporting a robust and vibrant local food system. The Land Bank strives to engage with the farming community and diverse stakeholders towards this goal. Working farms on public lands can have broad community benefits.

### **Justice – Equity - Diversity - Inclusion**

Understanding how justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion intersect with our work and with San Juan County farm and food systems is critical. To help eliminate inequity, Land Bank staff will continue working to better understand the ways in which our work interfaces with these foundational issues.

#### **Objectives:**

- Increase education around diversity, equity, inclusion and the structural barriers that exist in the farm and food system and then apply our learning to adjust our planning, operations, and public messaging to help eliminate inequity.
- Create new farming opportunities for traditionally underserved communities via innovative leasing or other approaches.
- Create opportunities to engage and listen to members of the farming community and other stakeholders
- Participate in Agricultural Resource Committee meetings and community discussions.
- Collaborate with SJI Ag Guild to connect farmers to farmland
- Support expanding community benefits on Land Bank farmland e.g. educational opportunities, research, food resiliency
- Strengthen and diversify organizational partnerships and collaborations
- Utilize broad reaching outlets when advertising farm lease opportunities, and offer language translation

## **Agricultural Compatibility with other Core Values**

**Environmental** – Agriculture alters the local environment to support the desired crops and products. Management practices will determine what impact farming has on the surrounding ecology. The Land Bank aims to support farmers who implement best management practices that maintain and improve agricultural resources on prime farmland while protecting and enhancing adjacent ecological resources.

**Historic** - Most island farm properties have historic legacies including cleared open space, infrastructure (buildings/structures, fences), agricultural artifacts (stone piles, ponds, ditching, equipment) and living relics (orchards, gardens, soils).

**Scientific** - Opportunities for agricultural and natural resource research abound on protected farmland. The Land Bank frequently partners with other agencies for research projects such as Ag field trials and soil and water quality sampling.

**Cultural** – The lands and waters of San Juan County, including current agricultural lands, have been home to indigenous people since time immemorial. The Land Bank strives to provide land access opportunities to tribal stakeholders and welcomes lease proposals by indigenous people or which incorporates protection, access, and/or enhancement of cultural resources.

**Scenic** – Views over pastoral landscapes are highly valued, and active agricultural management is the best way to maintain these cherished island scenes. No farmers = no farmland.

**Low-impact recreation** – There is often opportunities to incorporate public trails on Land Bank agricultural properties that do not adversely affect Ag uses.

**Potable water** – Protection of water resources is a priority.

## **Conclusion**

Conserving agricultural land presents great challenges and opportunities. The Land Bank believes that for farmland to remain in production in perpetuity, the quality of its agricultural and natural resources must be protected or restored and then be maintained indefinitely.

Healthy agricultural lands can provide benefits both for people and for the many species that depend on the remnant native habitats both within and adjacent or connected to them. Ecologically managed farms have the potential to support rural economies, restore waterways, mitigate the effects of climate change, and connect us to the natural world. When we think about farmland conservation as more than just local food and jobs, we open opportunities for creativity and collaboration.

Within a community, exposure to agriculture can be life-enriching and can promote learning about food systems, ecology, eating well, the satisfaction of working outside, land preservation, and much more. Publicly-owned farms provide a platform for learning, with children participating through school curricula and adults through agricultural workshops. Local farms contribute directly to local economies and support a variety of small businesses. Actions that avoid conversion of farmland to developed uses benefit us all. Active farming on these lands maintains the cherished agricultural and pastoral viewsheds and rural character.

The Land Bank plays a vital role in supporting agriculture in San Juan County through efforts to reduce development of agricultural resource lands, by providing land access opportunities to farmers, and through engagement and collaboration with the agricultural community. The Land

Bank strives to support an economically, environmentally, and socially vibrant and viable local food system.

**References -**

SJC Open Space Conservation Plan – 1990

SJC Growing Our Future – 2011

SJC Working Towards Climate Resilience – 2017

Conservation Agriculture Resource Team, Coffelt Farm Report – 2021

SJC Natural Resource Lands Analysis – 2018

Agriculture Resource Committee docs (see website)

SJC Agricultural Viability study - 2021

SJC Land Bank Policy Manual

SJC Parks Trails and Natural Areas Plan - 2017