

# AGRICULTURAL LAND PRESERVATION AND LAND CONSERVATION IN OKANOGAN COUNTY:

## CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD



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For The Trust for Public Land

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## ABOUT THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND

The Trust for Public Land conserves land for people to enjoy as parks, gardens, and other natural places, ensuring livable communities for generations to come.



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Okanogan Valley stretches 75 miles from the confluence of the Okanogan and Columbia rivers north to the Canadian border. Bordered to the west by the Methow Watershed and to the east by Kettle River and San Poil River Watersheds, the Okanogan Valley is known for its open vistas, productive agricultural and forest lands, abundant wildlife and rural way of life. While change has come slowly to this remote part of Washington state, the Okanogan Valley has been discovered by developers for subdivisions and retirees and those looking for a rural lifestyle, resulting in an accelerated change to the landscape and the traditional way of life.

According to an economic analysis conducted by Headwaters Economics, 45 percent of the large ranches in the Okanogan Valley (>400 acres) changed ownership between 1993 and 2008. Of the land that changed hands, 47 percent went out of ranch use to developers, investors and amenity buyers. While several trends have converged to create this rapid change in land use, one aspect cannot be denied: the magnitude of change in land tenure is shaping a new agricultural and economic base for the Okanogan Valley.

This report explores the changing nature of agricultural production in the Okanogan Valley and the complementary roles of agricultural land preservation and land conservation. While the agricultural and environmental communities have historically been somewhat at odds in Okanogan County, this report reveals that looking to the future, there is significant opportunity for this relationship to be redefined and oriented toward cooperation while leveraging resources and knowledge to benefit the greater good of the Okanogan Valley. Some areas of opportunity explored in this report include:

- Local marketing and niche production
- Continued land-use planning
- Improved community education and involvement of youth
- Conservation easements and programs
- Consistent, open communication

This report blends findings from economic research<sup>1</sup> with prominent ideas and expertise of local ranchers, wildlife experts, local leaders and long-time residents gathered through interviews conducted between May and November 2009. The report sheds light on common concerns of ranchers and conservationists in the Okanogan Valley and highlights opportunities for working together on development of new tools and methods to benefit agricultural and conservation values.

Despite current economic challenges, long-time Okanogan Valley residents are confident that agricultural production will continue to play a primary role in the future of the Okanogan Valley. This report shows that ample common ground exists between agricultural and conservation communities to work toward common goals and a common vision for the Okanogan Valley. With leadership, patience, and a willingness to learn and cooperate, a more coordinated agricultural land preservation and land conservation effort is possible. Local leaders, state and federal agencies, conservation groups, and others can use findings and recommendations presented here to take steps toward developing a future vision for the Okanogan Valley.

## THE OKANOGAN VALLEY LANDSCAPE

The Okanogan Valley of north-central Washington state is known for its open vistas, productive agricultural and forest lands, abundant wildlife and rural way of life.

Average annual precipitation for the Okanogan Valley ranges from 11 to 13 inches per year. Temperatures in this dry inland climate range from over 100 to -40 degrees Fahrenheit. These climatic extremes, combined with a low population density (less than 7 people per square mile) in an area similar in size to the state of Connecticut, have led to the remote uniqueness of the Okanogan Valley.

The rural nature of the valley has kept the landscape, as a whole, in a relatively natural, undeveloped condition. While towns have grown significantly—and some of the largest irrigation projects in the inland West have been developed to support local orchards and ranchers—the footprint of these activities has been relatively small across the entire Okanogan Valley. And, while livestock grazing has been pervasive throughout the shrub-steppe areas of the county, the intensity and impact has steadily decreased over the past 50 years.

Like many places in the remote and rural West, improvements in telecommunications, transportation systems and medical care have helped the Okanogan Valley become an increasingly popular place to settle or retire. The portion of the Okanogan Valley north of the U.S.-Canada border is known as the Palm Springs of Canada. It is a very popular area for retirement, in addition to being a prime vacation destination for Canadians in search of vineyards, sunshine, and outdoor recreation. Many Canadians view the land south of the border as “cheap” and have begun looking for and buying retirement property in the Okanogan Valley. Simultaneous with the arrival of newcomers in the Okanogan Valley, the past ways of life (ranching, orchards, timber, mining) have declined in profitability and percentage of county income. The result is that large tracts of land have transitioned and are transitioning out of agricultural production.



Despite new development and increasing fragmentation of the agricultural landscape, the quality of the remaining wildlife habitat is demonstrated by the presence of keystone species such as lynx, bobcat, cougar; rare species such as sharp-tailed grouse; and large migratory deer herds. The unique character of Okanogan County's diversity is reflected in the fact that it is the only county in Washington state with over 120 species of butterflies and all 6 species of grouse native to Washington. While farmers and ranchers have adapted and, in large part, found ways to live with wildlife over the past century, peaceful coexistence in the changing landscape and economy is getting increasingly more difficult as land

is further subdivided and more roads, pets, recreational vehicles and hobby farms dot the landscape. If this new trend in land-use patterns continues unabated, rural lifestyles and the quality of both large farms and large-scale wildlife areas will be compromised.

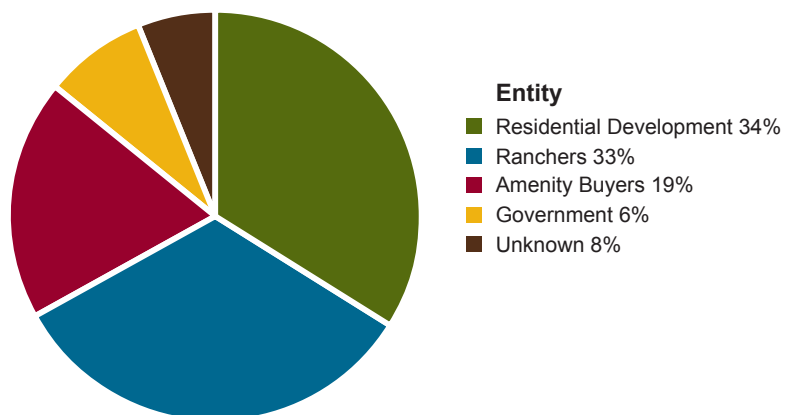
## ECONOMIC TRENDS IN THE OKANOGAN VALLEY

Like many landscapes across the West, the Okanogan Valley has witnessed a steady progression of rural subdivision and land conversion out of agricultural production over the last two decades. From 1993 to 2008, 45 percent of agricultural land in the Okanogan Valley changed hands, and half of that land went out of agricultural production. Figure 1 below shows the distribution of buyers of land sold between 1993 and 2008: 33 percent of the land was purchased by traditional ranchers, 34 percent was purchased by developers or investors, and 19 percent was purchased by amenity buyers, which is someone who buys land for its ambience, recreation, or aesthetic value. Only 6 percent of the land was purchased by government agencies, which is contrary to the widespread local notion that government has been the primary buyer of private land.

The gradual change in land use illustrates an important change in the primary economic drivers for the region: Census data show that in 1970, 32 percent of county income was derived from farm and agricultural businesses; whereas in 2006, farm and agricultural businesses represented only 19 percent of county income. Despite the gradual decline in the agricultural sector in Okanogan County, many businesses do persist in a market characterized by high volatility. Fluctuation of farm income, increases in production costs, decreases in livestock commodity prices, and increases in living costs all continue to strain the county's agricultural economy.

Whether agriculture can survive as a primary way of life and an icon of the county depends upon the leadership and innovation of today's producers and community leaders. While local leaders are strongly in support of agriculture and family farms, market forces and increasing land prices have convinced some producers to sell and move on.

**Figure 1. Change in Agricultural Land Ownership in the Okanogan Valley, 1993-2008**



## CHANGING TIMES IN THE OKANOGAN VALLEY

As economic trends suggest, life in the Okanogan Valley has changed significantly over the past 10 to 20 years. The economic statistics reveal a ranching economy struggling to remain profitable. Interviews conducted with local ranchers, long-time residents, and wildlife and conservation experts provide important anecdotal support of this unfortunate reality. However, the change that has occurred in the valley over the last two decades is not all negative; positive trends exist and both sides are explored below.

### POSITIVE TRENDS

While many individuals interviewed initially denied that any positive changes have occurred in the Okanogan Valley in the last two decades, several recurring themes emerged over the course of interviews:

- *Natural Resource Conservation Service and Okanogan Conservation District Assistance Programs.* Individuals expressed support for the natural resource assistance programs such as the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program, Environmental Quality Incentives Program, Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, Irrigation Efficiency Program, and the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program. These programs have helped landowners continue to remain in production and increase the capital available to reinvest in their operations.
- *Conservation Easements<sup>2</sup>.* Individuals strongly agreed that incentives offered through purchased conservation/agricultural easements offer a positive alternative to subdivision; however more information and a better understanding of the details of such easements is needed.
- *“Buy Local” and Local Marketing.* Organizations such as Washington State University Extension, Okanogan Conservation District, and the development of local farmers markets have helped individuals market local products locally, providing an important close-to-home market for goods and services.
- *Improved Technology.* Technological improvements over the last two decades have improved the efficiency of farming. Improvements to genetic stock for hay, alfalfa, cattle; farm equipment; marketing tools (e.g., internet and video marketing); and access to more information, especially through the internet (including online livestock auctions) are valued by local producers.
- *Improved Communication.* Local residents acknowledge that improved communication has resulted in a better understanding and respect between newcomers and long-time residents (e.g., a recognition that “we’re not the only ones here” and that “we all matter”). Overall, there is an increasing desire to work together to solve problems rather than be polarized and battle in court.

## CHANGING TIMES IN THE OKANOGAN VALLEY (continued)

### NEGATIVE TRENDS

Individuals shared a number of negative changes they have seen in the Okanogan Valley over the last two decades, and most of these focus on the economic hardships involved with agricultural production:

- *Increase in Costs.* In addition to increasing fuel, hay, and transportation costs, health care was a major concern for most people interviewed. Nearly all had at least one family member who “worked out” (i.e., off the ranch) to qualify for health insurance.
- *Decrease in Commodity Prices.* Commodity prices have decreased over the years. There is a general feeling that free trade with Canada has directly led to a decrease in the price of beef and timber, which has in turn hurt local producers.
- *Increase in Regulations.* Several individuals noted the increase of regulations, particularly on public lands, as a negative change. There is broad sentiment that public land managers are not as helpful to producers as they were in the 1950s and 1960s. The decrease in stocking levels and increase in scrutiny has increased production costs for livestock producers, and there is a sense that public land managers are not necessarily accountable for the outcomes of their land-management decisions.
- *Fragmentation of Large Ranches.* The changing nature of land use and ownership in the county has complicated livestock management. Many large ranches are surrounded by new neighbors on smaller parcels of land that often block historical stock driveways, leave gates open, and have pets that irritate livestock. Managing these interactions takes time, makes production more difficult, and reduces overall efficiency of operations. In addition, the rising cost of land provides incentive for some landowners to sell or subdivide to reap greater profits; there is concern that eventually the land may become too expensive to farm.
- *Loss of Local Markets and Stockyards.* Over the past decade, the two remaining large livestock yards closed, which has forced most producers to ship cows to distant markets in areas such as Sandpoint, Toppenish, Kansas and Colorado. The greater distance between the stockyard and farm increases production costs and decreases the opportunity for farmers to connect with local customers and markets that may be willing to pay more for local products.
- *Increase in Stress.* As profit margins decrease (i.e., production costs increase and profits fall), many family businesses are stretched to their limits. The struggle to make ends meet in traditional ways greatly increases stress within the family, decreases ability to pay for healthcare, and decreases overall quality of life. Some also cited feelings that the community seems to no longer value farmers, ranchers and orchardists as important food producers, which is illustrative of changing priorities in the community.
- *Difficulty in Securing Operational Loans.* In the past, some producers have relied on seasonal loans as part of their operating budget. These loans have become much more stringent and now require more paperwork, processing time and oversight, if they are available at all.



## MAJOR CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

With rapidly changing land ownership and economic conditions, the Okanogan Valley is at a crossroads. It is important to recognize the wide array of challenges and opportunities facing this unique region, in order to develop the most unique, innovative and positive vision possible for the future.

### CHALLENGES

Significant challenges face both agricultural land preservation and land conservation in the Okanogan Valley. Trends and local interviews reveal three challenging realities discussed in more detail below.



- *The Economic Hardship of Agricultural Production.* As described in the previous Negative Trends section, the general lack of profitability, rising production costs, and stagnant or falling income discourages many producers. Fuel and fertilizer are between two to three times as expensive today as in the early 1990s; the loss of two local stockyards and the lack of a USDA-approved meat-processing facility means transportation costs for all livestock raised in Okanogan County are very high; and the marginal income from farming and ranching, combined with increased regulations and increased conflict with newcomers, has pushed some producers to the point of selling their land and moving elsewhere.
- *Limited Conservation Funding.* In general, the interest in and demand for conservation and agricultural easement purchases in the Okanogan Valley far exceeds the amount of funding available from either state or federal sources. For example, while programs such as the Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) fit the needs of many producers, many programs only fund a portion of total project costs, leaving a considerable gap in funding needed to complete the project. While programs such as the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program's (WWRP) Farmland Protection Program (FPP) provide much-needed match funding, competition in both programs is stiff, and there is no guarantee funding can be secured in time to protect Okanogan Valley agricultural lands and meet the needs of producers.

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) has been the most consistent and largest source of conservation funding in the Okanogan Valley, drawing from sources such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Section 6 program, Bonneville Power Administration and the WWRP. Like any state or federal funding sources, funding levels fluctuate and each of these sources is at risk of being reduced or diminished, despite growing interest and opportunity. In addition, according to staff who work with these funding programs, program administration can be a challenge, potentially slowing down project efficiency and decreasing the rate and success of land conservation projects throughout the region.

## MAJOR CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES (continued)

- *Limited Trust and Communication.* Like many places in the West, a history of distrust and poor communication has limited collaboration and the success of diverse partnerships in the Okanogan Valley. While progress has been made in recent years, significant room for improvement remains. Misunderstanding and mistrust constantly increase the risk of polarization despite the common ground and agreement that exists around the value of agriculture and open space. In particular, there is a strong sense from the ranching community that state and federal agencies are not fully accountable for their land-management decisions and many of the land-use plans and policies that regulate land activities are not explained at the local level. Nearly all ranchers interviewed expressed interest in participating in a stakeholders advisory group focusing on local public land-management policies.

## OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the challenges discussed above, many opportunities exist for agricultural land preservation and land conservation in the Okanogan Valley. Trends and local interviews reveal four major areas of opportunity discussed in more detail below.

- *Local Marketing and Niche Production.* Across the country, communities are rediscovering their “roots” and embracing the local food movement. The dramatic increase in farmers markets featuring food and goods produced locally has revolutionized the way some families eat and connect with their community. Communities in eastern Washington are particularly blessed with a bounty of local foods. The movement has taken hold in the Okanogan Valley and organizations such as Washington State University Extension are helping local producers market and sell their goods locally.

### Local Perspective on the Opportunity: The Timmerman Family

The Timmerman family provides an excellent example of the potential opportunity involved with local and niche marketing. Their family has been ranching in the Okanogan Valley since 1899, and Mark and Tina are the fourth generation on the ranch. They say, “our dream is that the 5<sup>th</sup> generation on our farm will take it away from us, and the 6<sup>th</sup> generation will take it away from them.” The Timmermans own and operate Oberg Brothers Natural Beef, and sell their natural (hormone and antibiotic free) beef directly to customers throughout the state.

The Timmermans believe local grocers could provide important help in marketing and selling local products, and suggested that ranchers should be more involved with the Chamber of Commerce. The Timmermans are innovative, work hard, love their land, and believe in what they are doing, but they admit that profit margins are slim.

## MAJOR CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES (continued)

- *Continued Land-Use Planning.* The remote, rural character of Okanogan County has played a role in its limited history of land-use planning. In 1965, the county adopted a general land-use plan that has guided development in the county to this day. In 2007, the county initiated an update of that plan to meet the needs and challenges facing Okanogan County today as well as to meet statewide growth-management standards. The adoption of the new comprehensive land-use plan is anticipated in 2010 and will provide the county with new land-use policy guidance and updated land-use permitting tools to protect the private property rights of landowners. While the impact of the new plan lies in its implementation, the revised plan can be an important way to articulate community values such as the importance of a rural lifestyle, sustaining agriculture and natural resource quality.

### Local Perspective on the Opportunity: Mike Buchert

Mike Buchert represents another rancher who has changed his production methods and focus to adapt to changing economic times. He emphasizes that land-use planning plays an important role in the future of agriculture in the county. The Buchert family has farmed in the Okanogan Valley since 1913, and for most of his adult life, Mike has farmed sheep. However, as public land leases became more restrictive in recent years, Mike changed his focus to raising cattle north of Tonasket. Mike says, "Change will happen. It's important to effect change in a positive way and protect open space and prevent development that chops up the land and makes no sense. Instead there should be thoughtful planning and clustering."

- *Improved Community Education and Involvement of Youth.* The impact of a gradually declining agriculture sector has naturally had an impact on the traditional fabric of the Okanogan Valley. Many ranchers have expressed that the community seems to no longer value or appreciate the work of local producers. This gradual social and cultural shift threatens the future of ranching in the Okanogan Valley, especially in the case of succession (i.e., passing the ranch on to the next generation) and the involvement and understanding of youth in agriculture and natural resource-related work. Some local education and marketing efforts are underway to help turn the tide, but the process will take time.

MAJOR  
CHALLENGES AND  
OPPORTUNITIES  
(continued)

**Local Perspective on the Opportunity:  
Daryl Assmussen, Les Kinney, Mike Buchert**

Mike Buchert emphasizes that farmers and ranchers need to be appreciated as producers of strategically important food and fiber. The loss of appreciation for local production and control over natural resources has been discouraging for Mike, and he believes this loss of community respect discourages young people from getting involved. He believes local education and marketing could help rebuild an appreciation for local producers.

Daryl Assmussen, another local rancher, cited one program that has been particularly successful at reaching out to young people and getting them involved with hands-on work projects: the Pacific Northwest Trail Association's SKY (Service-Knowledge-Youth) program. Specifically, a SKY group worked with the Okanogan Chapter of the Backcountry Horseman of Washington, Okanogan County and the U.S. Forest Service to build a new trailhead at Mt. Hull. "It's important that kids learn how to work," says Assmussen. This project not only teaches tangible work skills, it also demonstrates the potential for public-private partnerships and funding to significantly benefit the local community and the natural resource base.

In addition to education for regulators and community leaders, Les Kinney, a dryland farmer near Wauconda, believes more recognition should be given to the role of rural farms in teaching a work ethic for children. Kinney's thoughts about the importance of hands-on work for young people resonated through several interviews, and represents part of the cultural shift that is difficult to quantify, but is clearly occurring throughout Okanogan County. The SKY program represents one approach toward addressing this change, and other programs such as a Farmlink program (linking young and old farmers), a farm-to-school program (supplying local schools with local farm products), or school internships and work-study projects could all be options for rebuilding and defining a work ethic and developing an understanding of the dynamic and complex business of food production.

## MAJOR CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES (continued)

- *Conservation Easements and Acquisition Lease-Back Programs*<sup>3</sup>. Farmers and ranchers across the country have taken advantage of conservation easements and other incentive programs to keep their land in working condition. Many interviewees pointed to these programs as good examples of how public-private partnerships can benefit farmers and ranchers. As land prices increase and the incentive to sell land also increases, subdivision is often the last, dreaded resort. While not everyone is in favor of conservation easements or fee-simple acquisitions, they offer a significant financial benefit for those who are interested and who qualify for funding.

The opportunity to realize some of the development value while also retaining private ownership rights (with a conservation easement), or lease-back options (with fee-simple purchases), provides vital capital that can be reinvested in marketing, technological improvements, resource conservation, healthcare, education or other unmet needs.

Public acceptance of these types of projects will depend on the long-term management of the conserved areas. There is great opportunity for demonstration projects, trial plots, student educational projects and community input and involvement in revising management plans over time as conditions change. Again, these opportunities are dependent on finding the public funds to support increased communication and public outreach with the community.

It is notable that the County Commissioners have requested an impact statement or analysis for each proposed acquisition project, showing the assumed economic costs and benefits of each project to the local County economy. According to the American Farmland Trust's Cost of Community Services Study for Okanogan County, completed in 2007<sup>4</sup>:

- For each \$1 Okanogan County received in taxes from farm, forest and open land, the county spent only 56 cents. For each \$1 the county received from residential properties, the county spent \$1.06 in services for those lands (based on 2005 data). In other words, residential lands cost the county twice as much as agricultural lands for services (road maintenance, fire protection, etc.).
- In 2005, residential land uses created a county deficit of \$4.8 million, while farm, forest and open lands generated a surplus of \$2.1 million in property tax revenues. Thus while residential land uses are charged the highest amount in property tax, the net effect on the county budget is negative.

## MAJOR CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES (continued)

### **Local Perspective on the Opportunity: The Nelsons, Bob Barnes, Les Kinney**

According to Brian and Cynthia Nelson, 80 percent of the land around their 1,000-acre+ ranch is for sale, with each property between 500 to 1000 acres in size. The amount of land on the market could mean a significant change is ahead for traditional farm and ranch families, or it could indicate a change in the way farm and ranch businesses are owned and operated. Similar to the large ranch consolidations of the 1950s and 1960s, the current trend may be for large ranches to incorporate some sort of conservation interest, such as a conservation easement, a conservation buyer<sup>5</sup> who leases private land for grazing, or a lease of public land. Some see conservation as an opportunity to enhance the farm or ranch economy, while others see the increase in outside participation as a threat.

The Nelsons are interested in working with a third-party buyer who would like to purchase a large amount of land, lease the grazing rights with a sound grazing plan, and then donate the land to a conservation group for a tax deduction with the grazing lease in place. While a transaction of this kind has many details to negotiate, conceptually, it illustrates how new ways of looking at land ownership and partnerships could change the financing behind farms and ranches, while also helping to sustain traditional land uses and family ties.

Bob Barnes also sees value in conservation easements, especially as families are pushed to the edge but want to hold on to their land. He says, “The only thing left is our land. We’re trying to resist selling land to sustain our existence, and we want hope for the next generation.”

In contrast, Les Kinney believes that good public-private communication and federal conservation assistance programs offer better opportunities than conservation easements. The Kinneys have owned an 800-acre dryland alfalfa and timber farm since 1967, and they run the operation almost single-handedly, thanks to good equipment and low debt. Kinney’s farm (in the Aeneas valley) may be in a slightly wetter environment than those further south, which means they can operate without irrigation and 50 percent of their land is in timber. The slight increase in moisture gives the Kinneys a slight advantage, making their operation more diverse (cattle, alfalfa and timber) and simpler to operate (no complex and expensive irrigation infrastructure). Diversity and simplicity are two recurring themes in successful family farms and ranches.

Les Kinney participates on numerous agency advisory panels, including the Provincial Advisory Council for the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest, and he particularly likes to give tours of his farm. The Kinney’s farm was awarded the NRCS Conservation Farm of the Year in 1992, and he believes on-the-ground tours and examples like his help build trust and respect between producers and regulators. Kinney would like to see more tours and continued efforts to improve communication, particularly with government agencies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Significant areas of common ground exist among seemingly disparate interests as we look to the future of the Okanogan Valley. Many farmers want their land to remain in working condition and profitable, local leaders want their communities to prosper now and into the future, conservationists want the landscape to remain intact and healthy with thriving wildlife populations, and everybody wants to retain their rural lifestyle. Tying together these various opportunities remains a leadership challenge for government agencies, conservation groups and individual producers. As noted by Jay Kehne, formerly of Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) and now with Conservation Northwest, “A polarized attitude hurts everyone in the end.”

Moving forward in the Okanogan Valley will require significant collaboration and new approaches to solving new and old problems. Areas of opportunity can be broadly defined as land, leverage, education, and communication.

### LAND

Land is the fundamental common interest for everyone involved in preservation of farmland and wildlife areas in Okanogan County. As the base for all agricultural production, wildlife, and natural resources, the land and how it is used sustains the community, culture, and environment of the Okanogan Valley. Rather than viewing agricultural or livestock production and land conservation as separate or opposed, many opportunities exist to benefit both interests simultaneously, whether through conservation easements, conservation incentive programs, or on-farm efficiency improvements. Because resources are limited, it is essential to prioritize areas where assistance dollars can have the biggest and most lasting benefit. Some key considerations for any prioritization process include:

- *Utility of Geographic Information Systems (GIS).* GIS can be a powerful tool for analysis and evaluation of landscape features and data such as land ownership, soil types, demographic information, recreation areas, and wildlife and habitat types. Land managers and land-use planners can use this information to evaluate the context and benefit of potential agricultural preservation and land conservation projects. While GIS is limited by the quality of data available, it can be a very useful tool to help inform land use, ownership, and management decisions.
- *Willingness of All Stakeholders.* Agricultural preservation and land conservation can only happen when all stakeholders—landowners, public agencies, non-profits, community leaders—are willing to work together to protect the land. Building trust, respecting private property rights, and being willing to work on projects that may take years to complete are integral ingredients for success. The willingness of all stakeholders is an essential criteria in the prioritization process.
- *Expert Opinion and Review.* To adequately evaluate the potential benefit and context of agricultural preservation and land conservation projects, experts on a variety of subjects should be consulted. Key considerations such as producer and local government economics, ecosystem values, partnership opportunities, funding opportunities, land management implications, and several other measures of risk and value should be thoroughly evaluated.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD (continued)

### LEVERAGE

In times of constrained resources, the art of leverage—using one resource to gain more from other resources—is a key concept to master. As discussed above, ample common ground exists among private producers, local businesses, local and regional non-profits, and government agencies (county, state and federal) to work together toward common goals. Developing and sustaining partnerships greatly improves chances to qualify for assistance grants and financial opportunities: organizations must regularly communicate about plans and priorities and view one another as partners, rather than competitors or obstacles, that can help leverage resources to achieve goals and objectives. Specific opportunities where partnerships can provide beneficial leverage include:



Photo by Justin Haug

- *State and Federal Funding Programs.* State funding programs such as WWRP’s FPP provide essential funding for agricultural land preservation projects. Federal programs such as FRPP provide critical matching resources to state funding programs. Opportunity exists for interest group partnerships to ensure these programs—and others—continue to be funded at appropriate levels to meet local need and opportunity. Funding to support programs within agencies such as WDFW wildlife area management is also critical.
- *Federal Conservation Incentive Programs.* As expressed by several landowners, conservation incentive programs available through agencies such as NRCS provide much-needed assistance to landowners trying to creatively offset operation costs and improve the condition of the land. Opportunity exists to work together to ensure incentive programs are fully funded, creatively leveraged to attract additional resources, and appropriately structured to meet landowner needs.
- *Cooperation with State and Federal Land Management Agencies.* Management of state and federal lands is an important issue for landowners in the Okanogan Valley. Good range and land management practices and flexibility in implementation of regulations benefit all landowners. Opportunity exists to work with the U.S. Forest Service and WDFW to address range and land management issues to benefit the greater good.
- *Local Assistance Programs.* The “buy local” movement is burgeoning in the Okanogan Valley and resources available through the Okanogan Conservation District (OCD) and Washington State University are invaluable to producers. Opportunity exists to build greater awareness of existing programs and explore the need for similar marketing and business development programs.
- *Local Capacity and Awareness Building.* Building organizational capacity and awareness of important local issues is a challenge in any community with limited resources. Opportunity exists to build more capacity among county staff (especially in the planning department) and local organizations such as the Okanogan Valley Land Council (OVLC). Although the community may have a sense of the economic challenges facing the county, there is opportunity to build more awareness of these issues and the potential impacts of such challenges on the land and the community as a whole.



RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR MOVING  
FORWARD  
(continued)

## EDUCATION

Education is the cornerstone of building more understanding and awareness of the challenges and opportunities facing the Okanogan Valley. Interviews showed the pervasive need for more education about food production, land conservation, agricultural economics and natural resource stewardship. Without exposure to information on best practices, economic dynamics, assistance programs, and more, people may hold tight to perceptions that may or may not be accurate. Providing more education opportunities may help overcome the common polarization and assumptions. Some key opportunities include:

- *Local School Curriculum.* Integrating agricultural and land conservation education into school curriculum at the elementary, middle, or high school level would provide the opportunity to educate youth and involve them in local issues, events, and work projects.
- *Educational Community Forums.* Hosting regular educational workshops on popular topics such as water rights, conservation easements, marketing, new markets, farm finance, healthcare for family farmers, songbird conservation, etc. would provide the opportunity for residents to learn more about local issues of concern.
- *Distribution of Local Resources.* Local organizations such as OVLC, OCD, and the Okanogan County Noxious Weed Office have produced several handbooks and information packets useful to local landowners. Increasing the distribution and visibility of these resources would provide an additional opportunity for education in the community.
- *Bridge-Building Opportunities.* Increasing opportunities to build bridges between long-time residents and newcomers promotes understanding, common ground and respect for the various ways of life in the Okanogan Valley. Marketing local products and sustaining a healthy local economy and environment may be an appropriate topic around which to build partnerships.

## COMMUNICATION AND NETWORKING

Communication is key to maintaining trust and taking advantage of as many leverage and partnership opportunities as possible. With more groups working in the Okanogan than ever before, there is an opportunity to improve communication to benefit agricultural preservation and land conservation. Respectful, open communication among appropriate stakeholders can increase understanding about complex resource issues and create new opportunities for successful collaboration. Specific opportunities for communication include:

- *County, TPL, OVLC, WDFW Quarterly Meetings.* Over the past year, in response to a request from the Okanogan County Commissioners, TPL, OVLC, and WDFW have met with the Commissioners on a quarterly basis to provide project updates. These meetings provide a vital way to communicate directly about conservation issues, priorities and projects underway in the county, and facilitate preservation of agricultural lands in a timely manner (with interested landowners). These quarterly meetings with the County commissioners should continue on an ongoing basis, in the public meeting format.

RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR MOVING  
FORWARD  
(continued)

- *Public Land Stakeholder Advisory Committee.* Many interviewees expressed interest in being on a stakeholder advisory group that would advise the County Commissioners on agricultural land preservation and conservation issues. Models of such partnerships are the Malpai Borderlands Group ([www.MalpaiBorderlandsGroup.org](http://www.MalpaiBorderlandsGroup.org)), Blackfoot Challenge ([www.BlackfootChallenge.org](http://www.BlackfootChallenge.org)), and Quivira Coalition ([www.QuiviraCoalition.org](http://www.QuiviraCoalition.org)) that can be found across the West and could be used as models for Okanogan County as groups with their own character and measurements of success develops.

WORKING TOWARD  
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While no one can predict what will happen in the future, it is likely that if stakeholders develop partnerships around common visions and goals, the future of Okanogan County and land protection will benefit. If stakeholders choose the path of polarization and resources are wasted in court battles and negative meetings, the future is likely to be contentious. To quote the Blackfoot Challenge, “Here, private landowners take the lead and public agencies follow in a shared goal—to keep large landscapes intact and rural lifestyles vital. What’s our secret to success? Focus on the 80 percent that folks can agree on and not the 20 percent that might divide us. Leave egos at the door and wear a Blackfoot Challenge hat in our meetings. Listen well, don’t rush and find the common ground before acting.”

It is up to the ranchers, conservationists, long-time residents, and community leaders in the Okanogan Valley to come together and develop a common vision that focuses on shared values. This report shows that ample shared values exist, from a deep care for the land to respect for a work ethic and education related to food production, and a desire for healthy, quality food and a rural lifestyle.

It is unfortunate that stereotypes and fears often intersect these shared values, and divert visionary energy toward defensive positions. For example, conservation easements have been a subject of contention in the past. They are not an appropriate tool for every situation, but they can be vital in some cases. Some have misinterpreted conservation easements to be similar to land condemnation, but in reality every conservation easement is voluntary, and each property owner has the right to decide whether to restrict the uses of their property, and to what degree.

However, even in cases of misinformation or misunderstanding, there is always an opportunity for improved communication and learning by all involved in challenging land-use questions. Perhaps the most important quality for future leaders will be patience and openness to new ideas, mixed with a healthy respect for local history and knowledge.

It is our hope that this report contributes to a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the agricultural and conservation communities in the Okanogan Valley. When listed side-by-side, the challenges tend to overshadow the opportunities; but opportunities for the future do exist, and they are more likely to become realities as diverse partners who care deeply about the future of the Okanogan Valley come together to collaborate on leveraging resources and facilitating productive conversation at the local, state, and federal level.

WORKING TOWARD  
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(continued)

The process of working together for common goals in the Okanogan Valley is not new. Homesteaders have helped each other face remarkable adversity for many generations; but today the adversities look different, and the recipes for adaptation are also different. Visualize the wooden irrigation flumes built over miles and miles in the past century, now defunct. If those flumes could be developed by a handful of people with vision and passion, so too can the local markets, natural resources and productive farms essential to sustaining the community and culture of the Okanogan Valley.

The pieces of the land conservation and agricultural land preservation puzzle are ready to be assembled into a bigger, more coordinated effort. This effort will require deliberate leadership, patience and learning by everyone involved, and it will require involving many more people and interest groups before the work is done.

This report represents a small step toward developing a larger vision, but we hope that it is a powerful reminder that resources for a positive vision and future for the Okanogan Valley do exist, and that local landowners and conservation partners are ready to be further engaged in solving the challenging issues facing the region today.



## END NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Julia Haggerty and Patty Gude, 2008. *Land Ownership and Change and the Ranching Economy in the Okanogan Valley and Eastern Okanogan County, Washington*. Headwaters Economics. Available online at: [http://www.tpl.org/content\\_documents/HeadwatersEconomics\\_Okanoganstudy\\_FINAL\\_11\\_12\\_08\\_sm.pdf](http://www.tpl.org/content_documents/HeadwatersEconomics_Okanoganstudy_FINAL_11_12_08_sm.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements between a landowner and a qualified non-profit or government agency, intended to protect specific conservation values.

<sup>3</sup> Acquisition Lease Back Programs are land purchases by a non-profit agency, conservation buyer or government agency, where the buyer leases the land (or some portion of the total land area) for agricultural use after the sale is completed. If a state agency purchases the property, they are required to make Payments in Lieu of Taxes to the County, in place of property taxes. Conservation buyers continue to pay property taxes as private landowners, and non-profits may request exemption from property tax.

<sup>4</sup> Cost of Community Services, Okanogan County, Washington. Report prepared by the American Farmland Trust. May 2007. [www.methowconservancy.org/cocs\\_final.pdf](http://www.methowconservancy.org/cocs_final.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> A conservation buyer is a private individual who wants to purchase a property to protect its conservation values, and who may allow limited public access, grazing, timber management, etc. depending on the landowner. Typically, conservation buyers place conservation easements on their property, or protect the property from development by selling to a public entity.

## ABBREVIATIONS

FPP: Farmland Protection Program

FRPP: Farm and Ranchland Protection Program

GIS: Geographic Information Services

NRCS: Natural Resource Conservation Service

OCD: Okanogan County Conservation District

OVLC: Okanogan Valley Land Council

TPL: The Trust for Public Land

WDFW: Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife

WWRP: Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program

## APPENDIX A INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ASKED TO EACH INTERVIEWEE

1. How long have you and your family been farming/ranching in the Okanogan Valley (or other related work)?
2. What are some of the positive changes for agriculture (in the Okanogan Valley, county) you've seen over the past decade?
3. What are some of the negative changes you've seen over the past decade? Have these changes affected your access to healthcare? Does anyone in your immediate family work outside the ranch/farm?
4. What projects, programs, businesses, or market changes have benefited agricultural producers in the Okanogan Valley, in your opinion?
5. What is currently the biggest threat to agriculture in the Okanogan Valley?
6. Looking to the future, what is your greatest hope for your own ranch/land and the greater Okanogan Valley?
7. What do you think needs to happen to achieve this vision?
8. What do you think community leaders should do now to ensure the best possible future for producers in the Okanogan Valley? (Should we distinguish between county and state leadership?)
9. Would you like to be involved in local discussions about land conservation, farmland preservation, and stewardship priorities? Why or why not?
10. Can you recommend anyone else we should be sure to interview?



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