

Getting long-term access to land can be one of the most significant challenges small farmers face when establishing or expanding their farm business. Farmers today are finding creative ways to secure land to farm. In addition to traditional purchase options, strategies to secure land include leasing, crop share, and collaborating with land trust entities or other non-traditional landowners.

This fact sheet introduces some of the critical considerations and resources available for finding and acquiring land to farm.

This fact sheet includes information on:

- Zoning and land use codes.
- Land acquisition planning.
- Resources for finding land.
- Agricultural conservation easements and land trusts.

Zoning and Land Use Codes

Understanding land use zoning is especially important when finding land on which to farm and creating a direct marketing business. Zoning in each county and city will designate what type of activity can happen on a property, with zones such as agricultural, urban or rural, industrial, and residential. It is very important to understand the zoning of a property before deciding it will work for your business plans.

Agricultural zoning exists to protect farmland from being lost to competing uses or development. Typically, farmers seek land in agricultural or rural zones because farm activities (raising crops or livestock, plowing, composting, barns/storage, mobile slaughter, etc.) are more often allowed and supported within those areas. However, agricultural zoning can specify limitations such as maximum and minimum parcel size, the number of dwellings or structures, required setbacks from property lines or roads for livestock or processing facilities, and allow or prohibit some processing, retail, events, or agritourism activities. It is especially important for direct marketing farms to consider these factors before buying or leasing.

In addition, there are critical areas within any zone where farming activities may not be allowed. For example, the presence of wetlands, floodways, salmon-bearing streams, habitat conservation areas, steep hillsides, and landslide areas on a property may limit overall acreage activities. To understand zoning more fully, look to your local county website for a link to the county code or the online parcel viewer and mapping tools, and get in touch with your county planning department. Ask your county planner about land use designations, critical areas, and other important considerations that apply to the property or others nearby.

Land Acquisition Planning

The following tools can help you create a customized farm acquisition plan:

1. "Acquiring Your Farm Toolbox," created by the nonprofit Land for Good, landforgood.org, includes seven topic modules (farmland tenure basics, financial assessment, owning farmland, leasing farmland, communications and negotiation, and community partners).
2. "Finding, Assessing, and Securing Farmland: A Plain Language Guide," created by the New Entry Sustainable Farming Project, nesfp.org/resources, includes locally relevant resources for Washington farmers, such as determining the right kind of land, deciding on your type of land tenure, and negotiating and signing agreements.

Leasing vs. owning

There are many considerations when choosing to lease or purchase land to farm, including which arrangement works for your budget, the scope of operations, the possibility of partnering with a land trust, the length of a lease, if you want land that has been in cultivation or fallow, farmed organically, and more. Leasing can provide a way to get experience farming and to build a business and customer base before making a big investment in land. It can also be an opportunity to learn from and share knowledge with the landowners. Sometimes, the best way to meet the needs of both parties is to take a creative approach to lease terms.

RUNNING A SUCCESSFUL FARM BUSINESS

Ownership comes with additional responsibilities and liabilities that may not apply in leasing arrangements. However, if you have the means to purchase a farm, owning land can offer more autonomy and the ability to retain the benefits of any improvements made to the property, from soil health to physical infrastructure. There are a variety of loans and other financial programs to support new and expanding farmers to own land.

- Find an extensive library of resources to help you decide whether leasing or owning farmland is right for you at The American Farmland Trust Farmland Information Center on “Access to Land” at farmlandinfo.org/accesstoland.
- Land owners and land seekers can find tailored, general advice and resources for finding land, lease arrangements, and sample lease agreements from two other sources: “Ag Lease 101” at aglease101.org, and a “Toolbox for Leasing Farmland” from Land for Good at landforgood.org/resources.

Lease rates and land values

Knowing the current lease rates will be helpful in assessing your options up front. Cash lease rates for farmland depend on the local market, the quality of soil of the rented parcel, if it has a water right or access to water, and the perspective of the landowner.

Find average Washington State county-level cash rental rates and average land value by acre from the USDA National Agricultural Statistic Service (NASS) Statistical Bulletin at nass.usda.gov/Statistics_by_State. Click on the “QuickSTATS” tool, and search the cash rent rates in the database by selecting “County” for geographic level, “Washington” for state, and then select your county name, and the most recent year. Then press “Get data.” To get a big picture view, use real estate websites like Land Watch, or Land and Farm to see current listing prices compared with regional soil quality maps.

Resources for Finding Land

There are many resources to help people find land to farm in Washington, such as online classifieds, keyword searches, real estate listings, nonprofit organizations with farmland access projects, and using the real-life social network.

- **Capital Press**, capitalpress.com, print and online editions have extensive listings for Washington State.
- **Washington FarmLink**, wafarmlink.org, is a project of Tilth Alliance that works to connect farmland owners and farm seekers around the state. The website offers free posts for users and a comprehensive resource list for finding land to farm.
- **Farm to Farmer**, farmtofarmer.org, a program run by PCC Farmland Trust, offers land listings through online and in-person matching and coaching with landowners and farmers. Contact PCC Farmland Trust to see if they are expanding to your region: (206) 777-1658, or email info@farmtofarmer.org.
- **The Farmland Directory**, farmlandinfo.org/directory, a project of American Farmland Trust, offers a simple search by zip code to find entities that sell protected properties, lease land to farmers and ranchers, maintain lists of land seekers or properties for sale, or help producers locate land.
- **Conservation Districts (CD)**, wadistricts.org/district-directory, and **WSU County Extension offices**, extension.wsu.edu, work closely with farmland owners and may know of available land for lease or sale. Find your nearby CD or Extension agent by searching online for your region or county.
- **Real estate listings** allow the user to search for farms for sale by price, number of acres, and location. Hiring a real estate agent may turn up more options that meet your particular search criteria.
- **Use your network:** Ask around to find out if there is a local network of farmers to connect with, perhaps via a listserv, or a group membership. Using word of mouth can be productive once people know someone is seeking land in a particular area.

Agricultural Conservation Easements and Land Trusts

Conservation easements and/or partnering with a land trust can present unique opportunities for accessing or preserving land to farm. Agricultural easements and purchase of development rights (PDR) programs are types of voluntary conservation easements whose main purpose is to keep the land available for farming. Landowners sell their right to develop the agricultural entity to another entity such as a conservation district or land trust. Landowners are paid for the rights they restrict, and they retain other property rights.

Agricultural Easements

An easement or PDR may provide options for an existing landowner to obtain cash needed to retire from farming, while ensuring the land remains in a farming use. A lower-cost sale of land to a new farm buyer may be possible because the development rights have already been sold. A new buyer may partner with a farmland preservation program that will buy the development rights as part of the purchase arrangement, providing the farmer immediate cash flow. A FSA-guaranteed low-interest loan for helping farmers implement conservation plans might also help reduce or offset the cost of buying farmland. Preservation programs can also help connect farmers with land to lease or buy.

Find more information from the Office of Farmland Preservation for Washington State at scc.wa.gov/ofp-easements

Land Trusts

To sell or donate an agricultural conservation easement, or to find land that has already been protected by an easement, farmers and landowners need to work with an organization that is willing to own, or hold, easements. Usually an easement holder is a land trust or government agency. Land trusts are 501c3 nonprofit organizations with the primary purpose of protecting or conserving land. Some land trusts own land that they lease to farmers. Land trusts may also be able to purchase an agricultural easement on farmland, reducing the cost of purchase to a more affordable level. Some land trusts may use additional tools, like an option to purchase at agricultural value, to make farmland more affordable.

There are numerous land trusts in Washington State, and they exist at all scales from small, local all-volunteer operations to regional, state, and national organizations. Find a land trust that focuses on agricultural land protection using American Farmland Trust's comprehensive Farmland Directory at farmlandinfo.org/directory.



6. Financing Your Farm