

\$2M for the Farmland Protection and Land Access (FPLA)

We urge the Legislature to include \$2 million for the Farmland Protection and Land Access (FPLA) Program in the capital budget. The Washington State Conservation Commission (WSCC) has requested funding for this pilot program to address an urgent, critical gap to protect farmland, support equitable access, and strengthen food systems across Washington.

Washington is losing farmland at a truly alarming rate. According to the USDA Census of Agriculture, 640,000 acres were lost between 2002 and 2017. A major factor for this loss is the rising cost of rural and peri-urban agricultural land. Land values are rising dramatically due to competing interests for development, which has only been exacerbated by the pandemic.

In addition to losing land, we are losing farmers. There are five times as many producers over 65 as under 35 years old. More than 70% of retiring farmers have not identified a successor. Young and beginning farmers lack access to affordable land, particularly those who have faced a long history of race-based discrimination for land tenure. In Washington, only 4% of producers identified Black, Indigenous, or a person of color in the Census of Agriculture.

At the same time, farmland is proving more critical than ever to our regional food system. With the pandemic, global supply chain issues continue to interrupt our food supply. Consumers have responded by turning to local farms. In the report from University of Washington on the *State of the Washington State Food System During the Pandemic*, they reported a striking increase in demand for farms serving local and regional markets.

Together, these overlapping trends demand an immediate response to maintain Washington's agricultural tradition and meet the changing needs of our state and its people.

FPLA, housed at the WSCC Office of Farmland Preservation, would do just that. FPLA is an innovative new program that removes speculative real estate value through easements, actively prioritizing the transition of ownership to beginning and historically underserved farmers. FPLA is also timely. It is specifically designed to work in tandem with a new loan financing program at the Washington State Housing Finance Commission, allowing conservation practitioners to operate in a fast-paced real estate market to keep at-risk farms producing fresh, local food for our communities.

The Washington Food Policy Forum, which was established by the Legislature and is comprised of over 40 key stakeholder groups across the state, has recommended significant funding for these agriculture conservation easements through the WSCC. In addition, the Puget Sound Partnership ranked FPLA as their second highest funding priority for this session's capital budget.

We urge your inclusion of \$2 million for the Farmland Protection and Land Access program in the capital budget to kick-start a more equitable and resilient food system for generations to come.

