



Natural Resources Conservation Service

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For additional information visit our Washington State NRI website at: <http://www.wa.nrcs.usda.gov/NRI>

## National Resources Inventory

*Resources of Washington Series*

### PRIME FARMLAND IN WASHINGTON, 1982 - 1997

(Revised December 2000)

Prime farmlands are lands that have the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing feed, forage, fiber and oilseed crops. The soils which constitute prime farmlands are generally level, deep, well watered and have no serious limitations for use and management.

Most counties in Washington contain prime farmland. The majority of the prime farmland is located in the eastern part of the State. Washington has many soils that are prime in all respects except one - adequate water supplies. Therefore, prime farmland could increase or decrease depending on irrigation water availability and the profitability of growing irrigated crops.

Since 1982, prime farmland acres have gradually decreased as those soils are being developed for alternative uses such as urban growth. The development of water delivery systems has also declined. This is mostly the result of lower crop prices.

Prime farmlands have decreased about 4.8% in the 1982 to 1997 time period. Prime farmland soils used for agriculture (cropland and pastureland) have declined approximately 140,000 acres as a result of

land use changes. The development of prime farmland soils for urban uses and transportation, farmsteads, and rural estates are the most significant reasons for these losses. Less available or affordable sources of irrigation water also account for smaller losses of prime farmlands.

Prime farmlands have decreased more in western Washington, primarily in Clark, Lewis, Pierce and Thurston counties than in any other region of the State. In eastern Washington, the Columbia Basin region has offset most losses of prime farmland by developing additional irrigation water for dry cropland. Only Grant County has had a net gain in prime farmland as irrigated acres have increased.

There are some acres of prime farmland which have been seeded to perennial grasses. These lands, as well as prime lands enrolled in Conservation Reserve Program, are available for cropping as the need arises.

Trends indicate that prime farmland will continue to decrease in western Washington and gains and losses in the Columbia Basin will balance depending on the availability of water and agricultural commodity prices.

In western Washington the majority of the prime farmland soils are forested. Lewis County contains approximately 20% of these forested prime farmland soils. These soils are also prime timber producing soils so the likelihood of these soils being cleared for crop production is low.

The only county in eastern Washington with a substantial acreage of prime farmland soils currently devoted to timber production is Stevens with about 38,000 acres. These acres could be cleared and farmed. However, the likelihood is low, given the recent years of low commodity prices, and that most of these acres are owned by forest products companies.

There are substantial amounts of prime farmland soils devoted to pasture production in Lewis, Clark, King and Skagit counties. These counties have about 140,000 acres of

pasture that could be converted to the production of annual crops. It is not expected that land owners will switch from pasture to annual crop production because of equipment expenses, lack of local marketing opportunities and rapidly changing land use patterns.

The minor amount of prime farmland soils currently devoted to rangeland are mostly in the Columbia Basin. These areas are outside the reach of irrigation canal systems and will probably remain in range until irrigation water becomes available.

Of the 2.2 million acres of prime farmland soils, approximately 855,000 acres are irrigated. This is primarily divided between cultivated crops such as potatoes and wheat grown on 460,000 acres and non-cultivated crops such as orchards and alfalfa which cover about 350,000 acres in Washington.

