

Part One – Administration

Rural Stewardship Planning

Flexible alternatives for rural properties

Under King County's new Critical Areas Ordinance, rural landowners have the option to pursue a Rural Stewardship Plan if they would like to achieve some flexibility from standard critical areas protections when developing their property. The planning process offers landowners an opportunity to tailor wetland and stream buffers to their land use needs in exchange for committing to implement a management plan that will protect natural resources over the long term.

Stewardship plans are available to all rural landowners

A Rural Stewardship Plan will help you develop a comprehensive, long-term plan for your property that includes resource protection and stewardship activities. Only properties zoned Rural Residential (RA) are eligible for the site-specific flexibility with CAO buffers allowed by a Rural Stewardship Plan. A Rural Stewardship Plan may not be the best option to achieve the goals of all RA landowners.

Properties with multiple uses, including rural residences, agriculture and forestry, can be addressed within a rural stewardship although there are unique benefits achieved through farm and forestry plans that might be more appropriate. Rural landowners should assess all three programs and determine which best suits their needs.

Allowed modifications and site-specific protections

There are several types of critical areas that can be directly addressed through a Rural Stewardship Plan:

- **Aquatic areas** – including rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, estuaries, marine shorelines and shallow aquifers;
- **Wetland areas** – are inundated by surface or groundwater often enough to support specific plants and animals unique to those areas; and
- **Wildlife areas** – contain critical habitats for species found to be of significant importance through King County's Comprehensive Plan. These areas include active nesting and breeding sites for nine priority species and the mapped wildlife habitat network that links wildlife areas with critical areas, trails, parks, priority habitat, and other open space to allow wildlife migration.

Buffers or other critical areas such as critical aquifer recharge areas or geologic hazard areas (i.e., steep slopes or landslide hazard areas) cannot be modified through a Rural Stewardship Plan.

As authorized in K.C.C. 21A.24.134 and 139, properties zoned Rural Residential (RA) may, via a Rural Stewardship Plan, achieve modifications for:

- Minimum buffer widths for aquatic areas;
- Minimum buffer widths for wetlands;
- Minimum buffer widths for wildlife habitat conservation areas; and
- Maximum clearing restrictions.

Allowed buffer modifications and clearing restrictions will vary between plans, depending on elements including:

- Basin condition that the property lies in, as identified in the Basin and Shoreline Conditions Map;
- For sites with aquatic areas, the location of the site within the drainage basin, with sites in upper drainage basins having different requirements than sites in lower drainage basins;
- Existing critical area buffer condition, categorized as high, medium, or low;
- The ecological function of any wetlands;
- Site specific wildlife habitat evaluation, if applicable; and
- The size of the property, with properties greater than 5 acres having different clearing requirements than properties that are 5 acres or smaller.

Modifications to the noted critical area buffers will only be allowed in return for developing a long-term stewardship plan that incorporates Best Management Practices (BMPs) to maintain, restore or enhance critical areas, buffers and native vegetation. King County staff will assist landowners in selection BMPs that will create a viable stewardship plan.

Landowners who complete Rural Stewardship Plans may be eligible for tax benefits through the Public Benefit Rating System (PBRs).

Goals and objectives of the Rural Stewardship Plan

An approved Rural Stewardship Plan must achieve the following goals, listed in priority order:

1. To avoid impacts to critical areas to the maximum extent practicable;
2. If there is the potential to impact more than one category of wetland, type of aquatic area, or more than one species of native fish or wildlife, impacts to the

- highest category of wetland, type of aquatic area, or most protected fish or wildlife species should be avoided first;
3. To maintain or enhance the natural hydrologic systems on site to the maximum extent practicable;
 4. To maintain, restore or enhance native plants;
 5. To maintain, restore or enhance the function and value of critical areas or critical area buffers;
 6. To minimize habitat fragmentation and enhance corridors between wetlands, riparian corridors, wildlife habitat conservation areas and other priority habitats;
 7. To minimize development impacts by implementing BMPs and meeting performance standards over the life of the development; and
 8. To monitor the effectiveness of stewardship practices and to implement additional practices to maintain, restore or enhance critical area functions when necessary.

Elements of a Rural Stewardship Plan

The Rural Stewardship Planning process consists of several steps directed towards producing a final plan that meets the goals referenced above and that is efficient and comprehensive for the landowner. The steps are:

1. Complete an inventory of existing conditions on the property. This will include identification of natural resources, critical areas and potential impacts to them. Specific elements of this inventory include:
 - Site assessment checklist;
 - Critical areas identification and/or designation; and
 - Site map of existing conditions, land uses and vegetation.
2. Identify protection requirements for these critical areas based on their classification and functions. This will result in development of a site map showing modified buffer and clearing restrictions.
3. Analyze potential impacts to these critical areas based on proposed activities. This will result in a site map of proposed activities and buffers.
4. Develop a plan for implementation and monitoring. Plan elements include:
 - A BMP plan;
 - An implementation timeframe;
 - A monitoring plan with performance measures, monitoring schedule and strategy for adaptive management; and
 - A bond agreement for landowners proposing site development.

Roles, responsibilities and available resources

Landowners are responsible for completing Rural Stewardship Plans and submitting them to King County for approval, but there are many resources to help landowners through the process. Resources available include:

- **Technical assistance from King County Staff.** Water and Land Resources (WLRD) staff will be available at no charge for site visits, guidance on how to develop necessary Rural Stewardship Plan products and support in navigating through the process. Department of Development and Environmental Services staff will be available for technical assistance related specifically to permit needs on a fee basis.
- **An instructional handbook** to guide the user through the Rural Stewardship Planning process. The handbook will lead the landowner through each element required in the final plan and will include informational resources and examples of plan components.
- **An optional classroom workshop** to introduce landowners to the Rural Stewardship Plan process; necessary plan elements; roles and responsibilities; timeframes; and stewardship principles.
- **Additional Web-based information** to help a landowner determine whether a Rural Stewardship Plan is appropriate and how to get more information.

More information

The Rural Stewardship Plan Public Rule, issued by the King County Executive, is available at: <http://www.metrokc.gov/recelec/archives/sysindex.htm>. The Public Rule reference and a hand handbook for rural stewardship planning will provide more detailed information about the process and components of a Rural Stewardship Plan and will assist landowners in developing a plan for their property.

King County staff can answer general questions about the benefits of a Rural Stewardship Plan and help you determine whether your property would be best served by this option.

For more information on Rural Stewardship Plans, please contact the Rural Stewardship Planning staff at 206-296-6519.

More information, including the draft "Rural Stewardship Planning Handbook", is available online at: <http://dnr.metrokc.gov/wlr/cao>.