

## 3 Land Use Element

### 3.1 Introduction

This Chapter contains the GMA required land use element to ~~create-provide~~ a framework ~~upon which~~ ~~for~~ future growth and development ~~will occur~~ consistent with community objectives and ~~the requirements of state~~ law. Consistent with GMA requirements, the land use element designates the proposed general distribution, location, and extent of land uses for agriculture ~~and other resource lands, timber production,~~ housing, commerce, industry, recreation, open spaces, general aviation airports, public utilities, public facilities, and other functions, as applicable, and describes development densities and projections for future population growth.

Within all elements of the Comprehensive Plan, project planning, scheduling, and financing are targeted to provide the basic infrastructure services that ~~correspond to enables the public to realizing the~~ designated land use. The relationship between elements is one of functional interdependence and internal consistency, where the Comprehensive Plan Elements and land use designations are:

- Consistent with and carry forth the Comprehensive Plan's policies
- Depict scale and densities consistent with the carrying capacity of the land, surrounding area, and infrastructure
- Cost effective ~~relative to for~~ the expenditure of public revenues to construct and maintain public infrastructure/service
- Reflect the suitability of the land for the designated land uses ~~in terms of for~~ capacity, compatibility, and availability of services

The land use element should undergo a major review every ~~8-10~~ years to reaffirm both the legitimacy of the "Vision" and to make necessary adjustments in response to new conditions or changing attitudes. Annual review enables the County to monitor the progress of meeting objectives and to keep objectives current relative to emerging issues and needs.

The purpose of the land use element, in conjunction with the rural element, is to:

- Provide a description of the outcomes the community expects from growth and development
- Provide certainty and predictability for development and financial interests, residents, and service providers
- Serve as the policy and regulatory framework which ensures that through the passage of time and successive political administrations the cumulative outcome of growth and development consistently moves toward that chosen by the rural community
- Demonstrate how local interests meet the mandates of state planning law and other requirements consistent with local needs and preferences

### 3.2 Existing Land Uses in the County

Benton County consists of over 1,715 square miles. The U.S. Department of Energy's Hanford Reservation occupies 416 miles, or 24 percent, of Benton County's northern area (see Appendix A: Map Folio, Figure 2 – Publicly Owned Lands Map). An additional 93,299 acres are owned or managed by other public entities (port districts, state, federal, and local government lands). Total public ownership represents 33 percent of the acreage in Benton County.

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The existing land use activities within unincorporated Benton County are principally agriculture, agricultural related industry, rural residential, rangeland, open space, and Hanford industrial uses (see Appendix A: Map Folio, Figure 3 – Existing Land Use Activities Map). The current allocation of land use within the County is presented in Table 3-1.



Dryland agriculture in Benton County

Table 3-1 indicates that GMA agriculture (irrigated and dryland) is the largest single land use within the County. It occupies approximately 59 percent of the total land area. Next largest is Hanford, which accounts for approximately 25 percent, followed by rural land uses (approximately 7 percent). The five cities and their UGAs occupy 72,245.37 acres (113 square miles), or over 6 percent of the total land area. See Appendix A: Map Folio, Figure 4 – Existing Land Use Designations Map.

**Table 3-1**  
**Current Land Use in Benton County (City annexations updated 2016)**

Land Use Type	Acres	Square Miles	Percent
Cities and Urban Growth Areas	72,245.059	113	6.58
Hanford	266,351.265517	416	24.27
Hanford Reach	12,443.268	19	1.13

Land Use Type	Acres	Square Miles	Percent
Unincorporated Area			
Growth Management Act Agriculture	647,107	1,011	58.96
Open Space Conservation	2,108	3	0.19
Public	15,163	24	1.38
Rural Lands 1	1,182	2	0.11
Rural Lands 1-3	318	0	0.03
Rural Lands 5	74,039	116	6.75
Rural Lands 20	1,813	3	0.17
Community Center	500	1	0.05
Community Commercial	26	0	0.00
Interchange Commercial	325	1	0.03
General Commercial	202	0	0.02
Light Industrial	1,333	2	0.12
Heavy Industrial	2,344	4	0.21
Total Unincorporated Area	746,460	1,166	68.01
Total County Area	1,097,499 <del>860</del> <u>860</u>	1,715	100

Source: Benton County GIS data

### 3.2.1 Land Use Pattern and Compatibility

Benton County's land use can be described in broad categories: urban, rural, agricultural, industrial, public, and open space. Agriculture is the predominant land use in Benton County. Much of the urban land is concentrated in the eastern portion of the County which comprises the Tri-Cities area—Kennewick, Richland, and West Richland—with Benton City and Prosser comprising the urban land in central and western Benton County. The rural residential lands are mostly along the



Rural residential area in Benton County

Interstate-82 corridor and in the urban fringes with some located in the Patterson and Plymouth areas. Industrial lands are minimal in the unincorporated County, located near Finley, ~~and Prosser and Plymouth.~~ This is in part due to the ability to site agro-industrial uses within agricultural lands, with several agriculture related developments such as storage and product packing facilities located adjacent to production lands throughout the County. Other industrial lands are mostly located within the Hanford area or within the UGAs. Public and open space lands are located throughout the County.

Compatibility is based on the intensity of land uses. Generally speaking, the most intense use is industrial due its operational impacts (e.g., noise, light, dust), supporting facility needs, and overall land impact. Natural areas are considered the least intense as there are no developments or improvements ~~on such in these areas.~~ Therefore, a low density residential areas are not compatible next next to a heavy industrial land use would be considered incompatible because of the negative impacts industrial uses may have on the residential areas. Appropriately designed buffers,

landscaping, and transition areas between uses should be considered between incompatible land uses.

### 3.2.1.1 Military Training Routes

When planning for new development within Benton County, it is important to consider the critical role of military training areas in support of national defense. Within Benton County there are several military training routes that function as 'highways in the sky' used by military aircraft to practice high- and low-altitude training exercises and to traverse between military installations. Any development or new construction that seriously impacts or hinders the military training routes' function and viability is considered incompatible land use. Future land use compatibility planning ~~must be~~ is an overarching goal of the Comprehensive Plan.

The GMA requires the County to provide notice to the military when it intends to amend its "comprehensive plan or development regulations to address lands adjacent to military installations to ensure those lands are protected from incompatible development." Per the RCW 36.70A.530:

1. Military installations are of particular importance to the economic health of the state of Washington. It is a priority of the state to protect the land surrounding military installations from incompatible development.
2. A comprehensive plan, amendment to a comprehensive plan, a development regulation, or amendment to a development regulation, should not allow development in the vicinity of a military installation that is incompatible with the installation's ability to carry out its mission requirements.

### 3.2.2 Population and Land Use Trends

~~Beginning in~~Since the 1990s, ~~through the present~~ there has been a condition of sustained population and economic growth in ~~southeastern~~ Washington. ~~For the present,~~ the cyclic booms and busts in the local economy characteristic of the 1960s through late 1980s have been replaced with a ~~seemingly~~ steady and prolonged period of population growth and conversion of raw land to agriculture and related industries, urban uses, and rural residential development.

~~Locally, since the early 1990s~~ Both the farm and construction/development sector of the non-farm economy ~~of the county~~ have enjoyed relatively favorable market conditions. The economy was less impacted by the recession in 2008 than the rest of the nation due to the increase in employment at the Hanford Site as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) investment in expedited cleanup activities in 2009 and beyond. ~~Like many other communities,~~ ~~the Covid-19 pandemic,~~ ~~like many other areas,~~ temporarily impacted the local Benton County economy, but ~~this~~ ~~has since recovered.~~ Table 3-2 indicates the historic population growth in Benton County by decades.

**Table 3-2  
Historic Population Growth in Benton County**

Year	Benton County	% Change Benton County
1970	67,540	8.81%
1980	105,800	56.65%
1990	112,560	6.39%
2000	142,475	26.58%
2010	175,177	22.95%
<u>2020</u>	<u>206,873</u>	<u>18.1%</u>

Benton County's current population, based on the 2017-2024 OFM data, is 217,493,585. The unincorporated County population constitutes 35,370 persons, or approximately 16.3% of the total County population. Agriculture, food processing, health care, education, and research have all contributed to recent and substantial economic development in the County. At present, the agricultural ~~and~~ sector is experiencing significant-steady economic growth in the County, as the domestic and global market share for eastern Washington farm products continue to increase-expand (Washington State ESD June 2025). At the local level, the commercial retail sector within the Tri-Cities has reached a scale of regional significance with new retail stores being constructed regularly and serving an area within an approximate 100-mile circumference of the Tri-Cities. A few renewable energy projects have been developed in recent years, and several others have been proposed. Additional energy projects may be proposed in the future. Hanford Cleanup budgets continue to play a major role in supporting local economic and population growth, and this is expected to continue into the future.

The land use trend ~~on-at~~ the Hanford Site can be broadly described as ~~the~~ gradual reintegration of major portions of Hanford's resources (land, water, and infrastructure) into the economy, custom and culture, and regulatory authority of local jurisdictions ~~within which the Hanford Site lies~~. Today, the Hanford Site is being cleaned up for future uses that, in addition to federal missions, will likely include non-defense related private and public sector uses.

Recently In 2016, 1,641 acres of Hanford land was transferred from the U.S. Department of Energy to the City of Richland, the Port of Benton, and Energy Northwest for industrial uses. A solar renewable energy project has located on this land and additional future development is expected. The Hanford Reach National Monument, created by President Clinton in 1999, has also generated additional visitors and tourists to the site and the surrounding communities ~~for from~~ water-related and upland recreation activities.

### 3.2.3 Future Considerations

Accommodating land use needs ~~of for~~ both agricultural and non-agricultural uses, while maintaining the potential of all economic sectors, is important for Benton County. Key considerations for land use in the County are to preserve and protect agricultural and resource lands, allow rural lifestyle in rural lands, support ag-industrial and other industrial and associated commercial development in County opportunity areas, and allow growth where services are available, primarily in the urban areas. With the County situated at the confluence of three rivers and its mountainous and ridged geological characteristics, protection of the County's environmental resources is also an important aspect for future planning.

As the agriculture economy continues to grow in Benton County, properly locating sites and providing basic services for agriculture related industries, facilitating the growth of "agri-tourism" and "value-added" processing sectors will continue to be important. In addition to preserving rural lands, the County also needs to provide space for industrial and agri-industrial development that supports the local economy. While much of this activity is located in designated industrial areas such as Prosser, Plymouth, and Finley, many agriculture-related industries are found within the GMA Agriculture District. These uses are often tied to farming and food production but can be large in scale and function much like industrial development. Allowing flexibility in zoning to support these facilities near farms, while making sure they are compatible with surrounding uses, is an important planning goal.

A review of industrial-scale activity in the County shows that the need for industrial land depends on factors such as access to infrastructure, nearby land uses, and development trends. Some areas, like Finley and Prosser, have an adequate supply of industrial land, while other areas have more specific needs. For example, Plymouth has demand for additional industrial land to expand the existing industrial park and support agriculture and transportation. In other cases, such as Port- or federally owned lands in Plymouth or parcels north of Prosser, industrial zoning is less suitable due to nearby land uses, environmental conditions, or landowner preferences. Making adjustments to Adjusting the supply of industrial land will help balance the County's land base, ensuring there is enough land available to support agricultural processing and distribution, and associated industrial development, while also protecting rural character and environmental resources.

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### 3.3 Land Use Categories

As noted above, land use in Benton County is organized into designation categories: urban, rural, agriculture, industrial, public, and open space lands. Some of these designations also have sub-categories. Table 3-3 indicates the proposed land uses and distribution of lands within Benton County (see Appendix A: Map Folio, Figure 5 – Future/Proposed Land Use Designations Map).

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**Table 3-3  
Proposed Land Uses and Land Distribution in Benton County**

Land Use Type	Acres	Square Miles	Percent
Cities and Urban Growth Areas	72,245,059	111,113	6.586
Hanford Site	265,576,17	415	24.189
Hanford Reach	12,443,268	19	1.132
<b>Unincorporated Area</b>			
Growth Management Act Agriculture	649,153,062	1,014	59.12
Open Space Conservation	2,169	3	0.20
Public	15,563,74	24	1.42
Rural Transition	3,601,507	65	0.332
Rural Remote	66,402,770	104	6.085
Rural Resource	7,244,136	11	0.656
Rural Community Center	448,450	1	0.04
Rural Commercial	468,23	1	0.04
Rural Industrial	2,870,786	4	0.26
Total Unincorporated Area	747,7498,016	1,1698	
Total County Area	1,0987,860,043	1,7156	100

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Benton County implements its various land uses through zoning designations as shown in Table 3-4 below.

**Table 3-4  
Land Use Implementation by Zoning**

Land Use	Zoning
Urban	Urban Growth Area Residential
Hanford	Unclassified
Hanford Reach	Unclassified
Growth Management Act Agriculture	Growth Management Act Agriculture, <a href="#">Red Mountain Agriculture</a>
Open Space Conservation	Open Space Conservation
Public	Park District
Rural Transition	Rural Lands 1
Rural Remote	Rural Lands 5
Rural Resource	Rural Lands 20
Rural Community Center	Community Center Residential, Community Commercial
Rural Commercial	Interchange Commercial, General Commercial
Rural Industrial	Light Industrial, Heavy Industrial

Designations under each category are further discussed below.

### 3.3.1 Urban Lands

Urban lands are lands located within, adjacent to, or as in the case of existing unincorporated islands, surrounded by existing city limits.

A key component of the GMA and the Comprehensive Plan is to allow growth within the UGAs. These areas include cities and other areas characterized by urban growth or adjacent to such areas, and areas and are designed to accommodate the projected population growth for 20 years. The GMA further specifies that urban growth should first be located in areas that already have adequate existing public facilities and service capacity and second, be located in areas where such services if not already available, can be served adequately by a combination of both existing and future public and private sector facilities and services.

The CWPP establishes a process between the County and cities to manage development within the cities and their UGAs, and a process of annexation of UGAs into the cities.

#### 3.3.1.1 Urban Land Use Designation

Urban lands in Benton County include land within the city limits and the UGAs. There are five designated and approved urban growth areas (UGA's) in Benton County: Benton City (Appendix A-Figure 18), Kennewick (Appendix A-Figure 19), Prosser (Appendix A-Figure 20), Richland (Appendix A-Figure 21), and West Richland (Appendix A-Figure 22). The densities, uses, and development provisions allowed within this land use assure that development patterns are consistent with city comprehensive plans.

~~This page updated April 12, 2022 & May 14, 2024~~

### 3.3.2 Rural Lands and Element

The GMA requires counties to include a rural element in their comprehensive plans to permit appropriate land uses that are compatible with the rural character of such lands and provide for a variety of rural densities. This element has been incorporated as a part of the land use element of the County's plan.

Rural lands are those areas outside of UGAs, excluding agricultural, public, open space, and other specifically designated lands in this Comprehensive Plan. Land uses in rural areas include a variety of densities for rural, commercial, and industrial use consistent with the rural character. Rural areas are traditionally used for small-acreage farms, orchards, agricultural crops, livestock, mineral extraction and processing, and low-density residential development. The low intensity use of rural land also

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provides fish and wildlife habitat, open space, and other environmental benefits. Recreational uses which preserve open space and protect the natural environment are encouraged in rural lands. The County's goals and policies, through the rural element in this Comprehensive Plan and associated development regulations, aim to identify and guide land use designation of rural lands in a manner that preserves rural character.



Rural lands in Benton County, [along the Yakima River near Yakitat Road](#)

### 3.3.2.1 Rural Character

The rural areas of Benton County are places where open space, the natural environment, and vegetation dominate over the built environment. The rural area is a place where one can find wildlife habitats and a historic heritage characterized by low-intensity land uses that include [large and small farms](#), [scattered homesteads](#), and [smaller, higher density communities, residences along the rivers and hills with views and extensive areas of open space](#). Rural areas vary in Benton County and differ based on physical characteristics and community preferences based on their customs, culture, outlook, and living environments.

Rural character embodies a quality of life based upon traditional rural landscapes, activities, lifestyles, and aesthetic values. This includes more open landscapes where the setting is quiet, peaceful, and natural. The residents may enjoy a slower paced lifestyle, closeness with nature, and access to recreational opportunities, acknowledging that larger acreage areas may also require more time for maintenance and management of the land, animals, and other responsibilities often associated with a more rural lifestyle. Rural areas are typically separated from urban areas.

### 3.3.2.2 Rural Communities

Rural communities, such as Paterson, Plymouth, Whitstran, and Finley are designated as Rural Community Centers to reflect a localized pattern of residences on less than 5-acre lots and a variety of small-scale local commercial service areas such as: grocery stores, service stations, eateries, taverns, post offices, and auto repair, that serve the surrounding rural population. The Comprehensive Plan Rural Community Center designation reflects this pattern and equals 1 to 3 dwelling units per acre (Du/acre). Rural Community Centers are "limited areas of more intensive rural development" (LAMIRDs) authorized by RCW36.70A.070 (5)(d). The County's RL-1 "Rural Lands One Acre District" lands are not LAMIRDs but may developed at an intensity similar to a LAMIRD based on historical development patterns and plats approved prior to the GMA. The size of the Rural Community Centers in Paterson, Plymouth, and Finley are 36, 89, and 189 acres, respectively. Whitstran Rural Community Center contains 67 acres. [Paterson and Whitstran are almost completely built out per the current densities but could accommodate some ADUs while Finley and Plymouth have more undeveloped and underdeveloped parcels that could accommodate additional residential growth.](#)

Other areas that are considered the equivalent of limited areas of more intense rural development are pre-existing urban/suburban areas designated rural lands one acre (RL-1). These RL-1 areas are located throughout the County and are characterized by locations adjacent to major travel corridors (e.g., state routes); smaller parcel sizes relative to the GMA "rural" designation; cultures associated with "neighborhoods" or landowner associations; and densities that allow for infill that would not negatively impact adjacent rural or agriculturally designated lands.

### 3.3.2.3 Rural Land Use Designations

Rural lands designations are based upon a required "minimum" lot size. A larger than minimum lot size may be required, when necessary, to satisfy Washington State Department of Health requirements for water and domestic waste disposal and code requirements (e.g., setbacks, easements).

**Rural Transition** is designated to areas that are in close proximity to UGAs and have experienced steady growth in the last decade. The intent of the Rural Transition designation is to enable rural residential living in conjunction with providing a transition area between the rural and urban

environments. ~~These Rural Transition areas may be~~ potentially suitable for future inclusion into UGAs. Maximum allowable density in this land use category is 1 DU/acre.

There are currently six areas in the County designated as Rural Transition. One is surrounded by Richland urban areas on all sides near the Columbia Park Trail. All other Rural Transition areas abut Kennewick, Richland, and Prosser UGAs on at least one side or adjoin a higher intensity land use between a UGA and the Rural Transition land use. A significant portion of the future population growth within the County is anticipated to occur in these areas.

**Rural Remote** is the predominant rural land use in the County. This land is located mostly between the agricultural lands (GMA Agriculture), Rural Transition, and the UGAs. Rural Remote land use is intended to enhance and preserve the County's rural character, which includes rural open space, low densities, wildlife habitat, public open space for outdoor recreational activities, and rural home sites on which a limited range of agricultural activities may be conducted. Allowable density in Rural Remote land use is 1DU~~+~~/5acres.

**Rural Resource** is designated in areas where existing topography or geological conditions can be protected and where a very low density of residential or other uses may be allowed. It is designed to enhance and preserve Benton County's rural character, which includes rural open space, low densities, wildlife habitat, public open space for outdoor recreational activities; ridges, slopes, and bluffs; and rural home sites on which a range of agricultural activities may be conducted. Allowable density in Rural Resource 1DU/20acres.

**Rural Community Center** – see discussion ~~above~~ in Section 3.3.2.2.

**Master Planned Resorts** per RCW 36.70A.360, MPRs are developments with urban characteristics that may be located outside of UGAs. A MPR is a fully integrated, self-contained planned unit development in a setting of significant natural amenities, with its primary focus on destination resort facilities consisting of ~~short-term~~ **short-term** visitor accommodations and a range of developed on-site indoor and/or outdoor recreational facilities. Capital facilities, utilities, and services, including those related to sewer, water, security, fire suppression, and emergency medicine provided on-site shall be limited to meet the needs of the MPR.

The primary purpose of MPRs is to provide for carefully planned, self-contained, and integrated destination resort facilities and amenities that are centered upon unique and commanding natural resource settings. MPRs may be amended to the Comprehensive Plan as Sub Area Plans.

**Small-scale Recreation or Tourist (SSRT) Use** per RCW 36.70A.070 (5) (d) (ii) can be an intensification of recreation or tourist uses on existing lots, or new development of SSRT uses, including commercial facilities to serve those recreational or tourist activities that rely on a rural

location and setting, but that do not include new residential development and are not intended to principally serve the existing or projected rural population.

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Significant differences between the MPR and the SSRT uses are: scale, the MPR is perceived as a destination resort of potentially very large size whereas the SSRT is relatively small and concentrated; residents, the MPR can have them as a secondary use, but the SSRT cannot; municipal services, although MPRs can be outside of a UGA, at the developer's expense, a MPR can connect to city services, whereas the SSRT cannot.

**Rural Commercial** encompasses all commercial lands in Benton County. This includes general commercial uses and commercial areas primarily along Interstate 82 and within the Rural Community Centers discussed in 3.3.2.2. The purpose of this land use is to provide retail goods and services to regional trade areas, serve highway travelers, and provide convenience services to residents. Uses include motels, truck stops, service stations, convenience stores, restaurants, and fast food.

**Rural Industrial** includes both heavy and light industrial uses in the County. The primary purpose of this land use is to provide land for industrial and supporting uses that will not present unmanageable conflicts with other land uses, that have access to necessary utilities and public facilities, and that have less environmental constraints. Some of the heavy industrial uses function at the fundamental economic level: rail transport and facilities operations, chemical products manufacturing and shipment for agriculture, sand and gravel operations for construction, raw products processing, and waste products recycling. The County has reviewed industrial lands in the entire County as part of the 2026 update and identified additional industrial land designation opportunity areas, primarily in the Plymouth area along State Highway 14. Some existing industrial-designated lands could change to other designations.



Wind turbines and dryland wheat

### 3.3.2.4 Agricultural Lands

Agricultural land is defined as land primarily devoted to the commercial production of horticultural, viticultural, floricultural, dairy, apiary, vegetable, or animal products or of berries, grain, hay, straw, turf, seed, Christmas trees, finfish in upland hatcheries, or livestock, and that has long-term commercial significance for agricultural production (RCW 36.70A.030(2)). Long-term commercial significance includes the growing capacity, productivity, and soil composition of the land for long-term commercial production, in consideration with the land’s proximity to population areas, and the possibility of more intense uses of the land. GMA requires each county to designate appropriate agricultural lands that are not already characterized by urban growth and that have long-term significance for the commercial production of food or other agricultural products (RCW 36.70A.170(1)(a)). Table 3-5 summarizes agricultural lands in the County by dryland, irrigated and rangeland.

**Table 3-5  
Agricultural Lands by Land Type**

GMA Agriculture Land Type	Acres
Dry land	286,440,304,839
Irrigated	218,306,296,432
Rangeland	112,921,902,89

Source: [WSDA 2024](#), [AC Geo 2025](#), [BERK Consulting 2016](#)

Dryland agricultural activities primarily consist of dryland wheat production, principally in the Horse Heaven and Rattlesnake Hills. Dryland production has an economy of scale requiring large operations, typically in the thousands of acres.

Crops grown in Benton County includes "specialty" berries and orchard crops, mint, hops, and juice and wine grapes. Corporate acreages of asparagus, potatoes, wine grapes, and corn are grown in large operations under "circle" irrigation systems found throughout the County, but most notably on the south slope of the Horse Heaven Hills above the Columbia River. Significant acreages of hillside orchards are found in the Red Mountain/Badger Canyon and Kennewick/Finley areas.

Benton County designates agricultural land as GMA Agriculture based on primary factors below, as well as other factors discussed in Appendix L:

- Urban Growth. The land is not already characterized by urban growth.
- Production Capability. The land is used or capable of being used for agricultural production.

- Long-Term Commercial Significance. This is determined by classification of prime and unique farmland soils, availability of public facilities including roads used in transporting agricultural products, tax status, public service availability, proximity to UGAs, predominant parcel size, land use settlement patterns, intensity of nearby land uses, history of nearby land development permits, land values under alternative uses, and proximity to markets.



Irrigated agriculture in Benton County

### 3.3.2.5 Agricultural Land Use Designation

**GMA Agriculture (GMA AG)** includes agricultural land (such as dryland and irrigated land) identified by the County based on the criteria established by the GMA. A GMA Agricultural District zone conserves agricultural lands by establishing a 20-acre minimum parcel size and (with exceptions e.g., resort destinations, wineries) limits the range of other land uses to those which are dependent upon, supportive of, ancillary to, or compatible with, agricultural production as the principal land use. This land constitutes about 59 percent of the total land in Benton County as shown in Table 3-3.

The county-wide review and designation of these lands was updated in [this the 2018 Comprehensive Plan and updated via a supplemental analysis as part of the 2026 update](#), as described below ~~and in more detail in Appendix L~~. ~~A supplemental analysis was conducted county-wide of agricultural lands as part of the 2026 update, and some minor adjustments have been identified for consideration.~~

[As part of the 2018 Comprehensive Plan update, Benton County completed an updated county-wide review of agricultural resource land designations. This review was supplemented further with an additional review and addendum during the 2026 update.](#) WAC 365-190-050(3) states that "lands

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should be considered for designation as agricultural resource lands based on three factors: 1) specifically is not characterized by urban growth; 2) is used or is capable of being used for agricultural production; and 3) has long-term commercial significance for agriculture.

Per the first factor, the urban and UGAs mapped in the County were excluded from the agricultural resource lands analysis as by their definitions, as these are areas characterized by urban growth.

For the second factor, agricultural production capability was evaluated using the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) land-capability classification system. Eight soil classes were grouped into "suitable," "suitable with management," and "non-suitable" categories. Both "suitable" and "suitable with management" lands were considered capable of sustaining agricultural use. Non-suitable areas were generally excluded unless they formed part of a larger, contiguous agricultural operation—such as draws or canyons interspersed among productive fields.

For the third factor, long-term commercial significance was assessed using criteria consistent with WAC 365-190-050(3)(c) and refined to reflect local conditions. Considerations included:

Per factor two, agricultural land production capability (factor two) was evaluated based on physical and geographic characteristics of resource lands in Benton County, using the land-capability classification system of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service as defined in relevant Field Office Technical Guides consistent with WAC 365-190-050(3)(b)(ii).

The Natural Resources Conservation Service land-capability classification was applied to Benton County lands, splitting eight soil type classes into suitable, suitable with management, and non-suitable land for cultivation. Strictly applied, both the suitable and suitable with management lands have the potential for remaining as GMA Agriculture lands, while non-suitable areas would not. However, many non-suitable areas are often adjacent to or surrounded by suitable or suitable with management lands often in existing agricultural production. Adjusting the designation of some these non-suitable areas from GMA Agriculture—primarily draws and canyons—was determined not to be necessary at this time, but a change of designation could be possible in the future, as other considerations come into play. Additionally, many of the areas near the fringe of the current areas designated as agricultural land and nearer to population centers that may be classified as suitable or suitable with management may also have the possibility of more intense land uses in the long term. In some instances, these are also the more marginal lands, particularly when considering dryland production areas in concert with factor 3 considerations, i.e., lands of long-term commercial significance.

Finally, applying factor three, long-term commercial significance for agriculture was evaluated by applying several different considerations determined to be most applicable to Benton County

resource lands, and generally consistent with guidance provided in (WAC 365-190-050(3)(c), but also supplemented by information important to local conditions such as precipitation patterns. These considerations included:

- Water availability/precipitation
- Parcel size
- Nearby UGAs, settlement patterns, land use, land values, and development permits
- Land in the Conservation Reserve Program or conservation land
- Prime farmlands
- Pesticide restrictions
- Public facilities and proximity to markets
- Tax status

Each of these considerations was reviewed on a county-wide, comprehensive basis of both existing GMA Agriculture and other lands to determine their relevance or contribution to long-term commercial significance of agriculture. Through this evaluation, multiple areas in the County were considered for reclassification.

In general, it was deemed important to maintain continuity in agricultural resource land designation; unless there are sufficient reasons that ~~the agricultural~~ the agricultural resource land should be de-designated, land should remain as agricultural resource land to protect the resource. ~~Additionally, there are many areas that had potential to be removed from designation through some analysis considerations but not others. For example, there are several areas north of Prosser that have small parcel sizes but are currently designated as agricultural resource land. However, these areas are irrigated lands with suitable soils, so it would not be appropriate to remove them from the agricultural resource land designation.~~

The areas that were removed from agricultural resource land designation are areas south of Richland, Kennewick, and West Richland. These areas are near population centers, adjacent to growing areas, proximate to utilities and roads, have low precipitation without irrigation, are outside of AVAs, and follow the recent settlement pattern of the County. Some of these areas also have more restrictive pesticide regulations, making it more expensive to treat agricultural lands. Together these considerations threaten or have already reduced the viability for the long-term commercial significance of the land as agricultural land, which fits the considerations noted in *Lewis County v Western Washington Growth Management Hearings Board* (2006).

#### Lands

~~Areas that should be~~ added to agricultural resource land designation ~~included~~ are areas south of Finley, west of Benton City, and near Prosser. These areas are currently farmed, are irrigated and

often have permanent crops in place, are large parcels, exist outside of UGAs, and are near existing land that is already designated as agricultural resource land and other rural uses.

The 2018 update resulted in 6,051 acres added and 4,565 acres removed from the GMA Agriculture designation. Additionally, 7,130 acres of higher-density Rural Residential lands were re-designated to Rural Resource to preserve these lands for potential agricultural uses such as rangelands, vineyards, and orchards.

As part of the 2026 Periodic Update, Benton County completed an addendum to the 2018 analysis to evaluate further needs for addition or removal of parcels from the GMA Agriculture designation. The addendum applied the same WAC 365-190-050 criteria through a set of sequential screening steps using current parcel data, aerial imagery, and input from County staff and landowners. The screening criteria included proximity to other zones, soil capability class, farmland classification, overlap with critical areas, and surrounding urban growth and development pressure.

The review identified 16 parcels totaling 1,248 acres where re-designation was warranted due to reduced agricultural suitability and land use incompatibility from adjacency to existing industrial or rural residential development. Approximately 973 acres were recommended for re-designation to Rural Industrial, and 250 acres to Rural Remote. No further additions to the GMA Agricultural zone were identified, indicating that the 2018 analysis adequately captured all parcels suitable for long-term agricultural use. The proposed designation changes from GMA Agriculture to Rural Industrial are further supported by a countywide review of industrial lands completed as part of the 2026 Update. This review showed localized needs for additional industrial lands near Plymouth for value added processing, storage, and transport of agricultural products, all of which support agricultural viability in the surrounding region. The proposed changes from GMA Agriculture to Rural Remote remove parcels with limited agricultural suitability that are partially surrounded by more intensive growth, improving the consistency of land use boundaries and reflecting current growth patterns. Overall, these limited adjustments preserve the County's base of productive agricultural lands while improving alignment with recent development patterns and supporting localized industrial land needs.

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Agricultural lands above Lake Wallula (Columbia River)

Additionally, approximately 7,130 acres are proposed to be changed from higher density rural residential designations to a lower density Rural Resource designation. This change in designation will preserve these lands for rangeland uses and agricultural production opportunity areas, such as vineyards and orchards. This can be considered an innovative zoning technique that fits RCW 36.70A.177(1) as being designed to conserve agricultural lands and encourage the agricultural economy.

In addition to the re-designation of lands described above, the comprehensive agricultural lands analysis resulted in 6,051 acres to be added to the GMA Agriculture designation and 4,565 acres removed from the agricultural land designation.

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### 3.3.3 Industrial Lands

Outside of the Hanford Site, there are currently 3,342~~87~~ acres of industrially designated land within unincorporated Benton County. Though a broad range of industrial uses is appropriate for these lands, the principle current use is for agriculturally related industries such as chemicals processing and shipping, cold storage, and fruit and vegetable processing and shipping.



Industrial development in [Benton County Whitstran](#)

The Hanford Site has land suitable for industrial development, and the Hanford Comprehensive Land Use Plan (CLUP) includes areas zoned "Industrial" and "Industrial Exclusive."— A percentage of this land will be developed to federally "programmed" industrial uses, including the Hanford industrial land recently transferred to the City of Richland, the Port of Benton, and Energy Northwest, as noted previously. The City of Richland and Port plan to market the property to industrial developers as "mega-sites" of 200 acres or larger (Oneza & Associates 2017). The proximity of this land to highways, rail, and utility services together with the large acreages available provide development opportunities for industries that exist in very few places throughout the Pacific Northwest. As a result, 901 acres of Hanford land is in the process of being added to the Richland UGA. This and other industrial lands within the cities augment the County's supply of industrial designated lands.

Current industrial lands in unincorporated Benton County are located in the vicinities of Paterson and Plymouth, east and north of the City of Prosser on County Route 12, within the Community Center of Whitstran, and in the south Finley area.

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[Industrial development in Plymouth](#)

Development of industrial land requires careful consideration of environmental constraints and associated mitigation strategies, availability of infrastructure and utility services and their capacity; access to rail, roads, and navigable water; proximity to the market, supplies, labor pool and other considerations.

An inventory of industrial lands in Benton County and surrounding communities was conducted as part of the 2026 Periodic Update, as described below and in more detail in Appendix M. The inventory highlighted a significant supply of industrial-zoned lands across the region, with Richland, Pasco, and unincorporated Benton County hosting the largest concentrations. The assessment further refined industrial land supply estimates by segmenting industrial lands into categories based on their development status. Various future population and industrial sector growth projections were also reviewed, presenting a range of demand scenarios for industrial land. Supplementary data, including building permits, stormwater permits, and aerial imagery, was also incorporated to assess industrial development trends across the entire landscape. This highlighted the spatial patterns of industrial development on both agricultural and industrial-zoned lands. Industrial-scale storage and value-added processing of agricultural products —such as potato and onion sheds and fruit packing facilities— are often closely integrated with farming operations and occur in more dispersed, decentralized patterns.

Larger-scale industrial activities, including manufacturing plants, distribution centers, and warehouses, are more concentrated in industrial-zoned areas with utility infrastructure and transportation connections. These larger hubs play a critical role in supporting surrounding

agricultural activity by facilitating the storage, processing, and distribution of agricultural products to wider markets.

The criteria used to identify areas for potential industrial land use designations included local industrial buildout activity, proximity to transportation infrastructure, availability of utilities, and the presence of development constraints such as critical areas. Development trends in nearby areas outside the County, such as Pasco, Burbank, Umatilla and Morrow counties in Oregon, were also considered. The review also included collaborative discussions with Benton County planning staff, employees of Tri-County Development Council (TRIDEC), Benton Public Utility District (PUD), Benton Rural Electric Association (REA), and industrial property owners.

Additional industrial land use designations are proposed near Plymouth and Paterson based on the findings of the memo. Plymouth and Paterson have higher growth potential due to their proximity to agricultural production, access to highways, rail, and waterborne transportation networks, and available utility infrastructure. These areas support the viability of surrounding agricultural operations by providing storage, processing, and transportation of agricultural products. Supporting industries such as metals fabrication and logistics/storage facilities may also be potential fits for this area.

The future demand for industrial land is further shaped by the emergence of new industries, including renewable energy, data centers, and large-scale warehousing. These industries typically require large parcels with direct access to energy transmission infrastructure, and growth in these sectors may drive changes in the industrial land supply, creating additional demand for lands dedicated to these uses in the county's long-term planning.

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**Port Districts** are major players in the industrial land base of Benton County. The industrially zoned acreage is predominantly owned by the Benton and Kennewick port districts, which are taxing districts under Washington State Law. Port districts are authorized to purchase lands for marketing, development, lease, and eventual sale to commercial interests with the objective of improving the local economy. Port district holdings include lands in the rural areas of Paterson, Plymouth, and Finley, and in or adjacent to the cities of Richland, Kennewick, Prosser, and Benton City.

Typical port enterprises include the construction of industrial and office space for start-up businesses; the lease of land or buildings to commercial enterprises, which may in turn purchase the real property from the Port; and facilitating the assemblage of major industrial/commercial projects requiring collaboration by numerous interests such as utilities, local and regional governments, and private enterprise.

Descriptions of the County's industrial land resources can be found in Chapter 5 (Economic Element).

### 3.3.3.1 Industrial Land Use Designation

**Rural Industrial** is intended for a wide range of industrial land uses including light and heavy industrial uses. These lands require access and infrastructure for heavy industrial uses; rail and waterborne transportation access are critical. Other important criteria include separation of such land from residential and commercial uses and availability of large acreages for outside storage and maneuvering of trucks and rail equipment. Industrial lands play a key role in the local and regional economy by offering manufacturing and various other types of jobs.

### 3.3.4 Public Lands Designation

The Public Lands (PL) designation is found throughout the County, but ~~is most~~ generally concentrated along the Columbia River corridor. Designated PL designated lands are intended for public uses such as parks, playgrounds, greenways, open spaces, and wildlife habitats owned and operated by a local, state, or federal government. ~~Although There are~~ approximately 15,563 acres of land ~~are~~ currently designated PL in the Land Use Map. ~~Though not specifically designated as PL~~, there are about 93,299 acres of additional land in Benton County currently owned by public entities, including the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Natural Resources, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Publicly owned properties—particularly those managed by the Bureau of Land Management, Department of Natural Resources, or Benton County—often contain open space characteristics such as native shrubsteppe habitat, steep slopes, wetlands, or riparian corridors. In these cases, the Public Lands designation may serve as an appropriate mechanism to ensure long-term preservation of open space functions while accommodating compatible public uses such as recreation, education, and habitat management.

Designation of suitable public parcels as Public Lands rather than Open Space Conservation may simplify administration and reflect existing ownership and management intent, while still fulfilling the County's open space protection objectives under RCW 36.70A.160. In other cases, Open Space Conservation designations may be appropriate for privately owned lands or mixed-ownership areas where conservation easements, restoration programs, or voluntary stewardship actions are used required to protect open space functions without public acquisition.

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### 3.3.5 Open Space Conservation

Open Space Conservation lands are ~~recognized as~~ areas that have been recognized as having critical resources and ecosystems with unique characteristics that support significant habitats for migratory birds, fish, and wildlife; natural riverine functions and aquatic environments; botanical inventory; water quality and flood retention. Open Space Conservation designated areas provide significant natural functions and benefits to natural resources and the public and should be protected from destruction, conversion, and encroachment by incompatible uses. These areas may also provide

limited recreational and educational opportunities for the public. Open Space Conservation lands can be public or private property, and must be held under conservation easements with local, state, or federal agencies or land trusts. Open Space Conservation designations are voluntary in nature for property owners.

Under RCW 36.70A.160, Benton County is required to identify open space corridors within and between urban growth areas, including lands useful for recreation, wildlife habitat, trails, and the connection of critical areas. The 2026 periodic update included an expanded focus on open space corridors within and between urban growth areas. These corridors serve multiple purposes, including recreation and trails, wildlife habitat, and the connection of critical areas. Open space strategies are integrated with shrubsteppe protection efforts, and incorporate shrubsteppe habitat quality modeling to identify high-priority properties for protection and restoration. A GIS analysis was conducted to identify open space corridors within and between UGAs. The analysis incorporated data and guidance from parallel open space and habitat preservation efforts, including the Benton County Parks Plan, the Arid Lands Initiative (ALI), Priority Habitats and Species (PHS), the Washington Shrubsteppe Restoration and Resiliency Initiative (WSRRI), and the Washington Habitat Connectivity Action Plan (WAHCAP). The following datasets were used to identify open space corridors:

- **Habitat quality and connectivity:**
  - PHS habitats
  - Habitat cores and corridors (PHS, WSRRI, WAHCAP, and ALI datasets)
  - Shrubsteppe biodiversity potential modeling.
- **Critical Areas and Shorelines**
  - Wetlands
  - Streams
  - Floodplains
  - Shoreline environments
- **Infrastructure and access to multimodal transportation corridors**
  - County road and highway rights of way
  - Railroad rights of way
  - Canals
  - Trails

The analysis identified a network of primary open space corridors within and between UGAs and forming a broad network of interconnected open lands. Identified corridors include the Horse Heaven and Rattlesnake uplifts, the Yakima River valley, major ridgelines near Red, Badger, and Candy Mountains, Amon Creek and Elliott Lake within the Richland and Kennewick UGAs, and shrubsteppe areas extending south from Kennewick along SR 397. These corridors provide the primary linkages between large habitat cores, critical areas, and recreation destinations throughout

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the County. Many overlap existing public lands and shoreline areas, supporting combined functions of habitat connectivity, flood storage, groundwater recharge, and non-motorized access. These identified areas overlap significantly with existing protected lands, including BLM and DNR holdings, county parks, and other publicly owned open spaces.

Open space areas and corridors may occur on private or public lands, but the means of protection differ. Publicly owned lands managed by local, state, or federal agencies often already provide open space and habitat functions consistent with the intent of the Open Space Conservation designation. In such cases, the Public Lands (PL) designation may be equally appropriate to recognize and preserve open space values while reflecting the property's ownership and management intent. Application of the Public Lands designation to publicly owned parcels with significant habitat or recreation value—such as DNR, BLM, or County-managed properties— also supports long-term open space preservation. Together, the Open Space Conservation and Public Lands designations establish a complementary framework for protecting Benton County's network of natural and recreational lands.

Through the open space inventory and analysis, several parcels were identified for permanent protection to advance the County's long-term conservation goals. Three publicly owned parcels totaling approximately 457 acres were recommended for redesignation from Rural Remote to Open Space Conservation or Public Lands. These properties, managed by the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM), contain shrubsteppe habitat, scenic ridgelines, and other ecological features that align with the County's open space objectives.

Through the 2026 Update, the County plans to implemented an Open Space Taxation Program and Public Benefit Rating System (PBRs) and a Shrubsteppe Mitigation Program to further support countywide preservation of Open Space lands. These are provided in Appendix XX and YYY.

The Open Space Taxation Program is will be based on statewide authorization under RCW 84.34 to encourage the preservation of open space lands by allowing qualifying properties to be taxed based on their current use rather than full market value. The Benton County program includes a Public Benefit Rating System (PBRs) that assigns point values to open space resources such as shrubsteppe habitat, wetlands, floodplains, scenic ridgelines, and historic sites, and provides additional points for permanent protection through a conservation easement. Properties with higher scores receive greater tax reductions. High-priority resources—including WDFW biodiversity corridors and WSRRI shrubsteppe cores and linkages—may qualify for up to a 75 percent reduction in assessed value. This voluntary, incentive-based program enables private landowners to conserve important open space features while retaining ownership and compatible use of their land. Properties enrolled in the

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program that include permanent conservation easements may also be suitable for future Open Space Conservation designation.

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The Shrubsteppe Mitigation Program complements these efforts by establishing a County-supported mitigation bank and in-lieu-fee framework, administered in partnership with the Benton Conservation District. The Program provides a mechanism for developers or project proponents to offset unavoidable impacts to shrubsteppe habitat through restoration, enhancement, and long-term protection of priority sites. Mitigation credits are generated from the preservation of high-quality shrubsteppe and open space corridors identified using the County's shrubsteppe biodiversity potential model. Lands protected under this Program are permanently conserved through recorded easements and may also qualify for Open Space Conservation designation as part of the County's long-term open space network.

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### 3.3.6 Energy Overlay

Renewable energy development in Benton County has increased significantly in recent years, driven by increasing energy demands, federal tax credits, and the state's clean energy goals. Several large-scale energy projects have been reviewed through the state's Energy Facility Site Evaluation Council (EFSEC) process. EFSEC coordinates the review and permitting of major energy facilities on behalf of the state, issuing a Site Certification Agreement that replaces local permits. These projects have primarily been located in the County's GMA Agricultural District. Additional energy development has also occurred within the Hanford Site and industrial areas near Richland, which provide large tracts of land already designated for energy and industrial use. Other emerging energy technologies such as anaerobic digestors, small modular nuclear reactors, and battery energy storage systems may also factor into Benton County's energy landscape in the future. As energy development continues to grow, careful planning is needed to balance energy goals with the protection of agricultural lands, habitat and other critical areas, and rural character.

As part of the 2026 update, the County completed a supplemental analysis to evaluate a potential energy overlay zone. The purpose of creating an energy overlay zone is to identify areas that are suitable for renewable energy development based on the ability to avoid or mitigate environmental and agricultural impacts. The overlay zone ~~can also establish~~would also include clear siting criteria to guide project review, ensuring that each proposal is thoroughly evaluated on a site-specific basis and appropriately addresses potential impacts.

The energy overlay analysis is focused on the County's GMA Agriculture District, which has seen the majority of large-scale renewable energy development proposals. The GMA Agriculture district includes lands that have long-term significance for the commercial production of food or other agricultural products. These lands form the bulk of Benton County's agricultural land base and drive its agricultural economy, which generates over \$1 billion in annual agricultural product sales (USDA 2022).

A large portion of the agricultural lands considered in the energy overlay analysis also intersect with mapped priority habitats and species, including shrubsteppe and biodiversity corridors. These habitats often occur along the edges of cultivated fields or in less intensively farmed areas, presenting challenges for siting energy projects without impacting habitat or agriculture. The energy overlay analysis used a range of spatial data to identify areas with lower potential conflict for renewable energy development, focusing on the protection of agricultural lands, sensitive habitats, and other key land use constraints. The analysis inputs included:

- Agricultural lands mapped by the Washington State Department of Agriculture
- NRCS soil capability classes 1–4
- Soils designated as Prime Farmland, Farmland of Unique Importance, or Farmland of Statewide Importance

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- PHS Habitats
- Biodiversity areas and corridors
- Wetlands
- Geologically Hazardous Areas

Using the input data, three scenarios were developed to reflect different criteria for agricultural land protection. All scenarios considered NRCS soil classes 1–4 and WSDA-mapped agricultural lands as indicators of protection priority. Scenario 1 took a conservative approach by including all agricultural lands and all prime, unique, and statewide important soils as protected. Scenario 2 removed irrigated Prime Farmland if it was not currently irrigated. Scenario 3 was the most flexible, excluding unirrigated lands with lower soil productivity from the “protected” category. These scenarios were used to identify areas with larger extents of “lower conflict” agricultural lands that do not overlap with protected habitats and other critical areas. The energy overlay was applied to areas that contained an above-average extent of “lower conflict” agricultural lands and a below-average extent of habitat and other mapped critical areas. Lastly, secondary factors such as proximity to major transmission lines were used to refine the boundaries of the energy overlay area.

Within the energy overlay, two zones are proposed to guide potential energy development. Zone 1 is more restrictive and includes lands with soils in NRCS land capability classes 1–4 and irrigated agricultural lands. In Zone 1, energy development is prohibited except under specific exceptions, such as on rooftops, parking lots, or other disturbed sites existing prior to the adoption of the overlay.

Zone 2 consists of lands that do not meet the criteria of Zone 1, including unirrigated agricultural lands with soils in capability classes 5–8. In Zone 2, energy development may be conditionally permitted, subject to site-specific review, mitigation, and compliance with defined siting criteria. The exceptions and siting criteria can be refined based on renewable energy trends and changing technology to accommodate future energy growth while maintaining protection of agriculture and habitat.

The Energy Overlay integrates with Benton County’s broader strategies for protecting critical areas, preserving open space, planning for industrial lands, and conserving Agricultural Resource Lands (ARL). The overlay was developed in coordination with the identification of Open Space Corridors described in the County’s Open Space Corridors Memorandum, using a unified approach to inventory and protect sensitive habitats, key wildlife corridors, and other critical areas. Additionally, the Energy Overlay aligns with the County’s Shrubsteppe Mitigation Program, which provides a consistent mechanism to protect and restore the highest value shrubsteppe habitats in the County while offering a predictable path forward for development, including energy projects, with unavoidable impacts. The overlay methodology for protection of agricultural lands aligns with the criteria applied in the 2018 and 2026 countywide reviews of Agricultural Lands of Long-Term

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Commercial Significance, ensuring that renewable energy development avoids high-value irrigated and prime farmlands while directing growth toward areas with lower agricultural and environmental constraints. In addition, the overlay complements the Industrial Lands Analysis Memorandum, which identifies key infrastructure nodes and existing industrial corridors that benefit from and can accommodate energy generation, transmission, and storage uses. Together, these coordinated strategies balance renewable energy siting with long-term goals for agricultural viability, habitat conservation, and efficient land use.

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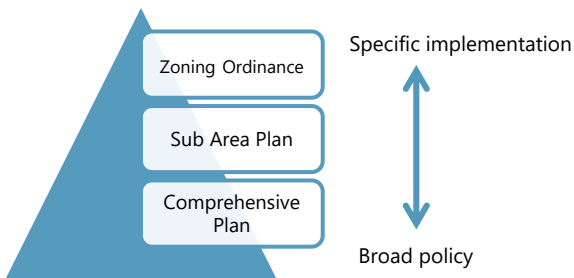
### 3.4 Sub Area Plans

The purpose of a sub area plan is to provide a framework for future decision-making for select and unique geographical areas within Benton County. These plans may regard areas with special features, such as shorelines that provide important functions and values or lands with exceptional soils and climate characteristics suitable for prime agricultural production, as valuable or unique for preservation, protection, or certain development. Sub area plans contain statements of guiding principles ~~to be followed~~, recommendations for strategies to achieve desired goals and objectives, and a plan of action to guide future land use development decisions in the area. Sub area plans are prepared with substantial public involvement.

#### 3.4.1 Hierarchy of a Sub Area Plan Document

The ~~A~~ sub area plan document fits between the broad policies of the Benton County Comprehensive Plan and the Benton County Zoning Ordinance with specific implementation tools as shown in Figure 3-1 below.

**Figure 3-1  
Sub Area Plan**



The following sub area plans are listed by their adopted title as found in the corresponding Benton County Planning Department Division files and are adopted by reference and incorporated as if fully set forth within.

Commented [GW76]: Division

### 3.4.2 Red Mountain American Viticultural Area Master Site Plan

The provisions of the Red Mountain AVA Master Site Plan (RM MSP; [Appendix G adopted by reference](#)) represent many hours of effort by the Red Mountain Alliance and interested citizens who live and work or have a vested interest in the development of the area described by the RM MSP. Red Mountain's topography, soils, and solar aspect have made it suitable for viticulture, an important economic resource for the region.

The purpose of the RM MSP is to provide a "viticultural park" concept that reinforces the existing and future qualities of the Red Mountain AVA. The RM MSP and its provisions are advisory in nature and intended to guide future development of the Red Mountain site plan area.

#### 3.4.2.1 How the Plan Is Organized

The RM MSP is divided into seven chapters that reflect the fundamental components of this Sub Area Plan. The chapters are as follows:

1. Introduction
2. Master Site Plan Elements
3. Visitor Projections
4. Design Guidelines
5. Steps toward Sustainability
6. Zoning
7. Next Steps

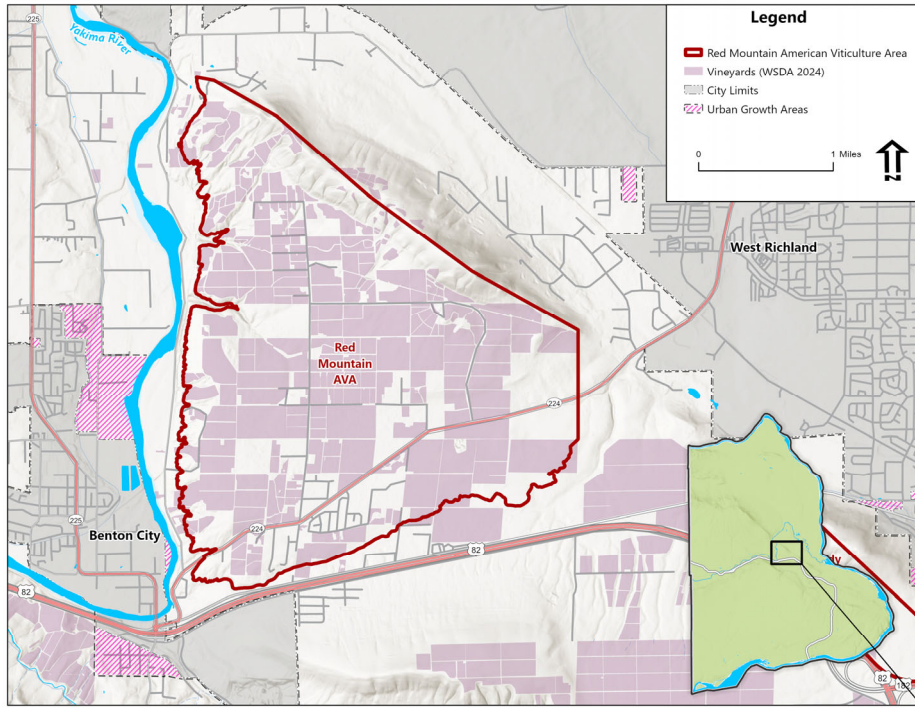
Each chapter refers to items and issues related to that category only. Endnotes and references are provided in Chapter 8, and an appendix follows.

The Red Mountain AVA Master Site Plan Map (RM MSP Map Figure [4-142-1](#)) shows the boundaries of the RM MSP, the Red Mountain AVA boundary, existing vineyards and wineries, potential vineyards and wineries, existing roads, and other proposed infrastructure. [The boundary of the Red Mountain AVA and existing vineyards are shown in Figure 3.2 below.](#)

#### **Figure 3-2** **Red Mountain AVA Map**

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### 3.4.2.2 Land Use Designations

The land use designation in the current Comprehensive Plan shows the [RM MSP](#) area designated as GMA Agriculture, with the land bordering south of State Route 225 and land adjacent to the east side of Demoss Road designated for Rural Remote. Land characteristics include suitable soils, farmable topography, un-platted acreages of significant size, and existing or potential availability of water, suitable slope exposure, and the absence of existing land uses that are known to be incompatible with agricultural operations.

### 3.4.2.3 Proposed Uses

#### 3.4.2.3.1 Red Mountain GMA Agricultural District

The area is planned to conserve and protect agricultural lands of long-term commercial significance as required by the GMA (RCW 36.70A) and more particularly to protect the unique agricultural character and attributes of these lands on Red Mountain. This area is within the federally designated Red Mountain Viticulture Wine Appellation. Vineyards and wineries are the predominant uses within this area. [The Red Mtn zoning district was created and implemented in December of 2018](#)

#### 3.4.2.3.2 *The Wine Village*

Red Mountain's "Wine Village" will provide an interpretive center with welcoming, educational, recreation, and support functions. The Wine Village is designed to both welcome and introduce visitors to Red Mountain and prepare them for what they will see, experience, and enjoy, as well as offering other tourist-related support services. Allowed uses within the Wine Village include a visitor interpretive center, small restaurants, bistros, casual food shops, art studios and galleries, wine retail, antique shops, demonstration vineyards, wineries, gardens, and small lodging facilities. Under current planning law, these uses will most likely occur via an MPR designation.

#### 3.4.2.3.3 *Tourist Serving Area*

In the southeast corner of the Red Mountain AVA, outside the AVA boundary and within the Rural Lands Five designation, the RM MSP identifies an important future entry way into the Red Mountain AVA area. A coordinated site-specific planning effort in this area is needed to provide a development plan that allows for a limited range of short-term "visitor serving" activities, recreational, commercial, and wine related conveniences for tourists and visitors to the vineyards and wineries of the Red Mountain AVA.

### 3.5 Countywide Planning Policies

Benton County and the five cities within it have jointly adopted a set of CWPPs (Appendix [EX](#)), which form the framework for the preparation, implementation, and amendment of [their individual](#) comprehensive plans. [The CWPPs in a manner that](#) provides for integration and consistency among the County and city plans in terms of services, designations, and other elements as applicable.

[Included within](#) the CWPPs [include are](#) a uniform methodology to calculate the amounts of additional land needed by each city to accommodate the population growth projections provided by the OFM. Other CWPPs establish standards for selecting additional lands to be included within the UGAs and for joint county and city planning on lands within UGAs.

### 3.6 Expansion of Urban Growth Areas

[There are two](#) aspects are important for UGA expansion: [1\)](#) meeting the required need for future land in urban areas and [2\)](#) maintaining low density land outside the UGA to enable logical and cost-effective expansion.

[Currently, the County is updating the UGA boundary in two areas as follows:](#)

- [1. City of Richland UGA expansion. As discussed before, 1,641 acres of Hanford land was transferred from the U.S. Department of Energy to the City of Richland, the Port of Benton, and Energy Northwest. As a result, the City has applied for an UGA expansion to add 1,184 acres of](#)

Hanford land to its UGA and remove 283 acres from the Richland UGA (for a net increase of 901 acres). This request has been incorporated into the County's Comprehensive Plan update.

2. ~~City of Prosser UGA amendment. Based on the City of Prosser's OFM population projection and land needed to accommodate this population, a reduction of 483.96 acres of UGA land and an addition of 100.44 acres of industrial land (for a net reduction of 383.52 acres) has been applied for and is incorporated into this Comprehensive Plan update.~~

Within the Comprehensive Plan, four principal factors apply to future connections between cities and the County relative to the build-out of and expansion of UGAs. These include the availability of vacant lands in the municipalities; urban densities within the cities and UGAs; appropriate sizing of UGAs compared to future population growth; and consideration of site planning that preserves rural lands outside of UGAs for future expansion.

For the 2026 update, only one community, the City of Benton City, is considering a UGA change but the County has not yet received the proposed change. Guidance has been provided to Benton City on what is required as part of a UGA change proposal.

### 3.6.1 *Total Vacant Land Within Benton County's Metropolitan Planning Area*

The cities of West Richland, Richland, and Kennewick are contiguous. Some ~~of the~~ cities already have annexed unincorporated lands that are adequate to meet future demand. For instance, the City of Richland ~~had placed a~~ significant amount of land within its UGA under the Urban Reserve land use category. West Richland also has extensive reserve lands within its city limits. Each City assesses their own land use demand based on vacant land and developable land to identify future needs before any UGA expansion is proposed.

The adoption of the County's Comprehensive Plan, and the adoption of each of the cities' plans, require that the expansion of urbanization, with its conversion of rural lands to urban uses, be an orderly, cost-efficient process, based on population projections and protection of rural neighborhoods and natural resource lands. The UGA process is intended to, and has, influenced a reduction of urban sprawl, increased annexation of unincorporated islands with the cities, and achieved greater cost effectiveness for development within UGAs.

### 3.6.2 *Urban Densities within Cities and Their Urban Growth Areas*

In response to market demands, the development of urban densities within UGAs is essential if the UGA is to function as a tool to achieve cost effective provision of urban services, and to protect agricultural lands and the rural community outside of the UGAs. To achieve this, densities within the UGAs should be high enough and encourage infill of existing UGAs.

**Commented [BF77]:** Update later in year, if Benton City submits UGA proposal

**Commented [GW78]:** City of Richland is also going to be submitting an application. Will know by Dec 1 which cities have applied

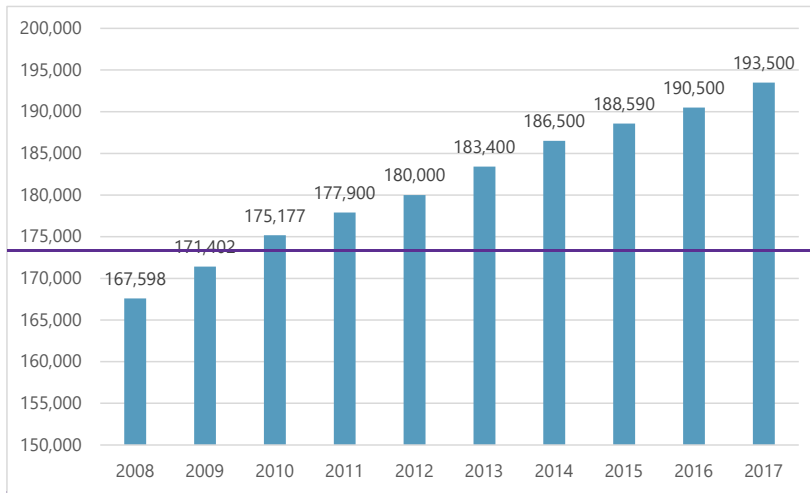
### 3.6.3 Objective Criteria for Determining When and How to Expand Urban Growth Areas

The CWPPs sets forth uniform criteria and methodology for calculating the amounts of land necessary in a UGA to accommodate projected population growth. The policies reflect methodologies identified in current planning literature (as well as recent GMA Regional Hearings Board decisions) for identifying the appropriate size of UGAs relative to population projections. Other CWPPs direct how locations of new UGAs are to be selected to avoid rural communities and agricultural lands. [Additionally, the Washington State Department of Commerce also provides guidance on UGA change proposals.](#)

## 3.7 Population Projections for Benton County

[From 2014 to 2024, the population growth in Benton County from 2011-2014 to 2024](#) grew at a rate from 186,500 to 217,850 for a total increase of 16.8 percent. The 20-year projection (through 2046) for the total and unincorporated part of the County and each of the cities is provided in Figure 3-2, reflective of the slow growth in the nation's economy, the improved national economy of 2017 has provided a rebound in growth reminiscent of the growth in 2009. Figure 3-2 reflects the population trend in the last 10 years in Benton County.

**Figure 3-3**  
**Ten-Year Population Growth through 2046 in Benton County**



Jurisdiction	2020 Population	2046 Population	Population Growth (2020-2046)
Benton City	3,479	4,985	1,506
Kennewick	83,921	108,989	25,068
Prosser	6,062	8,292	2,230
Richland	60,560	82,448	21,888
West Richland	16,295	26,387	10,092
Unincorporated	36,556	47,355	10,799
<b>Total</b>	<b>206,873</b>	<b>278,456</b>	<b>71,583</b>

Source: BERK, 2025 based on Commerce HAPT.

The latest population projections from OFM (2022), using the "high/middle" series estimates, indicate that Benton County can expect a population increase of ~~86,609~~71,583 over the next 20 years by 2046. This will result in a ~~year 2037~~20-year population of ~~278,804~~56,109, which is an increase of ~~45-34.6~~ percent over the ~~current 2020~~ population of ~~206,873~~193,500. The County will review the future growth trends and adjust population projections if necessary.

Approximately 18 percent of the total County population, or ~~36,556~~35,085 people (OFM 2017), reside in the unincorporated area of Benton County. The 20-year OFM projection also indicates the unincorporated County population will grow to ~~53,220~~47,355 persons in ~~2037~~2046. This will add ~~10,799~~8,135 additional people in the next 20 years who are projected to seek housing in unincorporated areas of the County ~~between now and the year 2037~~2046. This growth represents a ~~52~~ approximately a 30 percent increase over the current rural population. Growth projections effects on housing projections are provided in the Housing Element, Section 6. Table 3-6 indicates the population estimates in Benton County and the unincorporated areas of the County.

Table 3-6  
Population Estimates in Benton County

Year	Population in Unincorporated Benton County	Population in All Benton County
2017	35,085	193,500
2037 Projection	53,220	280,109

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20-Year increase	18,135	86,609
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Source: Washington State Office of Financial Management and U.S. Census Bureau

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### 3.8 New Housing Units Needed for Projected Rural Population Growth

At an estimated 2.7 residents per household, the increased population in unincorporated Benton County would require approximately 6,716 new homes in the next 20 years. This growth will be accommodated mostly in the Urban lands of the UGAs, Rural Transition areas, and Rural Remote areas. Some growth will also take place in the Rural Community Centers and Rural Resource areas.

Commented [BF79]: This information is now included in Housing element

There are currently 78,952 acres designated for the rural residential uses within the four rural land use designations of Benton County (outside of Hanford and the agricultural areas):

A land capacity analysis on vacant and existing units in the Rural Transition land (1 du/acre) and Rural Remote land (1 du/5 acre) indicates adequate land supply to accommodate future housing demand. However, additional growth is also anticipated to occur in the Rural Community Centers and Urban areas. Table 3-7 indicates potential allocation of future population in these two land use categories:

**Table 3-7—  
Potential Allocation of Future Population Per Land Use Category**

Land Use	New Units
Urban	134
Rural Transition	1,142
Rural Remote	5,652
Rural Community Centers	34
<b>Total</b>	<b>6,961</b>

Notes:

1. Does not include UGAs
2. Lot size is determined by minimum lot size requirements; i.e., how many units are allowed per given acreage.

### 3.9 NatuIntroduction

This Chapter describes the physical and biological setting of the County. Critical resources within the County are identified, including their "functions and values," and the current trends associated with regulatory protections for those resources. This Chapter also presents Benton County's approach for the protection of critical resources.