



2025 LOCAL FOOD Initiative



King County



Environmental Sustainability

(Access the full report)



Environmental Sustainability

goal: Protect and restore ecosystems and natural resources, and strengthen climate resilience to support a healthy, sustainable food system for future generations

A healthy environment is the foundation for all food production and life itself. To ensure that future generations have enough to eat, we must protect and restore our ecosystem, use natural resources responsibly, and strengthen our resilience to climate change. Today, we have the opportunity to continue protecting and restoring the natural resources that sustain us—soil, water, air, and biodiversity—by building on existing efforts to reduce food waste, prevent pollution, and support regenerative farming practices.

Looking ahead, we can strengthen and scale these efforts to build a truly sustainable food system by expanding regenerative and climate-smart production, cutting greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel use, and safeguarding biodiversity. Many of these practices have long been used by Native and Indigenous communities, who have cared for ecosystems for generations. Honoring, uplifting, and learning from their legacy of stewardship is critical to building a food system that is both sustainable and just.

According to the 2022 USDA Census of Agriculture, 48 King County farms are USDA certified organic production farms, up from 27 farms in 2017.

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Greenhouse microgreens

Environmental Sustainability goals continued

USDA certified organic production farms use farming practices that improve water quality, conserve energy, increase biodiversity, and contribute to soil health. At the same time, many other farms in the region use sustainable or regenerative practices without pursuing certification. It is important to recognize and support these growers as well, and to help all farmers continue adopting sustainable and regenerative approaches.

Food waste remains a pressing challenge. The 2022 King County Waste Characterization and Customer Survey Report showed that edible food waste is the most prevalent disposed material in King County, accounting for 8.3%, or 71,403 tons of the total annual waste stream, and non-edible fruits and vegetables accounted for an additional 4%, or 34,899 tons, of the total annual waste stream.

Environmental sustainability emerged as a key priority for building a resilient food system. Community and stakeholder input emphasized the importance of expanding resources for climate-resilient production and distribution practices, preventing and reducing food waste.

From a wide range of food system goals, survey responses showed strong support for environmental sustainability: 16% prioritized conservation practices to protect soil and water, 11% prioritized reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to climate change, and 8% prioritized reducing food waste and related solid waste.

The environmental sustainability goal focuses on protecting and restoring ecosystems and natural resources while strengthening climate resilience to ensure a healthy and sustainable food system for future generations. The goal's objectives are to increase use of regenerative, sustainable, and climate-smart food production practices; strengthen regional efforts to protect ecosystems and increase biodiversity; advance circular practices and reduce waste across the food system; and reduce greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel use across the system.

Regenerative and climate-smart farming works with natural systems to keep agriculture strong, protect the environment, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by storing more carbon in soil and plants. King County has recognized the importance of these practices by supporting the shift to regenerative farming on county-owned land and naming it as a key strategy in the recently adopted Strategic Climate Action Plan.

Environmental Sustainability actions



= Top 10 priority actions

Goal: Protect and restore ecosystems and natural resources, and strengthen climate resilience to support a healthy, sustainable food system for future generations

Objective 1: Increased use of regenerative, sustainable, and climate-smart food production practices

- 1.1 Coordinate research and provide technical assistance and education on climate smart and regenerative practices for farmers, agencies, and policymakers by creating climate-smart agricultural specialist positions at partner organizations.
- 1.2 Help farmers and landowners reduce their environmental impact by providing technical assistance, financial support, and incentives to:
 - develop farm conservation plans and resource management strategies that include best management practices and technologies for sustainable production, such as climate adaptation, soil health, water efficiency, and biodiversity;
 - adopt practices that reduce chemical inputs—such as pesticides, herbicides, and plastic mulch; and
 - improve irrigation efficiency and use efficient water technologies like water recycling, rainwater collection, water storage, and lagoon conversion.
- 1.3 Increase farmer awareness about safe and effective growing and soil management practices in areas affected by soil contaminants—such as lead and arsenic—to protect crop quality, human health, and long-term soil productivity through technical assistance, including the creation of a guidance document.
-  1.4 Increase adoption of climate-smart and regenerative practices, with a focus on small and historically underserved farmers, through funding, training, and coordination with partners, demonstration projects, and peer-to-peer assistance.
- 1.5 Create a climate-resilience resource hub for producers with guidance, funding, case studies, and research.
- 1.6 Conduct and update assessments on climate risks to different crops and livestock, and support applied research on climate-adapted varieties to guide future investments.

Objective 2: Strengthened regional-scale food system practices that protect ecosystems and increase biodiversity

- 1.2 Increase the number of farmers that adopt biodiversity-enhancing practices such as native hedgerows, flowering field borders, and riparian buffers by expanding technical assistance and financial incentives, including payment for ecosystem services programs.
- 2.2 Increase water access for agricultural production—including temporary water rights transfers, water leasing arrangements, and multi-objective projects that provide irrigation while minimizing impacts to farmland—by building regional partnerships with state agencies, utilities, conservation districts, and others.
- 2.3 Expand recycled water use in areas such as Sammamish and Green River Agricultural Production Districts.

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*Environmental Sustainability actions continued***Objective 3: Strengthened circular practices and waste reduction across the food system**

- 3.1 Reduce food loss and waste on-farm and throughout the production system through education, technical assistance, infrastructure support, and incentives, including programs like the Washington Commodity Donation Program.
- 3.2 Prevent wasted food in commercial and institutional settings (including farmers markets) through education and technical assistance, including the use of discounting, dynamic pricing, and market incentives for unsold produce.
- 3.3 Coordinate with the Washington Department of Ecology to reduce food waste through:
- education and technical support for businesses, institutions, and residents, including tracking and assessing sources of food waste;
 - technical and financial support for schools, including share tables, donation protocols, menu planning input, and ensuring adequate time to eat;
 - consumer education on low-waste cooking, meal planning, food storage, and food safety;
 - contribution to and promotion of Ecology's Food Rescue Map to connect food donors, relief groups, and distributors; and
 - support for the development of standardized processes, infrastructure, and best practices for food handling and distribution, providing training and tools to boost safe, efficient food donations.
- 3.4  **Improve the efficiency and scale of food recovery by increasing funding for logistics and operations, piloting innovative distribution models, and strengthening coordination between businesses, institutions, and food recovery organizations.**
- 3.5 Expand the production of value-added products made from B-grade/seconds and recovered foods, including the establishment of a pilot project fund or incubator program that supports costs of necessary ingredients, labor, and kitchen access.
- 3.6 Increase diversion of food waste from landfills and compliance with new statewide food waste laws by:
- creating a multilingual, culturally relevant countywide public education campaign, including grants for in-language, hands-on outreach; and
 - supporting cities in their transition to municipal composting by providing organic diversion starter kits and transition technical support.
- 3.7 Create compost use and application education and pilot projects, including training and materials for farmers, landscapers, and gardeners.
- 3.8 Reduce contamination in compost feedstock by:
- providing technical assistance to producers, processors, waste management service providers, and municipalities to reduce contamination in their food waste stream; and
 - creating improved public education and outreach on sorting organics and enforcement of contamination standards.

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*Environmental Sustainability actions continued***Objective 3: Strengthened circular practices and waste reduction across the food system**

- 3.9 Support King County's annual Organic Summit to improve policy alignment, education and outreach, enforcement strategies, and infrastructure investments.
- 3.10 Reduce the use of single-use plastic products and packaging on farms and in-farm product delivery through outreach, incentives, and pilot projects to transition to alternatives and more sustainable practices such the use of reusable and compostable products.

Objective 4: Reduced greenhouse gas emissions and fossil fuel use across the food system

- 4.1  Accelerate the adoption of cleaner technology across the food system by investing in public-private partnerships that pilot and scale low-carbon, energy-efficient solutions through funding, incentives, technical assistance, and outreach, including:
- on-farm: replacing fuel-powered equipment with solar and renewable systems;
 - aggregators, distributors, retailers, and hunger relief organizations: using efficient cold storage and renewable-powered refrigeration;
 - food storage and processing: retrofitting facilities with efficient, renewable technologies
- 4.2 Expand regional aggregation hubs and shared delivery systems with low-emission vehicles, efficient routing, and reduced redundant trips.
- 4.3 Increase consumer awareness of and access to sustainable diets that use fewer resources and produce less pollution through education, labeling, and price incentives.

*Kale at Horseneck Farm*