

**Economic Vitality Committee**  
**Meeting Highlights**  
**April 8, 2026**

**Commissioners Present:**

Lach Litwer, Chair  
Steve Hochman  
Laura Brennan Bissell (absent)  
Pah-tu Pitt (absent)

**Staff Present:**

Krystyna Wolniakowski  
Bryce Guske  
Connie Acker  
Sage Ebel  
Mackenzie Aamodt

After roll call, the December 6, 2025, and March 6, 2026, Economic Vitality meeting summaries were approved by a voice vote.

**Discussion of the Economic Vitality Plan**

Andrew Danies, Deputy Director at MCEDD, briefly described the 5-year Economic Vitality Plan. This Plan is updated every five years by MCEDD, the Gorge Commission, the Forest Service, OIB, and WIB, and then submitted to both the Oregon and Washington legislatures. The previous update was completed in 2021 by the Bi-State Advisory Committee, and the next one is due at the end of 2026. This is the foundational document for economic development priorities in the National Scenic Area, and the update will serve as a wish list/road map for the next phase of planning for economic vitality.

Chair Litwer asked Andrew where the Gorge Commission can do more to support economic vitality, reduce pain points, and address areas or communities that may be differentially affected economically. Can we bump them up in the priority list? Andrew answered that the main goal of the document is to balance the conservation and economic development purposes of the National Scenic Area Act. Chair Litwer asked for a follow-up discussion with MCEDD about opportunities and economic barriers, and to review the Economic Vitality Plan. Krystyna mentioned that after two 5-year revisions at the staff level, it will be helpful to engage the Economic Vitality Committee of the Commission. She also mentioned that it will be helpful to present this to the legislatures during the 2027 session, given that they will also be considering the Commission budget request then.

**Public Comment**

Mary Repar commented that affordability for the working class and service industry in the Gorge is difficult due to the cost of living and a lack of housing. The economy affects everyone - for people who work in the Gorge at minimum wage and for those making higher salaries.

### **Progress on Vital Signs for Agriculture**

Krystyna noted that the Commission is exploring the details of agriculture in the Gorge in more depth through VSI and trying to identify existing conditions and current uses of agricultural lands. Are the Commission's policies and guidelines in the Management Plan adequate to protect agriculture? Staff are reviewing current agricultural policies in the Management Plan and identifying the information needed as the Commission enters the Management Plan review (in 2027).

Sage presented an overview of the Vital Sign Indicators (VSI) program which is meant to assist the Commission in determining if we are doing what we need to do to implement the Management Plan regarding the protection of agriculture.

The goal of VSI is to understand existing conditions and gather data to help staff understand the agricultural context in the NSA. Mackenzie provided an overview of land use designations. She noted that soil conditions were also considered on a regional basis for the agricultural designations. About 25% of the eastern NSA consists of grasslands conducive to grazing. The central NSA is dominated by oaks and is more suitable for crops, while the western part is mostly forested. Minimum parcel sizes take into account agricultural land use – larger parcels, such as 160 acres, are mostly for grazing, whereas smaller parcels were designated for agriculture to support high-value crops.

Sage discussed the need to evaluate current conditions – is agricultural land being used for agriculture or other purposes? If yes, how can we further support it? If not, what are the barriers? Staff would like to compare conditions inside the NSA with those outside the NSA. Census data on agriculture can help identify the types of agriculture and productivity, as well as the total amount of land in farms – both Wasco and Klickitat have the most land in agriculture in the NSA.

The attached PowerPoint describes the details of Sage's presentation.

Chair Litwer asked about the small-agriculture-designated parcels that are next to large-agriculture-designated parcels. Mackenzie said that on small-scale ag parcels, landowners have the ability to build a home, even though they are still encouraged to farm it.

Krystyna followed up that large-scale ag parcels are used for grazing and other agricultural purposes, and the LUDs are designed to keep them in ag.

Once a home is approved on a large-scale ag parcel to support the agriculture on the property, it needs to meet the farm income test. But if it is built and the owner no longer wants to do ag, it is retired and not available to be productive ag lands. The ag income test is a tool that has been used to keep agricultural land intact as a working landscape. The question that has been asked is whether the same test should be used across the entire NSA despite different parcel sizes, crops, and agricultural potential and uses?

Krystyna clarified that the large-scale ag parcels are used for grazing and that it takes that much land to sustain ag use. Staff want to make sure the ag income test is the right tool to preserve farms for farming. We need to collect the data and then identify the policies needed to continue protecting ag.

More analysis of agricultural data is needed, and staff will work on information to help determine whether revisions are needed to the Management Plan, especially regarding the agricultural income test.

Chair Litwer mentioned interventions - measures of performance and measures of affect, with keeping the land in ag use as the big picture. What tools do we have to do this? One tool is the ag income test, but we do not know how it has been used. Is it the right tool to achieve the outcome we want? He also stated that we should ask ourselves whether there are layers of economic activity that would allow small-scale ag without conflicting with the preservation of the larger ag parcels?

Chair Litwer and Commissioner Hochman made several comments supporting and encouraging the approach of evaluating a Management Plan's intent, determining whether that intent is still valid, and then using data to determine whether the intent has been achieved.

Bryce mentioned that we do receive inquiries about building homes on large-scale ag, but no one has applied for a permit because of the ag income test. Sage pointed out that protecting agriculture also protects the ecological values of the habitats on these lands.

### **Public Comment**

Mary Repar commented that land conservation is an option to protect agriculture. She noted that there are inventories of agricultural lands. She asked whether we have lost ag lands over time and whether there has been habitat fragmentation. She mentioned that the 2007 VSI may also have included agricultural indicators that should be reviewed. She also mentioned that the Commission should use a geology overlay for the NSA.

Krystyna responded that the Commission has not changed any land use designations since 1986, so the same ag parcels exist, but they may not all

be used for active agriculture. She encouraged Commissioners to ask questions about how the data relates to the Management Plan as a framework. Staff will focus on a few key questions to guide our work. Krystyna asked Sage about the difference in ag lands between 2017 and 2022 in Wasco County. Sage will follow up to determine whether it is within the NSA or outside it. Truly understanding agricultural trends in the NSA is challenging.

### **Next Steps for Accessory Dwelling Units in the NSA**

Krystyna provided an overview of ADUs and summarized past discussions on their benefits and concerns in the NSA. Krystyna asked whether the committee had any additional questions to determine whether this topic should be forwarded to the full Commission meeting. Chair Litwer noted that there was not a quorum present to make recommendations. Commissioner Hochman asked for more background on why ADUs were not considered in the last Management Plan review. Krystyna explained that ADUs did not gain traction during the last review because of the large number of higher-priority topics. However, with critical housing issues in the NSA and throughout both states, the topic of ADUs is timely.

Chair Litwer asked whether the Commission wants to study this to determine whether to pursue it and whether conditions have changed since 2020 – do we need a committee to look at this? Both Governors are asking for more housing, so what can the Commission do to address the housing shortage?

### **Public Comment**

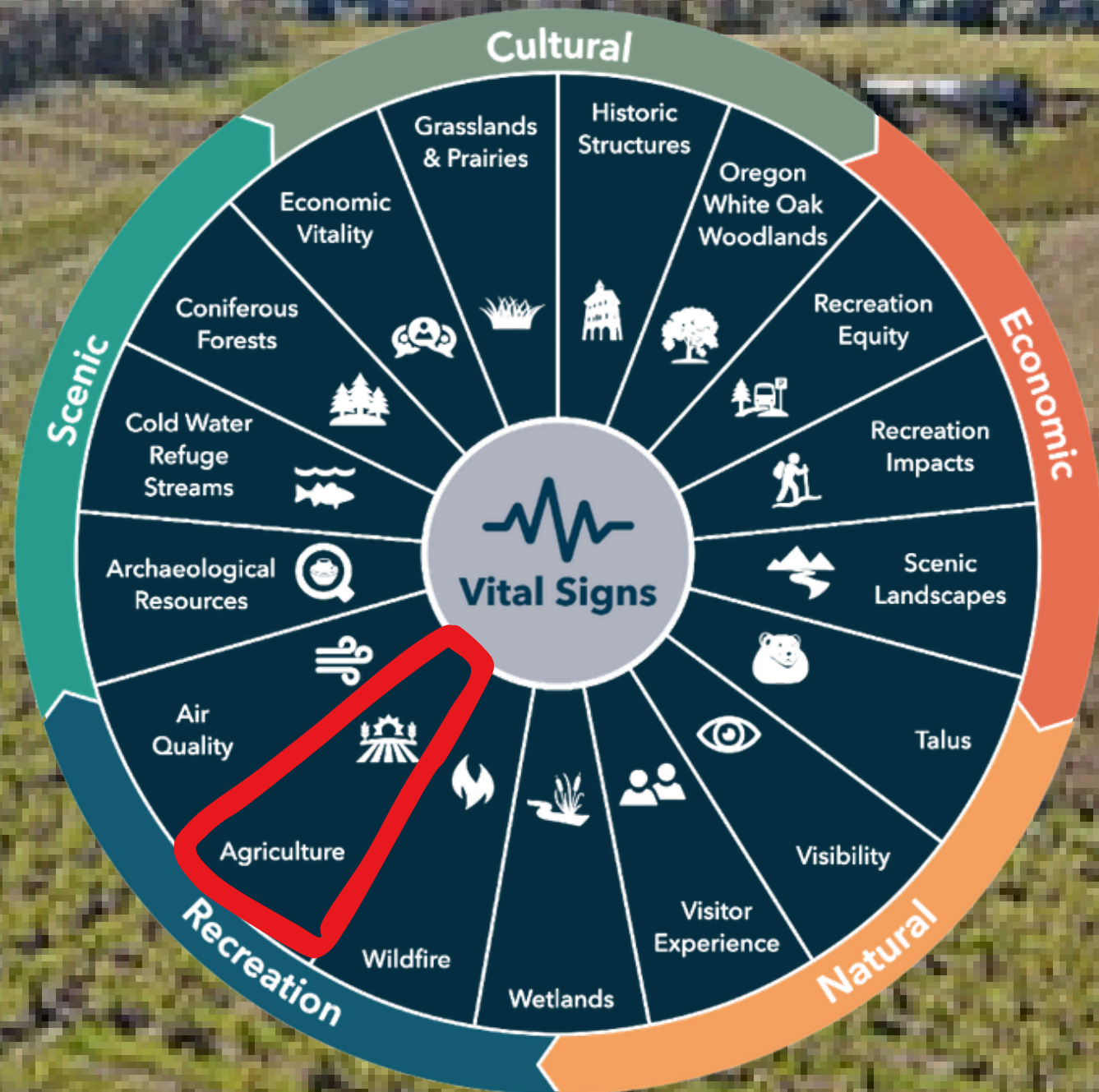
Lynn Burditt mentioned that the land use designations also included Special Management Areas and General Management Areas. There are differences between these two, and it is important to understand them. Miscommunications about these differences frustrate some landowners. SMAs are the lands that receive additional protections due to the resources present.

Mary Repar talked about ADUs and mentioned WA HB 1345. She expressed concerns that ADUs have been used for short-term rentals. She stated that policies are needed to help make homes more affordable. There are many questions about ADUs, and she opposes using them for short-term rentals.

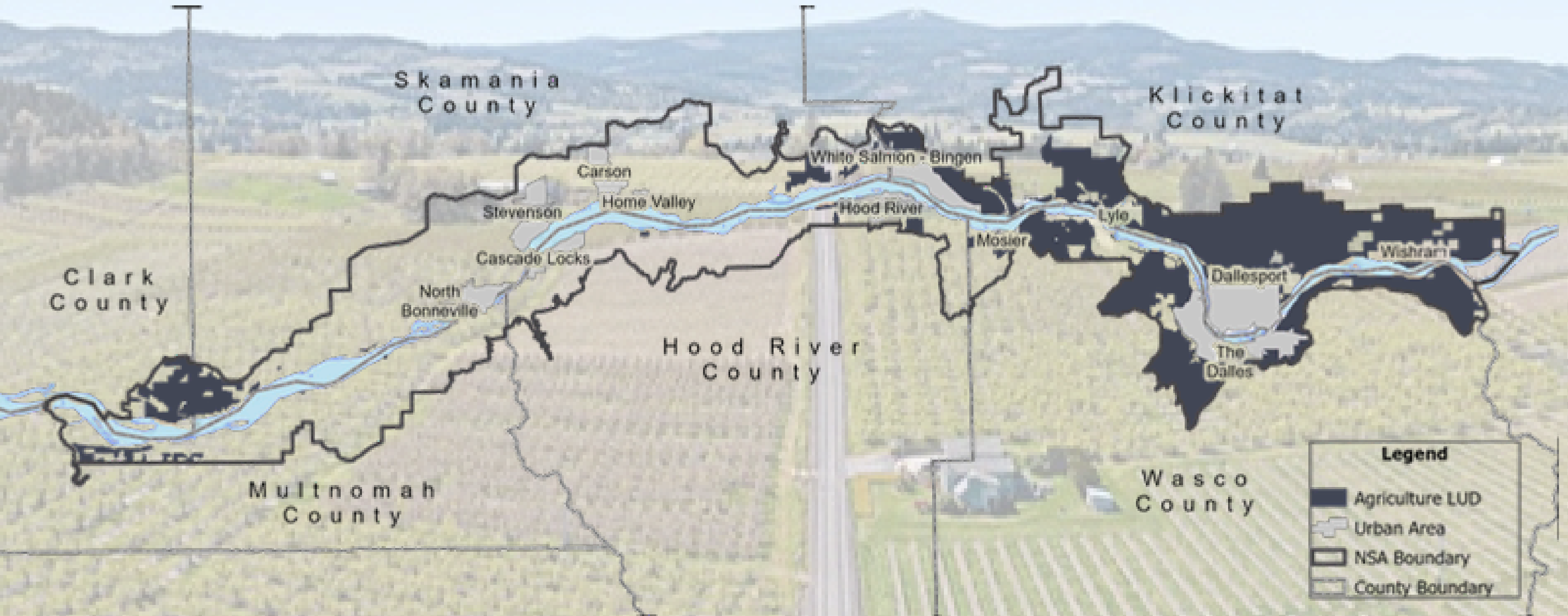
### **Next Steps:**

- ✓ Chair Litwer will work with staff to outline the path forward with ADUs and materials needed to bring this topic to the Commission.
- ✓ Sage and Mackenzie will continue working on characterizing and quantifying agriculture in the NSA.

# Agriculture in the National Scenic Area

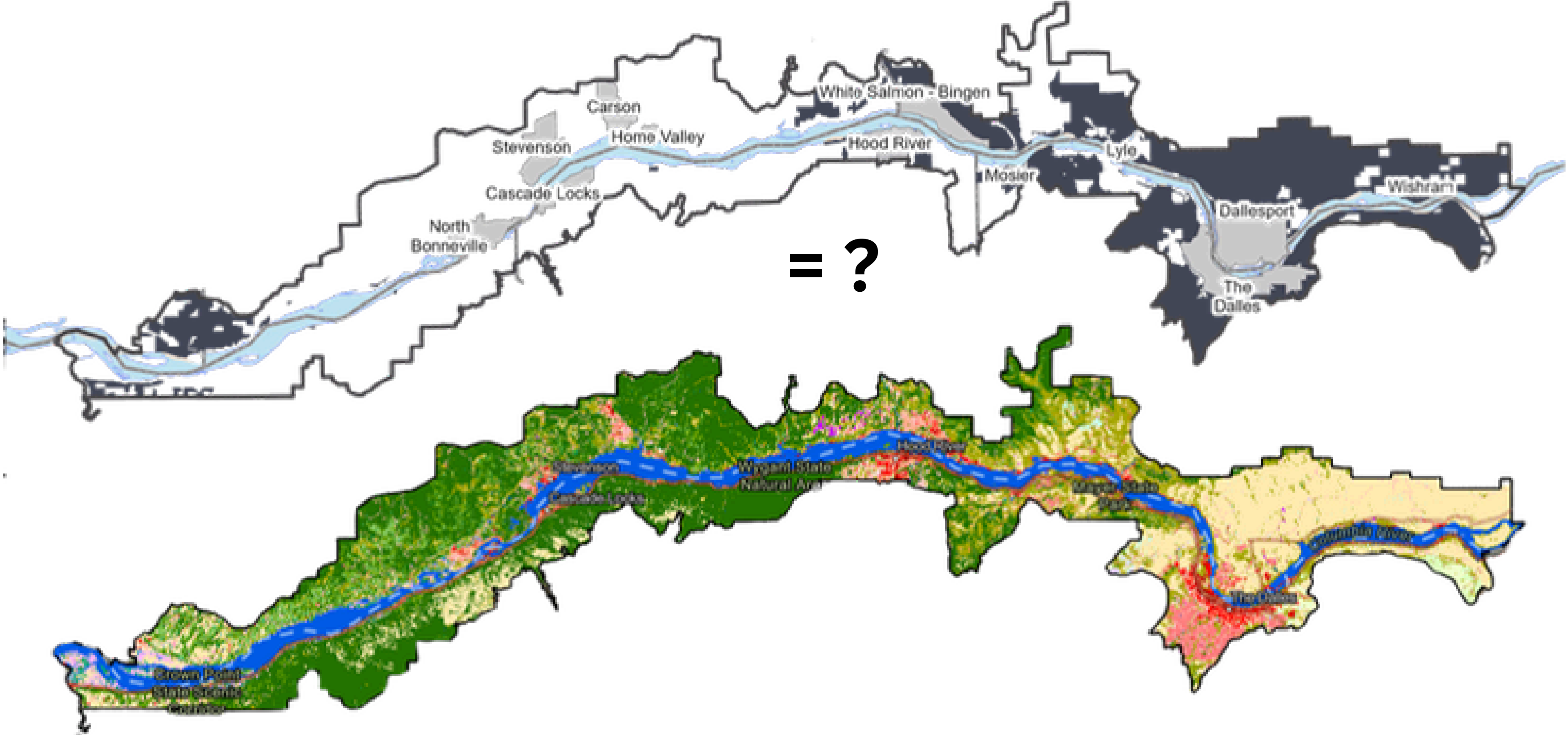


# Agriculture in the National Scenic Area



**33% of Land is Designated for Agriculture in the NSA**





**Does the management plan and our management of the landscape match the current and desired conditions?**

# Agricultural Protections in the Management Plan:

- Existing Ag land prior to the NSA remained Ag LUDs
- Lands classified as predominantly Class I and Class IV soils
- Landscape Settings in MP protect and enhance areas of agriculture:
  - ~25% are Grasslands: exposed and rocky hillsides for grazing
  - Oak-Pine Woodlands & Pastoral: dry, volcanic soil for crops
  - Coniferous Woodlands: wetter conditions for productive silviculture
- Assigns minimum parcel sizes to prevent fragmentation
  - Promotes efficient Ag management
  - Prevents valuable Ag land from conversion to other LUDs
- Lands adjacent to suitable Ag land were designated as Ag LUDs

# Step 1: Evaluate Current Conditions



**Is agricultural land being used for agriculture?**



**YES**



How can we support agricultural economy, workers etc?



**NO**



Why?

# Step 1: Evaluate Current Conditions

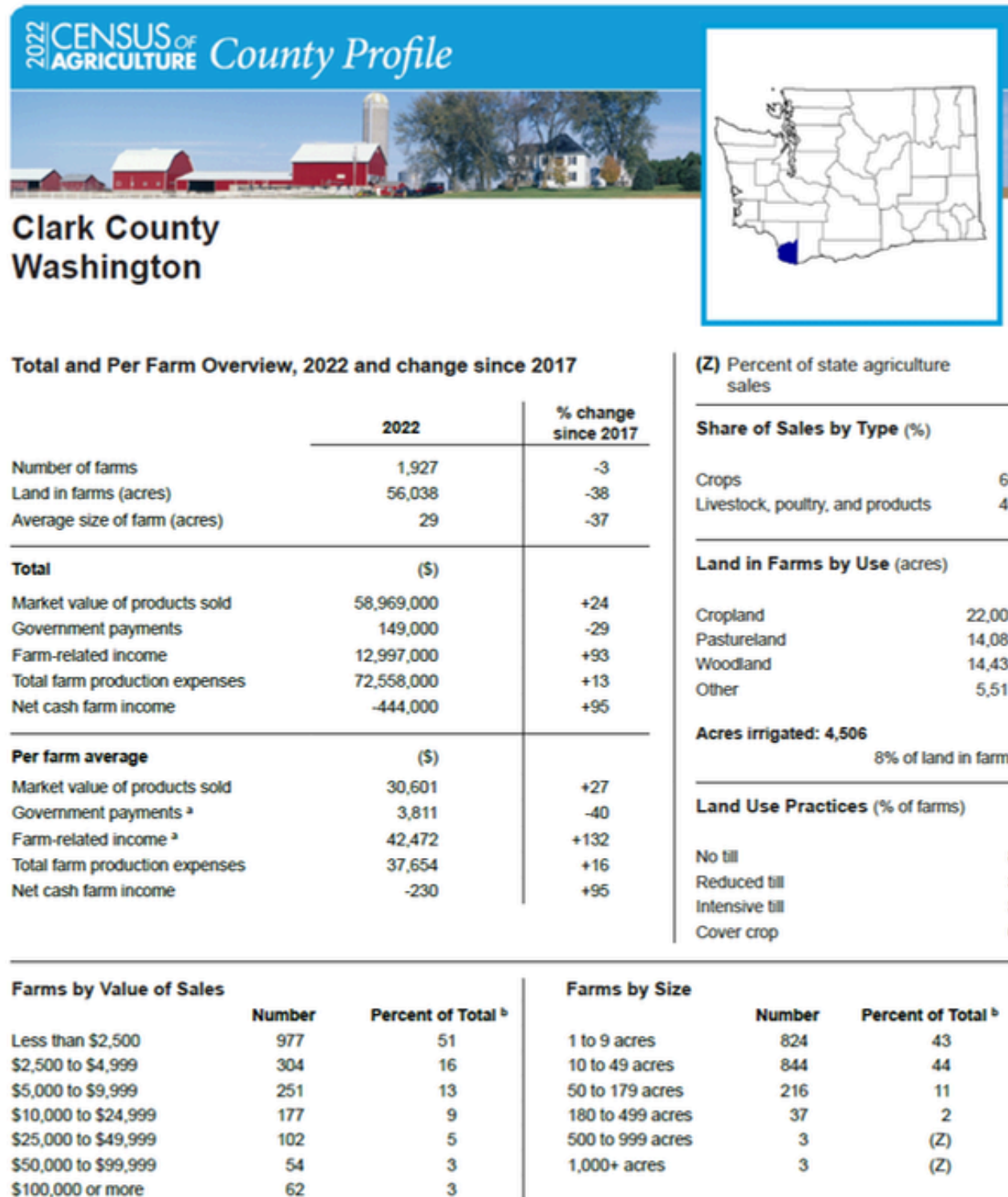
Guiding Questions: where is ag land, how is it being used, what is the economic impact?

Approach: Evaluate available data; compare conditions inside the NSA to the counties (and beyond?)

a. Census of Agriculture - Establish a county wide understand of agriculture production & economy over the last 10 years (+)

a. Cropland Data - Clipped to the NSA to understand how crop production inside the boundary may differ from outside

# Census of Agriculture County Profiles



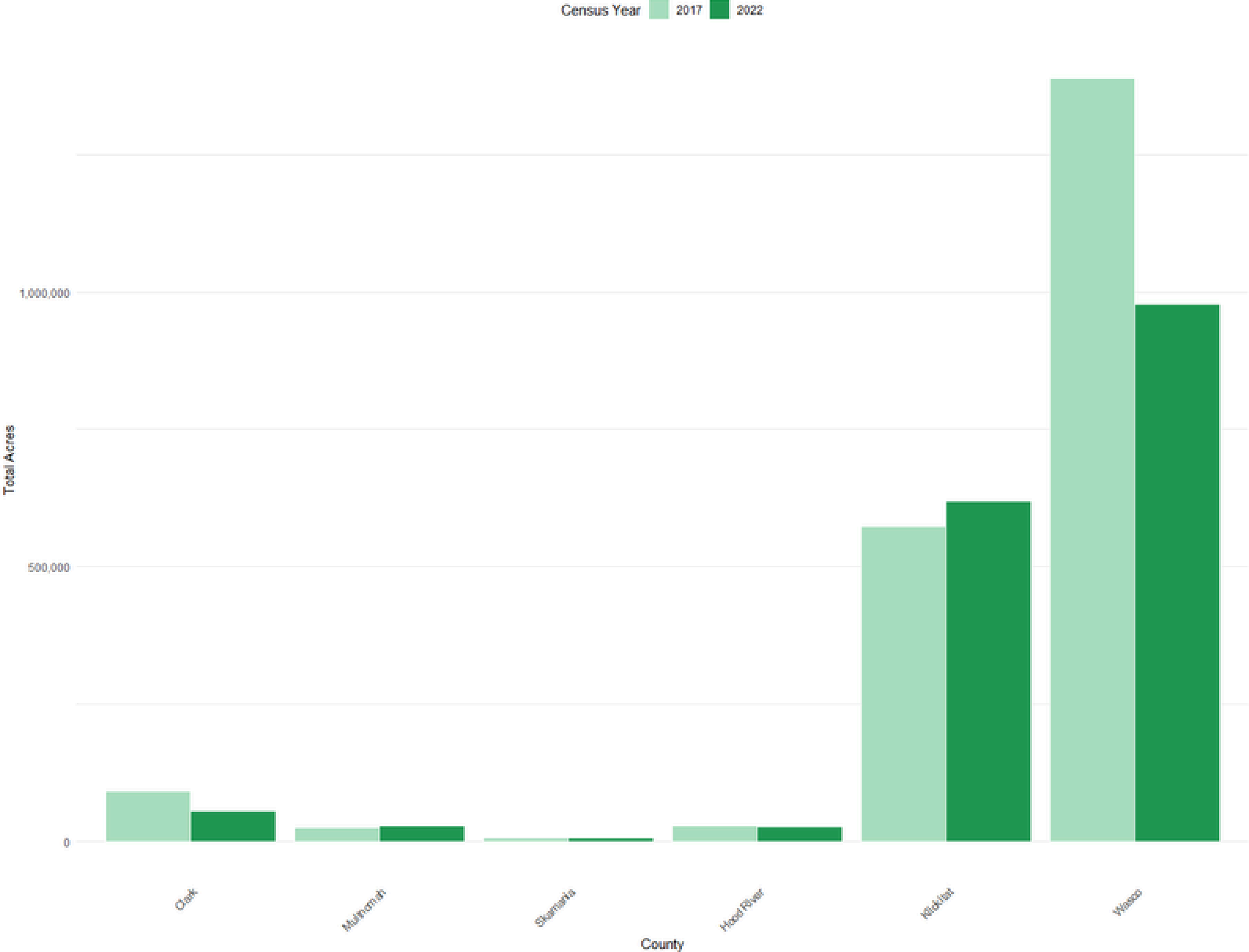
Data Provider: National Agriculture Statistics Service

Description: County wide summary of census data collected voluntarily from agricultural providers.

Limitations for our Analysis: County wide trends may differ from NSA level data, Survey Based, Only every 5 years (2012, 2017, 2022)

Total Land in Farms: 2017 vs. 2022  
Comparison of total acreage across census years

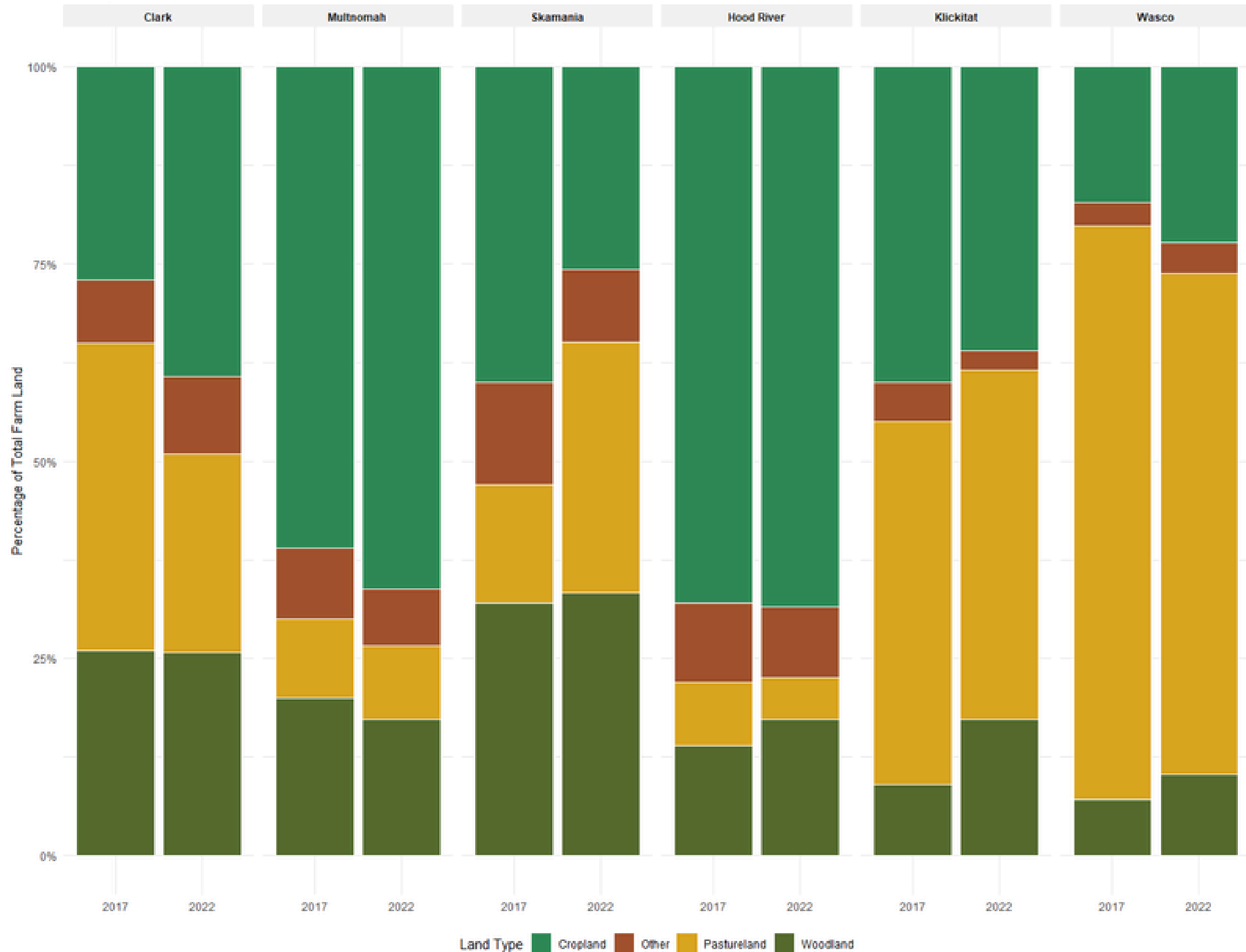
Census Year 2017 2022



Wasco and Klickitat counties have the most land being used for agriculture

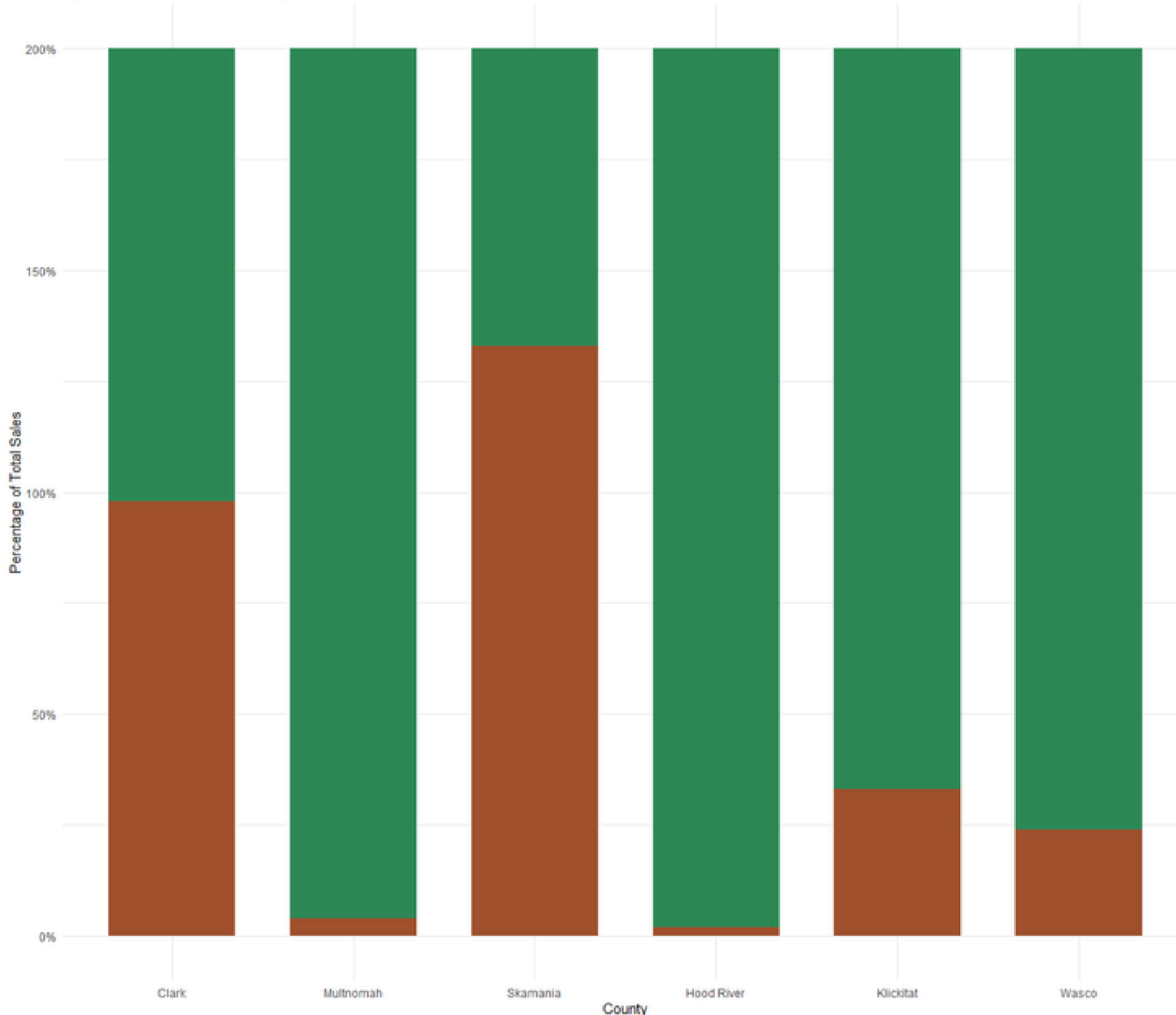
(not clipped to NSA)

**Agricultural Land Use Share**  
Self Reported Distribution of Land Uses within Farms



Multnomah and Hood River Counties have most of their land in crop production. Wasco has most land in pastures. Other counties have a more even split.

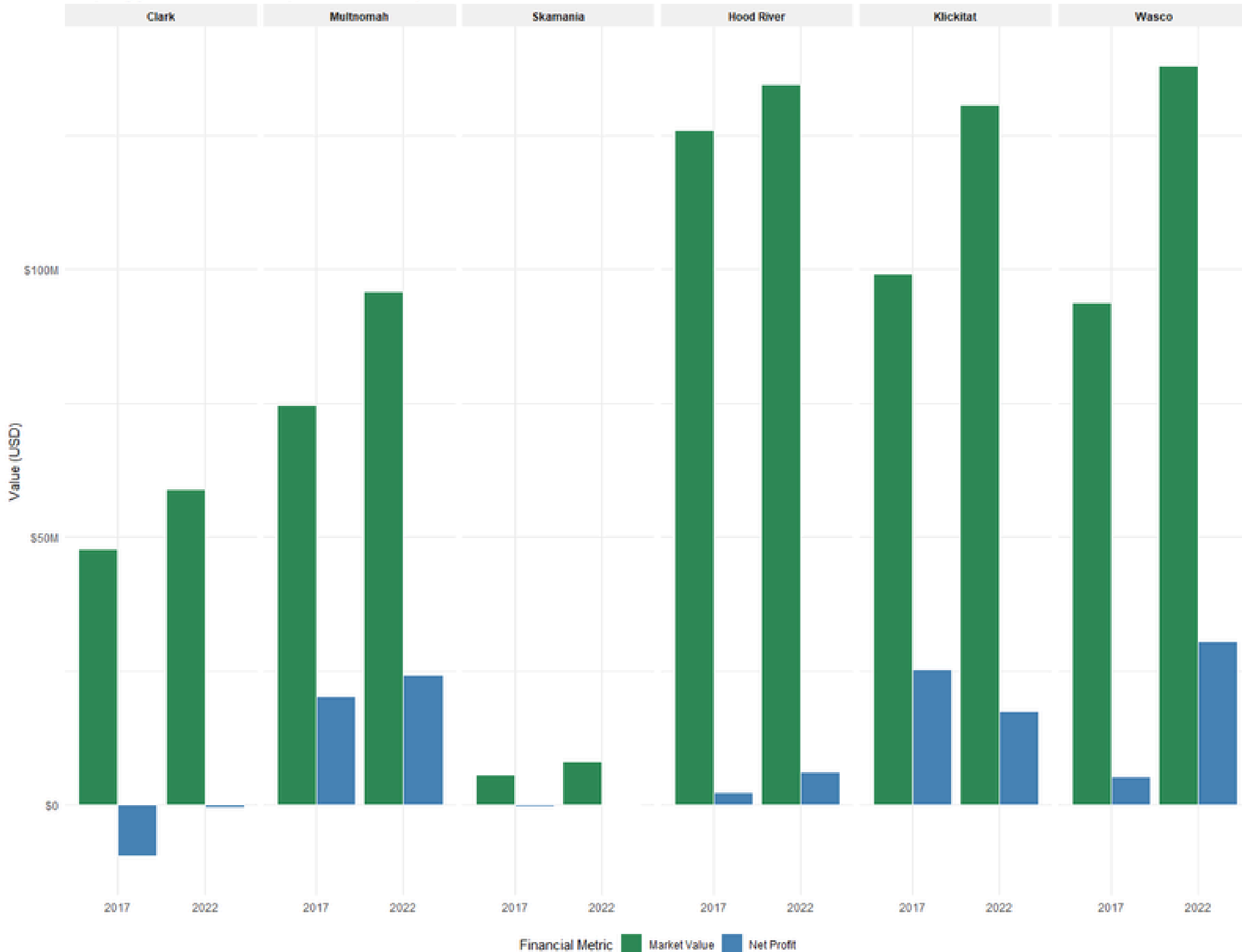
Agricultural Share of Sales by County



Crops comprise the majority of sales in all counties besides Skamania.

Despite most land being in pasture, most agricultural sales in Wasco & Klickitat come from crops.

Market Value vs. Net Farm Income by County  
Comparing gross sales to actual net profit across census years

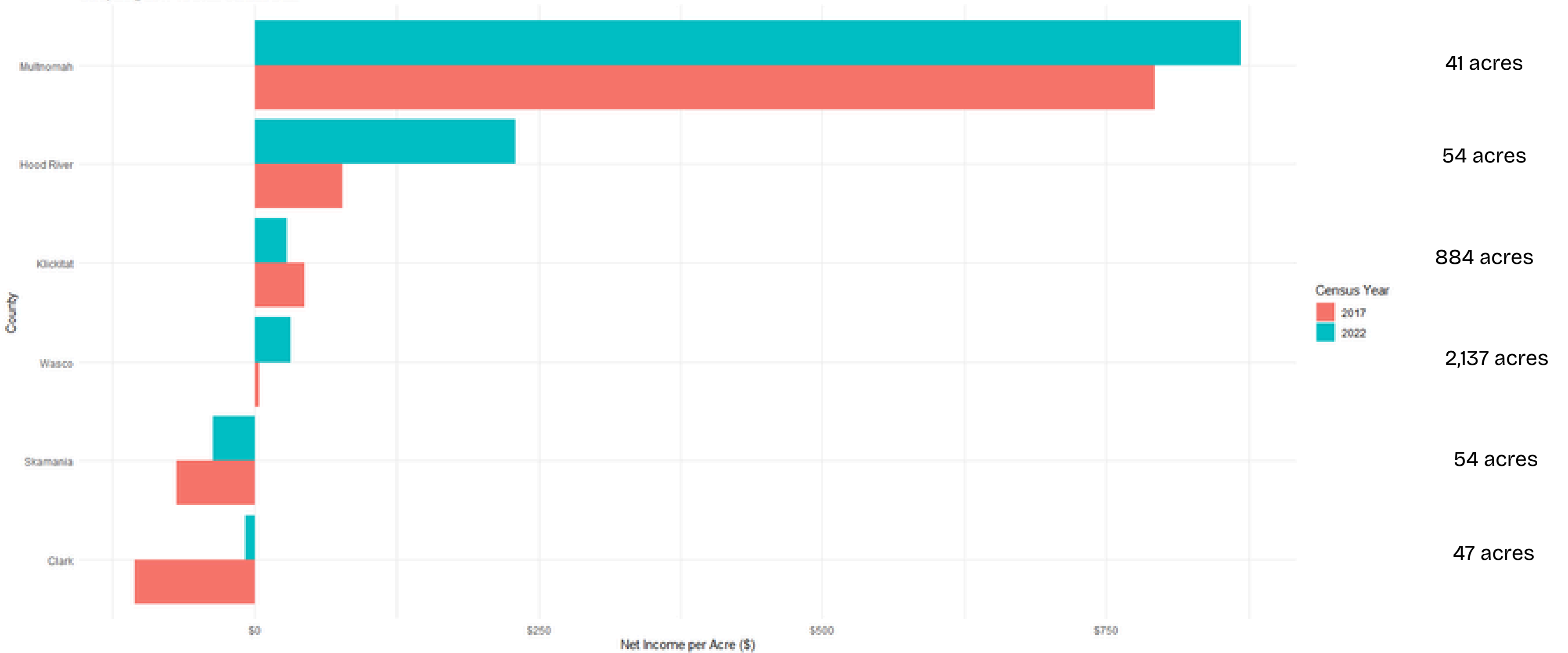


Increases in market value of products over the last 10 years is not reflected in net farm income in Klickitat.

Clark & Skamania county net farm income is negative or 0\$.

Net Farm Income per Acre (Normalized)  
Comparing 2017 vs 2022 Census Data

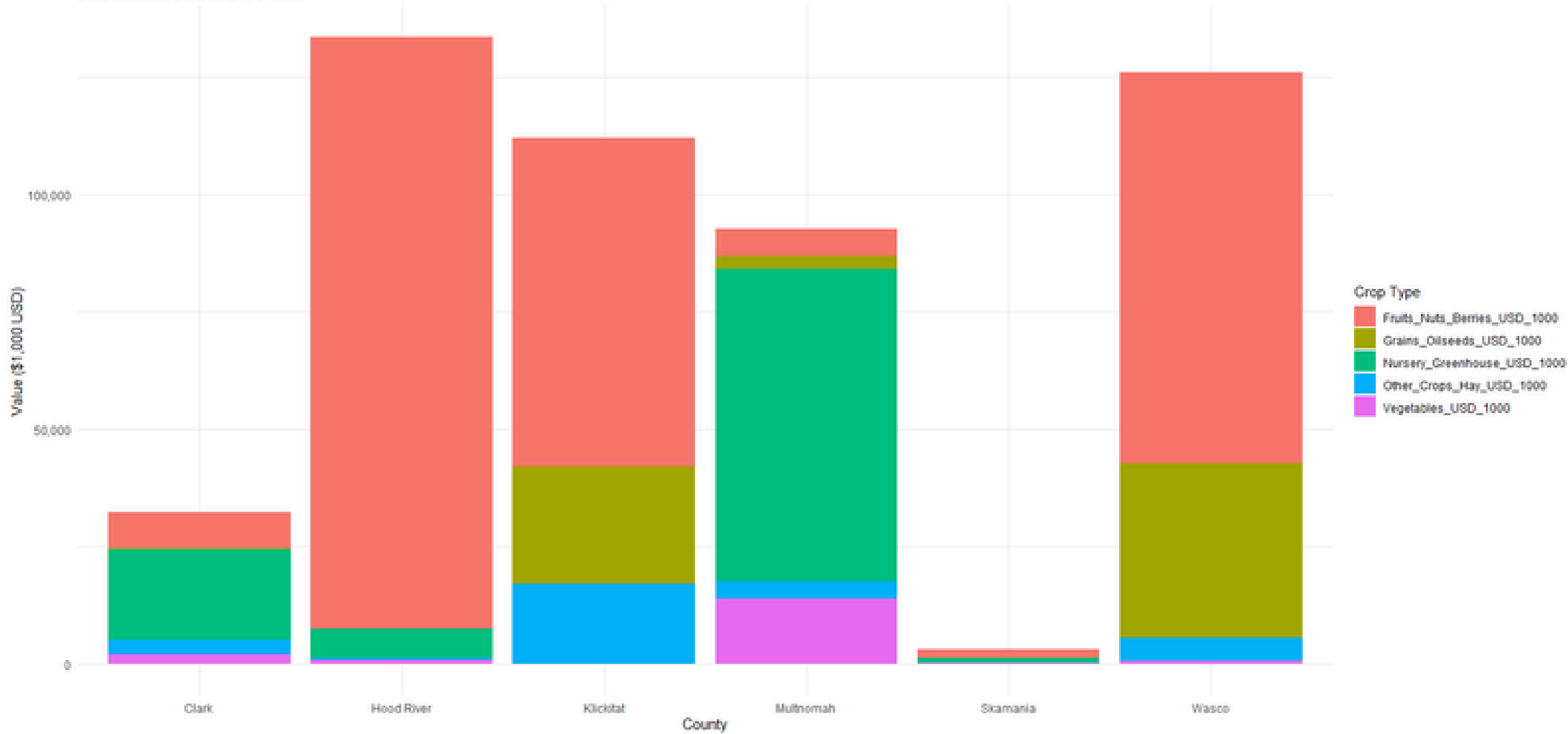
Average Farm Size



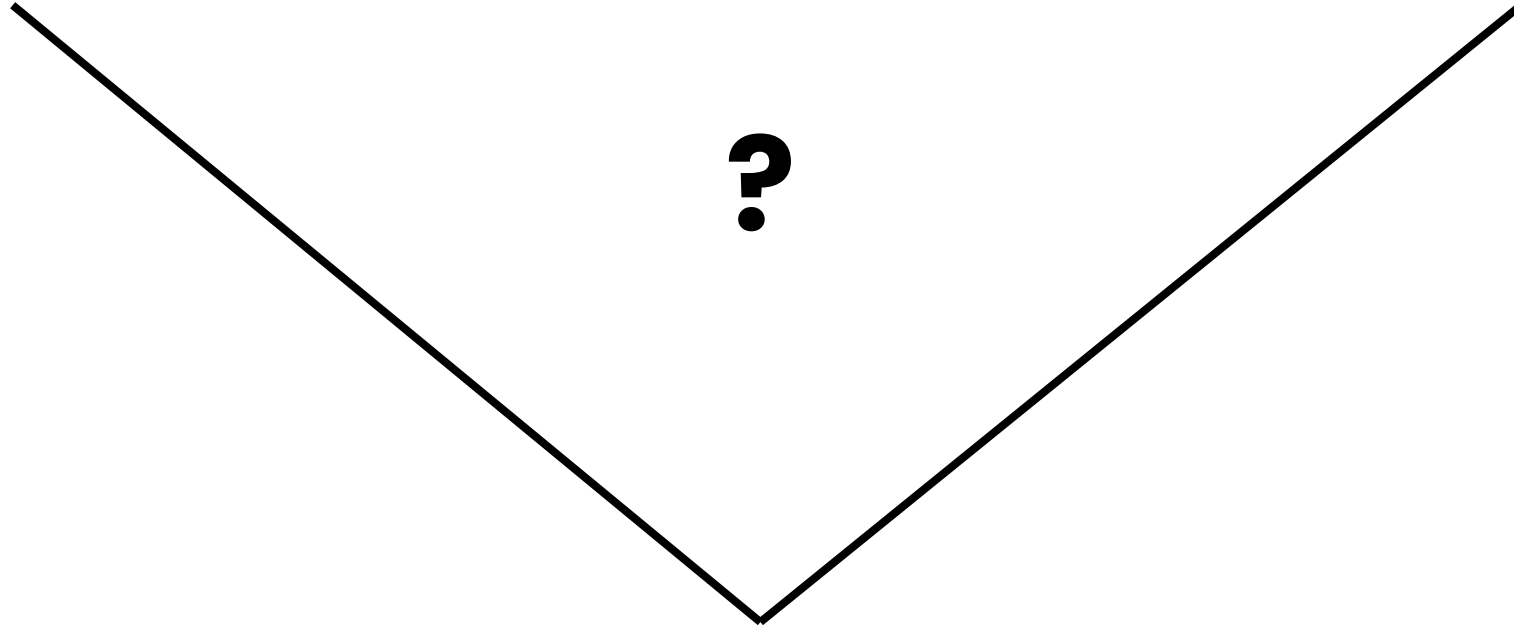
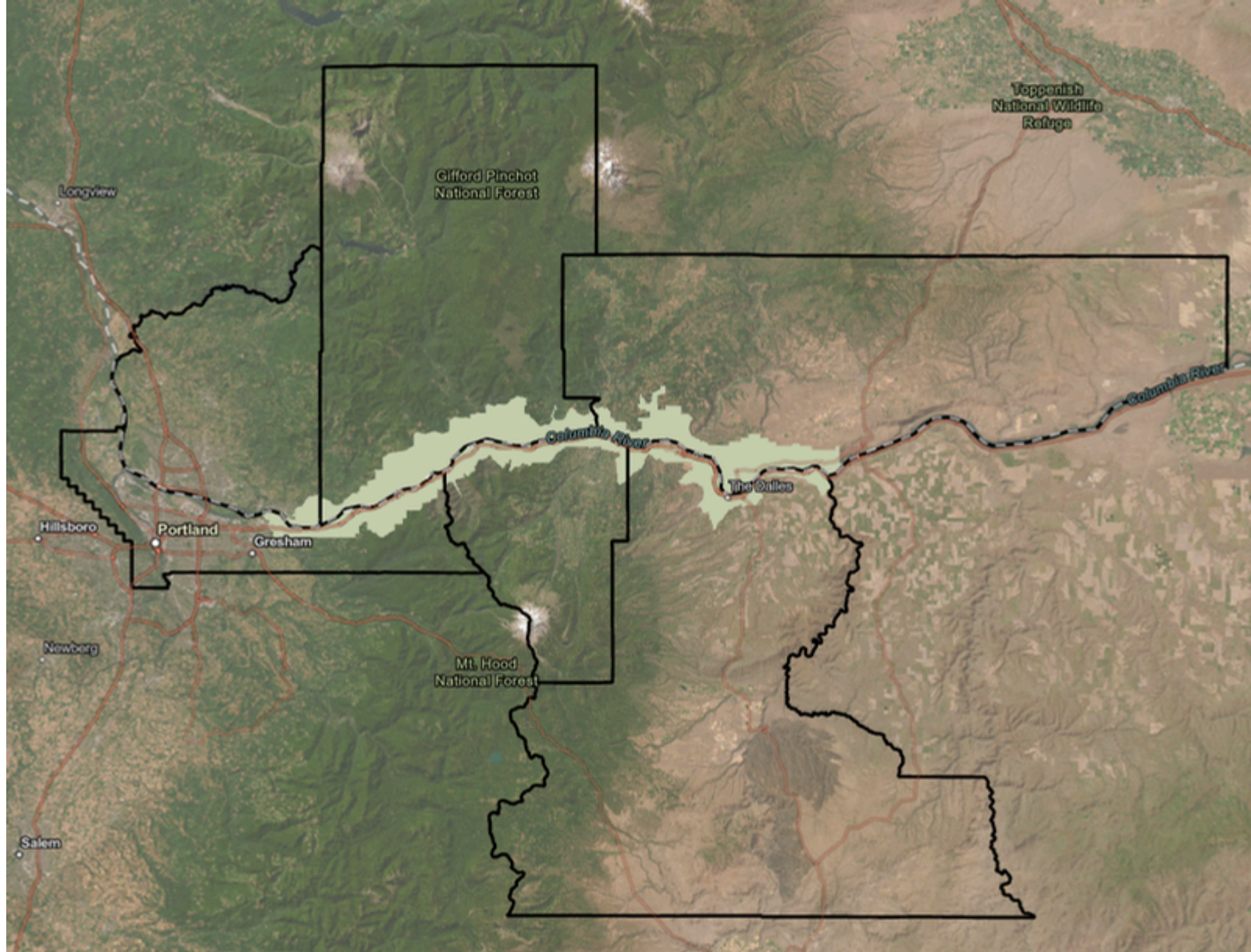
Counties with less farm land and a higher proportion of that land in crops earn more per farm acre (Hood River, Multnomah) than those with more pastureland. More land is required to earn the same profit in eastern counties. (not clipped to NSA)

## 2022 Census: Market Value of Crops Sold

Data extracted from County Profiles



Fruits, nuts and berries represent the highest market value by comparison in all counties besides Multnomah.



# Cropland

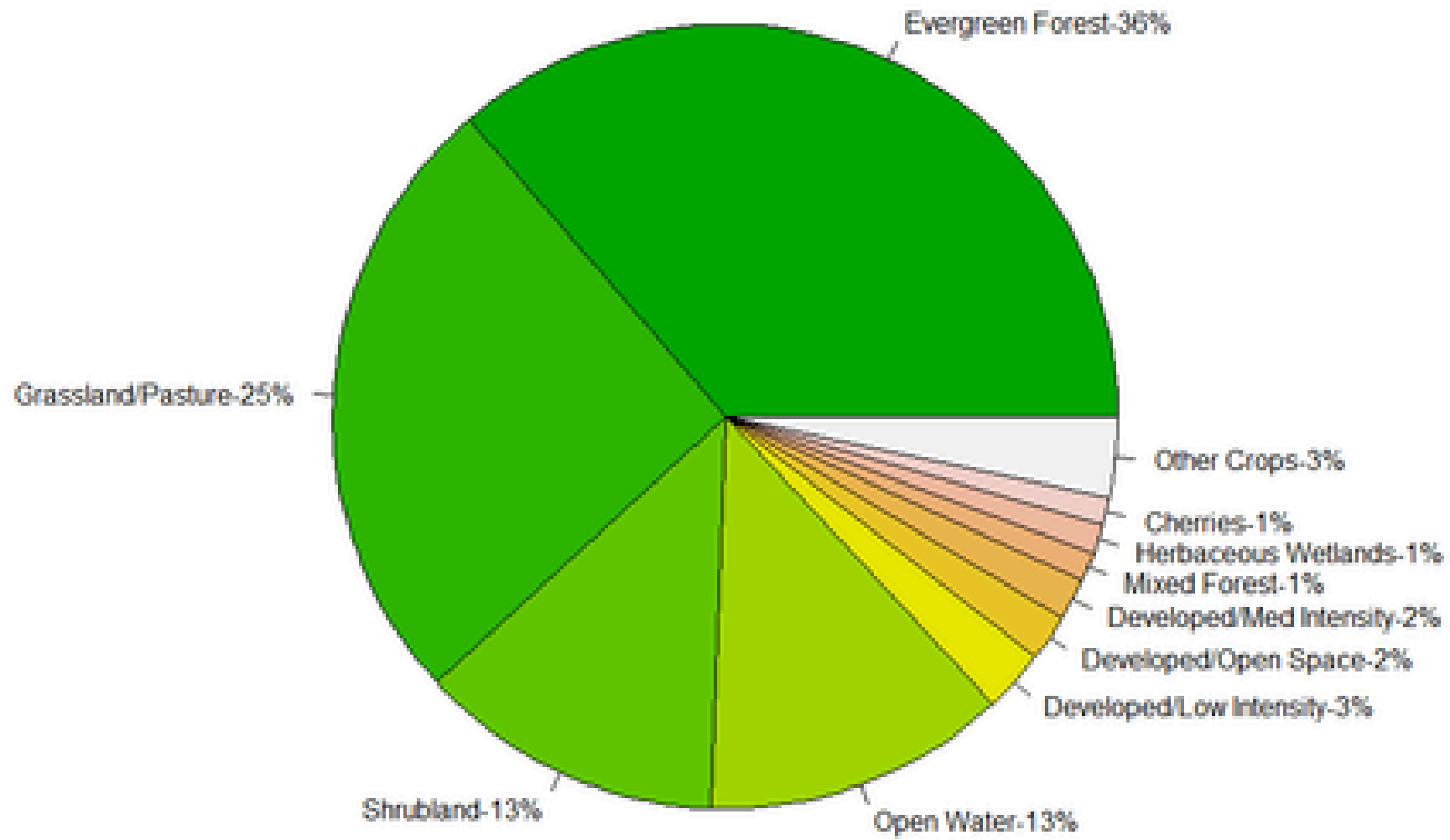


Data Provider: National Agriculture Statistics Service

Description: Crop specific land cover layer developed using satellite imagery from throughout the growing season and ground truthing.

Limitations for our Analysis: spatial resolution (30m, 10m) is high for our analysis area; confidence is lower in small farms; annual variability (in data and on the ground) makes it difficult to track trends; no economic data

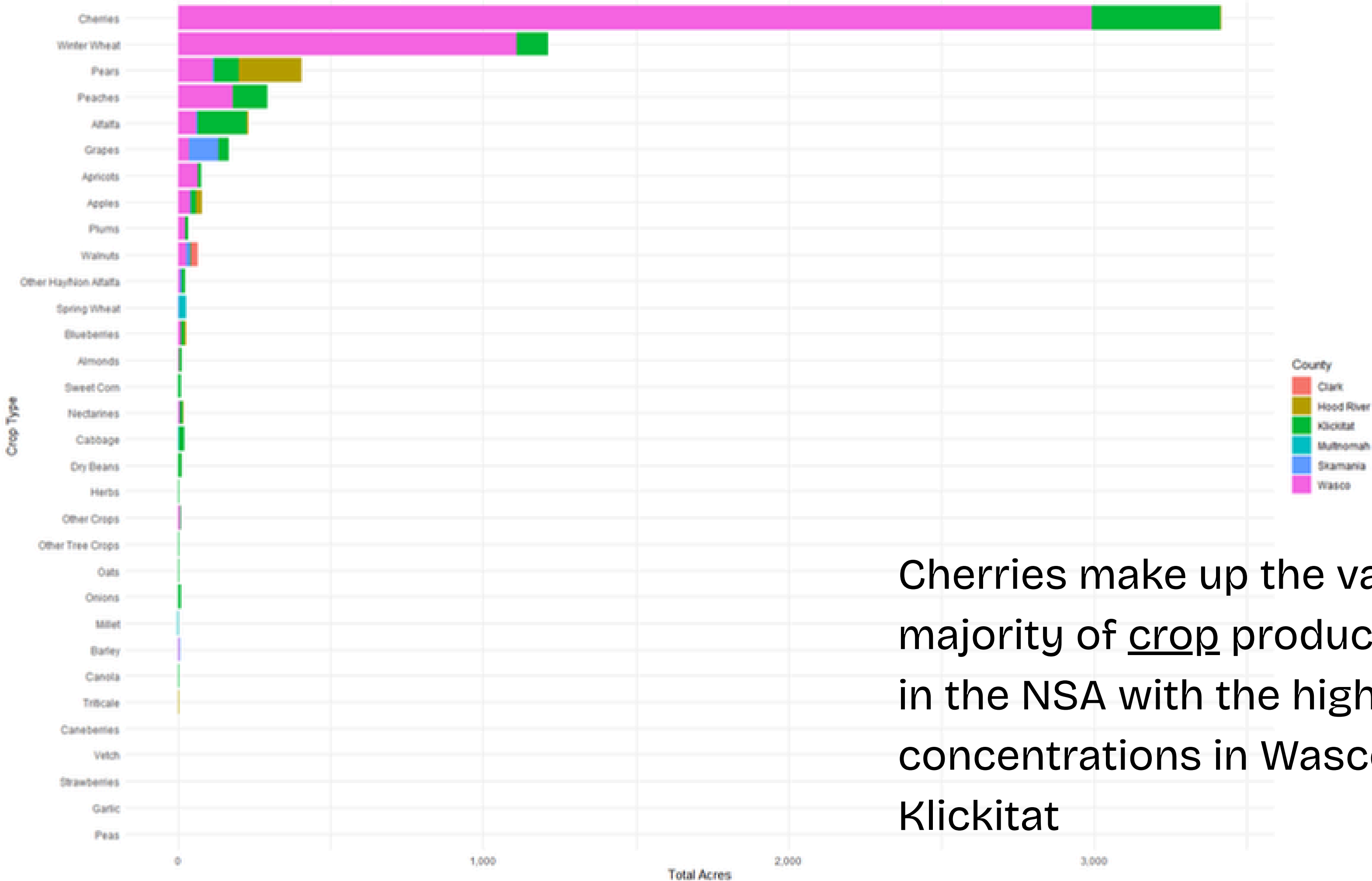
**Cropscape Land Cover in the National Scenic Area**



Most lands in the NSA are grasslands/pastures with cherries taking up only 1% of the land area

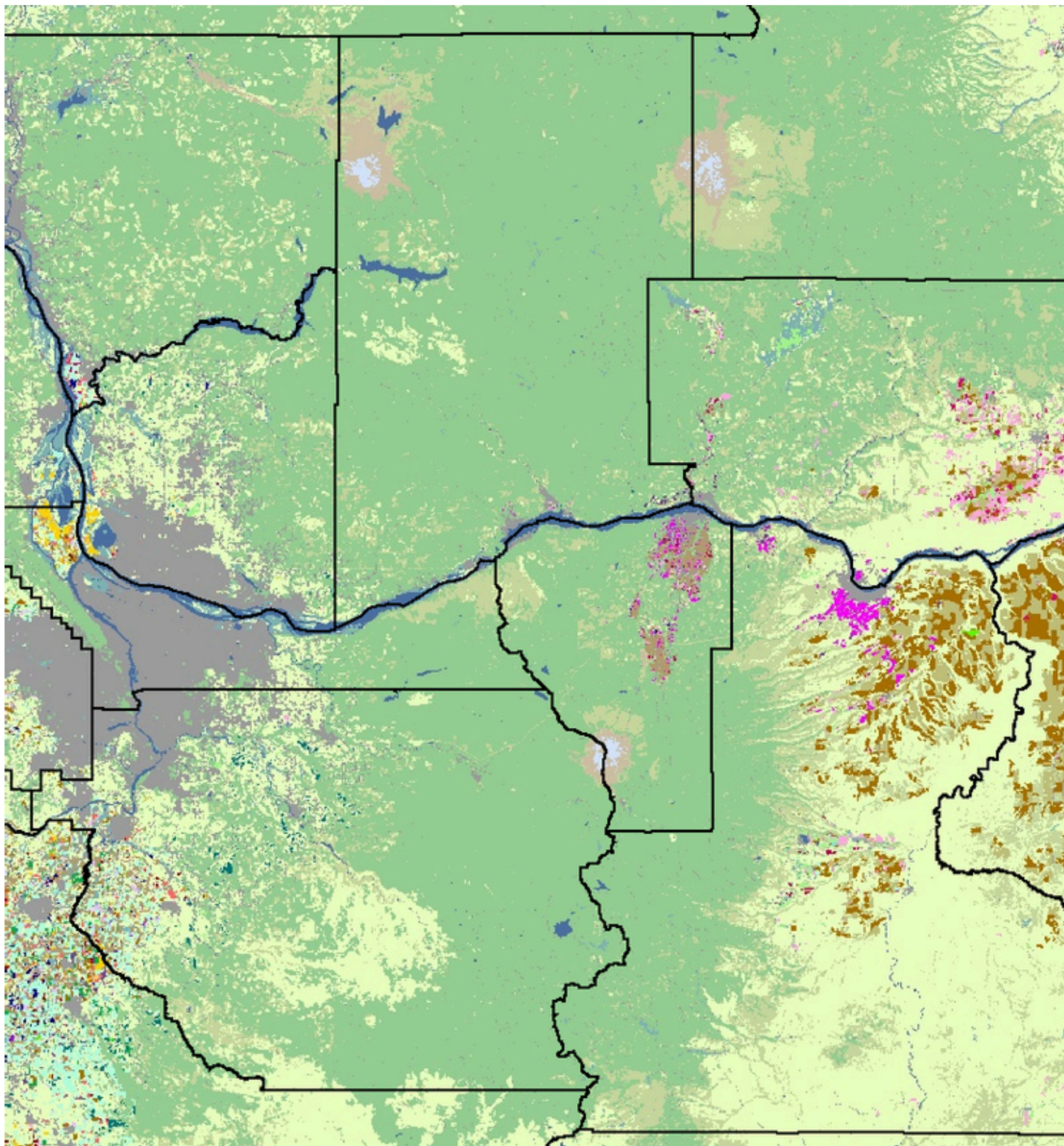
**2024**

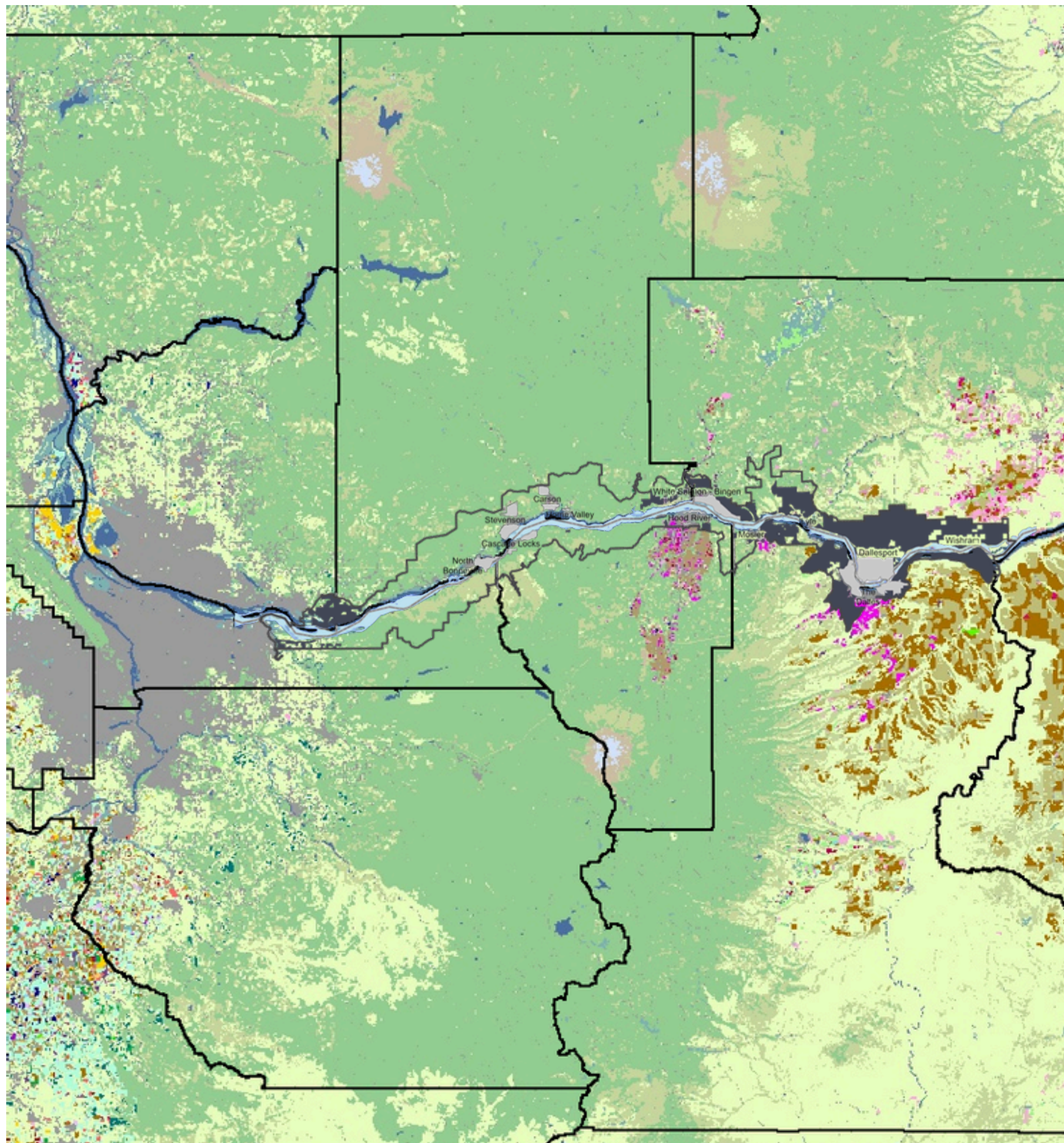
**Agricultural Crop Acreage by County (2024)**  
 Excluding Forests, Shrublands, Developed Areas, and Wetlands



Cherries make up the vast majority of crop producing area in the NSA with the highest concentrations in Wasco and Klickitat

Conditions in the NSA differ from the counties at large





Conditions in the NSA differ from the counties at large

Use may be determined by geography

Conditions appear most different in NSA vs county wide in Wasco (more crops) and Klickitat (more grazing)

Skamania crop producers concentrated inside NSA (grapes)

# Where do we go from here?

Ground Truthing: This is what we are learning is this true? What are the challenges?

Evaluation of economic data clipped to the NSA (jobs, income etc)

Draw connections between management plan and our findings

- Are there barriers to economic viability of agriculture in the management plan?

