Protecting the legacy of agriculture in Whatcom County

Whatcom County is known for many things; amazing recreation, fantastic community, beautiful Bellingham Bay and scenic farmland. Whatcom County is growing quickly, with more and more people eager to experience this wonderful place we call home. Development and expansion to accommodate growth has the potential to threaten many of the features which make Whatcom County great. This is why protecting these special places is so important to maintaining the health and vitality of Whatcom County.

In 2000 Whatcom County started the Agriculture Purchase of Development Rights Program (Ag PDR). This program is designed to protect the future viability of farmland throughout the county by strategically protecting key parcels of land that would be otherwise developed. This program allows interested landowners to sell specific property rights such as the right to develop future homes or to subdivide the property. Doing so ensures that their land will continue to be available for agricultural purposes for years to come.

Just outside of Bellingham, off of Mount Baker Highway, is Bellingham Country Gardens. There Sam Grubbs and his family own and operate a 20-acre U-Pick farm for strawberries, raspberries, vegetables and flowers. Grubbs prides himself in his “no spray” products.

In 2015 Grubbs applied for the County’s Ag PDR program. Two years into the process, he says it’s been a long time coming and he is excited to know that now his property will never be subdivided.

“This is a great legacy to leave,” Grubbs says, in anticipation of the completed transaction.
As Grubbs’ hope conveys, the Ag PDR program also is a way for property owners to express their values in a real and lasting way. Keeping Whatcom County’s agricultural lands from being developed is not only beneficial to participating landowners, but offers multiple public benefits as well. Whatcom Land Trust adds value to the equation in both the private and community realm.

Whatcom Land Trust contracts with the County to manage conservation easements on properties that participate in the Ag PDR program. Whatcom Land Trust currently co-holds with the County 18 other conservation easements through the Ag PDR program totaling 905 acres throughout the County. Farm conservation easements are the legal agreements that permanently protect these agricultural properties by removing the potential for future development and subdivision and requiring the conservation of the soils and water resources on the property. The Grubbs family, as is the case with all of our conservation easement partners, retains all other rights, including the right to own and use the land, sell it and pass it on to heirs.

The conservation easement on the Grubbs’ farm will have multiple benefits beyond protecting the County’s agricultural land base. The farm includes a swatch of Anderson Creek, which is a major salmon bearing tributary to the Nooksack River. The NRCS, a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is one of the major funders of farm easements. As a requirement for participating in the program, the owners must complete farm plans in conjunction with the local Whatcom Conservation District. Mr. Grubbs has recently completed his farm plan, which will, among other things, protect the riparian forest along the creek and requires the adoption of water quality enhancement measures for human and salmon health.

In addition to salmon, Grubb sees a host of other wildlife on his property. “We see quite a few eagles out here. When we cut the hay we get a great show. It’s really something spectacular,” says Grubbs.

The cornerstone of the conservation easement is establishing and maintaining a cooperative relationship with the property owner to help plan and

‘The Ag PDR is one of the pillars of farmland protection. While zoning is by far the greatest tool we have, the Ag PDR program allows us to strategically protect land vulnerable to development. Currently, 115,000 acres of land in Whatcom County are farmed. 87,000 of those acres are zoned for agriculture. The other 30,000 are in rural zoning and are at risk of conversion.”

- Chris Elder, Whatcom County Planner
manage each property. Whatcom Land Trust creates a baseline report of each property which includes a description of the land as well as photos of physical features and resources. Together the Trust and property owner monitor, make decisions and enforce the easement. The cooperative relationship between the Trust and property owners created by this program is critical in managing these conservation easements.

With the pending completion of the Ag PDR transaction, Grubbs takes stock of his land and prepares for the changes that winter brings to the land, creek and wildlife that depend on it.

For over 30 years Whatcom Land Trust has been proud to work diligently with private property owners and public entities to protect and conserve farmland throughout Whatcom County. We look forward to continuing to protect the rural nature of our community and grow a legacy of agriculture for generations to come.

Whatcom Land Trust currently manages 18 agricultural easements, totaling 905 acres of farmland. The Trust’s principle goal for agricultural protection in the county is to protect large tracts of productive farmland that are under significant threat of development. Protecting farmland was the catalyst for the creation of Whatcom Land Trust in 1984 and continues to be a priority in focal area 6 of our Conservation Plan Update, particularly in the agricultural core, which is roughly north of Bellingham, east of I-5 and encompassing Lynden, Everson/Nooksack and Sumas. To date, Whatcom Land Trust protects 33 agricultural properties totaling over 1,400 acres and is always interested in helping property owners protect and conserve agricultural lands throughout Whatcom County.