



AG LAND... GOING, GOING, WILL IT BE GONE?

by John Gillies

No doubt about it. Whatcom County continues to lose agricultural land every year. Census of agriculture data shows that from 1945 to 1990 land in farms declined from 202,000 acres to just over 125,000 acres. That is an average annual loss of more than 1,700 acres per year, almost 5 acres per day! At this rate Whatcom County will see its last acre of farm land converted to a *higher and better use* sometime around 2065.

But statistics lie, don't they? Maybe, yet a disturbing thought is that conversion of ag land may accelerate rapidly if we are not careful. Land in a *critical mass* of farm acreage is needed to keep the service and support industries such as feed and fertilizer dealers, equipment dealers, veterinary clinics, processing plants and myriad other ag support industries viable. Without markets or support services remaining farms will be short lived.

The above scenario almost seems impossible, considering that today agriculture in Whatcom County represents a 207 million dollar industry. This amount just includes the basic value of production or farm gate income. When the support and service industries, jobs and other spin-offs are considered, the 200 million is multiplied several times over.

Agriculture has always been a mainstay of the local economy. Whatcom is the nation's tenth largest dairy county. Almost one-third of Washington's milk is produced by Whatcom County farms. The county ranks first in the state in red raspberry, blueberry, and certified seed potato production. Peas, bush beans, carrots and strawberries are also important crops. Bellingham Frozen Foods, a vegetable processor and Bellingham Cold Storage are located at Squaticum Harbor. Carriage House Foods, a berry and vegetable processor, is located in Lynden along with Versicold Inc., operator of a cold storage facility. Darigold, in Lynden, operates the largest powder

milk plant in the nation.

It's easy to place economic importance on agriculture, yet equally important is the role agriculture plays in providing a unique quality of life for all Whatcom County residents. Picturesque farms, uncluttered landscapes, wildlife habitat, clean air and water, are also benefits brought by agriculture in this county.

In 1945 there were 4,854 farms on Whatcom County's 202,000 acres of farm land. Today 1,400 farms, including 370 dairies, remain on 125,000 acres of farm land. Tomorrow?

The Irreplaceable Bottom Line: *prime soils*

Prime farmland or lands of prime soil types, are an irreplaceable resource. Between 1967 and 1977, twenty one million acres of America's farmland were paved over and built on to make room for houses, schools, shopping centers, roads and highways. Even for a country as richly endowed with land as the United States, the loss was staggering and eye-opening. Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland commented at the time:

"I don't know where it is going to stop. But stop it must. Continued destruction of cropland is wanton squandering of an irreplaceable resource that invites future tragedy not only nationally, but on a global scale."

Although the rate of farmland conversion declined during the 1980s, this may have been a temporary lull caused by extremely high interest rates. Indications are that the rate of conversion is again on the increase.

Ag Land . . . (continued from Page 1)

Conversion of Whatcom County prime farmland parallels the national trends. Originally, about 99,000 acres of Whatcom County's land base were prime farmland. Today, 75 to 80,000 acres of prime land are available for agriculture.

A basic question is, what constitutes prime farmland and where is it located in the county? Prime farmland is land that has the best combination of physical and chemical characteristics for producing food, feed, forage, fiber and oilseed crops. The soil has the fertility, growing season, and moisture needed to produce sustained high yields of crops when managed according to modern farming methods. A second criteria is that the land must be available for such use, not paved over or built upon.

The Soil Conservation Service has specific quantitative criteria for determining whether or not a specific soil is prime. Of the 192 soil types found in Whatcom County, only 14, or 7%, are prime under natural conditions. Another 29 types are prime if all the criteria above are met through management such as irrigation, flood control and drainage. Oddly enough, the 14 types that constitute the best agricultural soil are also among the most highly sought for development.

This year over 400 acres of prime soils were lost in the annexation of Lynden. This land has been converted to housing, golf course and commercial development. There is a compelling need to protect prime farmland for optimal food production, to maintain a healthy economy and to ensure a future for agriculture in Whatcom County.

Whatcom County Farmland Protection

by Carl Batchelor and Ann Eissinger

Whatcom County has a solid history of planning and zoning for agricultural land preservation. Past agricultural comprehensive plan policies and pattern of agricultural zoning and regulations appear to have averted significant incompatible uses and conversions of agricultural land. Yet, zoning will not fend off the tremendous growth pressures driving up the price of rural land, plus, the less favorable economic times have upped the ante for farmers to sell out. Fortunately, Washington's Growth Management Act has required a more aggressive approach to prevent the loss of our productive land base and may offer some relief.

In order to comply with *GMA*, Whatcom County orga-

nized an intensive committee process to formulate an agricultural land comprehensive plan proposal. The fourteen-member advisory committee included farmers, food processors, interested citizens, planners and other government officials. Following an eight-month process the committee completed its recommendations and the resulting proposal was adopted by the County Council in March of this year. The Agriculture Resource Lands Comprehensive Plan sets goals for the preservation of farmland, designates agricultural land areas and land use policy, and sets forth an action plan for land evaluation and review. In addition to the Comprehensive Plan, the county also adopted a Right-To-Farm ordinance.

Farmland Conservation Options

As part of the Agricultural Resource Lands Comprehensive Plan, Whatcom County clearly states the need to preserve agricultural land through private non-regulatory means. Procurement of conservation easements by the Land Trust is encouraged in agricultural areas of the county and are specifically suggested for the following purposes:

- to conserve prime soils
- to conserve agricultural operations
- to conserve wildlife habitats
- to conserve scenic resources

Conservation easements are legally binding agreements negotiated between the land owner and the Whatcom County Land Trust. Once finalized the easement is monitored and enforced by the Land Trust. In many situations the granting of an easement will result in a tax benefit to the land owner.

The transfer or purchase of development rights (*TDR*) or (*PDR*) is another conservation option. Although a mechanism for *TDR* and *PDR* in the agricultural zone has not yet been developed, it is likely that the county will implement a system to allow land owners this option in the future. The transfer or purchase of development rights insures the conservation of agricultural lands by reducing the economic pressures on ag land owners to convert the land to other uses. It also provides incentive to retain large contiguous blocks of land for farming.

An obvious and probably the most familiar land conservation option available to farmers is the Open Space Taxation Program. Whatcom County offers a reduced tax assessment for qualified lands registered under the program. Currently there are 111,350 acres of farm and agricultural land in the open space program county wide.

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VERY SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR NEWSLETTER SPONSORS:

Old Barns of Beauty, Heritage and Habitat

by Brett Gaussoin

Old Barns — an eyesore or an endangered species? The classic old dairy barn is a window on the past. Most of the real beauties we see dotting the landscape range in age from 50 to 100 years old. Styles and methods of construction vary, but the fundamental principles of function are the same. Hay and grain are stored upstairs and stalls downstairs are used for milking or bedding.

When these barns were built, they were the largest structures on the farm. The pride in their construction is evident in the fact that many are still standing tall today. More than this, they are a man-made testament to a period of agricultural development in our whole region. When the white man immigrated to these parts he brought with him what he knew. Here in Whatcom County that was a whole lot of dairy. The Nooksack River had a broad flood plain that was diked, much like the homeland of many of the Dutch settlers.

Many of the remaining old barns are the oldest of their kind, built long before power tools. The architecture and construction techniques alone warrant historical significance. They remain symbols of the area's cultural roots.

As these great old barns fell into history with the advent of modern dairy practices, native wildlife soon began to utilize what the dairy farmer was leaving behind. In many cases these wild animals may have been co-habiting with the dairy for some time, their presence considered just a part of the dairy.

The wildlife which frequent these old barns consists of both birds and mammals. Eleven species of birds

commonly nest in barns, from the tiny house wren to the shy barn owl. Other species include barn swallows, cliff swallows, flickers, robins, Bewick's wrens, pigeons, starlings and English sparrows. Screech owls, kestrel and great-horned owls may also nest in barns, although this is much more common to the east side of the Cascades. Coopers hawks and sharp-shinned hawks commonly forage inside these structures, preying on the pigeons, starlings and sparrows that live there.

There are seven species of mammals that are regularly associated with old barns. Of course, rats and mice are the most common, but both local species of bat, the little brown bat and the big brown bat, often choose

barns to live in. Other mammals include skunks, raccoons, opossums and occasionally rabbits, weasels and even mink.

I began visiting barns in Whatcom County twelve years ago and have visited over 200. During this time 31 have been lost to wind, fire or, most commonly, the wrecking bar or bulldozer. The barns cost money to

maintain and owners are taxed for them, used or not. Therefore, many of the old barns are coming down.

Modern dairy practice dictates single story structures made of tin, steel and concrete. There is no place for the wild here. The derelict old barn, an eye-sore to some, is often a home for many. These beautiful old barns are fading from our landscape and our heritage. The Whatcom County Land Trust would like your ideas on how to keep these precious structures standing. Please call us at 647-5484 or write to P.O. Box 4455 Bellingham, WA 98227.

The author is a local raptor biologist and falconer with years of professional field experience. He is president of Pellets, Inc; a distributor of owl pellets nation-wide.



Photograph by David Scherrer

■ Bellingham Frozen Foods, Inc. ■ Eagle Mill Farms, Inc.

Whatcom County Land Trust Ag Committee Assists Landowners

by Henry Bierlink

Agricultural land preservation was the impetus for the creation of the Whatcom County Land Trust in the mid eighties. It remains one of the Trust's highest priorities.

The Agriculture Committee of the *WCLT* meets bimonthly to determine priority areas for protection from development and to seek ways to communicate what the *WCLT* can do for Agricultural landowners.

The committee is keenly aware that the current farm economy is such that there is often more financial reward in selling land to developers and speculators than in continuing to farm the land at marginal profits. Farmers often desire to see their land remain in productive agriculture yet find themselves forced to sell land to the highest bidder in order to generate an adequate retirement income. This economic climate causes many to question how agriculture can survive in the long-term future of the county.

The Land Trust has tools available that can help landowners conserve farmland yet insure adequate funds for retirement. Agricultural landowners are welcome to attend a committee meeting or to contact a committee member. The next meeting is scheduled for 7:30 pm, November 24, at the USDA Conservation District Office, 6975 Hannegan Rd., Lynden. For more information call committee chair, Henry Bierlink 354-3514.

Farmland Protection . . . (Continued from Page 2)

Right-to-Farm

One of the age-old conflicts between farmers and neighboring property owners arises when people who are unfamiliar with farming move into an agricultural area for the rural charm and pastoral setting. Frequently these people become offended by the noises, odors and slow moving traffic that are necessary results of normal farm activities. When people are bothered by such things their tendency is to ask the farmer to stop or to threaten legal action. In many cases the courts have ruled against farmers severely restricting their operation. Due to these and other pressures many farmers choose to subdivide their land thereby destroying the setting that was so attractive in the first place.

In response to this conflicting scenario, farmers nation-wide have sought legal protection under what is known as *right-to-farm* laws. The Whatcom County Council adopted a Right-to-Farm Ordinance this year. The purpose of the ordinance is to promote a good neighbor policy between farmers and non-farming property owners. First it notifies property owners before they even buy the property or build a house that they are in an area where agriculture is the preferred use. Second, the *hold harmless* portion of the law requires that those obtaining special use permits or subdividing agricultural land sign an agreement to refrain from taking legal action against the farmer or Whatcom County for normal, legal agricultural practices.

The Whatcom County Land Trade: Update Notes

The land trade is progressing in a favorable direction. Thanks to the hundreds of letters sent to the Washington State Parks Commission supporting the acquisition of Chuckanut Mountain as an addition to Larrabee State Park and the professional assistance of the Trust For Public Lands, the Commission ranked Chuckanut 9th in the state! Additional funding for Chuckanut was sought from by the Washington Interagency for Outdoor Recreation (*IAC*). The *IAC* distributes funds from the Washington Wildlife Recreation Program (*WWRP*) fund to State Parks and other state agencies as well as providing supplementary funding for priority land acquisitions. As part of the process *IAC* reviews and prioritizes project proposals. The *IAC* ranked the Chuckanut acquisition twelfth, a good but uncertain position that will depend on the state legislature's maximum appropriation toward the *WWRP* this session. Letters to legislators will be needed to ensure *WWRP* funding; without it, purchase of Chuckanut and many other projects state wide could be in jeopardy.

The city/county portion of the Chuckanut acquisition was ranked by the *IAC* as NUMBER 1 out of applications state wide. State matching is now very likely. Additionally, the City and county Councils both have agreed to the dedication of funds for their half the Chuckanut acquisition.

In the larger land trade picture, *DNR*, Trillium and Whatcom County are completing assessments of the trade lands. The assessments include a detailed economic review and valuation of the trade lands, an analysis of vegetation, natural features (soils, slope, etc.) and an evaluation of ecological values based on existing information. In order to facilitate the county's extensive review effort the Land Trust hired an intern to assist in the process. Funding for the intern's position was provided by a grant from the Bullitt Foundation and a contribution from North Cascades Audubon Society.

The land trade is progressing into its final stages and is expected to be substantially completed by the end of this year.

■ **Bellingham Cold Storage Co.** ■ **San Juan Sailing**

President's Message:**A STEWARDSHIP OPPORTUNITY**

by Chris Moench

With this issue of our newsletter I invite our supporters to take a personal role in a vital function of our mission as a land trust. I invite you to consider becoming one of our Land Stewards. An increasingly important component of the Whatcom County Land Trust's efforts are devoted to monitoring and protecting our trust lands. We do this through our stewardship program. When we accept responsibility for protecting a parcel of land through grant of a conservation easement or by an outright gift, one or more individuals are assigned by the Land Trust as Stewards.

The tasks of the Land Steward, who works under the direction of the Land Trust Monitoring Committee, include gathering descriptive information about the property, annually updating the information and maintaining good relations with the property owners through regular contact. The Land Steward becomes familiar with the property and its owner and serves as the main link between the property owner and the Land Trust.

We need Land Stewards for: Teddy Bear Cove and Clark's Point south of Bellingham, the Nessel property on the South Fork of the Nooksack River at Saxon, a property on Birch Point and the Kelsey property near Lake Terrell. There will soon be several more properties in various parts of the county.

Stewards need not be members of the Land Trust Board of Directors, and there could be more than one steward for a given piece of property. The main requirement for a steward is that he or she be willing to watch the land on an ongoing basis.

I urge you to consider joining our Stewardship program. If you are interested, contact me, Chris Moench, at my home: 734-9472, or work: 733-0212.

Gifts to Capital Fund In Memory of Margaret Cowling

We would like to extend our appreciation to those who generously contributed to the Land Trust in her memory. Those contributions will be dedicated to the Capital Fund.

Margaret was a friend and supporter of the Land Trust. She will be missed.

Welcome on Board: *three new directors*

The WCLT Board of Directors has expanded its professional talent with three new members. We heartily welcome:

Michael Durbin, CAD Manager/Civil Designer for Associated Project Consultants Inc.

Rick Fackler, Bellingham Parks Planner and Coordinator of the Bellingham Greenways Program.

Elaine Gold, Wetlands Scientist and owner of Pegasus Eco-Terrestrial Services.

Membership

Since our Spring newsletter and membership drive we have gained 80 members to the WCLT! We are thankful for the generous support and look forward to adding new members to our roster. If you haven't joined the Land Trust's efforts, please join. Our part-time staff position and day to day operations are dependent on your membership contributions. As a member you will **not** receive erroneous mail solicitations, a bumper sticker or discount travel packages to exotic lands. Instead, you receive a newsletter and the satisfaction of knowing you have contributed to direct action for the preservation of open space, wildlife habitat and farmland in Whatcom County.

Volunteers Needed: WCLT needs help with specific tasks. If you have time on your hands, special skills — or would like to learn — and have a willingness to help with any of the following jobs, please let us know by phoning Ann at 647-5484.

***Newsletter Mailing
Mailing List Management
Fund Raising
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Special Events***

Please Join Us Today!

WHATCOM COUNTY LAND TRUST
P.O. Box 4455 – Bellingham, WA 98227
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Thank You