

# SKAGIT COUNTY

## FARMLAND LEGACY PROGRAM

2009 ANNUAL REPORT



The Skagit County Farmland Legacy Program (FLP) is a county initiative that purchases agricultural easements on Skagit farmland. Agricultural easements specifically support agriculture while preventing non-agricultural development on protected land. The FLP also supports policies, programs, and plans that affect purchasing development rights. All owners of Skagit County lands zoned "Agricultural-Natural Resources" are eligible to participate in the FLP. Funding comes from the conservation tax and is often leveraged with federal and state grants and private donations.

### PROTECTING LAND

There are many Purchase of Development Right (PDR) programs across the country that protect farmland for long-term agricultural use; the FLP is one such program. PDR programs are *voluntary* programs that allow property owners to sell their development rights to a County while retaining both the title to their land and the right to continue farming.

Agricultural conservation easements place restrictions on future use and development of lands in order to protect property for agricultural use and productivity. To protect parcels of land, the FLP administers the Skagit County Conservation Futures Program. The Conservation Futures Program places permanent conservation easements on land that allows agricultural operations to take place. Easements may also be placed on critical habitat areas. These easements are important as they prevent the loss of agricultural land, protect important agricultural soils and existing critical areas, and restrict any use of, or activity, on protected properties that impair or interfere with agricultural values, character, use, or ability. The County holds easements in perpetuity. Property owners continue to own their land and may sell or lease the farm if he or she chooses, however, the development restrictions stay with the land. This way the farmland is maintained in a productive manner by allowing only uses that support agricultural productivity.



cover photos by Martin Burwash



## A MESSAGE FROM YOUR SKAGIT COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Nestled between the alpine mountains of the North Cascades and the clear seas of Puget Sound is Skagit Valley – the richest agricultural valley in the Western hemisphere. Bountiful crops including the finest red potatoes in the world, hundreds of acres of tulip bulbs, dairy farms, berries, apples, and seed crops make our county one of the most diverse and productive agricultural regions in the United States.

We are proud of Skagit County’s Farmland Legacy Program and the more than 6,500 acres it has protected from development. Our hope is that thousands of additional acres come into the program in the years to come. In addition to a prosperous agriculturally based economy, Skagit County is rich in natural resource lands. With 538,000 acres of federally owned land and large holds of private forests, there is room for agriculture, industry, and recreation.

As your Skagit County Commissioners, we are working hard to provide good stewardship to protect and enhance our rural lifestyle and agriculturally based economy.

We applaud our farm community for being world leaders in the formidable task of feeding a hungry world. With the diversity of agriculture in Skagit Valley, we also enjoy the additional benefits of a rural lifestyle, tourism, clean water, and habitat for fish and wildlife.

With a growing population that recently surpassed 100,000, Skagit County’s rural lifestyle is under continual threat. The preservation of agriculture is essential to preserve our way of life for our children and generations to come.

Sincerely,

Skagit County Board of Commissioners



RON WESEN  
DISTRICT 1



KEN DAHLSTEDT  
DISTRICT 2



SHARON DILLON  
CHAIR, DISTRICT 3



### CONSERVATION FUTURES ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Established in 1997, the Conservation Futures Advisory Committee consists of a diverse group of farmers and conservationists who oversee and implement the Farmland Legacy Program. Reporting to the Board of County Commissioners, the committee establishes priority agricultural areas that are under pressure for residential or commercial development. Through a tax-based fund, coupled with federal and state grants and donations, the committee acquires rights and interests on these voluntarily offered lands to prevent urban sprawl and preserve the fertile land base for future generations.

Members:  
Scott DeGaw, Dave Hedlin, Mike Hulburt, Carolyn Kelly (Chair), Alan Merritt, Keith Wiggers & Andrea Xaver

This report was produced by the Skagit County Public Works Department and funded by the Farmland Legacy Program.  
Editor: Emma Whitfield  
Pictures provided by Martin Burwash, Skagit County, WA, Natural Resource Conservation Service, photo by Tony Harms, the Skagit County Public Works Department.  
Historic photos courtesy of Art Johnson Family  
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### AGRICULTURE ADVISORY BOARD

*“Honoring our past, sustaining our future, where Skagit farms are the pride of the community.”*

The Skagit County Agriculture Advisory Board (AAB), established in 2002, serves to advise and provide recommendations to the Board of County Commissioners and the County Administrator regarding agricultural plans, policies, and programs. The AAB addresses issues regarding:

- Existing and proposed legislation and regulations affecting agriculture
- Land uses as they impact agriculture
- Ways to maintain, enhance, and promote agriculture and agricultural products in the region
- Agricultural issues requested by the County Commissioners

Serving as a nexus between the County and the agricultural community, the AAB serves to protect the agriculture industry as well as the rural character of the county. The AAB consists of 12 Commissioner-appointed members, each of whom serves a three-year term.

Members:  
Murray Benjamin, Jim Carstens, Randy Good, Bob Hughes, Mike Hulbert, Kraig Knutzen, Nels Lagerlund (Chair), Greg Lee, Bill McMoran (Vice Chair), Kim Mower, Lyle Wesen, Nate Youngquist

# HOW MANY ACRES HAVE BEEN PRESERVED?

Farmland Legacy Program	
FLP Enrollment	62 owners in Farmland Legacy Program 29 owners in conservation easements on Title 14.16.860
Total Acres Protected	6,563 acres in Farmland Legacy Program 6,669 acres with conservation easements from Title 14.16.860
Extinguished Development Rights	137
Pending Easements	16 (includes a total of 36 development rights and 1,346.2 acres)

To view Title 14.16.86, visit <http://www.codepublishing.com/wa/skagitcounty/>

Partnerships	Contributions
The Nature Conservancy	In-Kind Help
Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland	\$235,600
State and Federal Funding	
• USDA/NRCS/FRPP*	\$2,814,789.49
• RCO**	\$319,000
Skagit County Conservation Futures Tax	Approximately \$720,000/yr
Total spent to date	<b>\$9,758,307</b>

\* United States Department of Agriculture/Natural Resources Conservation Service/ Farmland and Ranchland Protection Program.

\*\* Recreation Conservation Office.



photos by Martin Burwash



## NEARLY 7,000 ACRES OF FERTILE SKAGIT VALLEY FARMLAND PROTECTED FROM FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Skagit County's Farmland Legacy program has protected almost 7,000 acres of Skagit Valley farmland from future development. But how much land is 7,000 acres?

An acre is about the size of a football field without the end zones. Thanks to the Farmland Legacy program, 7,000 football fields of farmland have been protected.

If football fields are difficult to relate to, one acre also equals 42,560 square feet. 7,000 acres converts to 297,920,000 square feet, enough to cover the floor plans of 126,828 average-sized homes.

In a good growing season, 7,000 acres can also produce a great amount of diverse crops in Skagit Valley. On average, potatoes produce about 20 tons per acre; this equals 140,000 tons or 280,000,000 pounds. If potatoes average two per pound, this equals 560,000,000 potatoes, enough for every man, woman, and child in the United States to have at least one.

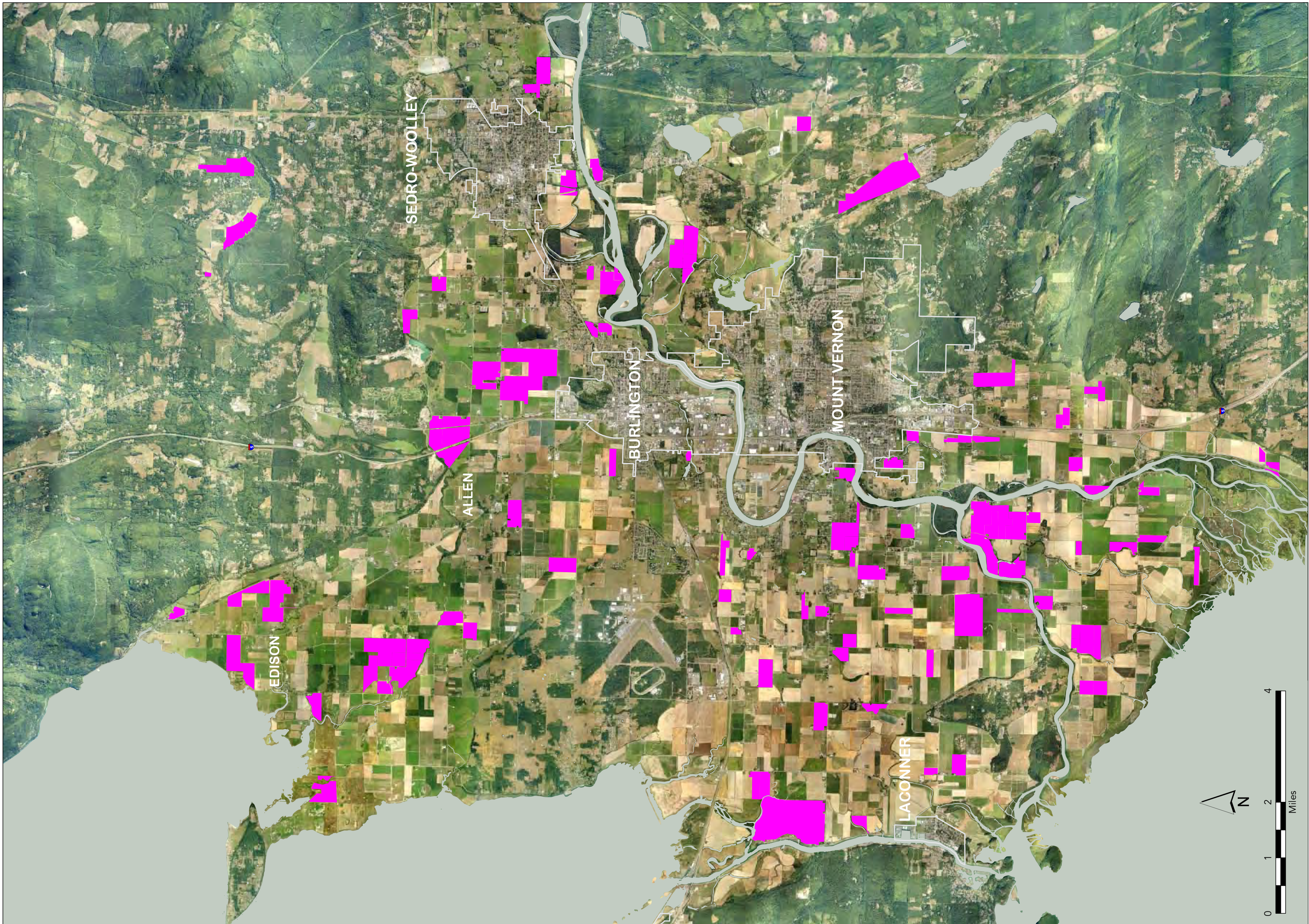
In terms of seeds, the number of zeros attached to a value is large enough to fill a phone book. It is safe to say, however, that 7,000 acres would provide the world with an ample annual supply of cabbage or spinach seed.

Blueberries top many charts as one of America's healthiest foods. At three tons per acre, 7,000 acres would produce 21,000 tons or 42,000,000 pounds. If two

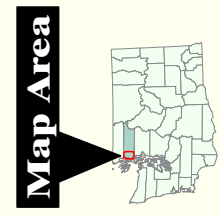
cups of blueberries equals a pound, all of the United States could top their cereal every morning with a handful of berries for an entire year.


Protecting farmland is more than just guaranteeing the production of food as commodities. It also provides habitat for fish and wildlife, protects water from non-point pollution, and provides open space that is important to a rural lifestyle.

With approximately 67,000 acres of prime farmland left to farm in the Valley, some say that a paltry 7,000 acres is a mere drop in the bucket. While protecting every acre of farmland with conservation easements may not be necessary, it is important to protect as many properties as possible. Every time development occurs in Ag-NRL zones, land is taken out of production, impervious surfaces and drainage issues increase, and farming becomes more difficult. Our enthusiasm to live in a beautiful landscape creates unintended consequences for those trying to farm the land. Driving large farm equipment down roads to other locations, for example, becomes difficult with increased traffic from homes and commercial development. With fewer farms, supporting infrastructure is jeopardized. Without these support systems, farming becomes expensive and challenging. Outside markets already threaten the economic balance of Skagit County. Therefore, in order to maintain agricultural vitality, the goal is to protect it all.



**PROTECTED FARMLAND IN WESTERN SKAGIT COUNTY**



 Farmland Legacy Protected Properties

# SKAGIT COUNTY: A HISTORY OF PROGRESSIVE LAND USE TO PRESERVE FARMLAND AND ENHANCE NATURAL RESOURCES

Skagit County has a successful history in protecting both natural resources and agricultural lands. Skagit Valley is one of the richest agricultural lands in North America and is home to the healthiest ecosystem for salmon and wildlife on Puget Sound. In addition to 67,000 acres of prosperous agriculturally based farmland, Skagit County is also home to 538,000 acres of federally owned resource land and large holdings of private forests. Thanks to an engaged community, a progressive government, and diligent foresight, Skagit County is well on its way to protecting local farmland for future generations.

Today, with the help and partnership from local conservation groups such as Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, the Nature Conservancy, the Washington State Department of Wildlife, and the Skagit Land Trust, farmland preservation efforts are numerous. These efforts, however, are rooted in a history of progressive land use regulations dating back to the 1960s that helped Skagit become a pioneer in preserving farmland.

Among the earliest and most notable efforts and regulations, include:

- 1965 – Skagit County signs its first Comprehensive Plan
- 1966 – Skagit County passes a progressive zoning ordinance
- 1973 – Skagit County adopts the Large Acreage Lot size establishing a 30-acre minimum on agriculturally zoned lands, allowing a one-time division.
- 1979 – Skagit County eliminates the one-time division and increases the lot size to 40 acres.
- 1991 – Skagit County adds a section to the zoning ordinance requiring that residential dwellings in Ag-NRL zones be constructed within 200 feet of the road or front property line.
- 1991 – Skagit County becomes one of the first counties in the state to pass the “Right to Farm” ordinance protecting farmers from unreasonable complaints from neighbors.
- 1996 – Farmland Legacy Program established

In addition to preserving farmland, Skagit County also protects commercial agricultural infrastructure in order to support profitable potato, tulip, daffodil, strawberry, blueberry, raspberry, seed, and nursery crops. Agriculture is a \$260 million annual industry in Skagit County that remains healthy and viable thanks to an ample land base of the most fertile land in North America.

## FLOOD DAMAGE REDUCTION

Since 1997, Skagit County has also worked collaboratively with cities, tribes, dike and drainage districts, federal and state agencies, and citizens to provide long-term solutions for flood control that:

- Protect fish and wildlife
- Preserve and protect productive agricultural land
- Protect major floodplain infrastructure including sewage treatment plants, oil and gas pipelines, chemical facilities, water treatment plants, and major transportation corridors
- Improve public safety and loss of life in the 100-year floodplain

Skagit County received notification from the Washington State Department of Ecology, on March 12, 2010, that floodplain regulations in Chapter 14.34 of Skagit County Code were fully compliant with Federal and State floodplain regulations and contained several excellent higher regulatory standards, from the State of Washington Department of Ecology.

A major observation of Ecology is that Skagit County’s agricultural preservation program has continued to be a very effective adjunct to the County’s floodplain management program by continuing to allow only minimal development on farmlands which are, for the most part, part of the floodplain.

When the original floodplain maps were developed in the early 1980s, it was concluded that the agricultural preservation mindset that was evident at the time would be the major factor in furthering good floodplain management.

Skagit County is rated fifth in the nation under FEMA’s Community Rating System.



## STATE RECOGNIZES SKAGIT COUNTY FOR TOP SCORE

In January 2010, the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Funding Board recognized Skagit County for an outstanding project to conserve valuable farmland.

Skagit County ranked first in a statewide competition for grant funding in the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program’s Farmland Preservation category, a grant program designed to conserve the state’s most valuable farmland for future generations.

“This farmland is important,” said Kaleen Cottingham, director of the Recreation and Conservation Office, which administers the grant program. “The long daylight hours, mild maritime climate and fertile soils make Skagit Valley one of the few places in the world where vegetable seed can be produced. Because the Skagit Valley produces between 50 percent and 75 percent of the world’s spinach and cabbage seed, these properties have an importance far beyond the local level. The land also supports a variety of migratory bird species, including the Wrangell Island Snow Geese, which is protected by international treaties.”

Skagit County was awarded a \$319,000 grant to conserve 264 acres of the Smith farm on Fir Island. Farmed for more than a century, the land is designated as significant long-term commercial farmland and prime farmland by the federal Natural Resources Conservation Service and Skagit County. The farm will be protected by a permanent agricultural conservation easement. The county contributed \$319,000 in conservation futures to match the state funding.

Skagit County competed against 16 other local agencies for the grant from the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program. The Legislature created the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program in 1990 to buy land before it was developed and to create outdoor recreation areas for the state’s growing population.

“These grants are very competitive,” Cottingham said. “To be awarded a grant, the applicant must show the property is valuable farmland, that the community supports its preservation, and that the price is reasonable. This helps ensure that only the best projects get funded.”

Former Senator, Harriet Spanel, a member of the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Funding Board, presented a check representing the funding available for these projects at the regular commission meeting on January 12, 2010.



# SKAGIT VALLEY CROPS

	Dollar Value to Producer (2008)	Crop Acreage
Apples <sup>(1)</sup>	\$225,000	100
Blueberries	\$8,000,000	1,200
Carrots (processing)	\$600,000	300
Cucumbers (processing)	\$1,260,000	900
Field Crops <sup>(2)</sup>	\$30,000,000	35,000
Grass Seed	\$975,000	650
Miscellaneous Crops	\$25,000,000	4,000
Peas (processing)	\$6,000,000	6,000
Potatoes	\$60,000,000	12,000
Raspberries	\$6,000,000	1,200
Strawberries	\$2,250,000	450
Vegetable Seed <sup>(3)</sup>	\$7,515,399	2,314

- 1) Includes no nonbearing trees
- 2) Field Crops include alfalfa, barley, corn and grass silage, grass, oats, pea hay, small grain, and wheat
- 3) Vegetable seed includes beet, cabbage, swiss chard, and spinach

\*Figures shown are unofficial estimates based on input from processing companies, growers, agricultural organizations and agencies, field representatives, news articles, and Extension Agent experience. Crops grown by fewer than three producers are combined to protect confidentiality. Official agricultural figures are collected every five years by USDA, National Agricultural Statistics Service. The last Census of Agriculture was collected for the year 2002 and can be viewed at the following web site: <http://www.nass.usda.gov/census/>. For state information, contact Washington Agricultural Statistics (360/902-1940).

With more than 67,000 acres of prime farmland and over 80 different crops, Skagit County is rich in agricultural diversity. Skagit County is a major global producer of cabbage, table beet, and spinach seed; of the seven vegetable seed companies in the county, a majority markets their products worldwide. Skagit County is also home to two processing companies, Twin City Foods and Sakuma Brothers, who secure raw products from Skagit County and are noted for their superior quality. After expanding throughout the past 15 years, the potato industry has also developed into an important crop producing 15-20 tons annually. Skagit County also produces more tulip, daffodil, and iris bulbs than any other county in the United States and is the fourth largest dairy producer in Washington State. Other crops, including cole crops, vegetable seed crops, cucumbers, and small fruits contribute less in gross dollars, but are a critical component of Skagit's agricultural vitality.

## APPLES:

The coastal climate allows Skagit County to grow a unique variety of apples that are not grown in the large apple-producing regions of central Washington.

These apples include Jonagold, Gravenstein, Spartan, Akane, and Honey Crisp. While the quality of these apples is excellent, the lack of nearby apple processing facilities makes commercial production ineffective. Because of this, apple acreage is currently declining in Skagit County.



In 2008, Draper Valley Farms, the sole Washington-owned chicken processor in the state, sold to Booth Creek. Draper Valley Farms produced around 80 million dollars, employed 500 people, and was located in Mount Vernon. Booth Creek intends to operate the company in the same manner as the previous owner.

## DAIRY:

There are only 24 commercial dairies remaining in Skagit County; six years ago, there were 52. In 2008, 29 dairies started the year grossing an average of \$159,000 per farm per month. By December, only 27 remained and each averaged about \$100,000 gross income per farm, a loss of 38%. The loss of dairies negatively affects the agricultural community and county economy on many levels. Dairies not only provide natural fertilizers that are essential to soil health and nutrient needs for a variety of crops, but they also provide around \$1.5 million annually per farm. At current economic levels, it is feared that Skagit County dairies will continue to decline.



demand for their high quality. While late blight disease, Silver Scurf, and Flea Beetle threaten their production, Skagit farmers continue to use integrated pest management practices to minimize losses in order to continue growing fresh market red, white, yellow, purple, fingerling, and chipping potatoes.

## RASPBERRIES:

Skagit County produces about 10% of Washington State's raspberries. Washington State, in turn, produces about 75% of the nation's frozen red raspberries; 83% of this comes from Whatcom and Skagit Counties combined. Skagit County primarily grows Wilamette and Meeker berries which are processed into juice, preserves, yogurt, bakery ingredients, and frozen products.



## BLUEBERRIES:

Compared to the Midwest, the quality and production of Skagit County blueberries is exceptionally high. The Pacific Northwest is the fastest growing region of the blueberry industry in the U.S., and while Skagit County currently produces 30% of the state's total blueberry production, it is expected to increase as consumer demand and blueberry acreage continues to grow.



## PEAS:

Skagit County green peas are among the finest in the world in terms of both quality and flavor. Green peas have the third largest amount of acreage in Skagit Valley and are a great rotational crop due to their nitrogen fixing abilities. In 2008, growers contracted with local processor, Twin City, to grow 5,500 acres of peas that produced \$4 million in yield. Twin City decided against growing peas in Skagit County for 2010. Pea acreage has greatly declined in recent years due to competition from other growing areas.



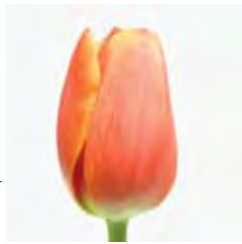
## SEED CROPS:

Skagit County vegetable seed crops consist of beets, cabbage, swiss chard, and spinach. Seed crops are complicated to grow due to their need for isolation in order to prevent contamination from cross-pollution. Consequently, Skagit County vegetable seed acreage is below 5,000 acres. Skagit County ranks first in vegetable seed production throughout Western Washington providing \$7.5m of the \$8.9m produced from vegetable seed crops. About one third of the world's beet seeds are grown in Skagit Valley.



## BULB CROPS:

Skagit County's bulb industry averages about \$20 million in annual gross income, \$3 million of which constitutes bulb sales. With approximately 1,100 acres dedicated to bulb crops, Skagit County grows more tulip, daffodil, and iris bulbs than any other county in the nation. These flowers are sold as both bulbs and cut flowers which are then shipped throughout the U.S. and Canada. The Tulip Festival, established in 1984, brings an estimated 300,000 visitors and \$65 million in County revenue each year.



## STRAWBERRIES:

Although acreage is declining, in part, due to national and global competition, Skagit County continues to produce about 20% of Washington State's strawberries. With around 500 acres in Skagit County, strawberries provide over \$2 million annually making this crop an important part of Skagit County agriculture.



## CHICKEN AND EGGS:

Washington State is ranked 16th in the nation for egg production. Three major companies, Dynes, Day Creek Organic Farms, and Dai-Zen, produce the majority of eggs for the county. Together, these three farms produce about 10 million eggs a year.



## POTATOES:

Potatoes are Skagit Valley's most profitable crop, providing over \$60,000,000 annually. With 12,000 acres dedicated to their production, Skagit County potatoes are in great



# DRAINAGE KEY TO SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

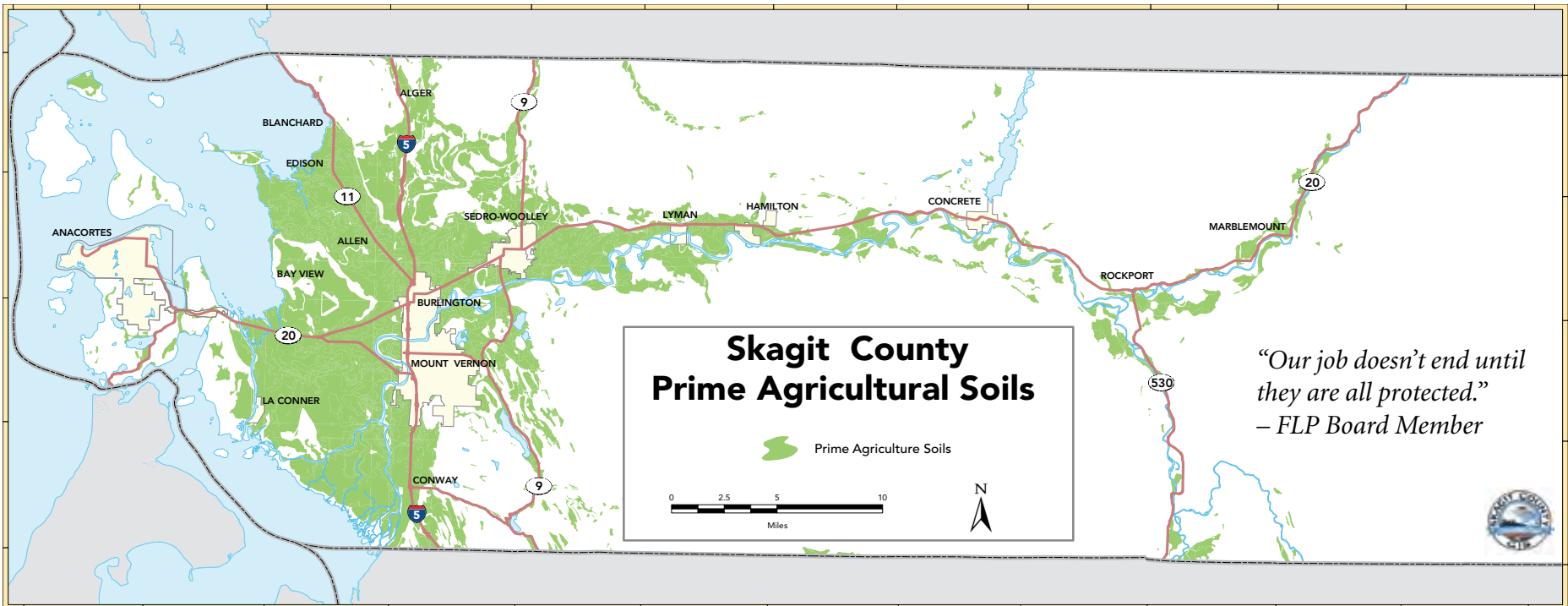
A key component of the success of agriculture in Skagit County is a complex system of levees, dikes, tide gates and drainage ditches established more than 100 years ago to protect more than 66,000 acres of prime farmland from flooding and tidal inundation.

role in supporting an industry that contributes \$600,000,000 to our local economy. Farmers assess themselves millions of dollars each year to maintain this intricate system.

This critical infrastructure is operated and maintained by more than 24 dike, drainage, and irrigation districts. With more than 380 miles of drainage districts, 147 miles of dikes and levees, and 130 tide gates and flood gates, Skagit County's special purposes districts play a significant

With more than 80 different crops, agriculture in the Skagit Delta provides some of the most productive and diverse farmland in the world. Still dominated by small family farms, many of which are third and fourth generation landowners, the future is bright, but only if the infrastructure and critical land mass is maintained.

## APPROXIMATELY 67,000 ACRES OF THE MOST PRODUCTIVE SOILS IN THE WORLD



### MAKE A DONATION TO SAVE AN ACRE

The Farmland Legacy Program (FLP) is grateful for donations like those of the "Preserve an acre of Skagit Farmland." A contribution of \$2,800 helps protect about two acres of farmland through the FLP. With every dollar contributed, the FLP is able to get an equal match from various state and federal agencies. The private donations provided by Skagit citizens demonstrate how important it is to the community to protect this rich and fertile landscape for farming. The FLP is constructing a donation board in the Skagit County Administration Building in Mount Vernon where anyone can make a donation. If you make a donation, please remember to consult your accountant or tax consultant as to the value and deductibility of your gift for tax purposes.

#### INTERESTED IN ENROLLING IN THE FARMLAND LEGACY PROGRAM?

Take the following easy steps:

- Fill out an application. Applications are available online or at (360) 419-3303. Leave your name and address and we will send you one.
- Meet with the director to discuss your property characteristics and owner options.

#### HOW THE PROCESS WORKS

The FLP orders an appraisal on properties along with a ranking evaluation and a title report. The appraisal is based on the fair market value taking into consideration the number of development rights, size, and location of the property. With this information, an offer is made to purchase the development right(s) and to place a conservation easement on the property. The easements allow for agricultural operations and activities. A draft easement is also available online.

If the landowner agrees to the offered amount, they sign a letter of intent and an easement contract. Final closing document are then executed, the landowner is paid, and farmlands are protected in perpetuity.

Continued citizen support is crucial to the success of the Farmland Legacy Program. For more information on the program, how to enroll, or to donate, contact Kendra Smith at [kendras@co.skagit.wa.us](mailto:kendras@co.skagit.wa.us) or visit [www.skagitcounty.net/farmland](http://www.skagitcounty.net/farmland). Also visit the County office at 1800 Continental Place in Mount Vernon to fill out an eligibility and pricing formula worksheet.

### "Protect an acre" of fertile Skagit County Farmland!



Join others to help save our fertile Skagit County soil by making a contribution to Skagit County's Farmland Legacy program! Donations are tax deductible.

Your donations help preserve farmland and help Skagit County leverage local, state, and federal dollars to preserve our agricultural heritage.

- \$25
- \$50
- \$100
- \$250
- \$500
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

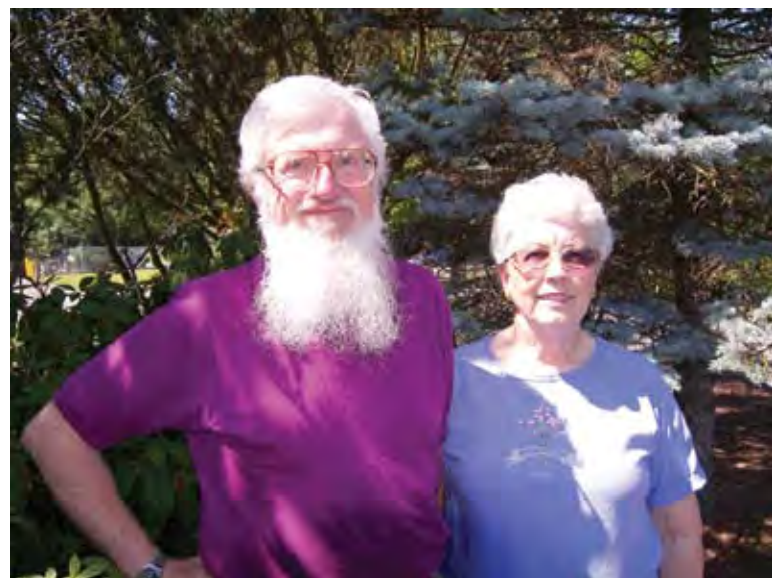
Your Name \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Send contributions to "Skagit County Farmland Legacy Program," 1800 Continental Place, Mount Vernon, Washington, 98273.

For further information, contact Farmland Legacy Director Kendra Smith at 360-419-3303.



Bob and Bev Helton of Mount Vernon are among those who have generously donated to "Protect an Acre" in the Farmland Legacy program.

