

SKAGIT COUNTY

FARMLAND LEGACY PROGRAM

2023 ANNUAL REPORT



Skagit County's Farmland Legacy Program is one of the most active and successful farmland preservation programs in the state of Washington.

Past its quarter-century mark, the Farmland Legacy Program now protects close to 15,000 acres of fertile Skagit County farmland from future development.

This voluntary program enables farmland owners to receive compensation for unused residential development rights and protect their land for agricultural use, while they retain ownership of their land.

PROTECTING LAND

The 14,700 acres of protected farmland in Skagit County include row crops, seed crops, dairy and cattle operations, as well as silage, hay pasture, bulbs, flowers, and berries.

More than 200 conservation easements on Skagit farmland place permanent restrictions on future use and development of the land—protecting its agricultural productivity for future generations.

Total protected farmland as of December 2023 represents 17% of the 89,000 acres designated Agricultural-Natural Resource Lands in the county.

THE ECONOMY OF AGRICULTURE

We can be proud that our county has made it a priority to protect our farmers and to support Skagit County's agricultural industry over the last 26 years and into the future.

A special thank you to our farmers and land owners for their commitment to preserving the county's agricultural landscape. And a heartfelt thank you to our Skagit County Commissioners and citizens. It is through your combined support that this important work continues.



A MESSAGE FROM YOUR SKAGIT COUNTY COMMISSIONERS

Nestled between the mountains of the North Cascades and the seas of the Puget Sound is Skagit Valley—one of the richest and most productive agricultural regions in the western hemisphere. Skagit County is a hub for innovation in the regional grain market, supplies much of the world’s cabbage, table beet, and spinach seed, and is one of the state’s top dairy regions. Growers here take advantage of each parcel of farmland, with an exceptional crop diversity that supports soil health, pest control, disease management, and market diversification.

When we adopted the Skagit County 2022–2032 Strategic Plan, we included a goal to enroll four hundred acres of farmland per year into the Farmland Legacy Program. The protection of farmland is an important priority to us because it ensures there is farmland available for future generations. Local farms are a vital part of our economy in Skagit County. Farmers provide us with fresh produce, support local businesses, ensure the protection of open space and natural habitat for wildlife, and increase our resilience to natural disasters. Farmland is a rapidly disappearing natural resource and it’s irreplaceable, which is why the Farmland Legacy Program is so important to protecting farmland from future development and conversion.

We are proud of Skagit County’s Farmland Legacy Program and the nearly 15,000 acres it has protected in its first quarter century. The success of this program would not be possible without the support of our community and partners. We thank you and we look forward to continuing our work to protect Skagit County farmland.

Sincerely,
BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS | SKAGIT COUNTY, WASHINGTON



Peter Browning
District 2, Chair



Ron Wesen
District 1



Lisa Janicki
District 3



Fir Island from Dry Slough Road, overlooking the 40 acres protected by the Fisher family in 2023.

Photo: John Holtman

“It took the Skagit River nearly 20,000 years to create this valley. Let’s not pave it over in a few years’ time.” Dave Hedlin, owner of Hedlin Farms, who permanently protected 60 acres through Farmland Legacy in 2013.

RECENT SUCCESSES: 2023 PROTECTED FARMLAND

Five Properties—425 Acres of Farmland—Added to Preservation Program in 2023

60 ACRES | LA CONNER

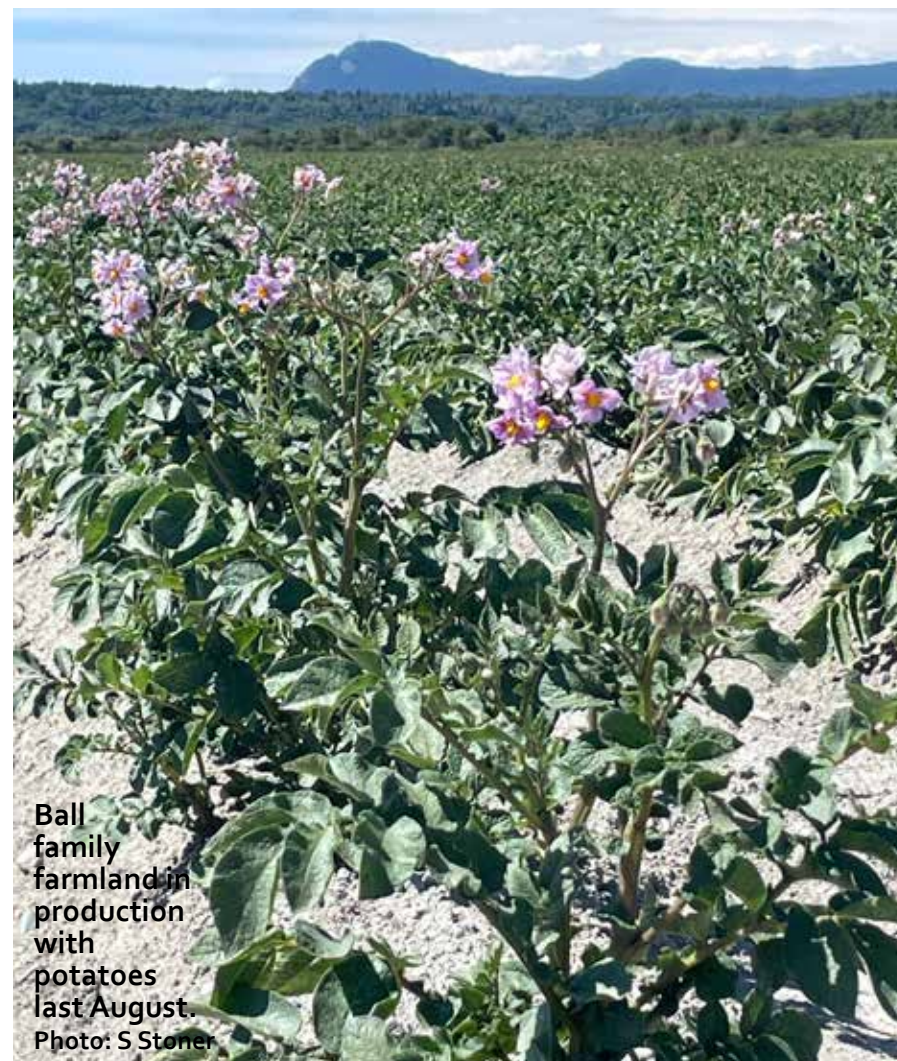
The Ring and Lillquist families manage their 60 acres of La Conner farmland together. These two families are descendants of Isaac Dunlap who served as Skagit County’s first County Commissioner in 1889. The land has been in a rotation of potatoes, grains, and vegetable crops over the last decade. “Our families’ first goal is to protect the land as farmland,” says John Ring, who owns the east parcel with his wife Berdean. “We want the land to stay the same for new generations who come to grow here.”



Photo: S Stoner

“We want the land to stay the same for new generations who come to grow here.”

John Ring, who owns recently protected La Conner farmland with his wife Berdean [in photo at left, with nephew and next door landowner Karl Lillquist]



Ball family farmland in production with potatoes last August. Photo: S Stoner

“Agricultural conservation easements ensure prime farmland is not developed, help to keep it affordable for the next generation of farmers, and provide a capital boost to local farm businesses,” said County Commissioner Lisa Janicki. The additional 60 acres create a 650-acre block of protected farmland between Chillberg and McLean roads in La Conner.

300 ACRES | LA CONNER

Alex Ball’s stewardship of 300 acres of La Conner farmland reaches back five generations to the late 1800s when Richard H. Ball pioneered the land after serving in the Civil War. The land is actively farmed by Jerry Nelson of Double N Potatoes. [see page 6 to read more about Jerry Nelson and protected farmland in Skagit County]

The decision to sell specific property rights so the land remains farmland no matter who owns it came about from Alex and his wife Karee’s recent estate planning. “It felt easy to do. It was the right decision for our family,” said Karee Ball.

“Keeping this prime La Conner soil as farmland is important to the Ball family’s legacy and to the community at large,” said Commissioner Ron Wesen. “We are indebted to farmland owners like the Balls who protect their land for producers today and future generations of farmers tomorrow.”

The additional Ball acreage creates a 1,500-acre block of protected farmland in northeast La Conner along the Swinomish Channel.

25 ACRES | BOW

Edison Fields’ newly protected 25 acres sit adjacent to 156 acres of farmland, also owned by Edison Fields, which were preserved in 2020. These protected 181 acres are part of Edison Fields LLC farming operation, on land owned and leased across Skagit County. The 25 acres add to the nearly 1,300-acre block of protected farmland along Farm to Market Road in Bow.

“The smaller size of Edison Fields’ 25-acre parcel makes it especially appealing to a residential development,” said Skagit County Commissioner Ron Wesen. “The rural neighborhood and views contribute to the residential appeal of this land. Thanks to their collective decision, Edison Fields’ farmland remains protected for our food producers.”

40 ACRES | FIR ISLAND

Colleen Fisher’s newly protected 40 acres of farmland on Fir Island has been in her family for several decades. The land is currently leased to S&B Farms, which produced potatoes last season. “Protecting it as farmland is just the right thing to do,” said Fisher. Fisher’s property sits north of farmland owned by S&B Farms that was protected in 2010.

“A big thank you to Colleen Fisher,” said County Commissioner Peter Browning, who represents the southwest district of Skagit County. “Her decision to put her land under the Farmland Legacy program reflects her family’s long-standing commitment to agriculture in Skagit County.”

QUESTION:

None of the families who protected Skagit County farmland this year farm the land themselves. Why is that?

ANSWER:

Land stewardship takes many forms. Many farms in Skagit County rent, lease, or trade ground to meet production and rotational needs.

Protected farmland can be held by families or individuals who no longer farm, but keep their land in production through a variety of short- or long-term arrangements with neighboring farms.

2023

Easement acquisition payments totaled \$745,000 in Skagit County Conservation Futures tax funds.

2024

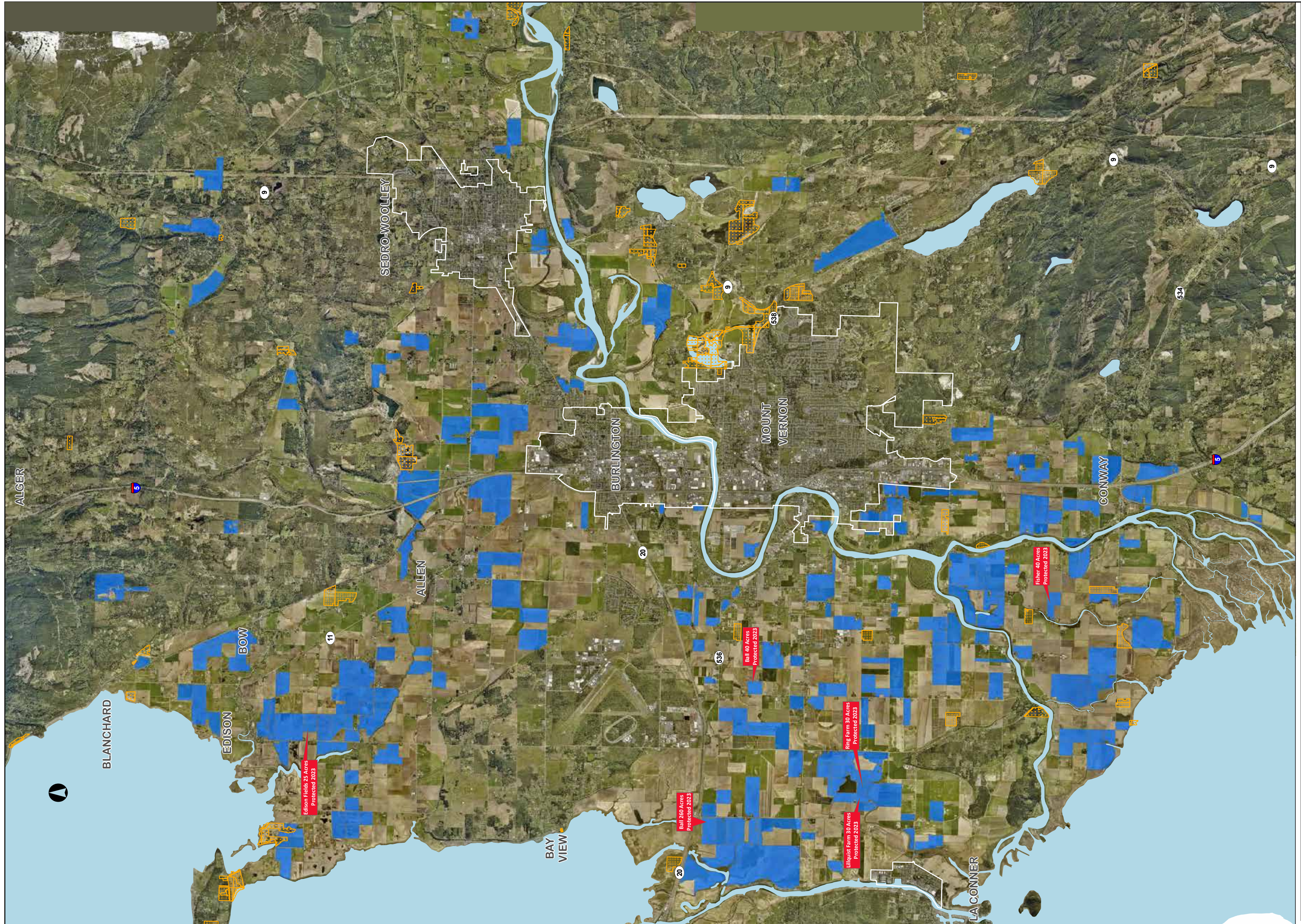
The county has budgeted \$1.5 million in Conservation Futures tax funds for the purchase of easements to protect additional agricultural land in 2024. More information on Skagit County’s Farmland Legacy Program is available at skagitcounty.net/farmland or by calling (360) 416-1417.

Skagit County is one of 14 counties in Washington that levy a conservation futures tax. This local tax funds the Skagit County Farmland Legacy Program.



Shown in the foreground is part of the 173 acres of La Conner farmland protected in 2021 by Nancy Dunton, along with the 60 acres (in photo center) of newly protected farmland managed by the Ring and Lillquist families. Photo: SP Fask

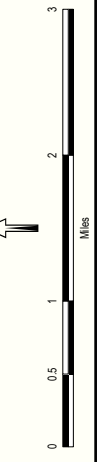
This report was produced by the Skagit County Public Works Department and funded by the Farmland Legacy Program Conservation Futures Fund. Front page: Feature photo by Cedarbrook Studio, Mount Baker sunrise. Photos continued, left to right, farmland view from Samish Bay overlook by NW News Network; pigs of Egbert Acres in Bow by Cynthia Buchanan; strawberry in the field courtesy of Hayton Berries; barn under full moon by Cedarbrook Studio. Content and Editing: Sarah Stoner, Kai Ottesen.



PROTECTED FARMLAND IN WESTERN SKAGIT COUNTY

Legend

- Farmland Legacy Conservation Easements
- Other Protected Properties (Skagitians to Preserve Farmland, Skagit Land Trust, NRCS, Ducks Unlimited.)



MEET JERRY NELSON, WHO'S PROTECTED THE MOST ACRES OF FARMLAND IN SKAGIT COUNTY

Meet Jerry Nelson. Jerry holds the most acres of Skagit farmland protected by Farmland Legacy conservation easements—with some 1,500 acres enrolled to-date.

He is the owner and operator of Double N Potatoes. Since the 1940s, the Nelson family has produced potatoes from the superior soil of Skagit County.

Featuring Jerry any year—as holder of the most acres in the Legacy program—makes sense... this year in particular, since it

was Jerry who encouraged a longtime La Conner family to protect their farmland in 2023.

Farmland Legacy program manager Sarah Stoner sat down with Jerry this spring—in the busy office of Double N Potato packing shed facility on Avon Avenue in Burlington—to talk about his farming operation, his family and love of flying, and how farmland preservation in Skagit County supports his farming operation.

When did you know you were interested in farming and the family business?

As a kid I didn't know I was going to go into farming. My dad, Norm Nelson Sr., worked hard and accomplished a lot in a very short time. He was busy and there wasn't much talk about me or any of us kids being on the farm. Plus, we lived off the farm, so we didn't directly witness day-to-day operations. I had a real passion for flying and saw my life as a pilot.

My last year in high school, my dad showed more interest in me being on the farm. I saw a place for me then and realized that's what I really wanted to do. Now we farm the same ground just west of I-5 where my father started growing potatoes in the late 1930s.

Tell us a bit about your decision to be a second-generation grower in your family.

As far as the farming operation, I spent a lot of time working on the farm. I had a real passion for it just like I do now. My son is involved now. He and my daughter will inherit the operation. They will take on the opportunity of continuing the farm. You know I'm only a few months away from 80? And I'm still doing this! I really like what I do. I'm one of the lucky ones.

When I got out of the service I got married. And, you know... your family comes first. But the farm was always very important to me. As time went on my dad's health wasn't the best and I had more and more responsibility. Some of the people my dad depended on at work, they moved on, so that gave me more responsibilities as time went on. I was good with it all.

A couple years before my dad passed, he made me president of the company. My brothers and also two sisters had been given interest. We worked real hard at making everybody feel good about what we were doing for the family business. At a point, one younger brother offered to sell his interest in the business. I realized my other brother would soon retire. So, about 2002, I bought the whole family out. It was a big undertaking.

You've been a strong proponent of protecting Skagit agriculture and, specifically, farmland. You hold the record for most protected farmland acreage in all of Skagit County—10% of total farmland protected by Farmland Legacy. What can you tell us about that choice?

Protecting our agricultural zoning is really important for us—to our community and the farming industry. So far, we have done that in Skagit County, despite the growth. We farm on the I-5 corridor. There's a lot of pressure to expand development into the farmland.

Last year, you referred the Ball family to the Farmland Legacy Program. How did that conversation come about?

I certainly want to see their land stay in agriculture. I've been farming their land for more than a decade. I introduced the idea of farmland protection to the Balls for the same reasons I extinguished the development rights on my land. I don't want to see homes built on it. To protect the land was their choice.

I think for them, they have children, and were looking to the future. Alex is the fourth generation of his family to own the property. Land that is owned by one family for four generations is uncommon, it's very special. What would happen if none of their kids want the farmland? That may still happen. But now it won't become houses or lawn. They protected the land's future.



Longtime local farmer and participant in the Farmland Legacy Program Jerry Nelson. Photo: Potato Growers Magazine

How has the Farmland Legacy program benefited your business?

Skagit farmers and dairymen often trade land with other farmers. Potatoes are a crop that we plant one year out of four [to minimize disease cycles in the soil]. For every one acre we put into potatoes, we need four acres. I farm a whole lot more land than potatoes to keep my crop rotation in place. We need agriculture to be alive and well in order for us to do well.

It's less expensive to rent than to buy farmland. Plus, it doesn't take up your working capital. But I can't lease from another potato farmer because the land is already in their own potato rotation. When a piece of land we've been renting comes up for sale, we risk losing land base if we don't buy it. Selling development rights helps offset cost to buy farmland. It helps lower costs to keep farmland affordable.

Any advice for people considering protecting their Skagit farmland?

Get clear about your vision for the future, and your plans for the land. Go into it with your eyes wide open. Understand the limitations and how it may affect your vision for the land down the road—ask all your questions. It's a great program because a house on farmland can take it out of production.

What are some bigger challenges owning and operating a farm business?

Weather is always a challenge. As a farmer, weather is your best friend and your worst enemy. We've lost a lot of potatoes in fall because of wet conditions, no longer able to get equipment into the fields to harvest. We've lost potatoes in the spring when we planted during good weather, and then heavy rains followed. One year, we lost over 240 acres of potatoes. A few years ago, we lost 80 acres.

The market is a challenge. Our prices are subject to supply and demand. Price of labor has gone up, price of fuel. All our inputs have gone up. In a year like this one, we are getting a lot less for our product because of an oversupply.

Also, finding help is concerning. We're getting more and more automated because we can't always find people to do the work. The cost of equipment isn't fully paid for in labor savings. But it's paid for in the fact that I'm able to operate.

What are some of your greatest successes as a farmer?

I think we've been a positive influence in the agricultural community here in Skagit County. I feel good about our housekeeping and operations. We provide health care plans and pension plans for our people. I think we've created a nice environment for people to work.

Skagit County now grows a variety of yellow, red, purple and white potatoes with a long selling season. It hasn't always been that way. People said we couldn't store and ship colored potato varieties that long. We did our own research and studies. With that investment in research, we've been able to grow the storage life of potato varieties in the Skagit and extend the length of the selling season.

Anything you'd like to add? What about more time to fly?

I tell you, this thing about being nearly 80 years old... it snuck up on me so fast. I plan to work until I no longer can. I've slowed down a bit, but I love the work, I have a real passion for it. Tell you the truth, I might be a bit lost without it. I am proud we have kept our operation running to the third generation and beyond. That's not an easy thing to do.

HOW MANY ACRES HAVE BEEN PRESERVED?

Farmland Legacy Program	
FLP Easements	207 conservation easements
Total Acres Protected	14,700 acres in Farmland Legacy Program
Extinguished Residential Development Rights	273 single-family homes kept out of working lands
Pending Easements	590 acres, 14 development rights queued for protection



Mount Baker overlooks local corn growing. Photo: Cedarbrook Studio



Drainage ditch and tractor. Photo: Cedarbrook Studio



Why do landowners apply to enroll in the Farmland Legacy Program?

- ◇ To preserve land for agricultural production in perpetuity
- ◇ To reinvest funds into equipment
- ◇ To reinvest funds into additional land purchases
- ◇ To aid in farm succession planning efforts
- ◇ To supplement farm income
- ◇ To reduce farm debt

Benefits to the community

- ◇ Preserves open space and rural character
- ◇ Supports local food production
- ◇ Limits development in the floodplain
- ◇ Reduces urban sprawl
- ◇ Contributes to the agricultural economy
- ◇ Conserves soil for future generations



Cattle grazing in Skagit County. Photo: courtesy of Hayton Farms



Since 1996, the Skagit County Farmland Legacy Program has sourced \$23.7 million in compensation to farmer-landowners for the permanent protection of agricultural land in Skagit County. The breakdown of the \$23.7 million spent over the past 26 years includes \$14 million in Skagit County Conservation Futures Tax and \$9.7 million in local and federal grants and nonprofit contributions.

Funding Sources & Partnerships	Contributions
Skagit Land Trust	\$104,000
Ducks Unlimited	\$148,000
The Nature Conservancy	\$250,500
Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland	\$850,150
WA State Recreation & Conservation	\$3,035,175
U. S. Department of Agriculture	\$5,379,575
Skagit County Conservation Futures Tax	\$13,995,600
Total invested to date	\$23,763,000

SKAGIT VALLEY AGRICULTURE

Economic Impact

- ◇ \$367 million farmgate value
- ◇ Approximately 90,000 acres of agricultural land* grow 90 different crops of commercial value
- ◇ 2,600 jobs; \$108 million in wages
- ◇ Support businesses (input and equipment dealers, consultants) add an estimated \$200 million in additional economic value, and hundreds of jobs
- ◇ Collectively a top employer in Skagit County

Agricultural Production of National and Global Significance

- ◇ Major producer of vegetable seeds in the world
 - Produces 75% of the nation's cabbage and spinach seed
 - Produces 95% of the nation's table beet seed
 - Produces 25% of the world's cabbage seed
 - Produces 25% of the world's table beet seed
 - Produces 8% of the world's spinach seed
- ◇ Major national producer of blueberries, raspberries, and blackberries



- ◇ Fifth largest dairy-producing county in WA.
 - Approx. 14,000 dairy cows produce 23.5 million gallons of milk for the year and provide a key supply of fertilizer for organic growers.

* 89,000 acres of land in Skagit County are zoned Ag-Natural Resource Lands (Ag-NRL). An estimated 65,000 acres (70%) of that total is tillable farmland; the remaining farmland acreage is non-tillable, taken up by roads, houses, driveways, ditches, etc.

Data provided by Washington State University Skagit County Extension.

PROTECTING OUR PRIME AGRICULTURAL SOILS

INTERESTED IN ENROLLING?

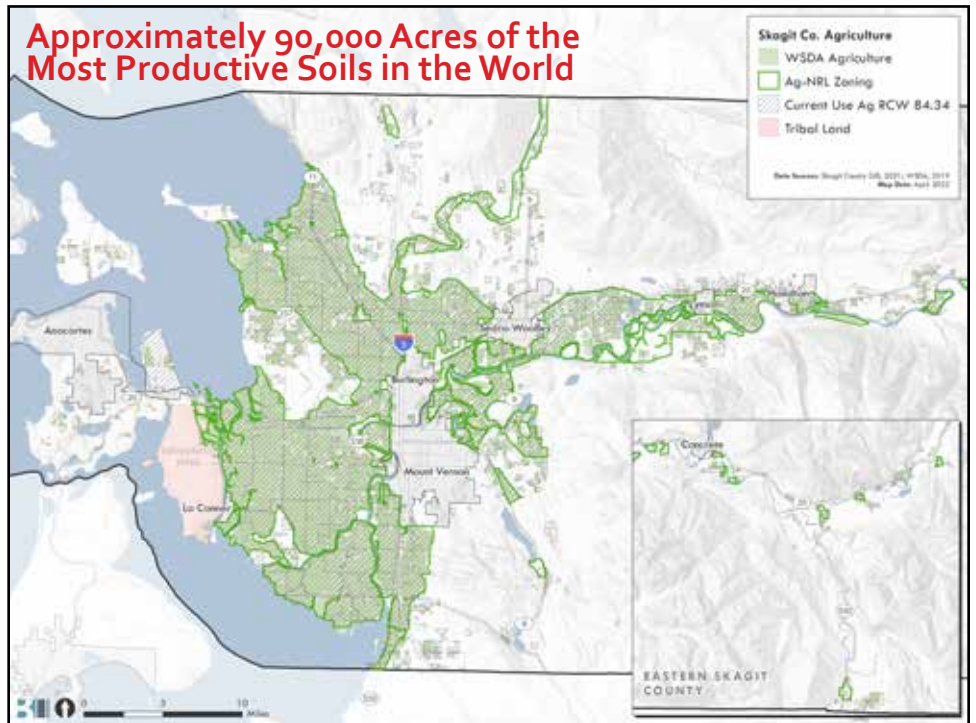
Take any one of following easy steps:

- » Call today to request an application. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis.
- » Call Sarah Stoner to discuss your specific property characteristics, concerns, goals.
- » Meet with Sarah—at the County office or your property.
- » Learn more at www.skagitcounty.net/farmland

Contact Farmland Legacy Program Manager

Sarah Stoner | 360-416-1417
sstoner@co.skagit.wa.us

Farmland Legacy staff guides Skagit County farmland owners and their families through the process of protecting their land for future generations. Each family and property has its unique circumstances and timelines.



CONSERVATION FUTURES ADVISORY BOARD (CFAB)

Chair

Scott DeGraw, District 3 (2008-2025)

Members

Owen Peth, District 1 (2013-2026)

Andrea Xaver, District 2 (2007-2024)

Keith Morrison, At-Large (2018-2025)

Margery Hite, Skagit Conservation District (2021-2024)

Jim Glackin, Skagit Land Trust (2018-2026)

Audrey Gravley, Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland (2021-2025)



Photo: S Stoner

Sarah Stoner, Skagit County Agricultural Lands Coordinator (*ex-officio*)

Reporting to the Board of Skagit County Commissioners, the CFAB reviews and recommends the farmland voluntarily offered from owners looking to prevent conversion to non-agricultural uses.

CFAB members closely review an applicant's property to consider factors such as size of farm, soil quality, scenic values, and possible development pressures. Advisory board members attend monthly meetings together with County staff and local partners.

DID YOU KNOW...? YOU CAN STILL PROTECT SKAGIT FARMLAND WHEN YOU HAVE AN EXISTING HOUSE

Q What if I have an existing home on my farmland in the Ag zone? Could I still protect my agricultural land?

A The county's Agricultural Land Preservation code is another avenue for landowners to protect farmland in Skagit County.

The Agricultural Lands Preservation code: A Closer Look

The Agricultural Lands Preservation code allows owners of an existing home in Agricultural-Natural Resource Lands (Ag-NRL) or Rural Resource-Natural Resources Lands (RRc-NRL) to create separate lots for the homesite and for the agricultural land.

For example, if a landowner has a house on 40 acres in Ag-NRL, utilizing this code, the landowner can create two lots—a one-acre lot for the home site and a 39-acre lot for the remaining agricultural land.

This code is commonly referred to as the 39-and-1 split. However, it applies to lots of any size within Ag-NRL or RRc-NRL zones. The County allows the landowner to create these substandard lots in exchange for the landowner placing a conservation easement on the agricultural acreage. A substandard lot in the Ag-NRL or RRc-NRL zones is any parcel under 40 acres.

This provision gives the property owner flexibility if they'd like to keep the house and sell the farmland, or to keep the farmland and sell the home. Of course, the property owner can retain ownership of both newly-created tracts. The zoning provision's intent is to encourage long-term agricultural land protection. Thousands of acres have been protected through this inventive mechanism.

To view Title 14.16.860, visit www.codepublishing.com/wa/skagitcounty/

