

# SKAGIT COUNTY

## FARMLAND LEGACY PROGRAM

### ANNUAL REPORT



**S**kagit County's Farmland Legacy Program is one of Washington's most active and successful farmland preservation programs.

The Farmland Legacy Program has protected more than 15,000 acres of prime farmland from future development.

This voluntary program offers farmland owners financial compensation for unused residential development rights while it ensures their land stays available for farming—and they continue to own the land.

#### PROTECTING LAND FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

The 15,130 acres of protected farmland support a diverse range of agricultural activities, including:

- Row crops and seed crops
- Dairy and cattle operations
- Silage, hay pasture, bulbs, flowers, and berries

With more than 200 conservation easements in place, these agreements permanently restrict non-agricultural development—safeguarding farmland for future generations.

Protected farmland as of December 2024 represents 17% of the 89,000 acres designated Agricultural-Natural Resource Lands in the county.

#### A THRIVING AGRICULTURAL ECONOMY

Skagit County has long prioritized protecting agriculture to ensure a sustainable future. We extend a special thank you to our farmers and landowners for their dedication 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.

Unfortunately, farmland is a rapidly disappearing natural resource and it’s irreplaceable. Not only is farmland under threat from future development, but it continues to be difficult for operators to stay in the business of farming. Rising costs, limited and highly competitive markets, and reduced funding opportunities have led to the closure of farms we have come to love and appreciate in our community. We are committed to supporting our local farmers through the Farmland Legacy Program to ensure we do our part in protecting land from development, and keeping Skagit County farmland in large, usable parcels for working farm operations.

We are proud of Skagit County’s Farmland Legacy Program and the more than 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.



Lisa Janicki  
District 3, Chair



Ron Wesen  
District 1



Peter Browning  
District 2

## RECENT SUCCESSES: FARMLAND PROTECTED IN 2024

Five Properties—460 Acres of Farmland—Added to Preservation Program



Barn built in 1930 on the now-protected farm in Conway.  
Photo: J. Holtman

### 66 ACRES | CONWAY

Northwest Territory’s newly protected 66 acres on the Skagit-Snohomish County line sit within the Skagit, Stillaguamish, and Samish River Deltas. The Skagit River is within a few hundred feet of the land. The land has produced a variety of annual crops over several decades.

These protected acres are part of the Northwest Territory LLC farming operation, on land owned and leased across Skagit County. An adjacent farmland protection project on the Snohomish County side is in process through neighboring conservation partners, which will create a block of protected farmland spanning the two counties.

### 267 ACRES | SEDRO-WOOLLEY

Brothers Keith and Mark Houser grew up on their family dairy farm near Hart Slough in Sedro-Woolley along with their three siblings and parents Ray and Winnie Houser. A dairy since the 1950s, the protected property is

“We need our working lands  
for our working farmers.”

—Mark Houser, who recently protected farmland owned  
with his siblings, wife and children.

now leased by Skagit Valley Farm’s operation to grow a variety of row crops. The forest and wetlands on Hart Island remain intact as part of the Houser’s land stewardship. With the homestead farmland now permanently protected, they continue to steward the soil. “We make sure a cover crop is planted every winter, in case it floods. Just like our dad taught us,” said Keith Houser, part of the Houser family co-ownership.

### 80 ACRES | BURLINGTON

Farmland along Skagit’s I-5 corridor has long been especially vulnerable to development pressure. A now-protected 80-acre farmland property is among the most visible from the highway. For years, Mark Houser, who co-owns the land with children, received phone calls from developers on a weekly basis.

“I want to see farmland set aside for my kids and for our farmers,” said Mr. Houser. “We need our working lands for our working farmers.” The 80 acres is leased to grow a rotation of potatoes and grains. This land is also part of the county’s several mile-long Agricultural Scenic Corridor, which has remained Washington State’s sole agricultural scenic highway since being officially designated in 2010.

“The 80 acres at the Chuckanut freeway interchange stood out as farmland at high risk of being converted to use that has nothing to do with farming,” said Farmland Legacy Coordinator Sarah Stoner. “Just take one look at what’s happened up and down the I-5 corridor, with numerous truck stops, warehouses, coffee shops, fast food and gas stations.”

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 Colby Mesick, patchwork quilt of working farm fields from Samish Overlook. Photos continued, left to right, spring lamb by Kat Smith; cabbage by Maria Orlova; Skagit Valley barn and machinery by Cedarbrook Studio.

Content and Editing: Sarah Stoner, Kai Ottesen.







Overlooking the 80 acres of Burlington farmland protected in 2024, along the Interstate 5 corridor at the Chuckanut freeway interchange.  
Photo courtesy of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland

“The nation that destroys its soil destroys itself.”

—Franklin D. Roosevelt, U.S. President, penned in a 1937 letter to state governors

8.5 ACRES | MOUNT VERNON

John Yearsley’s newly protected 8.5 acres of farmland on McLean Road in Mount Vernon has been in his family for nearly 90 years. The smaller size of Yearsley’s land and location near town makes it especially appealing to a home builder.

“The Farmland Legacy program serves us all well by slowing down the conversion of farmland to development,” said Yearsley. “Including my farmland in the program was an easy decision to make.” McLean and Penn Roads were all farmland when his parents arrived in Mount Vernon in the 1940s, he recalls.

Cabrera Farms subleases the land for their organic vegetable and berry operation. Francisco and Zochitl Cabrera are first-generation farm owners. They launched their business in 2016 at Viva Farms, a nonprofit farm business incubator for beginning farmers.

38.5 ACRES | SEDRO-WOOLLEY

This Sedro-Woolley farmland was protected using the Agricultural Lands Preservation code (see inset, right), an option available to landowners looking to separate a one-acre homesite from its surrounding farmland.

The homesite or the farmland can then be sold separately, allowing a homeowner to retain their home; and allowing a farmer to purchase land more affordably. In exchange for creating a one-acre homesite in Skagit’s agricultural zone, the remaining farmland is protected in perpetuity.

The additional preserved acreage in Sedro-Woolley creates a 120-acre block of protected farmland along Collins Road north of Cook Road.

**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 Resource Lands (RRc-NRL) to create separate lots for the homesite and for the agricultural land.

The zoning provision gives the owner flexibility if they’d like to keep the house and sell the farmland, or vice versa. The intent is to encourage long-term agricultural land protection.

To view Title 14.16.860, visit [www.codepublishing.com/wa/skagitcounty/](http://www.codepublishing.com/wa/skagitcounty/)

**Conservation Futures—  
Farmland Legacy’s Funding**

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.

**2024** Easement acquisition payments totaled \$985,000 in Skagit County conservation futures tax funds.

**2025** The County has budgeted \$1.5 million in conservation futures funds to pay for easements that protect additional agricultural land.

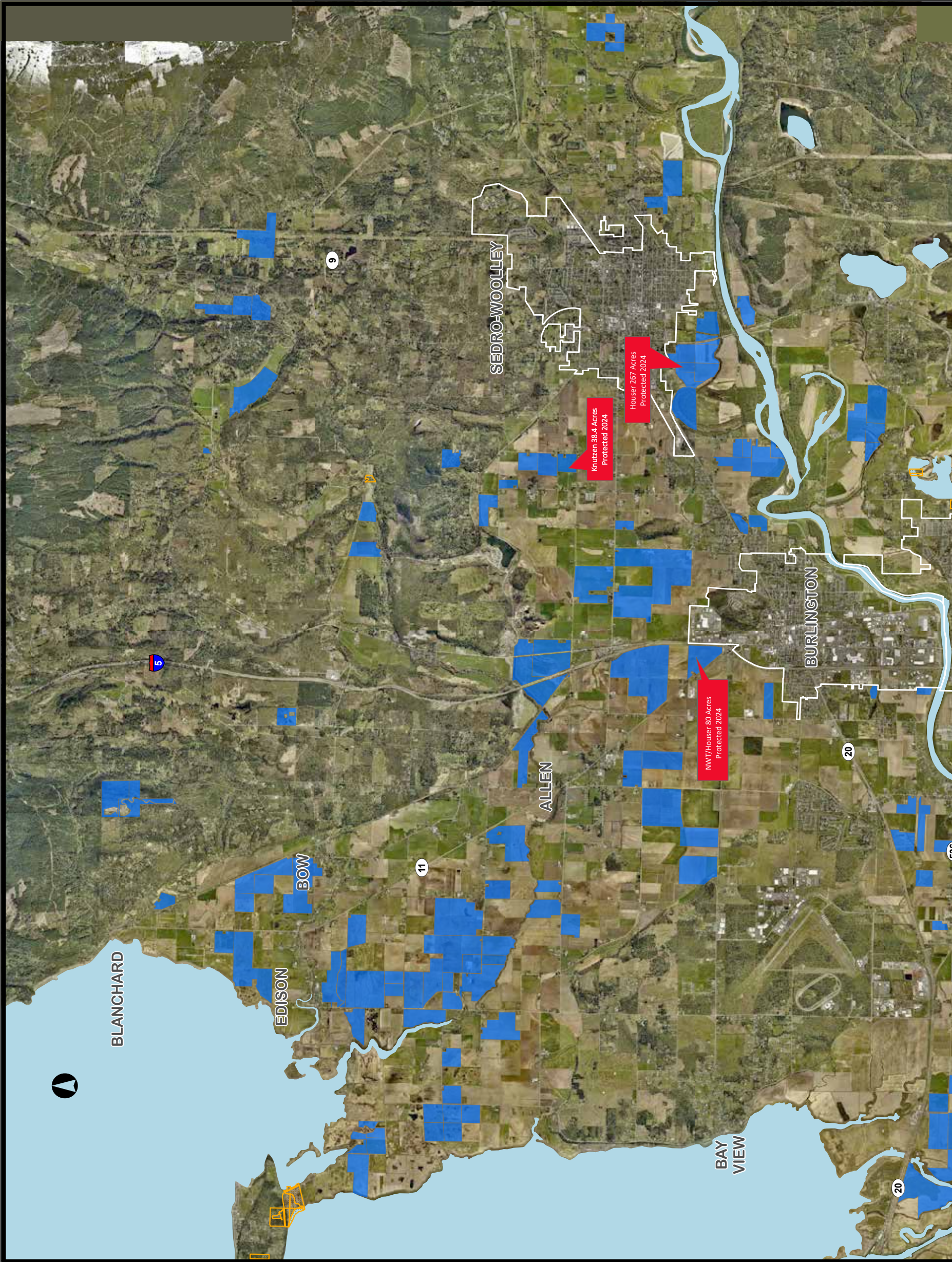
**For more information on Skagit County’s Farmland Legacy Program, visit [skagitcounty.net/farmland](http://skagitcounty.net/farmland) or call (360) 416-1417.**



Landowner John Yearsley shown in the foreground with Farmland Legacy Program coordinator Sarah Stoner, standing on his newly protected farmland in Mount Vernon, Washington.  
Photo: John Holtman













PROTECTED FARMLAND IN WESTERN SKAGIT COUNTY

Legend

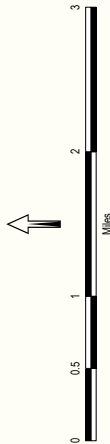
-  Farmland Legacy Protected Properties
-  Other Protected Properties  
(Skagitians to Preserve Farmland,  
Skagit Land Trust, NRCS, Ducks Unlimited)



Aerial Photo 2023  
Skagit County GIS



Map Print Date: February 3, 2025







# SKAGIT CROPS: KNOW WHAT WE GROW

The Skagit Valley’s fertile soil has been rated in the top 2% of soils in the world, making the Skagit Valley one of the most important and productive agricultural regions in the world. Roughly 90,000 acres of agricultural land grow 90 different crops, generating around \$350 million in revenue in 2023.

Potatoes have become an important crop with acreage expanding significantly over the past fifteen years. Other crops, such as cole crops, vegetable seed crops, cucumbers, flower bulbs, and small fruits contribute less in gross dollars but play an equally important role. The net return to the grower on these crops is relatively high, and they provide crop diversification and many jobs.

This diversity of crops is essential to the agronomic and economic resilience of Skagit Valley agriculture. By practicing rigorous crop rotations, Skagit growers make the most of each piece of farmland, which in turn supports soil health, pest control, disease management, and market diversification.

## APPLES

Skagit County’s coastal climate allows for different varieties from those grown in the large apple-producing regions of central Washington. Varieties grown here such as Jonagold, Gravenstein, Spartan, Akane, and Honey Crisp are excellent apples to consume, but with no apple processing facilities in Skagit County, shipping the apples back and forth across the mountain passes makes commercial production a niche enterprise.

## BLUEBERRIES

Harvested by hand and machine, about half of Skagit’s crop is sold for fresh market, and half is processed. Yields and quality are exceptionally high compared to the Midwest. Cooler summer temperatures allow the berries to ripen slowly, which result in higher sugar content. Prices have declined for blueberries due to overproduction.

## BULB CROPS

Skagit County represents 75% of U.S. commercial bulb production. Our local industry averages about \$20 million in annual gross income. Skagit County grows more tulip and daffodil bulbs than any other county in the nation—with approximately 1,000 acres dedicated to bulb crops. 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 more than 300,000 visitors and \$65 million in revenue to county businesses each year.



Cabbage blossoms for seed.  
Photo: Cedarbrook Studio

## BRUSSELS SPROUTS, CAULIFLOWER, BROCCOLI

Skagit County’s three main cole crops are all grown for fresh market. Head quality is exceptionally high in this region. Approximately 60% to 80% of these Skagit-grown vegetables are consumed in Oregon, Washington, and British Columbia. Skagit farmers grew about 2,500 acres of Brussels sprouts, cauliflower, and broccoli in 2023. Farmers in the Skagit Valley maintain acreages for these important rotational crops largely for the disease suppression that brassica crops provide via biofumigation.

## CHICKENS AND EGGS

Washington state ranks 19th in the nation for egg production. As of 2023, two companies produce

the majority of the eggs in Skagit County. These two farms account for hundreds of millions of eggs produced in Skagit County and Washington state. The sole Washington-owned chicken processor in the state is located in Mount Vernon. The company employs approximately 500 people and has sales around \$80 million. In the United States, the price for a pound of fresh whole chicken cost consumers \$1.96 which constituted a slight increase from 2022 but a long way from its price peak in 2020.

## SKAGIT CROP UP CLOSE

### VEGETABLE SEEDS

A large variety of vegetable seed crops are grown in the Skagit Valley. The top three in both acreage and farmgate value: spinach, cabbage and beet seed. Skagit County is a significant global contributor supplying

- 8% of the world’s spinach seed
- 25% of the world’s cabbage seed
- 25% of the world’s beet seed.

Other vegetable seeds produced in Skagit County include arugula, broccoli, Chinese cabbage, coriander, mustard, parsley, parsnip, rutabaga, Swiss chard, and turnip.

The Skagit Valley and central Denmark are the world’s main regions for producing spinach seed.

Vegetable seed production is highly technical and often involves long rotation intervals—sometimes stretching beyond a decade. Skagit County farmers have developed innovative tools and cultural practices along with a close relationship with Washington State University (WSU) research scientists and Extension professionals to be proactive in managing specialty seed crops challenges.

Vegetable seeds from Skagit County are marketed all over the world.

The need for isolation distances to prevent contamination from cross-pollination keeps vegetable seed acreage below 5,000 acres in Skagit County. Skagit-based seed companies contract some of their acreage with Snohomish, Island, Whatcom, and Clallam County growers.

To protect these areas, seed companies joined together in the 1940s to designate where crops would be grown. Each year, the seed companies meet at WSU NWREC for annual ‘pinning days’ that determine which crop/variety will be planted and where.

It is this spirit of cooperation that keeps the seed industry growing in Skagit County.

## DAIRY

At the start of 2023, there were 16 commercial dairies in Skagit County—only a third as many remaining as fifteen years prior when there were 46. Skagit dairies produced a total of 100 million pounds of milk, or approximately 11.6 million gallons. The loss of dairies negatively affects the agricultural community and county economy on many levels. Dairies provide natural fertilizer essential to soil health and nutrient needs for many crops. Skagit dairies generated nearly \$20 million in revenue in 2023.

## POTATOES

Potato acreage consists primarily of fresh market reds, whites, yellows, purple, fingerlings and some chipping potatoes. Skagit potatoes are in demand for their high quality. Because of the need for a three-year rotation, there is limited ground available for the 11,000 acres of potatoes currently grown in Skagit County.



Fresh strawberries.  
Photo: Connor McManus

## STRAWBERRIES

Skagit County produces about 20% of the state’s strawberries. Acreage has been decreasing in the county, due to difficulty securing labor. Most strawberries are sold to processors. Main varieties include Albion, Shuksan, Totem, Puget Reliance, Hood, Puget Summer, Redcrest, and Rainier. More growers are changing varieties to capture more of the fresh market by producing everbearing strawberries and using innovative technologies to increase the length of the season.

## WINE GRAPES

The marine climate in the Skagit Valley is similar in many ways to the fine-wine-producing areas of France and Germany. Research conducted from 1976 to 1988 at WSU NWREC produced a number of white wine grape varieties, which have proven successful in area vineyards. More recent research involves projects in evaluating new wine grape varieties, and rootstock trials evaluating earlier maturity potential in ‘Pinot Noir’ grapes. As of 2023 there were seven wineries producing 25,000 cases of wine on approximately 100 acres valued at more than \$1 million in sales.







# HOW MANY ACRES HAVE BEEN PRESERVED?

Farmland Legacy Program	
FLP Easements	216 agricultural conservation easements
Total Acres Protected	15,130 acres in Farmland Legacy Program
Extinguished Residential Development Rights	283 single-family homes kept out of working lands
Pending Easements	540 acres, 12 development rights queued for protection with new applications considered on an ongoing basis

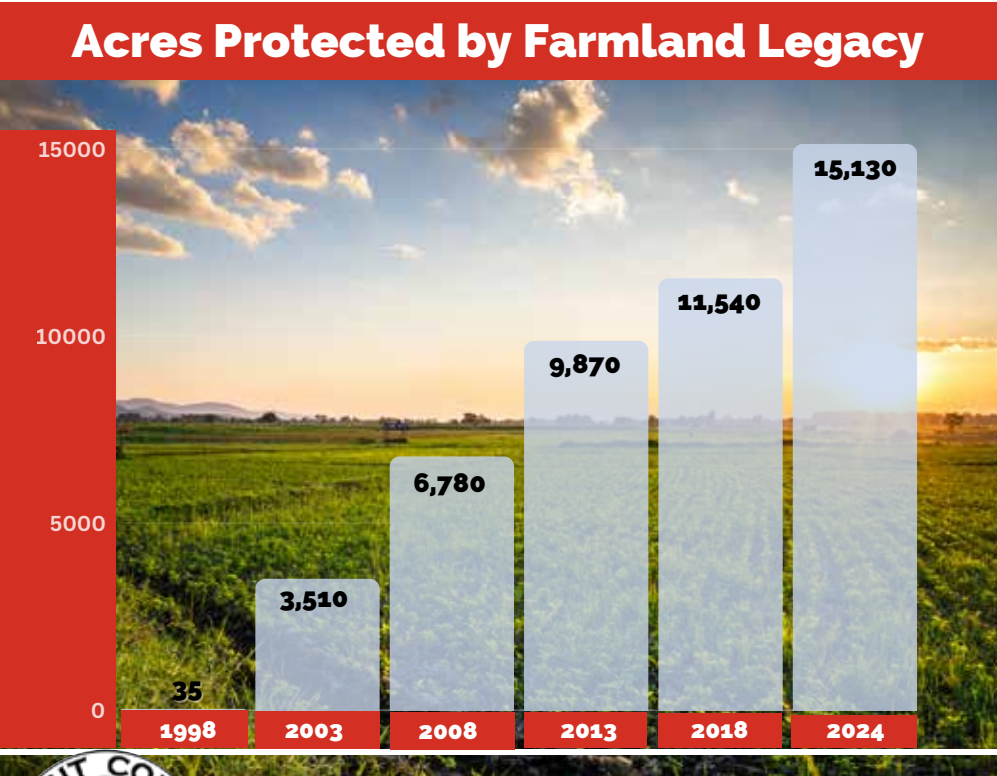


**Why do landowners apply to enroll in the Farmland Legacy Program?**

- ◇ 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



Since 1997, the Skagit County Farmland Legacy Program has sourced \$24.8 million in compensation to farmer-landowners for the permanent protection of agricultural land in Skagit County. The breakdown of funds spent over the past 27 years includes \$14.9 million in Skagit County Conservation Futures Tax and \$9.9 million in state and federal grants and local nonprofit contributions.

Funding Sources & Partnerships	Contributions
Skagit Land Trust	\$104,000
Ducks Unlimited	\$148,000
The Nature Conservancy	\$250,000
Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland	\$1,035,000
WA State Recreation & Conservation	\$3,030,000
U. S. Department of Agriculture	\$5,375,000
Skagit County Conservation Futures Tax	\$14,888,000
Total invested to date	\$24,830,000







# PROTECTING OUR PRIME AGRICULTURAL SOILS

## INTERESTED IN ENROLLING?

Take any one of following easy steps:

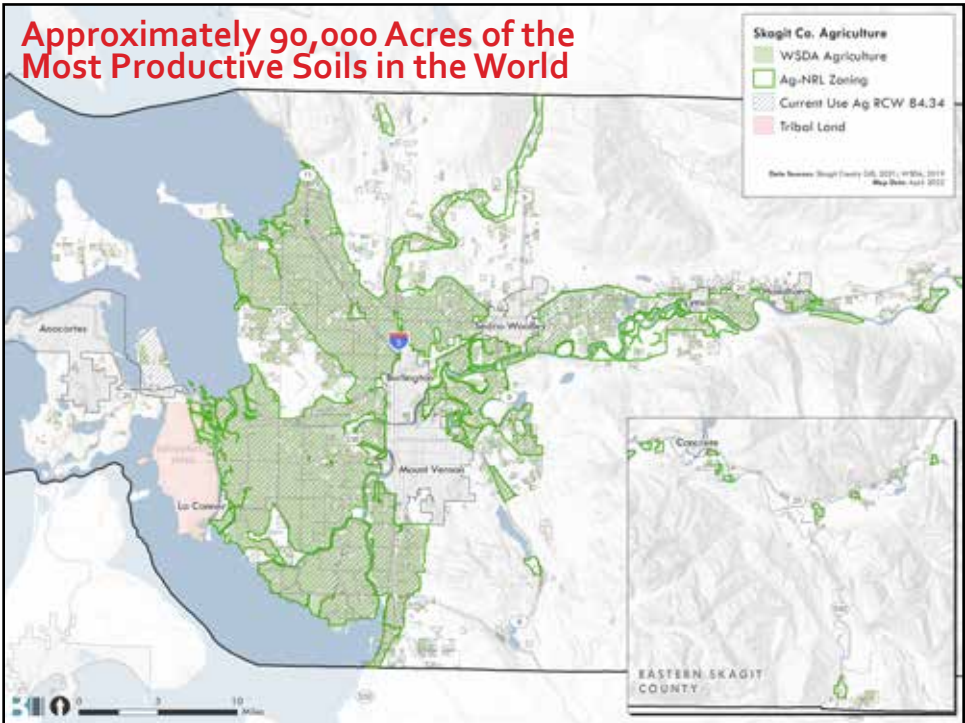
- » Call today to request an application. Applications are accepted on a rolling basis.
- » Call Sarah Stoner to discuss your specific property characteristics, concerns, goals.
- » Meet with Sarah—at the County office or your property.
- » Learn more at [www.skagitcounty.net/farmland](http://www.skagitcounty.net/farmland)

Contact Farmland Legacy Program Manager

**Sarah Stoner | (360) 416-1417**  
[sstoner@co.skagit.wa.us](mailto: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.

Approximately 90,000 Acres of the Most Productive Soils in the World



## CONSERVATION FUTURES ADVISORY BOARD (CFAB)

Chair

Scott DeGraw, District 3 (2008-2025)

Members

Owen Peth, District 1 (2013-2026)

Andrea Xaver, District 2 (2007-2028)

Keith Morrison, At-Large (2018-2025)

Margery Hite, Skagit Conservation District (2021-2028)

Jim Glackin, Skagit Land Trust (2018-2026)

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

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.

## SUPPORTING OUR CURRENT AND NEXT GENERATION

### It's Not Farmland Without Farmers

**Q** Do you know someone who could use support regarding the future of their Skagit farm or farmland?

**A** The county's Farmland Legacy staff is here to help clarify your needs in successfully transferring farmland to the next generation—whether that's to family members, community members or a new farmer.

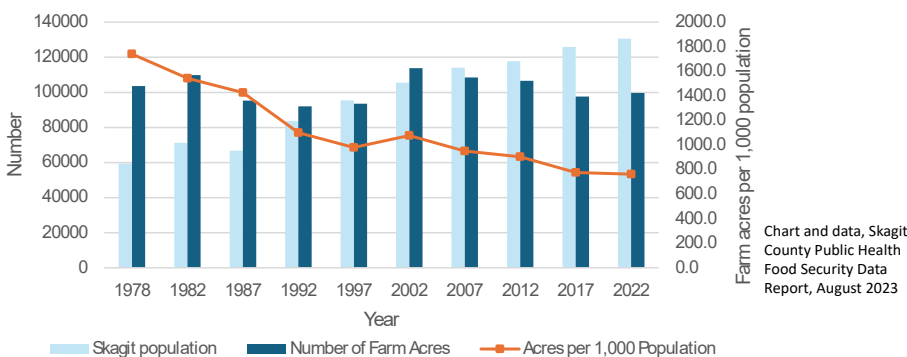
### Connecting the dots: farmland protection, succession plans, and the viability of agriculture in Skagit County

An agricultural easement may or may not be a part of a farmland succession plan. What *can* a conservation easement do? Bring in funds to help with farm succession efforts, without having to sell the land; make sure the land stays available for farming when or if there's a break in generational farming.

### Availability of farmland

Availability of farmland and the successful transfer of land to the next generation go hand in hand. We need farmers. We need farmland. Forty years ago, available farmland exceeded the population of Skagit County. In the past three decades, population growth has outpaced that of farmland. In fact, the acreage per 1,000 Skagit County residents has steadily decreased over time.

Farm acreage per 1,000 population—Skagit County, 1978-2022



**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.**

Farmland Legacy Program easement values commonly range from 15% to 20% of the full property value.

Photo: Cedarbrook Studio

