

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 15,400 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, berries

With 220 conservation easements in place, these agreements permanently restrict non-agricultural development—safeguarding farmland for future generations.

As of December 2025, Farmland Legacy protects 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.



Ron Wesen
District 1, Chair



Peter Browning
District 2



Joe Burns
District 3

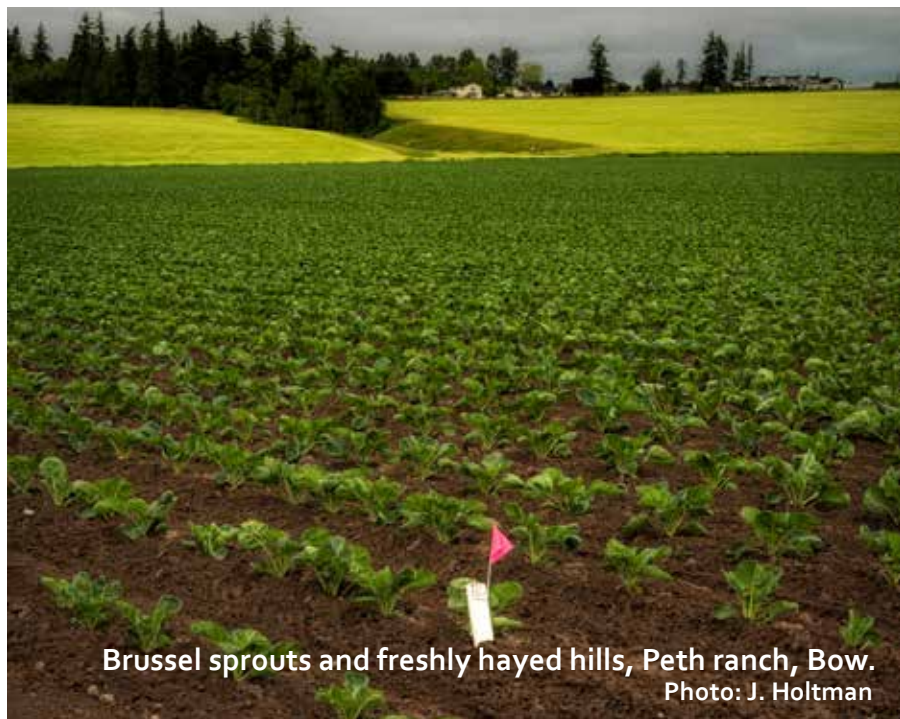


Furrows ready for spring planting on the 40 acres of Mount Vernon farmland protected in 2025 by the William Roozen family.

Photo: Bob Suttles

RECENT SUCCESSES: 2025
FARMLAND PROTECTED TODAY, FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

Four Properties—270 Acres of Farmland—Added to Preservation Program



Brussel sprouts and freshly hayed hills, Peth ranch, Bow.
Photo: J. Holtman

“It makes it a lot harder to farm when you have homes on farmland.”

—Jerry Nelson, who along with his wife Jenny, has protected some 1,500 acres of Skagit farmland

82.5 ACRES | BOW

More than eighty acres of the Peth and Sons cattle ranch in Bow is now protected. The operation is run by father-son duo Dan and Owen Peth, who are third- and fourth-generation cattle ranchers in the county.

The Peth’s 400 acres of ranch and farmland reaches back five generations now including Owen’s children. The land is rented to local farm operations when not used by the family farm or to rotate crops.

The decision to protect a portion of their ranch is part of a broader vision for their family land. “Protecting it is a key decision for our family,” said Owen Peth. “The Farmland Legacy program allows families like ours to protect Skagit’s scenic open space that is essential to ag operators. We are making sure that the local landscape does not change.”

40 ACRES | BOW

Since the 1940s the Nelson family has produced potatoes from the rich soil of Skagit County. Forty acres of land in Bow, part of the Double N Potatoes operation run by Jerry Nelson, are now protected from development.

The Nelsons have protected some 1,500 acres of Skagit farmland, holder of the most enrolled acres in the Farmland Legacy program. The program helps the Nelson operation offset land costs and ensures that farmland stays protected from non-farm development.

“It helps me support the cost of the land, plus the fact that I don’t really want to see buildings on farmland,” Nelson said. “It just makes it a lot

“The hope is that the land continues to be farmed in good hands forever.” —Spencer Roozen, speaking of his father’s now protected farmland.

harder to farm when you have homes on farmland.”

Jenny and Jerry Nelson’s newly protected 40 acres sit adjacent to 105 acres of farmland also part of their farming operation, preserved in 2007—creating a 145-acre block of protected farmland off Allen West Road.

107 ACRES | MOUNT VERNON

The Houser family’s newly protected farmground sits at the intersection of McLean and LaConner Whitney roads, six miles from the Mount Vernon city limits. The land is actively farmed by Thulen Farms [see page 6 to read more about the Thulen Farms operation].

The family has protected a total of 600 acres of Skagit farmland since 2020. This includes the Houser family homestead, a former dairy farm just south of Sedro-Woolley city limits and north of the Skagit River.

“I want to see farmland set aside for my kids and for our farmers,” said Mark Houser. “We need our working lands for our working farmers.” The additional 107 acres create a 1,550-acre block of protected farmland east of the Swinomish Channel and south of Highway 20.

Did You Know? As owners of RoozenGarde and Washington Bulb Co., the Roozen family lands are spread across many members. The John Roozen family protected one of the first farm properties when the preservation program first launched in the late 1990s. John Roozen and Washington Bulb Co. protected a total of 133 acres in 1999.

Every Acre Counts:
Excerpt from
the Agricultural
Conservation
Easement

3 Conservation Values

3.1 The Protected Property is of significant agricultural value to Grantor, the people of Skagit County, and the people of the State of Washington. The ‘Conservation Values’ include protection of agricultural productivity and protection of prime and important agricultural soils.

Farmland Legacy applications are considered on a rolling basis. There is no cost to apply.

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.

2025 Easement acquisition payments totaled \$585,000 in Skagit County conservation futures tax funds.

2026 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 or call (360) 416-1417.

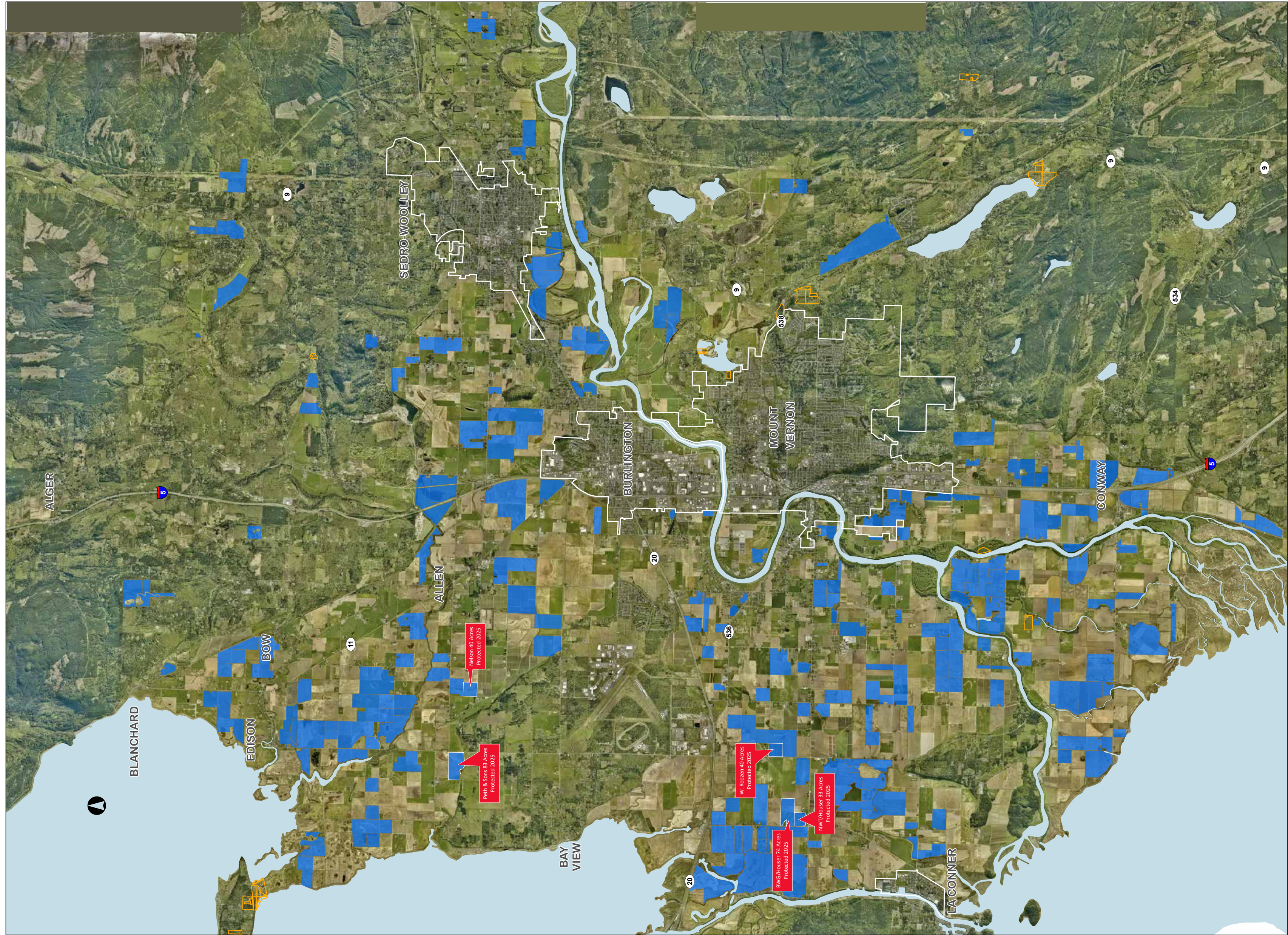


Peth and Sons cattle ranch on an overcast day in Bow, Washington. Photo: John Holtman

This report was produced by Skagit County Public Works and funded by the Farmland Legacy Program Conservation Futures Fund. Front page: Feature photo by Todd Johnson, cabbage seed fields in bloom, part of Mr. Johnson’s farm operation spanning Skagit and Snohomish counties.

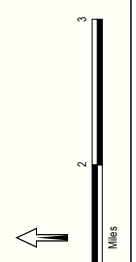
Photos continued, left to right, cranberries ready for market, courtesy Hayton Farms; dairy cows at Harmony Dairy by Andy Bronson; north fork Skagit River view by Marlin Greene. Content and Editing: Sarah Stoner, Anna Thomas.

Quotes from Skagit Valley Herald June 14, 2025, article by Cameron Martinez was incorporated with permission on pages 2 and 3.



PROTECTED FARMLAND IN WESTERN SKAGIT COUNTY

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



IT'S NOT FARMLAND WITHOUT FARMERS

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

Our Skagit farmers are deeply dedicated to carrying forward the legacy of Skagit farming into the future.

Both of the Skagit farmer-landowners featured below have chosen to preserve their land for future generations through Farmland Legacy. And still—much work remains to be done in order to successfully transfer the land to the next generation.

An agricultural easement may or may not be a part of a farmland succession plan. What *can* a conservation easement do? An agricultural conservation easement makes sure the land stays available for farming when or if there's a break in generational farming. It can bring in funds to help with farm succession efforts or to buy out owners no longer interested in managing farmland, without having to sell the land. Easements help reduce land costs.

Availability of farmland

Available 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. Farmland is more scarce, while land costs are high for our incoming generation of farmers.

SUPPORTING OUR CURRENT AND NEXT GENERATION: STORIES FROM FARMERS

DAVE HEDLIN HEDLIN FARMS, LA CONNER

“Succession is a key portion of sustainability in agriculture in Skagit County,” said Dave Hedlin, a founding board member of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland. Skagitonians is one of the organizations that partnered with Skagit County Farmland Legacy to host a three-part workshop series on farm succession planning, the second part of which Hedlin attended along with forty local farmers.

Hedlin did not disclose details of his succession plans, which involve his children Lauren and Arne, but said the discussion has been going on for about 12 years. The fourth generation in his family has known since childhood that if they ever want to come back to the farm, they are welcome to, but not until they earn a four-year degree in any discipline and have completed two years of work somewhere else, he added.

Hedlin's Nephew Kai Ottesen and his spouse, Jules Riske, have owned and operated the roadside farmstand under the Hedlin's Family Farm name for two years, according to Hedlin and the business' website. Eventually, the cousins will take over stewardship of the home farms, Hedlin explained.

Being a farmer can be both rewarding and tough, Hedlin said. Faced with what many lament is a labor shortage, as well as commodity prices that have not kept up with the cost of equipment and labor, farmers need to be motivated by a good dose of passion. If that “fire in the belly” isn't there on a daily basis, he said, neither the farmer or the farm will be happy.

Hence, his children are not expected to follow in his exact footsteps.

“We won't be disappointed in them if they don't farm, but we will be disappointed in them if they don't have a strong sense of stewardship for

the family land,” he said. “If you don't want to farm, that doesn't mean you should sell the land, it just means you have to find somebody else who wants to farm.”



Hedlin's Family Farms Kai Ottesen with daughter at farmstand, 4th and 5th generations.

Photo: Oliver Hamlin

JOHN THULEN THULEN FARMS, LA CONNER

Thulen Farms is the home of Pioneer Potatoes. John Thulen shares a similar sentiment to Dave Hedlin's. As a father of three, Thulen doesn't demand his children run the business, but hopes they will help keep the farming legacy going rather than sell the farm.

“What we have was built upon the backs of prior generations, so it isn't right for all of sudden to stop and to say ‘Hey, I'm gonna cash out,’” he said.



Dave Hedlin farms family fields adjacent to the town of La Conner.

Photo: Nancy Crowell

After returning to the family business four years ago, Thulen's son is poised to be the one who will fully take the controls. It is both a blessing and a curse, John recalled telling him, as his son learns to deal with the responsibility of many employees, as well as business challenges—and debt.

One day, Thulen won't be able to run the farm with the same energy. To ensure the business remains successful, farmers should be prepared to transfer the land not after they die, but just when they are starting to “run out of gas” and the business is in a good spot, he said. That is, if the family dynamic is healthy enough to have those conversations and reach an agreement. If not, a third party can help facilitate those talks.

“If you're that person who wants to run the race by yourself, by the end you're pretty tired, and probably your farm will be too. You won't be able to do all the things by yourself, you won't be able to manage the people as well, you won't be able to fix the machinery yourself,” he said.

Once the farm is fully owned by his son, Thulen won't step away completely, but will be available to provide guidance through the good and bad years that are inevitable in this trade.

Most farmers, he laughed, don't retire — they just go home earlier than they used to.

DON'T GO IT ALONE

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

LAND TRANSFER SUPPORT

A Land Transfer Navigator can help with the successful transfer of your farmland to the next generation—whether that's to a family member, community member or a new farmer.

They can help you:

- set goals; prepare for conversations with family members and business partners;
- access services and information to take your next step in the planning process;
- follow through on your plans and progress with regular check-ins.

Two Skagit area Navigators are available to you as a no-cost resource: Elizabeth Bragg, Land Transfer Specialist, American Farmland Trust, (360) 641-5502, ebragg@farmland.org; Sarah Stoner, Skagit County Farmland Legacy, (360) 416-1417, sstoner@co.skagit.wa.us



HOW MANY ACRES HAVE BEEN PRESERVED?

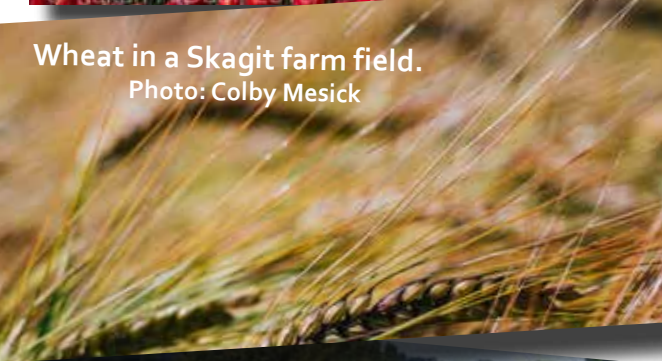
Farmland Legacy Program	
FLP Easements	220 agricultural conservation easements
Total Acres Protected	15,400 acres in Farmland Legacy Program
Extinguished Residential Development Rights	289 single-family homes kept out of working lands
Pending Easements	680 acres, 17 development rights queued for protection with new applications considered on an ongoing basis



Fir Island potato field in summer irrigation. Photo: Scott Terrell, goskagit



Skagit County spring scene. Photo: Rakan AlDuajj



Wheat in a Skagit farm field. Photo: Colby Mesick

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

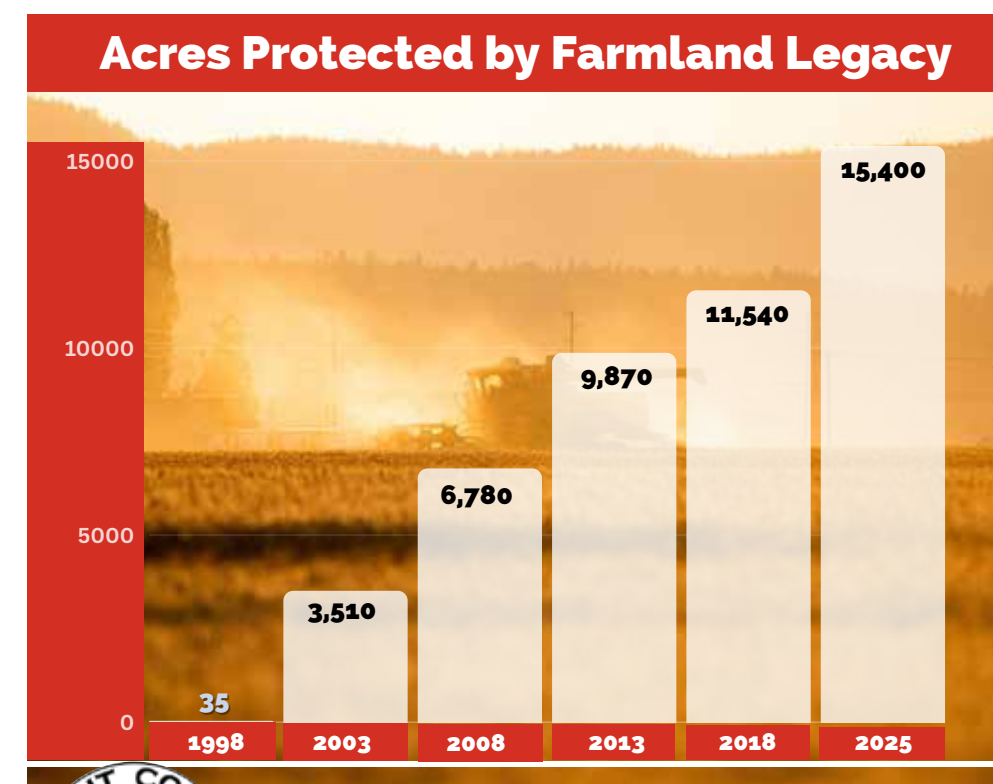
- ◇ To preserve land for agricultural production in perpetuity
- ◇ To reinvest funds into equipment
- ◇ To reinvest funds into additional land purchases
- ◇ To aid in farm succession planning efforts
- ◇ To supplement farm income
- ◇ To reduce farm debt

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



Grass cut to feed dairy cows, Mount Vernon. Photo: Andy Bronson



Since 1997, the Skagit County Farmland Legacy Program has sourced \$25.4 million in compensation to farmer-landowners for the permanent protection of agricultural land in Skagit County. The breakdown of funds spent over the past 28 years includes \$15.5 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	\$15,475,000
Total invested to date	\$25,417,000





PROTECTING OUR PRIME AGRICULTURAL SOILS

INTERESTED IN ENROLLING?

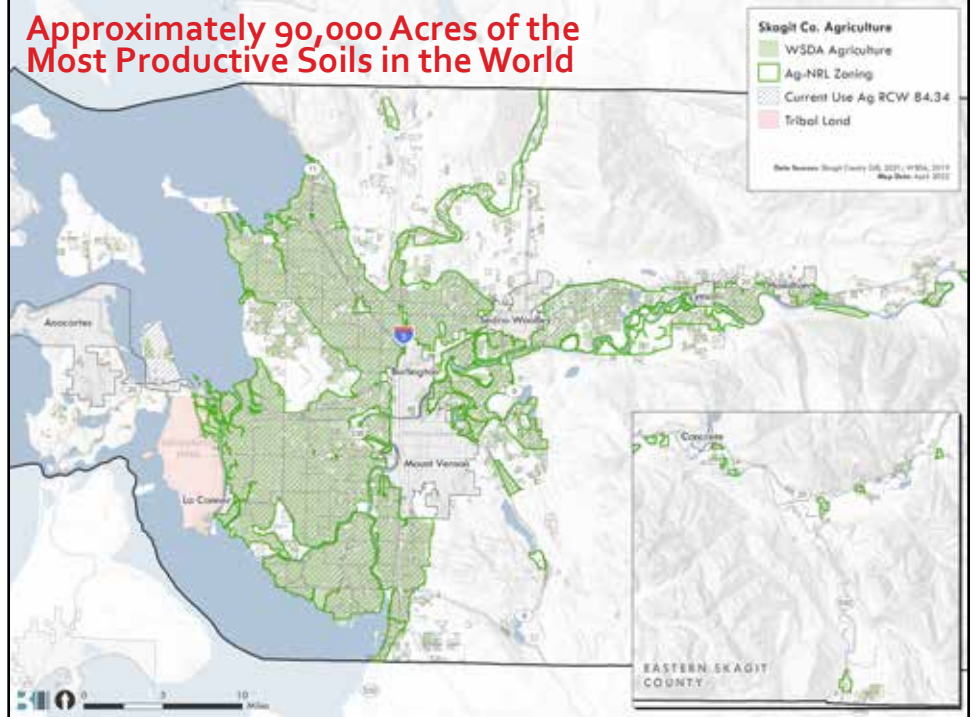
Farmland Legacy staff guides Skagit County farmland owners and their families through the process of protecting their land for future generations. Each family and property has its unique circumstances and timelines.

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



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*)



Also pictured: **Kai Ottesen**, Contracted Easement Monitor

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.

FARMLAND—A NATURAL RESOURCE

The Down and Dirty on Skagit Soil

The Skagit Valley was formed by water-deposited (alluvial) soils. Most cropland and pasture land in the county is located in the floodplain-delta area, as shown in the map above. The Skagit floodplain delta covers the valley floor and extends east along the Skagit River and its tributaries.

There are five primary soil types in this area. Three of the five are located in the floodplain: Skagit (26%), which consists of silt loam, silty clay loam, and a small amount of very fine sandy loam; Sumas (15%); and Field (14%). Two other distinct soil types are only found along the Skagit River: Lorus (17%) and Pilchuck (14%).

Floodplain soils are highly productive under dry land farming. Elevation in this area ranges from sea level to 500 feet. Soil wetness is a major limitation for crops in the floodplain area. The Skagit and Samish Rivers have a long history of flooding. The Skagit River, from west of Sedro-Woolley to the Puget Sound, is protected from flooding by dikes and levees. The lower reaches of the Samish River, below Thomas Creek, flood almost every year.

Skagit Agriculture: Seed-Sized Facts

Skagit County is a major producer of spinach, cabbage and beet for the world. There are six vegetable seed companies in the county, most of which market products worldwide. Skagit County supplies:

- 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: 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.

Agricultural statistics adapted from by Washington State University Extension 2024 Skagit County report. A full copy of the 2024 and earlier WSU Skagit County Agricultural Statistic reports are available at www.skagit.wsu.edu/agriculture/.

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

