



## SNOHOMISH COUNTY

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### **Farmers plant seeds of opportunity with County, State officials** *Leaders hopeful about future of agriculture in Snohomish County*

The scene was idyllic—lavender fields, grazing cows, blue skies—when a group of prominent Snohomish County farmers gathered July 29 to drink Lavender lemonade and tell County and State officials their concerns and hopes for local agriculture. A couple of those concerns were clearly visible from Lavender Hills Farm in Marysville in the form of abandoned dairy farms and encroaching housing developments.

“We’ve had some major growing pains here in the county,” said Dale Reiner, president of the Snohomish County Farm Bureau. “There’s a lot of pressure from the urban community—development, land use policies, degradation of farmlands.”

“There’s a lot of economic struggle here,” acknowledged County Agriculture Coordinator John Roney, welcoming the dozen farmers and handful of government representatives to the informal, hour-long get-together. “But we’re here today not only to present a picture of the state of Snohomish County agriculture, but to showcase the types of activities and efforts we are making on behalf of farmers, growers and producers.”

Juli Wilkerson, representing the Washington State Department of Community, Trade & Economic Development, told farmers that the goal of her agency was to provide “a diverse collection of programs to get people back into productive life. Farmers do agriculture; we do business,” she said. “We’ve got to keep agriculture prosperous, alive, well and healthy.”

County Council Chair and former dairy farmer John Koster admitted that “we’ve got a lot of empty land” in Snohomish County, and that “we need new agriculture initiatives,” but said he sees “a new cooperation between the Council and Executive Aaron Reardon’s office.” There are also cooperative projects involving tribes, such as the proposed biogas facility near Monroe. The partnership between dairy farmers, The Tulalip Tribes and Snohomish County would create a biogas capture plant where cow manure would be used to make energy-producing methane.

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“We’ve discovered that we have a whole lot in common with the tribes,” said Reiner. “We’re growing beef right across the fence from where they’re catching salmon—and both products are going to the same section of the supermarket.”

“This has always been one of the finest dairy-producing counties in the world,” said Henry Graafstra, long-time owner of the highly successful Country Charm Dairy. “If you’ve got preparation, service, quality and price—this is what it takes to market things. We sell everything we produce. But we have to look at doing agriculture in a different way.”

“It’s time to step up and organize,” said Jackie Macomber, chair of the Snohomish County Agriculture Advisory Board. “There are opportunities now to make changes, but we need more promotion, more education, more support.”

Like others in the group, Reiner is optimistic. “The County Executive has followed through on his promises—like naming John Roney Agriculture Coordinator and giving more power to the Ag Board. And the County Council has been more than farm-friendly. I really feel there’s a possibility of making agriculture a viable economic contributor. The County is finally asking us, ‘What do you want?’”

Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon earlier this year launched an economic development effort on behalf of local agriculture called the Snohomish County Focus on Farming initiative. Overseen by Roney, the program assists farmers to understand and navigate the myriad environmental and land-use regulations imposed on agriculture, facilitates development of needed agricultural infrastructure such as processing facilities, and explores new marketing channels for local farm products.

Roney says he is very optimistic about opportunities to benefit local agriculture through the Comprehensive Plan 10-Year Update, regulatory changes, and a number of economic development and educational programs. Roney sees particular promise in a “work-study program to show kids there’s a future in farming. We want to keep the money in the hands of the farmers so they can keep farming.”

Addressing Wilkerson, Roney said. “We’re looking for ways to stabilize agriculture, but we need state support to make it happen.”

“Tell me what you need,” Wilkerson responded, “We’ll ask for legislation for marketing money to help in whatever way we can.”

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