

Tribune

Volume 118, Number 48

Wednesday, November 28, 2007

Farming conference focuses on changing industry

For the fourth time, farmers from around Snohomish County and region converge to talk shop, share ideas

By **KATIE MURDOCH**

The fourth annual Snohomish County Focus on Farming conference will concentrate on how farmers can prepare for weather changes in order to keep their farmlands viable.

This year's theme is "Soils to Sales" and will provide patrons the opportunity to swap advice with other farmers and attend workshops to learn how to better manage their farms. The conference is Nov. 29.

"The main thing is networking and building support amongst farmers to raise hope," said John Roney, conference coordinator and former county agriculture coordinator.

The conference's keynote speaker is Fred Kirschenmann, a distinguished fellow from Iowa State

University's Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Kirschenmann has served on a variety of food and agriculture boards across the country, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture's National Organic Standards.

Kirschenmann was selected as the keynote speaker because he works with farmers around the country and as a result has a lot of supporters, Roney said.

"His message to use products and the land in an effective and efficient way to help make the land sustainable is the message we want to get across," he said.

His speech, "Meeting Agriculture's Challenges in a Rapidly Changing World," will provide examples of what the world's farmers are doing to meet the changes facing the industry.

and how to provide reliable food systems for the future despite an increasing need for fossil fuel energy, a resource agriculture relies heavily on, he said.

"I'm a strong believer in the notion if you're going to be serious about sustainability, you have to look 25 years in the future," Kirschenmann said.

He will urge farmers to conserve water.

"We can't continue to use as much water as we're using," he said. "We have to think of a future where we're using half as much water."

He will also speak about the predictions of climatologists of more droughts and floods in the future, and if farmers don't decrease green house gas emissions, they'll lose a significant amount of land across the planet to use for growing crops.

Farmers need to figure out what kind of farming systems can be used to sustain farmlands, he said.

Kirschenmann owns a 3,500-acre farm in North Dakota. He was one of the first farmers to switch to organic soil from conventional after a student introduced him to organic agriculture in 1968.

"What attracted me was how the quality of the soil improved drastically under organic principles," he said.

This year's conference will be at the Lynnwood Convention Center to offer a larger and more comfortable venue.

"The most important thing

farmers do is networking," said Snohomish farmer Dale Reiner, who has attended the conference all three years. "Farmers want to talk about what's working and give advice."

Roney expects approximately 650 farmers and representatives from agencies that aid farmers to network from counties across the Northwest.

"The format has stayed the same, but the scope has grown from a Snohomish event to a Snohomish County and Northwest event," Roney said.

The conference isn't exclusive to farmers. If someone is interested in becoming a farmer they can come and learn the state of the agriculture business, Roney said.

At past conferences, Roney realized farmers deal with similar issues.

"All farmers feel they're over regulated," he said.

In 2001, Snohomish County passed an ordinance requiring farmers to obtain a permit before they could move dirt on their property. The ordinance interfered with farmers' ability to plant crops on schedule and grouped farmers with developers.

"The county painted everyone with the same brush," Reiner said. "Developers aren't as constrained by weather as much as farmers."

Every time farmers tried to plow dirt to plant crops, they had to wait months to receive a permit.

Farmers have a short window to plant crops because if it's too



"I'm going to help them understand there's a new day coming in agriculture," Kirschenmann said. "There's no need to panic (because) we have the tools to respond to the future."

His speech will focus on keeping farms viable

muddy or dry then they can't plant them, Reiner said.

"The most important thing to farmers is weather, then rules and regulations," he said.

That year, Reiner attempted to grow a crop of corn on a 30-acre field. There were three wet spots on the field forcing Reiner to install three 50 to 100 foot drains to use the land, he said.

A code enforcement officer told Reiner he couldn't plant the crop until he obtained a permit for the drains and one to move the dirt.

It takes approximately 75 days to grow a crop of corn to harvest and 90 to 120 days to obtain a permit. Needless to say, Reiner didn't plant the crop and lost one year's worth of pay for the crop because farmers are paid once a year.

"These are the kinds of restrictions that don't work for farmers," he said. "You can't wait for a permit and plant a crop — it just didn't work."

Since 2004, the county has been making more sensible decisions in regards to regulating farmers, Reiner said.

"The county government has bent over backward to accommodate agriculture," Reiner said. "The county has been trying to make regulations work with farmers."

Another complaint made by farmers is that there's not enough effort being made to preserve farmlands, Roney said.

Roney cautions that if farmers lose their farmland, citizens in Snohomish County will lose their ability to locally feed themselves.

"The farmers are tremendous people," he said. "They provide a quality of life for us."

The conference also serves as a resource to help farmers

across the region work together to preserve their farms. In Puyallup, farms have been replaced with concrete warehouses.

"It's taken away our ability to feed ourselves," Roney said. "Who's going to feed our grandkids' grandkids?"

Roney was hired by County Executive Aaron Reardon in 2004 to serve as Snohomish County's first agriculture coordinator. During Reardon's campaign, farmers told him they needed a contact person to talk about issues and programs impacting farmers to help them build a more sustainable industry.

In response to the farmers' needs, Reardon created the position of agriculture coordinator.

"The best way to find out their issues was to hold a conference," Roney said.

More than 350 people attended the county's first conference, "Obstacles and Opportunities" at the Monroe Fairgrounds in 2004.

"People felt energized after the conference and wanted an annual conference," Roney said.

At that first conference, Roney learned farmers face four main issues: regulatory reform, economic development, communication and cultural heritage.

"Those items geared the Snohomish County Agriculture Action Plan," Roney said.

The Snohomish County Agriculture Action Plan was implemented by Reardon as an effort to preserve and enhance the county's agricultural economy.

Another problem farmers are encountering is that their children are not interested in running the family farm because

of low profits. One goal of the conference is to bring farmers together to learn how they can continue running their farms and provide for their families.

"We want to bring some reality to how farmers can stay on their farm and make money," Roney said.

The Focus on Farming conference "From Soils to Sales" begins at 8 a.m. on Nov. 29 at the Lynnwood Convention Center.

For more information about the conference including costs, features and registration, visit the Focus on Farming Web site: www.focusonfarming.org or contact Adele Barilleaux at (425) 388-3137.