

Farming Conference Extends Reach

Snohomish County's third Focus on Farming Conference will spread its wings, taking in farmers from throughout the Puget Sound region and Northwest Washington.

For two years, local farmers have gathered to discuss better ways to address regulatory concerns, protect farmland from development and achieve success. This year, they've invited farmers from other Washington counties to find the best ways to make farming economically viable.

Snohomish County farmers have found themselves for years in transition from wholesale crop farming to more specialized outlets, including agritourism, where farmers create an event surrounding a crop grown on their farms.

Focus on Farming III

Theme: "New Opportunities for Northwest Washington Agriculture"

Speakers: Keynote speakers are Jane Eckert of Eckert AgriMarketing, on "Sowing Seeds for Profits — Right on the Farm," and Don Stuart of American Farmland Trust, on "Why Saving Agriculture is Good for the Environment and Saving the Environment is Good for Agriculture." Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon will also speak and there will be workshops, seminars and panels.

When: 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Thursday.

Where: Lynnwood Convention Center, 3711 196th St. S.W.

Cost: \$30 at the door, \$5 for ages 17 and under.

With Snohomish County's population growth, farmers are finding it more and more necessary to come up with new ideas to keep farming a livelihood, said John Roney, the county agriculture coordinator. The conference will bring in national speakers to help farmers do so.

"Historically, the dairy industry has been very strong here," Roney said. "But it's very difficult to make a living at that today when you're competing with 25,000-head farms in California."

Instead, local farmers need to come up with new products that local customers will want to buy, Roney said. The county has encouraged the use of farmland for agritourism and organic-niche crops. It even is pursuing crops for producing biodiesel fuel.

"The idea has to come from a business perspective," Roney said. "When you talk about successful agriculture, farmers have to be making a reasonable return on their investment of time, equipment and keeping the land available."

Making enough to keep a farm operational isn't sufficient. Farmers also need to provide for their families.

Keith Stocker knows the pressure. He's a fourth-generation farmer in Snohomish County, and his family farm has switched from dairy to raising wholesale crops to the agritourism side of farming. Stocker grows corn for a fall maze that brings thousands of families annually to his property. He raises pumpkins, but not to sell wholesale for store purchase. He's direct-marketing them to the families who visit.

"I think, in any industry, survival requires enough flexibility and insight to adapt," he said. "Agriculture is no different, so we're having to determine who our customer is now and how best to serve them if this business of farming is going to succeed."

The conference will bring in people such as Dale Nelson of Food Concepts in Monroe to talk with farmers. Nelson develops small-scale food products he then sells to high-end customers through farmers markets, shops and on the Internet.

Nelson says it's not necessary for a farmer to change his entire outlook or crop, but he must find additional ways to market a crop and add value to his product.

"Take a pumpkin farmer," Nelson said. "He can bring pumpkins to market at 20 cents a pound or turn it into pumpkin cheesecake for \$20 instead."

If local farmers work together, Nelson said, there's a strong possibility they could develop branded products recognizing Snohomish County — much like the wine industry has done in the Columbia, Walla Walla and Yakima valleys.

"You can't be a single-product farmer anymore," Nelson said. "You have to develop a portfolio of products."

Roney hopes the conference will draw as many as 650 people. The first two averaged 325 participants. But a new location — the Lynnwood Convention Center, instead of the Evergreen State Fairgrounds in Monroe — should be more conducive to a larger crowd. Snohomish County also has linked with King County and the state's Northwest Agriculture Business Center to promote the event.

"We're looking for long-term viability here," Roney said. "But there are no guarantees until we get people thinking in new ways."