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Farmland Preservation Program Fostered

Advocates: Farms buffer urban growth, serve as water, wildlife protection, so should be part of grant program

Sometimes saving farmland from development comes down to saving small chunks of farmland that are key to the future of larger sweeps of farmland.

That's the case in many of the nine farmland projects proposed by the [Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition](#), now being reviewed by Gov Chris Gregoire as she crafts her budget for the 2006-2007 biennium.

The coalition advocates for the [Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program](#), which for the past 16 years has made grants to protect habitat and develop state and local parks. Last year, the state Legislature approved broadening the program to include farmland preservation and shoreline protection.

The farmland piece of the pie targets the need to conserve working farms that are under strong development pressure, an approach that is based on the value of working farms as buffers against urban expansion and as guardians of wildlife habitat and water resources.

Most of the farms in this year's projects will be protected through the purchase of development rights, a program referred to as PDR.

Under this strategy, the farmer receives the monetary difference between what his or her land is worth if it were to be developed and what it's worth as farmland.

The arrangement extinguishes the rights to develop the farmland forever. But it also gives the farmer money that can be used to make investments in the farm, thus increasing the likelihood it will remain a working farm.

The funding from the state through the WWRP program is matched by local entities, in most cases, counties, but sometimes conservation and farmland preservation groups.

Two examples

One of the projects involves 42 acres, the "home farm," of the Werkhoven Dairy in the Tualco Valley in Snohomish County. In the WWRP budget request, the Werkhoven Dairy was granted \$143,050, an amount that would be matched with funding from the county, thus bringing the grant to \$286,100.

Dairy farmer Andy Werkhoven, who describes program as a "great idea," is a man who can talk about "the right amount of money" in the same sentence as "doing the right thing as a steward of the land."

"It's going to be about the money," he said. "If the price is right, I'm definitely interested. But we need to get our value from the farm so we can invest in it and keep dairying."

Werkhoven's goal is to to develop the farm as a long-term sustainable farm.

"To me that's the issue," he said. "It's the right thing to do." The property is a good fit for the program based on its location next to the Chester Hoberg farm, the first farm in Snohomish County to be protected under the county's PDR program. In addition, both farms are adjacent to other farms that the WWRP would like to see protected through a PDR program.

Werkhoven Dairy, which contracts with Darigold, leases hundreds of acres of surrounding farmland and is recognized as a vital part of the agricultural community.

Out on the Olympic Peninsula, one of the two projects in Clallam County involves 24 acres of leased prime farmland - an integral part of organic grower Nash Huber's 450-acre organic produce farm, [Dungeness Organic Produce](#).

Under a PDR arrangement, the owners of the land would receive \$349,849 from a WWRP grant and another \$349,849 from [North Olympic Land Trust](#) and [Friends of the Fields Foundation](#).

Community supporters of the project have been working hard to raise the money for the match and are within \$85,000 of their goal.

Negotiations with the owners have not yet been finalized. Because this piece of land has been farmed organically for the past 25 years, the land has optimal drainage thanks to the buildup of soil tilth and year-round organic vegetable production.

The farm is poised for the future. It has an irrigation system with water rights, a storage barn, processing shed and nearby supporting infrastructure.

The property also has excellent permanent farm-to-market access and has no features that would restrict its agricultural use.

Located in the Dungeness River Delta, the 24-acre piece is part of the Pacific Flyway and adjacent to a salmonid spawning stream. Huber said it's a key piece of the farm because it nestles in with two pieces that already have conservation easements on them.

"It would make it a 100-acre piece that's a really nice piece of farm," he said. "It's some of the best farmland we've got. You can grow anything on it."

He believes that saving this piece of farmland would show people "that we can continue to conserve farmland."

"It would be a good trendsetter," he said.