

Media Advisory – Nov. 5, 2009

Contact: Christopher Schwarzen

Office: 425-388-3883

Email: Christopher.Schwarzen@snoco.org

County's Focus on Farming Conference tops 500 attendees

More than 500 regional farmers, growers and retailers attended Thursday's Focus on Farming Conference – the largest attendance in the event's six year history.

Each year, attendance has increased since a small group of farmers met at the Snohomish County fairgrounds for the inaugural Focus on Farming Conference. Now hosted at the Tulalip Resort and Conference Center in Tulalip, participants enjoyed a day of learning, networking and farm-fresh local products prepared by gourmet chefs.

“Since 2003, we've reached out to farmers in an open conversation about their needs, and out of that grew the Focus on Farming Conference,” said Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon, who opened the conference [with comments](#). “This has now grown beyond that original Snohomish County focus and become a truly regional event.”

Reardon highlighted the need to spend as much time providing farmers opportunities and fostering positive relationships with them as regional and state officials do with the state's aerospace suppliers.

“While the Boeing Company is considered a legacy corporation – its existence dates back about 100 years – the same can be said for many local farmers in Snohomish County,” Reardon said. “The goal is to retain current farming families and operations while growing new producers and farmland in production.”

The results are positive, said Linda Neunzig, the conference chair and the county's agriculture project coordinator. Between 2002 and 2007, nearly 100 new farms were added to the more than 1,500 already operating in Snohomish County. An additional 8,200 new acres of land was placed in production, bringing the total in 2007 to almost 77,000 acres. The average size of farms also increased 6 percent from 44 to 46 acres per farm.

“Farmers recognize there are still obstacles to overcome, but the Focus on Farming Conference has become a place to discuss those obstacles and find solutions,” Neunzig said.

This year's conference, with the theme “Growing Together,” balanced business-style sessions on marketing, environmental stewardship and future markets with new-product classes including wine-making, nursery development and bioproducts. Participants could choose from seven different tracks offering 28 workshop sessions.

“This is the kind of event where all the players – from farmer to producer to regulator – can meet to discuss differences, learn new ideas and take home a feeling that we’re all in this together,” said Judy Olson, state executive director of the Farm Service Agency, a division of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The FSA/USDA was a sponsor of Thursday’s conference. “The USDA is pleased to be a sponsor and participant in this event. We realize the importance of Western Washington agriculture to our state’s economy.”

Attendees also heard former Secretary of Agriculture for New Jersey Charles Kuperus discuss the ever-shrinking U.S. agricultural land, farmer and author David Mas Masumoto’s musings on family, farming, life and death and age-old wisdom that only a farmer can know.

Wrapping up the afternoon with entertainment was Cowboy Poet Baxter Black, a self-described poet who can shoe a horse, string a barb-wire fence and bang out a Bob Wills classic on his flat-top guitar.

As always, the day was filled with a gourmet lunch – including clam chowder, blackberry braised beef, white bean chili and mixed heirloom apple chiffon cake – prepared by local chefs with locally grown and raised food.

The evening was topped off with a wine-and-cheese tasting featuring wineries and artisan cheese makers from Western Washington.

Watch County Executive Aaron Reardon’s [opening comments](#).

###