

Media Advisory – Sept. 24, 2008

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County wetland banks take top state honors

Snohomish County received top honors Wednesday from the Washington State Department of Ecology for its recently approved wetland mitigation banks, the first in the state to receive full local, state and federal accreditation.

Bill Lewallen, the county's airport deputy director, also was honored by Ecology for his leadership in completing the wetland-mitigation process during the past 10 years.

Specifically, Ecology awarded the county and Lewallen its Environmental Excellence Award, which is reserved for "individuals, businesses and organizations showing leadership, innovation or extraordinary service in protecting, improving or cleaning up the environment."

"This wetland bank is an environmental and economic achievement," County Executive Aaron Reardon said Wednesday. "It speaks to the effort Snohomish County is making toward balancing growth with environmental protection, and it shows that our county staff is among the best in the state."

The 60 acres of created and preserved wetlands on and near airport property can now be used by future county airport projects to offset wetland losses that cannot be avoided. State and federal laws prohibit the loss of most wetlands due to development.

Ten years ago, Snohomish County began developing a wetland mitigation bank with the help of Ecology, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Federal Aviation Administration.

In April, regulatory agencies determined two properties – the Swanson Wetland Mitigation Bank and the Narbeck Wetland Mitigation Bank – had matured enough to be made available for mitigation.

Officials from each agency gathered Wednesday to celebrate the final approval.

"These banks were only possible through the collaborative efforts of the federal and state agencies, Snohomish County and the airport nearly a decade ago," said Col. Anthony Wright, commander of the Corps' Seattle District.

Ecology is working with other private and public agencies across the state to create more wetland mitigation banks. Ecology officials said Wednesday that the Paine Field wetland banks are the state's centerpiece for other projects.

“The future of wetland mitigation will look like the Paine Field bank,” said Jay Manning, Ecology’s director. “We can use this project as a model, applying the lessons learned from this banking approach to future projects throughout the state.”

EPA approval is a must for any wetland mitigation bank, and Washington state’s program is based on federal standards.

“Our region’s wetlands and small streams are not only home to salmon and other threatened and endangered wildlife, but they also prevent flooding and protect us from storm damage” said Elin Miller, EPA’s regional administrator in Seattle. “Our new wetland mitigation rule will help ensure ecological success, while providing greater consistency and predictability for property owners and developers.”

Snohomish County’s Narbeck wetlands also double as a passive recreational opportunity for thousands of residents and employees living in the area. The county provided public access to the Narbeck project with the help of the Friends of Narbeck Wetland Sanctuary. Trails intersperse the property along with interpretive signs for self-guided tours and passive recreation.

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