



Saving Farms and Salmon



How a Conservation Partnership Changed One Washington Community

BY DON STUART

A small local government in Snohomish County, Washington, has a remarkable story to tell about the interconnectedness between farming and the environment in the Pacific Northwest. It is a story that is playing out throughout the region, as environmentalists and farmers increasingly recognize their common interest.

The Snohomish River in Washington is home to dwindling runs of wild salmon. They are now listed under the Endangered Species Act, as population growth and human activities have degraded much of the Snohomish River watershed. Once-robust commercial, sport and cultural salmon fisheries are disappearing. But public pressure has intensified to prevent the extinction of the Snohomish River Chinook salmon and to preserve the immense natural value of this watershed. Native American tribes with strong ties to the fish have treaty rights to protect and restore them. As a result, heightened regulations now affect almost every activity associated with the river.

The Snohomish County Drainage District 13 is a 600-acre area located near Everett, Washington, in the Snohomish River estuary. In this area, the tides raise and lower the water from Puget

Sound to the city of Snohomish. Local residents created and fund the drainage district to keep the tiny community dry enough to farm and live.

There are 19 farms in the district, and they lie below high tide. Early settlers erected dikes along the banks of the Snohomish River to reclaim the land, as their European ancestors had done for centuries in places like the Netherlands. The dikes are equipped with tide gates that open to let water drain out at low tide. The gates are forced closed when the tide comes up, protecting the farmland from inundation. Several generations of farmers have lived here, working the land, improving the soil and making this little community a contributor to the local farm economy. Swan Trail Slough, a waterway that once provided refuge for fish escaping the main channel, now drains the district's farmlands.



LEFT: An endangered Chinook salmon in Washington

RIGHT: Record levels of rain caused flooding in Snohomish County in November of 2006. Frequent flooding is a fact of life for area residents.

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When the 58-year-old tide gate in Drainage District 13 succumbed to rust, residents feared they would never get the permits to replace it. There was talk among district residents that if the tide gate and pump failed, the district's dikes, like those in a neighboring district, could be marked for breaching and the land returned to fish habitat, as it had been before their forefathers settled here in the late 1800s. And there was a lack of money to do the work.

Then Drainage District 13 learned about a new grants program called "Pioneers in Conservation," which funds projects that save salmon while helping farm businesses. The drainage district board was impressed that Shared Strategy for Puget Sound (an umbrella salmon recovery planning group) and American Farmland Trust were partners in the

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program: it was run by people who had loyalties to agriculture and the environment. So they applied. They wanted a new, efficient tide gate that would let more water out of the district at low tide, draining the farmland and flushing the stagnant slough to improve water quality. Their existing heavy steel tide gate with its rusting hinges barely opened, so few fish could enter or leave. A tide gate made

of lighter material like fiberglass or aluminum would open wider, allowing salmon to pass freely.

The district also wanted to replace the pump used to drain the fields with one that would not kill fish passing through. Newer pumps require less maintenance, use environmentally friendly oil and are designed to pass fish without injuring them. Finally, the district wanted to replace



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The new tide gate during installation.



invasive weeds with native plants to provide habitat for fish and other wildlife. The 19 farms in the district would be drier and more farmable, and a whole new area of restored habitat would be opened up for juvenile salmon seeking refuge from the river's main channel.

The wish list grew as the potential for funding inspired district farmers. With funding available, a willing landowner with a successful agri-tourism business said he would volunteer land and labor to create an educational trail through restored habitat. He would invite school groups to adopt the area and learn how farmers could serve as good stewards of the land. Another volunteered land for a large buffer if funding could be found to replace a collapsed culvert.

Not everybody in the district immediately warmed to the idea, however. Most residents were suspicious of environmentalists and concerned about the potential land-use consequences of harboring endangered salmon. But given

Pioneers in Conservation: Salmon Restoration Helps Farms

When AFT began working on the salmon recovery issue, we could not have known that our work might end up helping to save a whole farming community. But that's how it has turned out.

The grants program that helped fund Drainage District 13 had its genesis in 2004, when communities throughout Puget Sound were writing a salmon recovery plan required by the Endangered Species Act. AFT knew the plan would have a major impact on agriculture and decided to get involved.

We began by helping local salmon advocates develop a plan that would respect, and benefit from, local agriculture. The plan that emerged recognized that "if salmon recovery is possible in the Puget Sound region, it will be with the help of farms, not in spite of them."

This simple but revolutionary concept set the stage for a new "partnership for farms and salmon," in which saving

agriculture became a concern of salmon recovery and saving salmon was in the interest of farmers. AFT began working with Shared Strategy for Puget Sound to implement this idea and create a new salmon-restoration grants program called Pioneers in Conservation. The Pioneers program funds projects that help salmon and farm businesses at the same time.

To date, Pioneers has funded 17 projects around the Puget Sound area. There are projects to keep livestock out of streams; to plant riparian zones for fish while preventing erosion; and to help farms get certified as "Salmon Safe" while strengthening product marketing, among others.

Each of those projects has a story to tell—many of them are quite amazing. The story of Drainage District 13 is only one of them.



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Farmland in Drainage District 13.

the benefits, even the doubters ultimately signed on. Some of the most skeptical have now even warmed to the possibility of riparian habitat improvements on their own land. Such is the power of an idea—especially one with broad credibility and backed by funding!

The Pioneers in Conservation money attracted other support. Snohomish County established an inter-local agreement to help the district pay for the new tide gate. NOAA Fisheries awarded state-of-the-art water quality monitoring equipment to the Snohomish Conservation District to measure improvements in water quality, and Snohomish County Surface Water Management pitched in to help with monitoring. Conservation District engineers provided technical designs, assisted with permits, and provided construction oversight. The Pioneers award encouraged the Community Salmon Fund to also support replacing a collapsed culvert and planting the buffer on private land. Community members stepped forward to pot and care for plants, assist with paperwork and even clear weeds.

Armed with funding, new credibility, community backing, and the obvious benefits for fish and other wildlife, the district got its permits from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Weather delayed pump installation, but the new tide gate is in place, and its first test convinced even the most stalwart doubters. In November 2006, the Snohomish River experienced record floods. The entire district filled with water, leaving only a ribbon of dike and the houses above the waterline. As the floods receded, district residents walked the dike to watch the lightweight tide gate. It was open wide, draining water from the district at a rate they had never before seen. The new tide gate allowed the district to leave the old pump turned off for most of the event—a good thing since salmon fry are already entering the slough in numbers not seen in recent history.

There have been other unexpected benefits. Farmers in the district had been questioning their future. Many thought agriculture in the Snohomish River Valley was doomed, either by environmental regulations or by drainage problems that would bankrupt them and condemn their land for wetland restoration projects. Some hesitated to invest in improvements or even maintain their farm businesses. All had withdrawn in frustration from the political arena, certain that county government wanted them to fail at farming and give in to fish restoration. As a result, most had become vocal adversaries of environmental protection.

Today, however, the community is acquiring a new sense of pride and self-identity. Agricultural business owners who run traditional beef and hay operations, agri-tourism and nurseries are discussing ways to market their products locally. District farmers and residents are talking about how they can be a model for other area districts to promote agricultural products that are grown with respect for the salmon and the environment. The district is beginning to reach out to neighbors on the surrounding hills to help them recognize and reduce the rising impacts of impervious surfaces and poor landscape management on Swan Trail Slough. The community is making plans to educate other farmers and the public through workshops and site visits.

Most importantly, the Pioneers in Conservation program helped district farmers gain a new self-confidence. They now know that they are valuable, perhaps even indispensable, in saving salmon and protecting the region's environment. With that confidence comes the realization that in exchange, the other three million or so people living in the Puget Sound area must be prepared to do what is necessary to help farming survive, both environmentally *and* economically, well into the next millennium.

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The Importance of Cooperative Conservation

Farmers in the Puget Sound area, where there are endangered Chinook salmon, face heightened environmental regulations. The 2007 Farm Bill could do more to help Puget Sound farmers—and farmers and ranchers across the nation—address such high priority natural resource concerns. AFT has proposed a new “cooperative conservation” program that would support the collective efforts of farmers and ranchers in a given watershed or region as they work together to steward our nation's natural resources.