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Farming it out

The agricultural industry in Skagit and Whatcom counties continues to weed through a number of challenges

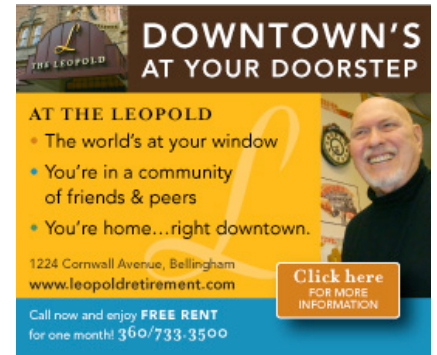
By: *Amanda Baltazar*



The rows of potatoes in Skagit County constantly fight water issues – too much in the winter; too little in the summer.

We're a wasteful nation. Every year Americans throw away 40 percent of the food produced in this country, which costs around \$1 billion to load into landfills, according to a study by the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases.

Figures like this surely don't please farmers since not only is farming hard physical labor, but it's also fraught with myriad issues that make it a difficult industry to be in.




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Northwest Washington is no exception. The agriculture business here is perpetually dealing with three big issues, said Henry Bierlink, executive director of Whatcom Farm Friends in Lynden. These issues are land, water and labor. Let's take a look at what these mean for Whatcom and Skagit counties.

Land

"A critical mass of land is imperative to keep an agriculture business going," explained Bierlink. The difficulty is that Northwest Washington is an attractive place to live, being located between Seattle and Vancouver, which in turn makes it an attractive place to build homes – and that building often takes place on farmland.

When this land is not being farmed, said Bierlink, the agriculture industry implodes and farmers, food processors and everyone else associated with the industry, go away.

"We're not purist and say that no agricultural land should ever be converted – that's not a realistic option – but we would hope we do that very wisely and we do it in the right places. And we would hope that if we take a half step back, we take a full step forward in another area," he said.

Whatcom is by far the largest agricultural county on the west side of Washington and it's in the top six agricultural counties in the state (Skagit is seventh). Fortunately, Whatcom still has a critical mass of land and so does Skagit. Both are supported in part by processing as well as other industries (like banking), Bierlink added.

But farmers here have been very careful to keep this land, said Mike Shelby, executive director of the Western Washington Agricultural Association in Mount Vernon.

They've been very careful in Skagit to keep the zoning laws in favor of keeping the land, he pointed out. "It's something you always have to be vigilant about and on top of because there's always someone else who can think of another use for that land."

Water

That the agriculture business in Whatcom and Skagit counties face a water problem is ironic but a reality. For nine months of the year farmers are trying to drain their land of the excessive water in the ground from our plentiful rainfall. But for the other three months, the issue is irrigation.

"That puts us at odds with streamflows, fish (salmon) and tribal rights," pointed out Bierlink.

Whatcom Farm Friends was created in 1993 to deal with water problems. "That was the crisis of the day and it's still one of our larger issues," said Bierlink. "We've come to understand that the issue itself is not going to go away."

The organization works closely with the Native American tribes and believes that the focus should be placed at the lowest practical level – that of an individual drainage unit. So, all landowners within a drainage unit should be empowered to carry out necessary water management duties and responsibilities.

Something else could also be impacting the water in Whatcom and Skagit counties and that's the environment. Allen Rozema, executive director of Skagitians to Preserve Farmland, Mount Vernon, pointed out that river routes are changing, possibly related to climate change.

The farmers in Skagit, he explained, have enough reserved water rights for irrigation. "The issue is timing and moving the water around because in Skagit the crops are rotated every three to four years and there needs to be a legal mechanism in place to make sure water rights can be moved as crops move, so the water follows the crop," he said.

Mike Shelby has long been involved with the water issues and began looking into a comprehensive irrigation district management plan six or seven years ago.

"We looked at how we could get the water, how we could protect the fisheries that are involved in the watershed and how other uses are also considered (like shorebird populations where they need some water available). We were trying to make sure we had everybody considered in the process.

"Then we looked at how much water we had rights for. We've spent 150 years trying to drain the swamp here so we can actually farm the delta but at the same time not let it go so far that we drain it out. We need to control it."

The crops grown here, which include raspberries, blueberries and potatoes, cannot survive without water. "There's such an enormous cost to growing the crops that you can't run the risk of losing the crop because there's not enough water available," said Shelby.

Water issues aren't going to go away, he continued. "Water's always going to be an issue. There's either too much of it in one place or not enough of it."

Labor

Labor continues to be an issue for farmers in Whatcom and Skagit counties.

The problems are different than they used to be, pointed out Bierlink. The supply of farm laborers is no longer being stretched by a booming construction market, which tended to attract farm laborers, he explained.

"But while we may have a brief respite from competing job pressures we are constantly aware of the difficulties seasonal workers experience and the changing international job markets. There is little clarity in the long-term labor supply and our farmers are very interested in resolving these uncertainties in a manner that is fair to all involved."

But most of the labor that comes to this area of Washington is migrants who move around to different states and different growing regions, said Bierlink. However, he pointed out that more people have left that cycle and are living here since the berry industry is able to employ people for most of the year.

Coping with crops, dealing with dairy

Land, water and labor are big issues and they're not issues that are going to go away. Unfortunately, nor are the other perpetual challenges that the agriculture industry deals with.

One of these is the exodus of farmers from Skagit and Whatcom counties, ever since processing peaked in the mid 1970s. This year, Skagit County saw the departure of Twin City Foods, a pea processor that had 5,000 acres of land, the last of the large processors to depart. (In the early 1970s there were nine large processors of green vegetables here.)

"The peas generated money that went back into agriculture," said Shelby. "You can't grow the same crop year after year so the in-between years you had other crops there. So when you lose a crop (like peas) you have to figure out what you can replace it with." The ground could be allowed to rest for a year, he added, "but ultimately we're in better, healthier condition if we have more crops to grow."

It's not just green vegetable processors that are disappearing. Whatcom County has also been losing dairy producers.

According to Ken Kadelec, general manager of Skagit Farmers Supply, 25 years ago there used to be 85 dairies in the county



Young farmers work with Sebastian Aguilar (see sidebar) to bring organic methods to the region.

and it's now down to about 20.

"It's because very low prices have caused them to get out as well as other issues, like new regulations on handling animal waste, so it wasn't worthwhile to invest the kind of money they'd need to keep their facilities running," he explained.

The dairy industry in Skagit County continues to be large, however. Most of the milk produced here is processed into milk powder at the Lynden Powder Plant by Darigold, which has a co-op of farmers in the Northwest and plants throughout the region. From here the milk powder is sent out to different areas of the world – in fact, far below 5 percent of the milk produced in Whatcom stays in Whatcom and is consumed here.

And weather is, of course, a challenge that can neither be reckoned with nor forecast. And this year has been particularly difficult, because following a mild winter, the rains have been pretty constant.

"The cold weather we had this spring will affect pollination," said Kadelec. "That's a huge issue on the crops. When the weather's really crummy the bees aren't active and the berry and tree crops need that, although potatoes and corn don't."

Kadelec estimated that this year the crops' yields will be down because of the reduced pollination during the cold, wet spring. "Many crops will be planted later than they would have, and there will probably be more disease because of the cold wet weather, since that's when disease organisms typically prosper."

Rozema said that he's heard that farmers this year are worried but optimistic. "I haven't heard anyone report that they're taking losses yet. The first people that will be affected will be the berry guys. There's also possibly some damage to the potatoes that have already been planted."

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