



WESTERN WASHINGTON AG REPORT

MAY/JUNE 2021



THE FIR ISLAND FARM PROJECT & PROGRESS

The history of a local, private land restoration project

A history of drainage

Fir Island is a unique and special place. Physically, it's an "island" set apart from the mainland by the natural fork of the Skagit River. When you drive around the Skagit Valley, you realize that the only thing protecting you from water is the meticulously crafted dike and drainage system throughout the region. This is no more evident than when on Fir Island, which has a long history with the good and bad of the system.

One hundred years ago Fir Island, Mount Vernon, and surrounding towns were under 30 feet of water in places. The flood of 1921 ripped through Skagit Valley days before Christmas when heavy rains, warm winds and melting snow made the Skagit River burst through adjacent levees. Fir Island's adjacent communities of Conway and Milltown, like much of the Skagit delta, were flooded. Buildings, homes, rail lines and roads were destroyed. More recently, in 1990 Fir Island was under water as a result of one of the area's worst floods in recorded history. That November, 450 residents of the island were evacuated after a levee failed on the north end of the Island, at

the Skagit River fork. Witnesses said the hole doubled in size "within 20 minutes." The break sent a wall of water flooding over fertile farmland and forced the evacuation of residents and thousands of cattle.

"The dike felt like jelly," resident Pat Dozier told reporters at the time. "It felt like an earthquake under your feet. We all got out of there fast just before it blew. If we would have got caught in the path of that water, we would have been history. Waves were 8 to 10 feet high. I saw it wipe out a fence row." (Seattle Times, Nov. 13, 1990)

Farms were devastated, livestock and crops were lost, and some farmland was forever changed--not only with the river water flooding on the north end, but saltwater inflows from the south end. District commissioners excavated a large breach in the saltwater dike at the south end to drain the massive quantity of river flood water into Skagit Bay.

"We're draining the water on one place on the island," Don Nelson, county flood-control engineer said. "But, if the water gets too deep and the saltwater dike gets too soft, it could break in 25 or 30 places. And then you've got a real problem. If

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Explanation of the Fir Island Farm project
- The Private Lands Program
- Friend of Agriculture

Cover: Skagit Bay Estuary Unit on Fir Island (North Fork)

the entire dike breaks, then Fir Island becomes a part of Skagit Bay." (Seattle Times, Nov. 13, 1990)

Less than two weeks later another flood hit. Repairs on Fir Island took months, and the delicate nature of our infrastructure in the Skagit River Delta was again in the spotlight.

A partnership

The Island is home to farms, towns, and businesses, with dike and drainage infrastructure managed by Skagit County Consolidated Diking Improvement District No. 22. The District, and included

WWAA MISSION

To represent agriculture by providing services to the entire agricultural community

WWAA COMMITMENTS

Engage in internal and external (economic, environmental, regulatory) pressures on agriculture

Interact with county, state, and federal legislators and regulators

Pest and nutrient management control

Network with and support of the agricultural research community

Seek out and develop opportunities and technologies for agriculture

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President

Marty Coble

Vice-President

Garrett Williams

Secretary/Treasurer

Tyler Breum

Directors

Dan Gundersen

Bob Hughes

Owen Peth

Andrew Schuh

Jenn Smith

Steve Strand

Jon Vanderkooy

STAFF MEMBERS

Executive Director

Brandon Roozen

broozen@westag.org

Office Manager

Debbie Danielson

ddanielson@westag.org

Assistant to Executive Director

Gary T. Jones

gjones@westag.org

2017 Continental Place #6
Mount Vernon, WA 98273
(360) 424-7327
westag.org

landbase, hosts multiple estuary habitat restoration projects: Fir Island Farm, Wiley Slough, and the Deepwater Slough/Island Unit. In the 1990s, the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW) purchased a specific part of the island from private landowners and farmers for the purpose of providing an “undisturbed feeding and resting area for snow geese.” Under contract with WDFW, nearby farmers planted forage on this acreage for the geese and other waterfowl to feed. WDFW officially designated and named the property the “Fir Island Farm Snow Goose Reserve”.

Years later, Chinook salmon

were listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and along with multiple others, the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan identified the acreage encompassing Fir Island Farm as a priority location for juvenile salmon rearing habitat restoration. With the support of District 22, WDFW and partners moved forward with the plan to restore this area to estuary habitat. In order to protect the surrounding farmland, the project included construction of a pump station, drainage storage pond, and tidegates to maintain drainage for the District. In addition, the setback dike was designed to account for future coastal flooding and the impacts of sea level rise. The project was completed in 2016, and 131 acres of estuary habitat were restored as a tidal marsh. In 2020, WDFW transitioned ownership and operations of the project’s infrastructure to District 22, which now maintains the site’s 5,800 feet of marine dike, tidegates, storage pond, and pump station in concert with other District infrastructure.

Is it working? Are the Chinook back?

While we know that 131 acres were restored, we don’t know if the project is meeting expectations of Chinook recovery. The Skagit Delta Tidegates and Fish Initiative (TFI) implementation agreement requires that partners attain 1.35 million smolts (juvenile salmon) or restore 2,700 acres, whichever is achieved first during the 25 year agreement.

Officials predicted that this project would yield 65,000 smolts per year, and it’s been 5 years since the completion of the project. Smolt counts are being conducted by WDFW and the Skagit River System Cooperative (SRSC). SRSC provides natural resource management services for the Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe and the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community. According to them, 11,000-50,000 Chinook smolts have been restored in this area per year. With various interests at play, WWAA continues its watchful eye on Chinook recovery. Before more private farmlands are acquired for salmon estuary habitat, we want to ensure that past projects are actually working as originally intended.



Fir Island sits between the North and South Forks of the Skagit River.

IMAGE CREDIT: Agricultural Land Use GIS map, WSDA



A view of the Fir Island Farm project and its restored tidal marsh. Once fields of productive farmland, they now sit as salmon estuary habitat.

PRIVATE LANDS PROGRAM

"Every acre must count"

More than half of the land in Washington is privately owned. As a comparison, nearly 96% of Texas and only about 4% of Alaska is privately owned.

In Skagit County, private landowners have contributed to the health of the community both socially and economically. With nearly 90,000 acres of farmland in production in the county, farmers make up the largest sector of private land owners in the county. The Swinomish Indian Tribal Community is the next largest landowner, with more than 7,400 upland and 2,900 tideland acres.

Public-private partnerships are critical to moving infrastructure forward. Farmers and ranchers have partnered with neighbors and communities to improve this region agriculturally, economically, and socially. When it comes to wildlife management on private lands, there is one rule: landowners own the land, but the state owns the wildlife. According to Washington law, fish and other wildlife are the property of the state, and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is the agency responsible for preserving, protecting, and enhancing fish, wildlife, and ecosystems, while securing public access for hunting and fishing. When it comes to estuary habitat restoration, HB 1418 provided that WDFW restore public lands before private lands.

For decades, WWAA has worked with WDFW to address fish and wildlife habitat restoration needs while protecting farmland. In partnership with other agricultural organizations, WWAA has consistently been a strong voice for the preservation of western Washington prime farmlands and the protection of these lands from conversion to non-agricultural uses.

In 2008, WWAA signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with the WDFW called the Skagit Land Use Management Planning Process. This agreement outlines that the two entities would undertake a collaborative, community-based effort to identify and discuss land use issues of mutual concern within the context of the greater Skagit River landscape of western Skagit County. Most of this area includes the Skagit and Samish River lowlands, deltas and estuarine areas. It is also inclusive of the area of Snohomish County in southern Skagit Bay and around Camano Island.

They also agreed to develop a long-term vision and land-use plan for natural resource and wildlife recreation lands acquisition and management that represents and respects the shared interests and needs of both the agricultural and natural resource communities. They agreed to involve other stakeholder groups, individuals, and local, state, federal, and tribal governments in development of the vision and land-use plan, as appropriate and mutually agreed upon by the parties. WWAA, WDFW, and other stakeholder parties, agreed on a land use plan through workgroup collaboration. The goal of that workgroup was to craft land conservation management and acquisition guidance for WDFW that:

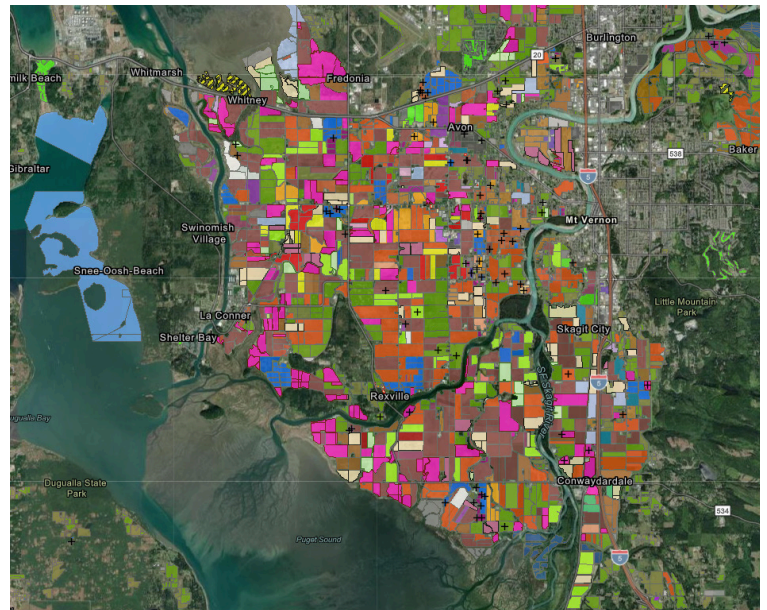
- Will describe and encourage an array of management options, including conservation easements, landowner agreements and fee simple land acquisition where appropriate, for public recreation, fish and wildlife habitat while minimizing the impacts on agricultural land uses.
- Will identify and improve long-term vision and predict-

ability of the land base for WDFW and the agricultural community.

- Will incorporate stakeholder interests involved in this process.
- Will adapt and endure in the face of change (e.g. climate change and land use).
- Will provide a legacy of sustainability for agriculture, fish and wildlife conservation, ecosystem health, and public recreation for future generations.

The Skagit MOA workgroup recommended that WDFW adhere to the Lands 20/20 strategy and process when considering land transactions in the Skagit Delta with some modifications:

(continued on next page)



Over 90 different crops are grown in Skagit County. This map showcases the various different crops raised on private farmlands currently in the west region. IMAGE CREDIT: Agricultural Land Use GIS map, WSDA



A productive grain field near the Skagit Bay Estuary Unit on Fir Island.



2017 Continental Place #6
Mount Vernon, WA 98273
(360) 424-7327
westag.org

- Planning Integration—Acquisition or conservation of any property under consideration must be linked to the Department Strategic Plan; to a local, regional, state, national, or international plan or agreement that is consistent with the Department goals and objectives; or a mitigation settlement signed by the Department.
- For properties being considered for salmon restoration, the potential project must be part of a salmon recovery activity described by the local lead entity.

- Alternatives to Department ownership or management of any property (e.g. conservation provided through land use regulation, another entity holding title, or a conservation easement) should be explored.

WWAA and ag stakeholders also raised the concern that land acquisition by state agencies reduces the agricultural land base in private ownership. In addition, agriculture interest groups believe that the state can meet many habitat and recreation goals by leasing access or habitat from farmers instead

of outright acquisition (the same model of leasing, swapping, and exchanging lands currently practiced in growing crops in the greater Skagit Valley).

Partnerships between private landowners and the WDFW will be critical in the future as the region continues to implement the Skagit Chinook Recovery Plan (2005). The goal of WWAA is to adhere to the commitments made in previous decades regarding salmon recovery while protecting farms and ranches in the region from harm and loss.

MARY MARGARET HAUGEN

Friend of Agriculture

Many policies protecting agriculture today would not have been possible without the support of Mary Margaret Haugen. A lifetime resident of Camano Island, she served the 10th District in the Washington Legislature for 29 years, representing all of Island County and parts of Snohomish and Skagit counties. Originally elected to the House in 1982, she served five terms in the Senate following five terms in the House of Representatives. She chaired the Senate Transportation Committee, and was a champion of farmland preservation in Skagit County.

In 2003, she introduced one of the

most important pieces of legislation for Skagit farmers: HB 1418. Haugen had strong support from WWAA staff, leadership, and members. Many of our agricultural partners and leaders testified in support of the bill. Among other goals, the bill created a long-term plan for intertidal salmon enhancement to meet the goals of salmon recovery and agricultural lands protection. It led to the prioritization of public lands for restoration, and kept agriculture land participation voluntary.

"Mary Margaret was instrumental in protecting farms from government overreach," said WWAA Executive Director, Brandon Roozen. "Without her leadership, the salmon recovery process would look very different today in Skagit County."

We appreciate her commitment to Skagit Valley landowners.

