



Farms' slippery slope

Conservation agreements attempt to save dwindling agricultural lands

BY DIANE URBANI DE LA PAZ

03/02/08

DUNGENESS -- Sequim is more than a retirement destination.

It's a wide-open salad bar for the Puget Sound region.

So says Patty McManus-Huber, who, with her husband, Nash Huber, owns Nash's Organic Produce.

McManus-Huber heads fundraising efforts for Friends of the Fields, a nonprofit that began its farmland preservation efforts in 2000.

With help from the North Olympic Land Trust, Friends has established conservation agreements across Clallam County which guarantee that 146 acres of farmland won't be sold for development.

During the past two years, Friends pulled in some \$350,000 in donations from North Olympic Peninsula residents and bought the development rights to the Dungeness Valley Creamery farm.

The deal left the 32-acre parcel in the hands of the Brown family — and ensured that the pastures won't be paved.

This year, the group wants to raise \$1 million for future purchases.

"We know that it will be difficult to raise that locally, in the time frame," McManus-Huber said.

So she, along with Friends president Jim Aldrich and founder Bob Caldwell, is widening the search for supporters.

"We know that the Puget Sound eats food that comes from here," McManus-Huber said.

"Sixty percent of Nash's product goes to Seattle."

Little farmland is left in the central Puget Sound area, she added, since growers in the Seattle-Tacoma area gave ground to malls, casinos and condominiums.

In a strategic planning workshop earlier this month, the Friends board of directors set another goal:

Develop a marketing plan that will promote their Clallam farmland preservation efforts off the North Olympic Peninsula.

"We're hoping to turn our sights a little eastward," McManus-Huber said.

### **Friends' fundraisers**

It's not that locals haven't written checks.

Friends of the Fields started nine years ago with about \$800, Caldwell said.

Since then, barn dances, strawberry shortcake sales at the Sequim Open Aire Market and other fundraisers have put substantial amounts into Friends' bank account.

In 2007, Bill and Esther Littlejohn stepped forward to preserve a 40-acre piece of farmland in Sequim, plus the Dungeness Valley Creamery deal.

Friends now wants to buy the development rights to 50 acres of the Finn Hall Farm in Agnew.

Owners John and Carmen Jarvis have had the property in their family for 70 years, and "they want it to stay a farm," Aldrich said.

After Friends and Clallam County have the land appraised, they can finish their application for a state grant.

The application is due in May — and is contingent on matching funds locally, he added.

Girding for a high appraised value, Friends is setting its local fundraising goal at the half-million-dollar mark.

"As land prices have shot up, it's been an uphill battle," McManus-Huber said.

### **Other properties**

Regardless of whether the Finn Hall Farm efforts bear fruit, Friends will

keep looking for other properties to preserve.

McManus-Huber emphasized that when farmers sell development rights, they retain ownership of their lands.

Friends, she added, needs to make its mission more widely known before it's too late.

Many Clallam farmers are getting on in years, and. "their kids have moved away . . . they're looking at their land as their retirement," McManus-Huber said.

After toiling in their fields for decades — and watching their children choose other professions — she can understand why farmers consider selling their land and living off the proceeds.

"We're going to be grateful, 20 years from now, for every farm we protect, and for the local food," she said.

"Now we have to get our message out."

Contributions to Friends of the Fields' Clallam County farmland preservation fund may be mailed to Friends of the Fields, P.O. Box 1201, Carlsborg, WA 98324.

For more information about Friends of the Fields, phone 360-683-7750.

For more information about North Olympic Land Trust, based in Port Angeles, phone 360-417-1815.

---