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James Vesely / Times editorial page editor

The true environmentalists, linking ownership to values

Farmerson the lower Skykomish River were trying to keep farming in the face of tougher regulations and urban development.

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Foresters on the Olympic Peninsula were worried about the number of mushroom pickers entering the woodlands, so they developed a certification program for migrant workers that validated their harvest and ensured both the work and the crop.

Other examples follow, but they sum up an idea coming out of downtown Seattle that reaches to the ranches and the forests of our state. It sits inside the political spectrum of keeping land within private ownership while maintaining its ecological value.

The organization behind the idea is **Stewardship Partners**, born out of a failed political campaign and the need to pay back \$50,000 of campaign contributions.

"I had this epiphany walking across the land near the Skykomish," said Chris Bayley, failed candidate for the U.S. Senate and chairman of **Stewardship Partners** of Seattle. "The land had to be farmed, or it would revert to blackberry bushes in a few years. There was no need to lose the ag land for the families or the community. So we helped them work with the regulators. We shouldn't lose any more farmland."

About 30 miles from Walla Walla, in the farming town of Dayton that looks like just a dot on Highway 12, **Stewardship Partners** worked on the Broughton Ranch along with Washington State University to develop habitat conservation. The result was \$100,000 in federal money for species cataloging on a unique parcel of forest, rangeland and farmland.

The point is that this kind of habitat and farmland protection is coming from people with both Republican roots and a Seattle-based environmental ethic.

"I don't run into many farmers who are Freedom County types," Bayley told me Friday morning. "They are almost always true conservationists who find themselves squeezed between regulations and economics. We are the catalyst trying to bring the regulators and the researchers and the landowners together."

Working off a tiny annual budget (\$120,000 this year), the organization is engaged in three projects, plus the one on the Skykomish:

- Along the Okanogan River, 1,600 acres of pristine forest, archeological sites and virgin ponderosa pine form the last roadless area between the Canadian border and the confluence with the Columbia River. Working with Central Washington University, **Stewardship Partners**, property owners and tribal councils will develop a biological research and education center.
- Local property owners in the lower Snoqualmie Valley near Seattle want to maintain responsible **stewardship** of oxbows — water channels cut off from the main Snoqualmie River. Most of the oxbows are on private land. **Stewardship Partners** and landowners are trying to create a working model that would preserve the oxbows.
- The Nisqually River Conservation Project seeks to keep parts of the treasured

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wetlands near Olympia within private ownership but guaranteeing habitat protection and offering incentives for landowners to do so. It's part of **Stewardship Partners'** intention to teach landowners how to protect river systems close to urban cores, and also part of the larger Glacier to Sound Conservation Corridor.

One day in 1998, Bayley found himself staring at \$50,000 after he lost his race for the Senate. He had to send the money back to the contributors but he followed it up with a letter saying each could redonate the money to this new land-use idea. **Stewardship Partners** was formed in 1999 out of that lost ambition. Its board of directors includes some of the old-line names of conservative thinkers in Seattle. Bruce Chapman of Seattle's Discovery Institute is among them.

The shift from government lands to some kind of private ownership that includes a public **stewardship** ethic is occurring steadily and nobody knows where it will take us. The land story with the biggest headlines was the one a few weeks ago that announced 100,000 acres of forest — a huge swatch of eastern King County — moving from Weyerhaeuser ownership to a land trust administered by environmentalists. Upcoming on these pages Tuesday will be an essay on the idea of charter forests, a way to consider moving U.S. Forest Service lands into a new form of **stewardship**. It's written by a conservative who wants fewer subsidized timber roads.

Stewardship Partners strikes me as the sensible center — it seeks to keep farmers on their land and forest owners on theirs within the embrace of a shared environmental ethic. I have no idea if, in the long run, the idea will work or be sustainable. But I know not all the answers reside within private ownership going belly up. Government doesn't have the money to save every river bend and every meadow. Somewhere in the rift between environmental regulations and private landowners, there must be something better than a battlefield.

Stewardship Partners can be reached at <http://www.stewardshippartners.org/>.

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