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Certified for saving salmon

BY BEVERLY CRICHFIELD, FEATURES EDITOR

New certification gives farmers another way to attract environmentally conscious customers

For La Conner farmer Dave Hedlin, saving the struggling salmon in local waterways is a complicated, three-pronged formula — scientific research, a change in farming methods and cooperation among a variety of government, farming and community organizations.

But the best of his own contributions may be far more simplistic overall.

The tall, quiet, third-generation farmer hiked up the embankment of a dike to the tangled, gnarled shrubs and trees that hang over to shade the shoreline of Sullivan Slough. He then pointed toward a quiet pocket of dark water.



La Conner farmer Dave Hedlin's family has farmed next to Sullivan Slough for three generations and has worked hard to protect the slough's fish-rearing habitat, mostly by not disturbing the natural environment of the slough.

The slough near his farm is naturally prime salmon-rearing habitat, with willow trees springing from the top of the dike to provide shade from the sun and leaves dropping into the water to provide nutrients.

"Our jobs as stewards of this land and for this generation is just not to mess this up," Hedlin said with a laugh and a shrug. "We just try to keep it the same." Farmers have for the most part unfairly taken much of the brunt for the dwindling salmon stocks in Pacific Northwest streams and rivers, Hedlin said.

Many are adopting the all-important "best management" farming practices designed to help reduce the amount of chemicals that drain from farmers' fields into local waterways and restore stream banks to promote salmon health.

Customers increasingly care about how farmers raise their food and whether they're harming the environment, Hedlin said. So when Seattle-based nonprofit Stewardship Partners approached Hedlin last year with the idea of taking part in a voluntary program that would allow him to add a "salmon safe" certification to his produce, he had to consider it.

Hedlin's is one of two farms in Skagit County and 18 in the Puget Sound area that have been certified salmon safe, said Larry Nussbaum, director of the Washington-based salmon safe program.

The certification has several benefits for farmers, Nussbaum said. The label opens new markets with retailers who specialize in selling organic or environmentally friendly products, Nussbaum said. It also helps farmers distinguish their products from those of other farms, he said.

Hedlin says those potential benefits were enough for him to jump on board. "Certifications are the emerging thing," Hedlin said, noting that studies have shown customers are willing to fork out a little extra money for what they believe is healthier food.

Incentive to protect

The salmon safe program is an offshoot of a similar program established by the Oregon-based Pacific Rivers Council in 1997. More than 100 farms have been certified salmon safe in Oregon since the program's inception.

Washington's nonprofit Stewardship Partners, which helps landowners preserve and restore their natural landscape and protect habitat, launched its own salmon safe program in 2004, Nussbaum said.

"Stewardship Partners took this model and saw it as a good tool because it focused on nonregulatory-based approaches to restoration," Nussbaum said. "It's a good way to reward farmers who are being proactive as far as addressing salmon habitat issues."

Stewardship tested the program in the Snoqualmie Valley by certifying four farms. When the response from farmers and retailers was positive, Stewardship decided to expand the program to other areas in Puget Sound, Nussbaum said.

The program is relatively new, Nussbaum said, so the farmers haven't been coming to Stewardship Partners to be certified. Rather, Stewardship Partners has approached farmers who have reputations for environmentally friendly farming practices.

Many of those farmers already are involved in other habitat restoration programs or community efforts, including the Pacific Northwest-based Food Alliance, a nonprofit group that promotes sustainable agriculture, and Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland.

To become certified, a farm must meet a list of guidelines that rate everything from the water quality of drainage, use of natural pest control to minimize chemicals and how well the banks of any rivers and streams near the farms are protected for salmon to the condition of buffers around those streams and rivers and how farmers protect other nearby natural habitat, Nussbaum explained.

Hedlin said he believes about 90 percent of the farms in Skagit County would qualify if they applied.

Nussbaum isn't so sure.

Of the four farms reviewed in Skagit County so far, only two met the guidelines, Nussbaum said. Most farmers are still using primarily "conventional" farming techniques that rely on pesticide applications, Nussbaum said. But, he added, more of them are looking to make a change.

Although Hedlin has used conventional farming methods for years, about 60 of his 400 acres have been certified organic. Another 20 acres is in "transition," from conventional to organic.

Not so many years ago, Hedlin said he realized that the market for organic produce had expanded considerably.

"I woke up one day and said, 'Virtually all of our practices in the market production are certifiable,'" Hedlin said, gazing over the bulky rows of cabbage in one of his fields. "Then there's the fresh-market component — the farmers markets where people like to buy produce."

Organic: a way of life

Mother Flight Farm, the second farm in Skagit County to be certified "salmon safe," started out with an organic farming philosophy.

Mother Flight has often been described as an alternative farm.

Standing next to a long, narrow pond with just a few feet of water, Glen Johnson, co-owner of Mother Flight, nodded his head in approval. He dug the pond himself — with the help of an excavator — specifically to build up his own fish-rearing pond. Once the dirt-sided pond is lush with foliage and the water fills deeper, Johnson said he plans to dump in some rainbow trout and possibly allow sports fishermen to cast their lines there once in a while, for a price.

"This pond is really the thing that excites me," Johnson said, adjusting his multicolored woolen hat against the cold wind that blew across his small 20-acre farm on Fir Island. "It's a barometer of the health of my land. Almost all of the drainage from my farm goes into this pond."

Johnson, a self-prescribed "black sheep of the farming community," has been operating



Photos by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald
Alejandro Marquez harvests spinach at Mother Flight Farm on Fir Island. Mother Flight is known for its organic farming practices.

Mother Flight for the past 15 years. He used to be a conventional farmer who worked in dairies and applied pesticides to fields.

Johnson's move toward organic farming came one day after a conversation with his boss about a former pesticide applicator who mysteriously took ill with cancer at the tender age of 23.

"That shocked me pretty good," Johnson said, wandering through the rows of corn separated by rows of burdock — a long tubular root that's often grown in Asian countries and used for medicine. Most farmers don't want to deal with the hassle of growing and harvesting burdock, Johnson said. But Johnson has been able to build up a steady clientele and sells the root for a good price.

Johnson said his willingness to grow on a variety of conventional and nonconventional crops — about 50, including raspberries, zucchini, asparagus and even walnuts — for a diverse market has made his small-scale farm survive in a competitive environment.

Every inch of Johnson's farm is used and has a purpose — the leaves from the red alder trees lining a long gravel and dirt lane are eaten by the earthworms, who turn it into nutrients for the soil. The wood also can be used for fuel and the curtain of tree boughs is a great windbreak for the fields, Johnson said.

Meantime, Johnson said he's careful not to disturb the knotted sides of the Kik-I-allus Slough that skirt his property and cut through the surrounding farm fields. The Kik-I-allus doesn't have any salmon in it, he said.

"The fish people want fish in there — so do I," Johnson said, pointing over the willow trees and reeds that line the side of the slough. "My farmer friends are mortally afraid of a fish in there. They would have to change their farming practices."

The water that drains from his farm is, according to the review board, clean of contaminants.

Johnson was able to use the new "salmon safe" label from his certification at his fruit stand last summer. He said the label adds another layer to his reputation as a conscientious farmer.

"It's another way to get attention for what I'm doing here," he said.

Johnson was noted by the Stewardship Partnership for his use of innovate weed control techniques that don't include chemicals.

"Mother Flight is the more obvious example of what farm would earn our certification," Nussbaum said. "They are creative and careful about the environment."

Contact

For more information on Stewardship Partners' "salmon safe" program, call 206-789-5668 or visit the Web at www.stewardshippartners.org.

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