It's not Farmland without Farmers

Connecting the dots—farmland protection, succession plans, and viability of agriculture in Skagit County

Our Skagit farmers are deeply dedicated to carrying forward the legacy of Skagit farming into the future.

Both of the Skagit farmer-landowners featured below have chosen to preserve their land for future generations through Farmland Legacy. And still—much work remains to be done in order to successfully transfer the land to the next generation.

An agricultural easement may or may not be a part of a farmland succession plan. What *can* a conservation easement do? An agricultural conservation easement makes sure the land stays available for farming when or if there's a break in generational farming. It can bring in funds to help with farm succession efforts or to buy out owners no longer interested in managing farmland, without having to sell the land. Easements help reduce land costs.

Availability of farmland

Available farmland and the successful transfer of land to the next generation go hand in hand. We need farmers. We need farmland. Forty years ago, available farmland exceeded the population of Skagit County. In the past three decades, population growth has outpaced that of farmland. Farmland is more scarce, while land costs are high for our incoming generation of farmers.

Supporting our Current and Next Generation: Stories from Farmers

Dave Hedlin
Hedlin Farms, La Conner

"Succession is a key portion of sustainability in agriculture in Skagit County," said Dave Hedlin, a founding board member of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland. Skagitonians is one of the organizations that partnered with Skagit County Farmland Legacy to host a three-part workshop series on farm succession planning, the second part of which Hedlin attended along with forty local farmers.

Hedlin did not disclose details of his succession plans, which involve his children Lauren and Arne, but said the discussion has been going on for about 12 years. The fourth generation in his family has known since childhood that if they ever want to come back to the farm, they are welcome to, but not until they earn a four-year degree in any discipline and have completed two years of work somewhere else, he added.

Hedlin's Nephew Kai Ottesen and his spouse, Jules Riske, have owned and operated the roadside farmstand under the Hedlin's Family Farm name for two years, according to Hedlin and the business' website. Eventually, the cousins will take over stewardship of the home farms, Hedlin explained.

Being a farmer can be both rewarding and tough, Hedlin said. Faced with what many lament is a labor shortage, as well as commodity prices that have not kept up with the cost of equipment and labor, farmers need to be motivated by a good dose of passion. If that "fire in the belly" isn't there on a daily basis, he said, neither the farmer or the farm will be happy.

Hence, his children are not expected to follow in his exact footsteps.

"We won't be disappointed in them if they don't farm, but we will be disappointed in them if they don't have a strong sense of stewardship for the family land," he said. "If you don't want to farm, that doesn't mean you should sell the land, it just means you have to find somebody else who wants to farm."



Hedlin's Family Farms Kai Ottesen with daughter at farmstand, 4th and 5th generations.

Photo: Oliver Hamlin

John Thulen
Thulen Farms, La Conner

Thulen Farms is the home of Pioneer Potatoes. John Thulen shares a similar sentiment to Dave Hedlin's. As a father of three, Thulen doesn't demand his children run the business, but hopes they will help keep the farming legacy going rather than sell the farm.

"What we have was built upon the backs of prior generations, so it isn't right for all of sudden to stop and to say 'Hey, I'm gonna cash out,'" he said.



Dave Hedlin farms family fields adjacent to the town of La Conner.

Photo: Nancy Crowell

After returning to the family business four years ago, Thulen's son is poised to be the one who will fully take the controls. It is both a blessing and a curse, John recalled telling him, as his son learns to deal with the responsibility of many employees, as well as business challenges—and debt.

One day, Thulen won't be able to run the farm with the same energy. To ensure the business remains successful, farmers should be prepared to transfer the land not after they die, but just when they are starting to "run out of gas" and the business is in a good spot, he said. That is, if the family dynamic is healthy enough to have those conversations and reach an agreement. If not, a third party can help facilitate those talks.

"If you're that person who wants to run the race by yourself, by the end you're pretty tired, and probably your farm will be too. You won't be able to do all the things by yourself, you won't be able to manage the people as well, you won't be able to fix the machinery yourself," he said.

Once the farm is fully owned by his son, Thulen won't step away completely, but will be available to provide guidance through the good and bad years that are inevitable in this trade.

Most farmers, he laughed, don't retire — they just go home earlier than they used to.

DON'T GO IT ALONE

Do you know someone who could use support regarding the future of their Skagit farm or farmland?

Land Transfer Support

A Land Transfer Navigator can help with the successful transfer of your farmland to the next generation—whether that's to a family member, community member or a new farmer.

They can help you:

- set goals; prepare for conversations with family members and business partners;
- access services and information to take your next step in the planning process;
- follow through on your plans and progress with regular check-ins.

Two Skagit area Navigators are available to you as a no-cost resource: Elizabeth Bragg, Land Transfer Specialist, American Farmland Trust, (360) 641-5502, ebragg@farmland.org; Sarah Stoner, Skagit County Farmland Legacy, (360) 416-1417, sstoner@co.skagit.wa.us

Content from La Conner Community News February 1, 2026 article by Luisa Loi was incorporated with permission. Population data from Skagit County Public Health Food Security Data Report, August 2023.

How many Acres have been Preserved?

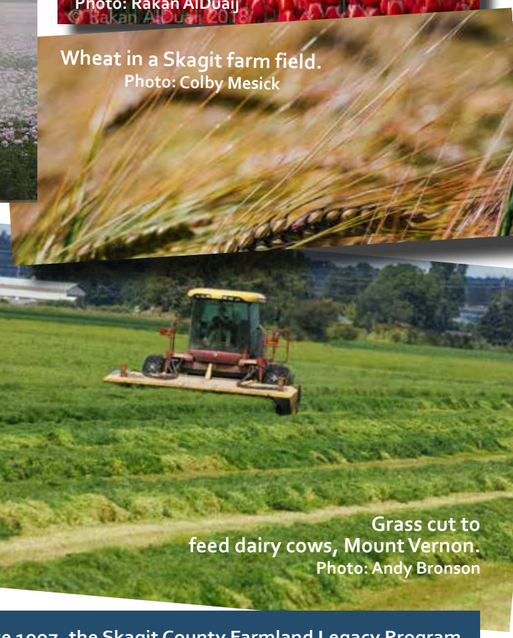
Farmland Legacy Program	
FLP Easements	220 agricultural conservation easements
Total Acres Protected	15,400 acres in Farmland Legacy Program
Extinguished Residential Development Rights	289 single-family homes kept out of working lands
Pending Easements	680 acres, 17 development rights queued for protection with new applications considered on an ongoing basis



Fir Island potato field in summer irrigation.
Photo: Scott Terrell, goskagit



Skagit County spring scene.
Photo: Rakan AlDuaij



Wheat in a Skagit farm field.
Photo: Colby Mesick

Grass cut to feed dairy cows, Mount Vernon.
Photo: Andy Bronson

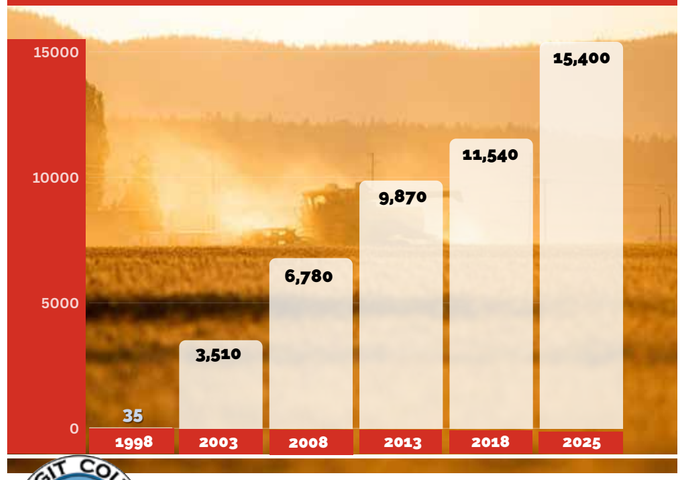
Why do landowners apply to enroll in the Farmland Legacy Program?

- To preserve land for agricultural production in perpetuity
- To reinvest funds into equipment
- To reinvest funds into additional land purchases
- To aid in farm succession planning efforts
- To supplement farm income
- To reduce farm debt

Benefits to the community

- Preserves open space and rural character
- Supports local food production
- Limits development in the floodplain
- Reduces urban sprawl
- Contributes to the agricultural economy
- Conserves soil for future generations

Acres Protected by Farmland Legacy



Since 1997, the Skagit County Farmland Legacy Program has sourced $25.4 million in compensation to farmer-landowners for the permanent protection of agricultural land in Skagit County. The breakdown of funds spent over the past 28 years includes $15.5 million in Skagit County Conservation Futures Tax and $9.9 million in state and federal grants and local nonprofit contributions.

Funding Sources & Partnerships	Contributions
Skagit Land Trust	$104,000
Ducks Unlimited	$148,000
The Nature Conservancy	$250,000
Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland	$1,035,000
WA State Recreation & Conservation	$3,030,000
U. S. Department of Agriculture	$5,375,000
Skagit County Conservation Futures Tax	$15,475,000
Total invested to date	**$25,417,000**