

LOCAL NEWS

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Wilcox hatches a greener future

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Moving from one white tube to the next, Ron Olin and his crew placed black plastic sheets on the soil around the thousands of tubes at the Wilcox farm near Roy.

Inside the tubes were young cedar, Oregon Ash and other juvenile trees that eventually will mature and create salmon-friendly habitat along the Nisqually River that runs through the poultry and dairy farm.

“What we are trying to do is clear the grass away from the trees so that it doesn’t interfere with the trees’ growth,” said Olin, 35, a Nisqually Tribe member. “And the black sheets provide the greenhouse effect.”

In the background, trucks dumped their loads on mounds of compost made up of chicken manure, which will be shipped to organic farms in Eastern Washington.

On the other side of the 1,800-acre farm, construction workers were renovating older cage-style chicken houses, which will be home to free-ranging organic chickens later this year.

Wilcox Farms – one of the most recognized local brand names in dairy and egg products – is going green.

The nearly century-old family-owned farm headquartered near Roy is transforming part of its operations to produce organic products.

Also, the family is investing to become an environmentally friendly farm by working on habitat protection and restoration on the Nisqually River watershed.



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PHOTOS BY PETER HALEY/THE NEWS TRIBUNE

Ron Olin and two other crew members from the Nisqually Tribe install protective matting around freshly planted trees and shrubs earlier this month. The land, owned by Wilcox Farms, nudges up to the Nisqually River near Roy. Wilcox hopes the trees will prevent erosion when the river eventually shifts course.



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A sticker will soon appear on Wilcox Farms eggs noting the company’s salmon protection efforts.

And Wilcox's efforts to become a responsible business in the watershed have earned it a "Salmon Safe" label, an emerging Northwest eco-certification that distinguishes farms committed to protecting salmon habitat.

Starting this fall, customers will see Wilcox products with Salmon Safe stickers at grocery stores.

The farm currently packages about 1.2 million eggs daily and ships to supermarkets and restaurants in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Alaska.

"We've just seen an awareness in customers that they want more than just regular products," said Andy Wilcox, a fourth-generation family farmer. "They want to know how their food is made."

An expensive transition

At the chicken houses under renovation, what's left of the original 1960s structures are the building frames and some silver aluminum siding.

The insides are gutted. There's no sign of the cages where tens of thousands of chickens sat between dividers, ate and laid eggs, without moving much. Their manure piled up on a tray underneath.

When the first organically raised chicks arrive at the farm in mid-May, they'll be able to move around in the renovated houses and go outside.

They'll eat organic feed, and their manure will be constantly removed through a conveyor-belt system.

By fall, they'll start laying organic eggs. And some of them will be more than just organic.

The family plans to add flax seeds to the birds' feed, making the eggs rich in healthy omega-3 fatty acids.

"What we've got is value-added products that are better than just regular products," said Jim Wilcox, a third-generation Wilcox farmer and Andy Wilcox's uncle. "People are willing to pay more for these products."

Transforming the farm into an organic one isn't cheap, however.

The renovation of two chicken houses is costing about \$1 million.

In the next three to five years, the family plans to convert about 400,000 of 850,000 hens at the Roy farm near Harts Lake into organically raised birds.

That means investing in six more chicken houses, each of which handle about 50,000 hens. The total price tag will be about \$4.5 million.

"It's really a huge transition for us," Jim Wilcox said.

Help for the fishes, too

The Nisqually River used to cut right into the bank where the tribal crew was planting trees earlier this month.

But the water in the bend now sits still, as the river changed its course during high waters in the winter.

The river has changed shape through the farm over the years, and tribal officials hope the trees the crew



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Andy Wilcox, vice president of poultry at Wilcox Farms, left, and Jim Wilcox, chairman, stand in one of the company's chicken houses being renovated to allow birds to roam freely and have access to the outside. The chickens will eat organic feed, and some will get a flax-seed boost to produce eggs rich in omega-3 fatty acids.

planted will prevent bank erosion when the river rises again and comes back to where it used to flow.

But it'll take 20 years for those trees to mature.

"It's very easy to quickly destroy the habitat – it takes a long time to restore," said Jeanette Dorner, salmon restoration program manager for the tribe.

The Wilcox family hasn't always been conscious of the environment.

"Years ago, we were pretty sloppy – by today's standard – about an agricultural management," Jim Wilcox said. "Through a lot of years, you sort of took the environment for granted, like not paying attention to keeping the waterway clean."

And, when the Nisqually River Council – a group of representatives from government and fisheries agencies – began working on a plan in the mid-1980s to manage the Nisqually River basin, the Wilcox family, like other farmers in the area, was skeptical.

"In the making of the plan, there was a lot of speculation as to what it was," said Justin Hall, executive director of the Nisqually River Foundation. "Landowners thought they might lose their property rights."

Gradually, however, the Wilcox family began to understand that the plan was not to chase farmers out of the watershed.

"I realized I've got to do my part," Jim Wilcox said. "I can't just say we've got to save the river and not do my part."

The family became one of the proponents of the plan, and the Wilcox input helped shape the latest update of the plan – due out later this month – that calls for actions in the entire watershed, not just on the river banks the original plan focused on.

While other area dairy farms were forced to move elsewhere by environmental regulations that got stricter over the years, the Wilcox family phased out its dairy operations at the Roy farm.

For its eco-conscious farming practices, the farm received the Salmon Safe certification in February from the Stewardship Partners, a Seattle-based nonprofit that helps private landowners restore and preserve land.

"It's a nonregulatory approach to encourage preservation with voluntary participation, and promote their products," said Larry Nussbaum, program manager at Stewardship Partners.

There are 25 farms certified by the group in Washington. Wilcox Farms is the only one in Pierce County and the biggest farm in the Northwest to be certified.

'Showcase for our products'

The Wilcox family wants to show its commitment to cleaner and healthier products and the environment beyond what the labels on farm products will show. It wants people to visit the farm and see how it's run.

The family plans to build a trail from the chicken houses under construction to Horn Creek, which runs into the Nisqually.

Wilcox Farms has a large milk processing operation at Roy. It receives much of its raw milk from other farms.

The family wants to bring a few hundred organic cows onto the pastures at the Roy farm in the near future to begin production of organic dairy products.

"We are not going to just stop" at converting the farm to organic, Jim Wilcox said. "We want to make our farm the showcase for our products."

The Wilcox family plans to stay in the region for many more years, while other large Pierce County large farm operations disappear.

"I think we are ahead of the rest of them," Jim Wilcox said.

Wilcox farms and products

1,800 acres, eggs and dairy 500 acres, eggs 13 acres, dairy 100 acres, eggs

The legacy

The four generations of the Wilcox family:

Around the turn of the 20th century, Judson Wilcox moved from eastern Canada to the West Coast to join the Alaska Gold Rush. After returning from Alaska, Judson went back to Canada and married Betty Cahoe. They settled in Seattle in 1903 and ran a hat store in Pioneer Square. They moved to Roy in 1909 to start the farm. They got into the poultry business in 1920.

Judson and Betty had one son, Truman, and three daughters. Truman married Mildred Grosser of Tacoma. He became a partner in the business in 1932.

Truman and Mildred's two sons, Jim and Barrie, are the chairman and chief executive officer, respectively, of the farm today. The two men and their four sons – J.T., Chris, Brent and Andy – run operations.

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