

Green agriculture at Wilcox Farms

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Think globally, act locally” could be the new corporate motto of Wilcox Farms.

Years ago, the Wilcox family – like many farmers – was skeptical about proposals to alter agricultural practices for the sake of the environment. In the case of their egg-and-dairy farm near Roy, the issue was the health and salmon habitat of the Nisqually River, which runs through the 1,800-acre property.

That skepticism gave way to belief – and now zeal. The big Roy farm has been going green in a big way.

In partnership with the Nisqually Tribe, it has planted thousands of young trees that will control erosion and otherwise create better salmon habitat on the Nisqually. For that and other eco-conscious practices, the Wilcox operation in February became one of only 25 farms in Washington to win “Salmon Safe” certification from Stewardship Partners, a nonprofit organization that promotes responsible agriculture and land management.

That's not all. In the next few years, the Wilcox family intends to spend \$4.5 million moving 400,000 hens from tightly packed cages to new, roomier quarters where they will have access to the outdoors. These free-range hens will produce organic eggs as well as mountains of organic chicken manure for other organic crops.

Wilcox Farms is obviously seeking to do the right thing as a steward of the land. But it's also gambling that doing the right thing will prove to be good business.

Demand for organic farm products has been growing by 20 percent a year in the United States: Sales of these products reached \$10.4 billion in 2003, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported in February. A narrow market once bought organic foods chiefly to help the environment; a much larger and expanding market now buys them also for reasons of nutrition, taste and food safety.

And Wilcox Farms is part of another healthy trend: purchasing from local farms, which cuts transportation costs, helps guarantee freshness and lets consumers monitor how their food is grown. South Sound shoppers have long been able to find Wilcox dairy products at area supermarkets.

May the Wilcox family and like-minded farmers succeed in the marketplace – because their success will encourage other growers to adopt earth-friendly practices.

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