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Fruits of steward farmers bring smiles on King County tour

By Keith Ervin
Seattle Times staff reporter

"Looking at your babies?" the farmer called out to his friend.

Indeed he was.

David Burger, executive director of Stewardship Partners, was showing off the mile-long forest his organization began planting three years ago on the bank of the Snoqualmie River at Jubilee Farm near Carnation.

Erick Haakenson, the farmer, was leading a hayride for city folks Saturday as part of King County's 10th annual Harvest Celebration Farm Tour.

The fast-growing alder, cottonwood and willow trees are already shading the river, stabilizing its steep bank and allowing Jubilee Farm to sell its organic produce under the "Salmon Safe" label being promoted on the sides of Metro buses and on local public-radio broadcasts.

More important, Haakenson said, he believes the forest makes his farm more productive by bringing back the rich array of plants, birds and insects that disappeared long ago.

Last year, when the leaves fell off the young trees, he saw a sight not seen since an older forest was cleared for dairy farming: "There were birds' nests all over. It's just starting. That whole thing used to be just these blackberries. Birds never nest in blackberries."

Jubilee Farm, one of 26 stops on the tour, is the biggest habitat-restoration project the 10-year-old Stewardship Partners has done in the Snoqualmie Valley.

Many farmers, including Haakenson, were skeptical when Burger first approached them, wondering what this fledgling environmental group had to offer. Persistence paid off in "the thousand cups of coffee," as Burger calls his many meetings with landowners.

It didn't hurt that Stewardship Partners offered to clear the invasive blackberries, plant native trees and nurture the young forest for three years. Now landowners can look at what their neighbors have done.

The idea has caught on, particularly among the organic-produce farmers who have brought commercial agriculture back to the Snoqualmie Valley after the collapse of the dairy industry.



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Ivonne Merrin, of Issaquah, offers her son Mateo, 3, a strawberry at Jubilee Farm in Carnation. The farm is a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm, where members purchase a "share" in exchange for a weekly bag of fresh, local produce throughout the growing season.



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Farmer Erick Haakenson, at far right, is the owner of Jubilee Farm near Carnation and offers tours to visitors and CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm members.



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After picking beans Saturday at Jubilee Farm near Carnation, Allyson Schrier, of Fall City, and her friend Avi Caspe, 7, of Seattle, weigh their bag. Schrier has been a Community Supported Agriculture member at the farm for 10 years.

Sixteen farms in the valley have received Salmon Safe certification, and five others are either planning or have begun restoration projects. Statewide, 70 farms and vineyards have taken part.

The first farm to get the Salmon Safe makeover was Oxbow Farm north of Carnation, where the first planting and clearing took place in 2004.

By 2005, Stewardship Partners volunteers and employees had rehabilitated half a mile of riverfront, and plans are afoot to improve another half-mile, then create a wetland habitat.

Tom Alberg, who owns the Oxbow property and leases it to organic farmers Luke and Sarah Woodward, has also received Salmon Safe certification for the Eastern Washington vineyard where grapes are grown for his Novelty Hill Winery in Woodinville.

Alberg, a managing director of the Madrona Venture Group, visited Haakenson's farm Saturday to see what his neighbor was up to.

"Fortunately, we've got this generation of younger people who are really dedicated to organic farming," Alberg said. "It's a way of life, it's a philosophy for these people. They are committed to it."

As the new riverside forests grow, Burger expects to thin trees to make way for conifers such as Douglas fir and cedar, which will eventually dominate the forest, fall into the river and provide more hiding places centuries from now for the wild chinook and coho salmon.

Haakenson, who has taught philosophy at Bellevue Community College, cites theologian Martin Buber and philosopher Rudolf Steiner to explain his belief in bringing more biological diversity to his farm.

"You can treat the soil like an 'it' and it becomes dirt. Or you can treat it like a 'thou' " — and you realize it's "a living presence."

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Farm facts

To learn about farms, farmers' markets and other places to buy fresh local produce, see www.pugetsoundfresh.org or www.cascadeharvest.org.

Information on salmon-safe farms is at www.stewardshippartners.org
