

# Wilcox farm earns 'salmon-safe' label

Egg producer earns distinction by combining agriculture, conservation

By John Dodge

The Olympian

ROY — A fixture in the Nisqually Valley since 1909, Wilcox Family Farms is growing greener by the day.

□ The 1,800-acre farm, bordered on the west and south by the Nisqually River and sliced into sections by Horn and Harts Lake creeks, just received a "Salmon-Safe" certification from Stewardship Partners, a Seattle-based nonprofit group that works with landowners on a voluntary basis to protect and restore salmon-bearing streams.

Chinook, coho, chum, pink and steelhead salmon are all known to spawn or overwinter on or near the farm, sharing the environment with hundreds of thousands of chickens.

Wilcox family farms, home to about 1.25 million laying hens and younger hens, is the largest of the 25 farms in the Northwest to achieve the salmon-friendly label, according to Larry Nussbaum of Stewardship Partners.

"Wilcox Farms is playing a leadership role in demonstrating how successful agriculture and salmon conservation are mutually supportive," Nussbaum said.

The farm earned its eco-label by:

- Reducing chemical use in its transition to natural and organic food products.

"We're not using commercial fertilizers or pesticides on the soil," farm chairman Jim Wilcox noted.

- Replanting natives trees and vegetation along Horn Creek and the Nisqually River to provide habitat and shade to cool the streams.

- Keeping livestock away from rivers and streams with fencing.

The farm no longer has a dairy herd on site, but is looking at putting an organic dairy herd on the farm this summer, Andy Wilcox said.

- Finding off-site uses for its chicken manure to ensure the farm isn't overloaded with animal waste.

The chicken manure is shipped to an organic farmer in Eastern Washington, which, in turn, supplies Wilcox Farms with organic feed for its chickens, Barrie Wilcox said.

For decades, the farm was all about producing eggs and milk, with little thought to the environment or salmon habitat, noted Jim Wilcox.

"When you are a commodity-based business, you don't think a lot about the environment," Wilcox said of the old business model.

"You're busy just trying to make the payroll and pay the bills."

But during the past 20 years, that has steadily changed.

Increased environmental awareness grew out of the 1980s work prompted by the state Legislature to create a Nisqually River Management Plan to protect the natural, cultural and economic resources of the Nisqually watershed — from the peak of Mount Rainier to the Nisqually Delta.

Once private property owners such as the Wilcox family were convinced environmental groups, the Nisqually tribe and planners were not out to condemn their property and build a river corridor trail from the mountain to Puget Sound, new approaches to farming with the environment in mind took shape on the farm, Wilcox said.

"A big part of the change was our friendship with the tribe," Wilcox said.

Consumer attitudes have played a role in the farm's movement to more natural and organic products, Wilcox said. More and more, consumers want assurances that the egg and dairy products produced at the farm are not at the expense of the environment.

"If we want to keep farming here, we can't just be about commodities," he said.

With that in mind, the farm managers have embarked on a three-year program to convert about 400,000 of their laying hens to a new living environment that will qualify the eggs they lay as organic food.

The hens still will have laying houses, but they will be free to roam around and will have access to the outdoors, Andy Wilcox explained.

From improved salmon habitat to changes in the way eggs are produced, Wilcox Family Farms is serving as a model for other businesses to work on a sustainable future for the Nisqually watershed, said Justin Hall, executive director of the nonprofit Nisqually River Foundation.

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