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Talks between farmers, tribe show promise

Long-festering problems can be solved when people of goodwill work hard to find common ground. But somebody has to take the first step.

Widely respected Skagit Valley farmer Steve Sakuma and Swinomish Tribal Chairman Brian Cladoosby did just that. And their ground-breaking effort to find a way through the impasse between tribes and farmers over salmon preservation deserves the community's support.

Around a year ago, Cladoosby made a decision to reach out to the agricultural community. He contacted County Commissioner Don Munks, and asked him to arrange a meeting with farmers. Sakuma, who also is president of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, took the lead in responding to the overture.

The meetings weren't always moderate in tone. Emotions flared at times, but the talking and listening went on. When tempers subsided, guess what? As Sakuma put it recently, "We were a lot closer on the issues than we ever would have believed."

What was born of the growing trust between Cladoosby and Sakuma is a new, if still small, organization called Skagit Tribal/Agricultural Alliance. The Alliance will seek ways to rebuild runs of the endangered King Salmon in the Skagit River while minimizing impacts on farming.

There was a time when Native American interests were brushed aside and century-old treaties were viewed as little more than historical artifacts. But today, tribal treaty rights rest on a solid legal foundation and the tribes have a long string of court victories behind them. Any government that ignores Native American rights does so at its peril. But Cladoosby has come to recognize that there are limits to what can be gained by lawsuits. He says he comes to the table with no desire to harm agriculture and with the belief that farmers don't want to harm fish. When each side accepts the good faith of the other, progress can be made.

Neither man expects to move his constituents overnight on such hot-button issues as streamside buffers and the operations of the tide gates that prevent the Sound's salt water from reclaiming delta farmlands but also prevent the movement of fish. There are still many skeptics on both sides.

First comes open dialogue, then goodwill and, finally, trust. By their leap of faith, Sakuma and Cladoosby may have put the parties on the right path for the first time in many years. There now may be a chance for some real dialogue and, ultimately, a recovery plan that can assure there will always be wild-run King salmon in the Skagit River.

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