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Summit draws farmers intent on protecting ag, fish

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During a break-out session on agriculture, Skagit County dairy farmer Ron Wesen explains some of the suggestions about how to measure success in making farms viable.

TACOMA, Wash. – Out of conflict, cooperation.

Out of chaos, a plan.

Such was the dream that gave birth to Shared Strategy for Puget Sound, a grassroots approach to salmon recovery.

Last week, that dream moved closer to reality when about 500 people – farmers, tribal members, biologists, federal and state environmental officials, politicians, and business and community leaders – came together during Shared Strategy’s two-day summit, “Creating a Future for both People and Salmon.”

One of the major goals in front of them was to start knitting together community-based watershed plans for 14 major river basins into the region’s first-ever plan to protect and restore salmon habitat.

But those watershed plans, which were submitted late last year, still need to be fine-tuned. That’s part of the heavy lifting still to be done before the draft salmon-recovery plan for the region is presented this June to NOAA Fisheries and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

The two federal agencies, which are participating in Shared Strategy, are responsible for implementing the Endangered Species Act.

On a practical level, the overall goal is to bring salmon numbers in the Puget Sound region up to levels that will allow fish listed under the Endangered Species Act to be delisted.

Executive Director Jim Kramer said Shared Strategy wants to find ways to fit salmon recovery into society, rather than remaking society around the needs of salmon.

One of the goals of last week’s milestone summit was to make revisions, based on input offered during the summit, to nine draft platform statements.

One of those, “Saving Farms and Saving Fish – Creative Problem-Solving and Incentive Programs,” was the subject of a three-hour breakout session.

The session gave farmers and other watershed players the chance to suggest ways to improve a variety of previously proposed ag-related incentive strategies, as well as to tackle other challenges standing in the way of running a profitable farm and protecting salmon.

The consensus of the draft statement was that farmers who are good stewards play an important role in the future of salmon.

“If salmon recovery is possible in the Puget Sound Region, it will be because of farming, not in spite of it,” says the draft statement.

After the break-out session, dairy farmer Jay Gordon, executive director of the state’s dairy federation, said he’s seen a significant change in attitude since he first became involved in Shared Strategy several years ago.

“It has changed from antagonism and hostility toward agriculture to an attitude that agriculture is now considered part of the solution,” he said.

An important part of that change are the connections farmers have made with the tribes.

“It’s amazing what you can do when you realize you’re all in this together,” said Ben Smith, a Sequim, Wash., dairy farmer. “Things are different now. We realize that we’ll achieve success through cooperation.”

Skagit County dairyman Ron Wesen praised Shared Strategy for providing a way to get people talking with each other.

“It gives us a chance to hear different viewpoints and explain our side,” he said.

Mike Shelby, executive director of the Western Washington Agricultural Association, said it was important for farmers to be at the summit.

“The right people are here,” he said, referring to politicians and others that make policy decisions and control salmon funding.

During his keynote speech at the summit, William Ruckelshaus, chairman of the state’s Salmon Recovery Funding Board and of Shared Strategy’s policy group, said the strength of the regional fish-recovery plan is the commitment so many people have made to it.

“We’re all in charge – all of us who share the Puget Sound ecosystem,” he said.

When addressing the task ahead, he asked those attending the summit “to leave their agendas at the door and go to work over the next two days to save people and fish.”

But there are daunting challenges ahead. With \$50 million per year already spent on salmon recovery efforts in Puget Sound in the past several years, salmon leaders concede that getting twice that much money in the years to come isn’t going to be easy, especially with Congress and the state already grappling with budget deficits.

In an interview after the first day’s meetings, Jeff Koenings, director of the state’s Fish and Wildlife Department, warned of the “salmon-funding” fatigue that he’s seeing in legislators and editorial boards.

He believes that fatigue makes it more important than ever to reinforce the benefits of salmon recovery to local communities. Examples of those benefits are 46,000 jobs and hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues based on recreational and commercial fishing.

Comparing salmon to the canary in the mine, Koenings said that good salmon runs represent healthy watersheds.

“Salmon funding represents an investment in a healthier place to raise your kids,” he said. “Isn’t that what everyone wants?”

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