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Planting the seeds of cooperation

BY JAMES GELUSO



Matt Wallis / Skagit Valley Herald
Steve Sakuma (left), president of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, and Brian Cladoosby, chair of the Swinomish Tribe, are spearheading an effort to help salmon recovery while not hurting Skagit Valley agriculture.

Swinomish tribe, farmers form alliance where getting together to talk is the goal

For years, the Swinomish Tribe and the Skagit County government have been at odds over how to balance salmon recovery with the preservation of agriculture.

Then, a couple years ago, Swinomish Tribal Chair Brian Cladoosby decided to do something different. He called up county Commissioner Don Munks and asked him to set up a meeting with some of the Skagit Valley's farmers. And then Cladoosby went, and listened.

And the farmers met him halfway.

On Wednesday, Cladoosby and berry farmer Steve Sakuma held a picnic to celebrate what they are now calling the Skagit Tribal/Agricultural Alliance. But despite the fancy name, it's just about people talking.

Sakuma, president of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, said the alliance is not the silver bullet that will eliminate the tension between the tribe and local farmers. Some farmers still don't trust the tribe, he said.

"We've never said we're the entire answer," he said. "This is just another tool in the toolkit." The tension was at its highest between 1996 and 2002, when the tribe was pushing for Skagit County to impose buffers on farms.

The Swinomish Tribe, and its allies the Upper Skagit (which has since broken with the Swinomish) and the Sauk-Suiattle, said buffers were necessary to protect salmon in the streams from chemicals, soil runoff and animal waste.

Those buffers — strips of unfarmed vegetation up to 75 feet wide on each side of a stream — would have taken massive amounts of land out of production, the farmers complained.

After years of legal wrangling, the county finally convinced the courts to accept a system that would protect salmon by regulating farm practices. That system is still under legal review, but has passed its first hurdles.

It was in that environment that Cladoosby took his step forward, against the advice of his staff.

The initial meetings were tough, Sakuma said.

"The very first characteristic we had to get over was emotion," he said. But once the two sides had each vented, there was a revelation: "We were a lot closer on the issues than we ever would have believed."

Cladoosby said the last thing he wants to see is more damage to the agricultural economy. He recognizes that Skagit County farmers aren't out to hurt fish. And, he said, he wants to pull away from "cookie-cutter" plans — including the buffers the tribe once pushed so hard for.

There is still a long way to go, Sakuma and Cladoosby said. The sentiment was echoed by William Ruckelshaus, a former administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency.

Ruckelshaus is now working with Seattle-based Shared Strategy, a group aiming to assist salmon recovery by bringing government agencies, farmers and local groups together. He accompanied Cladoosby and Sakuma to an interview at the Skagit Valley Herald Wednesday, then went to meet with county officials.

The Skagit River is considered the most important area in the recovery of Puget Sound Chinook, or king, salmon. King are the only Skagit River salmon listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

The factor that biologists believe is most limiting the recovery of kings is the amount of available estuary — the shallow areas where fresh and salt water mix.

Young Chinook like to spend months in the estuary growing strong before heading out to sea. But there simply isn't enough space and food in the estuary that's leftover since most of it was diked away a century ago.

"We're not home free by any means," Ruckelshaus said.

Still, the progress that has been made is significant, he said.

"These two guys deserve an enormous amount of credit," he said.

Four years ago, Cladoosby said, he and Sakuma wouldn't even send each other

e-mail, much less organize a picnic. Now, there is a level of respect and trust that makes communication and planning possible.

The partnership already is beginning to bear some fruit. The discussions resulted in at least one project that has been submitted to the state Salmon Recovery Funding Board for consideration. The project, on land owned by Richard Smith, would create wetland habitat for salmon near Fisher Slough in the Conway area.

The project was ranked high by the Skagit Watershed Council, a local group that considers salmon recovery projects and forwards them to the state board.

Shirley Solomon, chair of the council, said having a private landowner like Smith on board for a project is a novelty.

"I think the talks that were under way, in all likelihood, provided leverage for that," she said.

County Commissioner Ken Dahlstedt said he thinks the alliance is a good thing, although it doesn't let the county off the hook.

"They are encouraging the ag community and tribal community to come together and work out their issues," he said. "We're not opposed to that at all."

But the county still has to have a law protecting fish from farms, he noted. The Swinomish Tribe hasn't dropped its legal challenges.

Cladoosby said he expects the process to continue to evolve over the next five to 15 years, as both sides get closer to a balance that will help salmon recover without hurting farmers.

"All we want to do is be able to go out and catch a king," he said.

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Close Window

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