

Farmland Preservation 101

In 1954, San Juan County had 50% more farms than today. On average, these farms were over twice as large. Just what does this mean?

Allow me to do the math: it means that we now have only 27% of the farmland we had back then. It means that within the memory of the average San Juan County farmer, farmland has shrunk from two out of every five acres to one out of nine. And it continues. We lost 9% of our farmland just in the five years from 1997 to 2002. It's no wonder that the County Council named agriculture as a top priority in 2008.

We can all list reasons why this is important. Here are just a few: "Food Security" may sound like another fashionable phrase, but it means we can feed ourselves when ferries don't run or transportation costs rise. In this century of global warming, sustainable farming practices can sequester tons of carbon in the soil from the atmosphere. Once farmland is developed, its productive use is downgraded or lost forever. For those involved in our tourism industry, who will come to look at our glorious views of housing lots?

What can we do about such ponderous problems? Plenty! There are programs in place to preserve farmland, questions to answer, and plans to be made. We are fortunate to have the San Juan Preservation Trust, the County Land Bank, the San Juan Islands Conservation District, WSU Extension, and the County Assessor to help us. Wait, the County Assessor? Yes. The County Assessor administers the state Agriculture Open Space Taxation Program, which included 12,389 local acres in 2007. This program assesses working farmland at its current use as farmland instead of its potential for

growing houses. This is not a permanent solution, but neither is it an answer if you run out of cash at tax time. Please contact the Assessor's office for information.

The San Juan Preservation Trust and the Land Bank have been working to preserve farmland since 1984 and 1990, respectively. Usually the landowner voluntarily sells or donates certain rights to their land, called a "conservation easement", to one of the two organizations. Easements are written with the landowner's wishes in mind, while protecting the land from development that would limit its use as farmland. Examples of agricultural easements are spread throughout the county. If you have questions ranging from new farm enterprises to green building methods, the San Juan Islands Conservation District and WSU Extension can help with the "how" of keeping farms alive.

There are alternatives to preserve our rural character, but nobody has the perfect solution, and the possibilities multiply when more brains are engaged. This spring, there will be town hall meetings to gather ideas. Bring your questions and comments, either to the meeting or to any of the organizations mentioned above. At the very least enjoy the views of working farms and the food that comes from them. Think of it as tasty insurance.