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Farms remain vital part of Whatcom County life, economy

THE BELLINGHAM HERALD EDITORIAL BOARD - THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

A warm winter and mild spring mean the summer harvest of berries may come sooner than usual this year.

Already at the county's berry farms and processing plants farmers are preparing the fields, tuning up the harvesting machines and updating the freezing and refrigeration units. In a matter of weeks an estimated 6,000 seasonal jobs will be filled harvesting, packing and shipping raspberries.

This is big business, and it is of big importance to the economic health of Whatcom County. Combined with the dairy industry, cattle raising, seed potatoes and a few other crops, berries are the heart and soul of an industry that accounts for nearly 15 percent of the total Whatcom County economy.

We think that many people, particular those in urban Bellingham, often forget what farming really is here. Many people love that farming brings wide-open spaces and a more rural feel to our community. But for many city dwellers, farms are just peaceful places to drive by and occasionally stop at a road-side stand. It is too easy to forget the industrial scale of dairy and berry production - and how vitally important that production is in providing economic stimulus and opportunity in our county.

Last week, our editorial board accompanied leaders from Whatcom Farm Friends to a couple county farms to talk to farmers about everything from economics to technical advancements in the field, to labor issues and immigration to the pressure on farms from growth and development and regulations regarding the environment and water use.

It was an enlightening trip. Among the important things we learned:

BANK HEALTH IMPORTANT

Like everyone, farmers are effected by the current economic downturn. Demand for most products is stable, but the tightening of the money supply is potentially disastrous. Many farmers are dependent on bank lines of credit in years where increased supplies send prices down. They pay back the credit in years when higher prices bring better returns. With so many banks failing, and those that exist tightening their lending practices, farmers who use lines of credit are worried that money won't be available next time they need it.

Online article at: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2010/05/20/1440910/farms-remain-vital-part-of-whatcom.html#ixzz0otZUm9OK>

Meanwhile, increased globalization of food sales has increased competition and thus the volatility of the markets.

BIG FARMS MAKE BIG MONEY

The 140 largest farms in Whatcom County account for nearly 88 percent of the value of sales from farms.

There are more than 1,480 farms in the county total, but most are just people with a handful of cows or chickens or a couple fields. Many people considered farmers in our community do so only part-time. They play a part, but aren't the economic drivers the largest farms are.

The big farmers are running huge operations covering thousands and thousands of acres and supplying milk, cattle, raspberries, blueberries and seed potatoes and other crops all over the world.

The largest dairy in the county has about 3,000 cows. Most dairies here are sending their milk to the Lynden powdering plant, where the milk is processed and shipped to Asia. Berries grown in our community produce about one-third of all raspberries in Washington state and nearly as much as whole other countries. Whatcom County produced 22,000 metric tons of raspberries in 2008, while Chilean farmers produced 40,000 metric tons.

The top 140 farms in Whatcom County have sales of \$500,000 or more a year and, as a group, accounted for more than \$285 million in sales in 2007, the last time an agricultural census was done. The sales figures place Whatcom County as the largest agriculture county in Western Washington and sixth largest in Washington state.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES IN THE FIELDS

Many county farmers are embracing technological advances. We learned of one seed potato farmer, for example, who is using tractors guided by GPS - with no drivers - to plant fields in a more efficient way that will increase output while cutting down on water and fertilizer use.

LABOR, IMMIGRATION VITAL

Farmers rely on seasonal labor. And many are worried that new emphasis on immigration arrests in the country will scare off potential employees.

The farmers we know want a fair and comprehensive U.S. immigration policy. But they tell us that it is completely unrealistic to expect the industry to survive if all the potential workers are scared off.

As we said earlier, an estimated 6,000 seasonal jobs will be created in the summer berry harvest months. Farmers tell us there is no way to fill all those positions without migrant farm workers - those who travel from farm to farm across the nation following the seasons. Few natural American citizens want to live that lifestyle. Immigrants will.

Our local farmers understand legal immigration and work hard to make sure they have the proper paperwork on hand. But they say it's important that in the long run, the U.S. create a guest worker program that makes it so enough workers are available when the fields need to be picked.

GROWTH PRESSURES IMMENSE

The 350 largest farms own nearly half of the land in Whatcom County west of the federal forests and parks. Raspberry fields cover about 7,000 acres. The growing blueberry crop now covers around 3,000 acres. Dairies cover bigger areas, with land needed for grazing.

It's important to know how much land is in farms in our county as it continues to grow. Too many rural areas in other Western Washington counties have seen their agricultural areas over-run by suburbs.

Whatcom County residents have said many times that they don't want the same kind of sprawl here. Farmers, led by Whatcom Farm Friends, have estimated 100,000 acres must be kept in farming over the long-haul to guarantee enough room for the industry to survive.

But make no mistake about it, our farmers are under pressure. The possibility of making money selling land for development starts to look pretty good to farmers who face volatile markets for their goods. Meanwhile urban and suburban development begins to encroach more and more on farms, and increases complaints about smells and noises from farms from suburbanites not used to living next door.

The spreading of manure on fields. The use of noise cannons to chase birds off berries. The sounds of tractors running first thing in the morning. Many of the important aspects of farming come under criticism when urban life gets too close.

Our community should do whatever necessary to provide buffers of land between cities and farms. And yet a drive north from Lynden on Double Ditch Road will provide ample evidence we are not doing so.

Meanwhile, people who say they support preserving farms often take stances that unwittingly hurt farmers' chances of survival. During our discussions, farmers told us that environmental regulations, efforts to turn ditches used for field drainage back into streams and restrictions on water usage are all threats to the viability of farms.

SUPPORT FARMING SUCCESS

We believe strongly there is a way for the environment and farmers to co-exist. But we urge those creating and enforcing environmental regulations to listen to farmers and learn the ways that farms are being effected by the rules. There are many. And some are so potentially damaging to farmers, particularly those involving water rights, that they endanger the business.

As a community we need to do more to understand our farms and how best we can support their success. That knowledge is vital to the future livability of Whatcom County, the future of our food and the future of our economy.

LEARN MORE

Whatcom Farm Friends, an organization made up of county farmers and those who support their success, is hard at work trying to find ways to balance the needs of the larger community with those of farmers.

Among the group's more innovative ideas is a proposal to create "Natural Resource Markets" that would allow for trade and transfer of the value of environmental improvements and property as a way to decrease growth, improve the environment and help farming profitability.

Learn more about this idea and the other work done by Whatcom Farm Friends online at wcfarmfriends.com.