The Merrill Family
2003 Stewards of the Land
BRINGING CONSERVATION DOLLARS HOME

AFT’s long-time advocacy for federal conservation money pays off for family farms.

By Sandra Tassel

Less than an hour north of Seattle, Washington, strip malls and casinos give way to the dark soil and neat farmsteads of the fertile Skagit Valley. Visitors marvel at the overflowing produce stands, verdant fields, huge flocks of migrating swans and snow geese and abundance of fish in the estuarine rivers—all against the backdrop of majestic Mt. Baker. But those who manage the farms that provide these stunning vistas, wildlife habitats and other benefits don’t earn anything from our enjoyment. They, like most of the people who produce this country’s food, are struggling to make a living. Help is at hand, however. Here, and across the country, farmers and ranchers are joining in a conservation movement, funded by the federal farm bill, that is simultaneously supporting their businesses and encouraging ecologically sound farming.

"The Skagit Valley is one of the most productive areas in the world. It has the perfect combination of prime soils and climate, especially for seed crops and berries," says Steve Nissley, district conservationist with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. But as part of the Puget Sound Basin, the fifth most endangered agricultural place in the country, the valley’s agricultural future is in question. The influx of commuter and retirement development, coupled with the unstable economics of growing food, pose dual threats to the land and communities of the Skagit Valley.

Sakuma Brothers Farm exemplifies the challenges facing farmers both in the Skagit Valley and across the country. Steve, Glen, Brian and Richard Sakuma are cousins—the third generation of farmers in their family. They, in partnership with two other cousins based in California, produce a sweet bounty of strawberries, raspberries, blueberries and apples on their 1,000-acre farm. In the past, Skagit growers sold their fruit to processors for distribution around the world. Today, Chile and Mexico grow cheaper berries that are available in supermarkets year-round. When the last local fruit processor closed in the 1980s, the primary wholesale market was eliminated. Accordingly, this generation of Sakumas must be creative entrepreneurs to keep their farm operating and profitable. Support from the farm bill’s Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)—a program to improve water quality and protect water supplies by reducing agricultural pollution and waste—is a key element in their increasingly complex strategy.

Richard Sakuma describes the business plan as "vertically integrated." In order for the farm to survive, the family has to "do it all." Accordingly, the farm sells wholesale fresh blueberries to California groceries, operates a flourishing farm stand that sells direct to consumers (and educates them about farming), supplies nursery stock to growers and garden stores and operates an on-site processing plant that provides fruit to retail, food service and industrial customers. Glen Sakuma observes, "We had to have processing for the operation to work." And for the plant to work, both for the business and for the environment, a substantial amount of money had to be invested.

Processing fruit requires large volumes of fresh water and large quantities of electricity to pump it out of the ground. After washing the fruit, the water becomes a byproduct requiring disposal. Originally, the plant piped the wastewater onto a small pasture from whence it ran off into the adjoining waterways, while the farm had to pump additional water to irrigate the crops.

This spring, a new water and energy saving system will be in place, thanks to aid from EQIP. The system is integrated with the crop irrigation. Formerly watered by large, wasteful center pivot sprinklers, the berries will now get their moisture drop by drop. "We are recycling water from the wash-
Federal Farm Policy

Revered by some, reviled by others, there is no question that the federal farm bill has significant and complicated impacts on farming, crop prices, consumer costs, land use and local economies. Influencing the objectives, content and funding levels contained in the legislation is a priority for AFT because of the bill's far-reaching effects.

Tim Warnan, AFT vice president for programs, says, "The question for the future is, 'What should the American taxpayer expect from farmers in return for their support?' In the past the answer has been confidence that American farmers would produce all the food and fiber America needs. Today the global marketplace supplies a large portion of ag products Americans buy. But foreign producers cannot provide Americans with fresh, local foods, scenic views, strong rural economies and precious wildlife habitat. As Americans continue to support federal agricultural policy, they will increasingly expect to receive these benefits in return.'"

When AFT President Ralph Grossi addressed the U.S. House of Representatives in June 2001, he stressed the need to reward the producers who protect our water, land and air resources while providing us with a safe and abundant supply of food and fiber. He urged Congress to make farm bill monies available to all farmers and ranchers, rather than only those who grow one of the so-called commodity crops that received 94 percent of all payments in the 2000-2001 fiscal year but make up only one fifth of the value of the country's farm products.

With AFT's leadership, the 2002 version of the farm bill—officially titled "The Farm Security and Rural Investment Act"—reflects a strengthening commitment to the programs that help limit sprawl, improve water quality and increase wildlife habitat while helping farmers and ranchers stay in business. —Sandra Tassel

ing," reports Brian. "The system focuses water where you need it, covers the fields fast and reduces runoff because the dripped water sinks in." Glen adds, "We are trying to conserve water and reduce our utility costs."

"Our vision is to sustain farming in this area, so we are trying to promote and support agriculture in the valley," says Richard. "We are planning to bring in a fourth generation of Sakumas." An efficient farm is a surviving one, and the Sakumas' future on the farm and the farm's future as a cornerstone of the Skagit Valley's agricultural landscape have been greatly aided by EQIP's investment.

Their future in farming was very much on the minds of Peter and Debbie Hunter as they pondered the fate of their 136-acre Longview Ranch in Yolo County, outside of Winters, California. "Farming and land conservation have been part of Longview since its beginning," says Debbie. The Hunters feel strongly about the importance of maintaining a local agricultural presence so that people can get their food close to home.

Several factors made it a challenge for the Hunters to continue the family's 50-year tradition of growing French prunes. With the ranch within commuting distance of both Davis and Sacramento, a collection of hobby farms and weekend homes already borders the west side of the property. Longview Ranch forms the western edge of Winter's development zone.

Thanks to the outreach of the Yolo Land Trust, the Hunters were familiar with conservation easements and decided they would like to permanently dedicate Longview to agriculture, thereby creating a boundary on the west side of town. However, like most farm families, the Hunters couldn't afford to donate their development rights. Prune trees must periodically be replaced as they only produce for approximately 40 years. Longview's orchard had already reached the point of declining production. Replanting and upgrading the irrigation system to more efficiently utilize precious water required financing the Hunters did not have available.

The federal Farm bill Protection Program (FPP)—a farm bill program that helps fund the purchase of agricultural conservation easements—provided an ideal solution. Yolo Land Trust obtained FPP funding, and matching dollars from the California Farmland Conservation Program, to acquire Longview's development rights. The sale allowed the Hunters to both secure the future of their property and make the necessary investments to continue the operation.

AFT's California Director John McCaul is delighted with the Hunter's decision to sell their development rights, and with the use of FPP funding to protect the working landscape around Winters.

"Right now agriculture is still the key to this community. It is a huge base for jobs, and the orchards produce high-value crops," he says.

Even in parts of the country where sprawl and subdivision are not immediate threats to agriculture, federal funding for conservation is helping farmers and providing public benefits.
With 5,800 acres of wheat, sorghum and corn in the Texas Panhandle, Sublette Farms uses the more conventional subsidies for which the farm bill is generally known. However, this operation is an example of how conservation programs can modify farm practices in ways that support both wildlife and producers.

During the 1980s downturn in the farm economy, Randy Sublette enrolled 1,250 acres in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). CRP, another farm bill program, retires marginal and highly erodible cropland from production. Sublette Farms had a portion of land that was difficult to work and irrigate, and was not very productive. Today that land is planted with native grasses and the farm receives an annual lease payment from the federal government. In essence, instead of being paid to grow wheat—which contributes to surpluses that depress prices further—conservation dollars pay him to re-grow a prairie.

As the grass matured, birds such as pheasant, quail and songbirds returned. Both white-tailed and mule deer established populations on the Sublette acreage. This turned out to be a source of pride and enjoyment for the landowners. The aesthetics motivated Sublette to seek out other opportunities to grow habitat alongside his crops. Using monies from other farm bill programs, he planted rows of trees that offer shelter to the wildlife that make the farm home and protect the top-soil from blowing away.

Today, growing for conservation is part of Sublette Farms’ financial survival strategy. This approach has earned Sublette more than an improved bottom line and personal enjoyment. In 1998 Sublette was named High Plains Lone Star Land Steward by Texas Parks and Wildlife. Local schoolchildren look to his land as an outdoor classroom where they can get acquainted with the natural residents of their part of the world.

Adding conservation to its products has helped make Sublette Farms a viable business, even during tough times. “Economic viability is the best tool we have to protect farm and ranch land,” says Julie Shackelford, AFT’s Texas regional director. In many parts of Texas, farming for wildlife makes sense. She sees the definition of agriculture changing to include recreational activities that depend on conservation. “Many ranches make more money leasing to hunters than raising cattle,” observes Shackelford. This type of diversification is an enhancement for the more traditional activities, and farm bill funding can offer the means to make that transition.

Despite the seemingly large dollar amounts associated with the farm bill, the amount of money available for conservation programs remains a significant constraint to creating more success stories like those in this article.

Many of the innovative new elements of the farm bill, such as the Conservation Security Program, are mired in the federal budget debates. Even if all of the promised funding is released and the new initiatives successfully launched, the need will still far exceed the funding. For example, in September 2002, $50 million in FPP funding was made available, but 34 states had projected $253 million in requests. According to congressional testimony given by AFT President Ralph Grossi in 2001, 75 percent of the applications for EQIP assistance and half the requests for technical guidance by USDA had to be turned down due to lack of money.

As a result, farmers and ranchers who most deserve and need support from the conservation programs may continue to be frustrated in efforts to undergo stewardship measures. An example lies deep in the Corn Belt, in Nebraska’s Elkhorn River Valley, where farmers Todd and Julie Stewart offer a glimpse at how sustainable stewardship could be part of their food production. They are struggling to make a living without playing the commodity support game that ensnares so many producers. With only 1,700 acres in a region where farmers typically cultivate 5,000 acres or more in order to make financial ends meet, the Stewarts rely on creative scrimping, market niches and a diverse slate of products.

Theirs is exactly the type of operation that would be assisted by the Conservation Security Program, an initiative promoted by a broad coalition of agricultural and environmental interests. It would pay farmers to implement and maintain conservation-oriented activities on working lands. The Stewarts would use support to continue to improve their grazing rotation, fence livestock out of the streams, upgrade their watering systems to preserve dwindling aquifer supplies, develop new marketing options and plant more trees. “I hope it gets funded because we’ll really use it,” says Todd. “That program is the best thing going for farmers who are trying to do the right thing.” For farmers like the Stewarts, doing the right thing comes naturally because they love to farm and want to care for the land that sustains them. Like the Sakumas, Hunters and Sublettes, there is no place the Stewarts would rather be and nothing they would rather do than farm.

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