# WESTERN WASHINGTON AG REPORT

*MARCH/APRIL 2022*

Western Washington Agricultural Association

## EVERY ACRE MATTERS

*In Western Washington, every acre of farmland matters to the entire agricultural community. Each farm is connected through voluntary partnerships sharing land.*

*Basics*

After a short drive through northwest Washington, you can tell that there's more to farming this region than simply hard work and hope. Each field on any given year represents hundreds of hours spent on the planning, planting, tending, and harvesting of its crop. While farmers around the state use rotations to best manage their soil and crops, few are required to be as meticulous with the process as those in this region. And this requirement wasn't born out of haphazard homesteading, it was born out of necessity.

Farmers in Skagit, Snohomish, and Whatcom counties must be precise with their planning due to crop specifications and scarcity of land. For example, Skagit County is home to only about 90,000 acres of farmable land, managed by roughly 1,000 farming families in 10 to 100 acre "chunks" divided by irrigation and drainage ditches and small land parcels. In comparison, dryland farmers, say in Lincoln County, share more than a million acres of farmable land in chunks of 160 acres or more. While the dryland acreage produces great wheat, farmers there are limited to growing only a couple different crops in their rotation. In fact, some fields only grow wheat and barley well. Northwest Washington, however, with its abundant rain and rich soil, allows farmers to grow more than 80 different crops. Rotational farming allows farmers to break up disease, insect, and tillage cycles within each field. With the blessing of ample crop choice, however, comes a few unique challenges. Every crop has unique needs. Because of the nature of the region's small chunks, limited acreage, crop requirements, and water management, farmers here must be precise with every inch of farmland in the delta. Every inch of farmable soil matters to farming families in the region, and they've developed a unique, cultural, science-based approach to managing every inch.

*Unique Seeds*

Just like children, each crop grown in the region has a unique set of needs. The water, nutrition, and heat needed for blueberries doesn't work for potatoes. For our certified vegetable seed farmers, the needs are even more specific. Northwest Washington is home to one of the world's premiere seed-growing regions. The 49th parallel, with the

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## WWAA MISSION

To represent agriculture by providing services to the entire agricultural community

## WWAA COMMITMENTS

Engage in internal and external (economic, environmental, regulatory) pressures on agriculture

Interact with county, state, and federal legislators and regulators

Pest and nutrient management control

Network with and support of the agricultural research community

Seek out and develop opportunities and technologies for agriculture

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long summer day length and mild maritime climate year round, is especially good for the seed production crops in the Skagit. The delta soil is incomparable to others around the world. Seed growers in this region provide clean, certified vegetable seeds to farmers and gardeners around the world.

"Our seeds end up on farms in California, Spain, Asia, England, even Washingtonians' home gardens, to name a few," explained Sierra Hartney of Sakata Seed America, based in Burlington, WA. When home gardeners buy Ed Hume, Johnny's, or other home garden companies' seed packets, their cool season vegetable seeds most likely come from farms in Snohomish, Skagit, or Whatcom counties. "It's very important that our seeds are not only the cleanest on the market, but that they're 100% true to type."

"True to type" means that a variety grown in a field is 100% pure to its name. It guarantees that if you buy "Early Wonder" beet seed from Ed Hume Seeds, you will have a pack of "Early Wonder" beet seeds, not a mix of "Early Wonder" seed and other varieties or different generations of seed. This is extremely important in the vegetable seed industry because their customers want a guarantee that they are buying pure seed. To make that guarantee possible, certain seeds require different rules so they don't intermix and cross pollinate with each other. For example, brassica is an insect (bee) pollinated crop. Bees can travel miles in search of pollen, therefore, brassica seeds require a 3-mile buffer from each other so they don't cross pollinate, resulting in strains that are untrue to type. Spinach, beets, and chard, on the other hand, are wind pollinated, so they don't need as much distance between fields.

One northwest farmer rarely has enough land to grow every crop available (grass, potatoes, vegetable seed, flowers, etc.). Many farmers work together to "trade" land each year and raise crops on each other's property so that cross pollination is avoided, and disease cycles are broken. This voluntary partnership is unique and requires science and planning to ensure that each field is growing the right seed at the right time. The planning process is called "pinning," named after the original process of placing actual push pins on a printed aerial map of all the fields in the area, showing where each type of seed will be planted. It is now done electronically and ensures that farmers are accounting for every inch of the land available in the most efficient way.

When you see fields of food and flowers growing in northwest Washington, understand that this checkerboard is strategically designed. It represents months and years of both beneficial and vital collaboration between farmers, landowners, and industry. Every inch of increasingly scarce farmland is valuable; losing any acreage would create a major impact on the viability of the system farmers employ in the region. Each field is connected to each other, and what happens to one affects all.

# BEST FISH & WILDLIFE HABITAT: FARMLAND

Between 2001 and 2016, 11 million acres of farmland and ranchland in the U.S. were converted to urban and highly developed land use (4.1 million acres) or low-density residential land use (nearly 7 million acres) according to the American Farmland Trust. That's roughly 2,000 acres a day paved over, built up, and converted to uses that threaten the future of agriculture.

"No issue will be more important to 21st century America than how we use our dwindling land resources," explained former EPA Administrator William K. Reilly in 1997. His words ring true more than 25 years later. "The competition for land—especially productive agricultural land—will intensify as our population grows and communication technologies make it easier for us to live and work in widely dispersed communities. The irreplaceable land that produces our food and provides us with scenic open space, wildlife habitat,

and clean water is increasingly at risk from urban sprawl and rural subdivisions. To ensure a prosperous future, we must save our farmland."

The tug of war between preserving farmland and providing services for a growing population is always spotlighted in northwest Washington. When it comes to also providing fish and wildlife habitat, there is no question that farms are the best use of the land for both humans and animals. According to the EPA, urban sprawl byproducts such as roads, parking lots, and buildings "contribute to nonpoint source water pollution by limiting the capacity of soils to filter runoff; they affect peak flow and water volume, which heighten erosion potential and affect habitat and water quality; and they increase storm water runoff, which can deliver more pollutants to water bodies that residents may rely on for drinking and recreation."

WWAA's allied partner, Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, recently noted the pollutants in storm runoff from the urban environment "is done to a much more concentrated level than would accrue from the same storm runoff in agriculture lands."

The rich land within the fields of Snohomish, Skagit, and Whatcom counties not only raises some of the best food in the world, it also is home to multiple wildlife species on land and in the water. From salmon to spotted frogs, snow geese to elk, regional farmers provide and protect habitat for fish and wildlife species through a land stewardship model based on viable food and fiber production. Improved fish habitat created with the Voluntary Stewardship Program throughout the region positively impacts water species.

"Regional farmers are generous friends and neighbors to Puget Sound fish and wildlife species," says Western Washington Agricultural Association Executive Director Brandon Roozen. "Farmers are conservationists. They must manage and protect their land for the crops they grow now and the crops they wish to grow later. That land ethic and priority translates to benefiting the animals that also call it home."

# TULIP FESTIVAL 2022

Throughout the month of April visitors to travel to northwest Washington to witness the many colors of the Skagit River Delta. Tulips, daffodils, and bulbs of all shapes and sizes are in bloom, and the 2022 Tulip Festival is underway. With more than 25 different vendors and three major bulb producers participating this year, it's set to be one of the region's best. More tulip and daffodil bulbs are produced here than in any other county in the U.S.


*Blueberries in the Skagit River Delta. Over 90 different crops are grown in Skagit County. This region is home to berries, flowers, bulbs, potatoes, vegetable seeds, and multiple other fresh market crops.*

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