

Skagit Valley Herald

Gregoire signs bill to fund preserving farmland

James Geluso, Skagit Valley Herald, May 11, 2005
May 11, 2005

By James Geluso, of the Skagit Valley Herald
May 11, 2005

A bill signed Friday by Gov. Christine Gregoire likely means more money for farmland preservation — but not until 2007.

The bill added farmland preservation to the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program, which purchases land for the state.

Bob Rose, executive director of Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland, said the change will benefit Skagit County's efforts to keep farming alive.

"It's another potential funding source to match the county's Farmland Legacy program," he said. "It's a good thing to have more funding sources, because funding is limited."

How much money goes to farmland will depend on how much money the Legislature allocates to the program. If the program gets less than \$40 million, then farmland preservation gets no money. But farmland will get 40 percent of any money allocated between \$40 million and \$50 million, and 10 percent of any money allocated past the \$50 million mark.

This year, the Legislature put \$50 million into the statewide program. If it does the same in 2007, that's \$4 million for farmland preservation.

"That's a lot of money," Rose said.

The bill is consolidating several of the state's land-acquisition grant programs into the existing program, said Mike Ryherd, a lobbyist for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, an advocacy group for the program. Included in the consolidation is a farmland preservation program that the Legislature had never funded, he said.

Because counties and cities are the entities that submit grant applications for money to buy park land, urban wildlife, salmon restoration lands and farmland, it makes sense to give them a single agency to send the applications to, Ryherd said.

Setting aside money for farmland acquisition doesn't detract from the mission of the program, said Carrie Powell, director of the coalition.

"We're feeling like it enhances it," she said. "It's in line with the other restoration projects and the goals of the program."

The bill also requires the state to make payments on land acquired by the Department of Natural Resources for conservation. That would result in about \$9,000 a year for Skagit County, where about 7,500 acres, including Hat Island and most of Cypress Island, are in conservation programs, according to Bonnie Bunning, executive director for policy and administration of the department.

James Geluso can be reached at 360-416-2146 or by e-mail: jgeluso@skagitvalleyherald.com.