

3. Natural Resource Conservation Element

Introduction

Natural Resource Lands (NRL) have an important role in preserving the rural character of Guemes Island. Under the Skagit County Comprehensive Plan (SCCP), the NRL include three primary types of land-based natural resources: agriculture, forest, and mineral. The larger tracts of NRL lands may be zoned Agricultural-NRL, and Industrial- or Secondary Forest-NRL, while smaller acreage with characteristics of both agricultural and forest capability are zoned Rural Resource-NRL. Mineral NRL are designated as a Mineral Resource Overlay. On Guemes Island, the NRL are limited to Rural Resource-NRL.

The Natural Resource Conservation Element is intended to complement the Land Use Element by defining the purpose and intent of land-use policies to guide long-range planning, programs, and regulations with the objective to conserve the Natural Resource Lands. The element provides information on the current and future conditions of the NRL on Guemes Island and makes recommendations to supplement the policies of the SCCP and the Skagit County Code (SCC).

Therefore, the purpose of this element is to:

- Preserve the rural environment of Guemes Island.
- Support the primary and preferred uses of growing, harvesting and processing of natural resources and their products.
- Minimize residential development in resource lands.
- Provide opportunities for agricultural and forest activities.
- Provide opportunities for timber activities.
- Protect Guemes' natural resources for future generations.

Current Conditions and Issues

Guemes Island contains approximately 500 acres designated as Rural Resource Lands (RRL). The Department of Natural Resources (DNR) owns 120 acres of these lands as forested School Trust Lands. Islanders use the trails on this tract for recreational activities. The remainder of the RRL is a mixture of agriculture, forest, wetland and drainage channels (Figure 2.2). Of the privately-owned RRL, 315 acres are currently classified under the Open Space Taxation Program: almost 78 acres are in Open Space; another 80 acres in Timber Open Space; and 157 acres in Farm and Agriculture Open Space.

The acreage zoned Rural Resource Lands on Guemes amounts to 10 percent of the total acreage on the island, while the 15 parcels so designated make up only 1 percent of the total number of parcels. No mineral resources have been documented for Guemes Island,

although Down Under Guemes has historically been a low-production sand-and-gravel mine since 1967.

The EPA has designated Guemes Island as a Sole Source Aquifer (SSA; see Environment Element for details of this designation). Because of its SSA status, Skagit County does give special consideration to the island in cases of Conservation and Reserve Development (CaRD) subdivisions, where density bonuses are not allowed except where the source of water is outside of the SSA-designated area. [SCC14.18.310 (2)] (See Land Use Element for details of the CaRD process)

Some of the Rural Resource Land parcels may be significant aquifer recharge areas and several serve an important function in the regulation of surface water run-off.

Future Considerations and Issues

As the County re-assesses the need to accommodate future growth, the possibility exists that the zoning of the natural resource lands might be changed or that a higher density might be allowed under the present zoning. In addition, a number of uses that are currently allowed in the RRL under Permitted Uses and Hearing Examiner Special Uses might pose a threat to the aquifer or would conflict with the peaceful nature of the island.

As trees are harvested from forested areas, the Forest Practices Act (FPA) requires replanting of trees. However, the FPA does not require replanting with mixed species, which should be encouraged to create diverse habitats on the island.

Although many of the Rural Resource Lands parcels are enrolled in the County Open Space Taxation Program, this program does not protect the lands on a permanent basis. Property owners should be encouraged to permanently protect their lands.

Agriculture and forestry resource production are important elements of the island community. In order to support sustainable living on the island, it is desirable to encourage such activity. In doing so, the rural character of the island landscape and the diversity of the community would be maintained.

Education

- Island organizations should work closely with private land trust organizations to encourage natural-resource land-owners to permanently protect these lands through sale of development rights, estate planning, and conservation easements or through land donations.

Policy Recommendations

The following recommendations are intended to supplement the policies of the Natural Resources Conservation Element of the SCCP or SCC. The Land Use Element also includes recommendations that affect uses in the Rural Resource Lands.

- 3.1 No increase in density shall be permitted in a CaRD sub-division on RRL. [SCCP: 5C-1.2 (a)] and [SCC: 14.18.310(2)]
- 3.2 Property owners shall be encouraged to place a conservation easement on their Rural Resource Lands designed to encourage long-term forestry and agricultural land conservation. [SCCP: 5C-1.2(a)]
- 3.3 Commercial land-based aquaculture and related development shall be a Hearing Examiner Special Use instead of a Permitted Use. [SCC: 14.16.430(2)©]
- 3.4 The County shall encourage the use of mixed native forest species, suitable for the site, in reforestation. [SCC: 14.16.430 (2)(f)]