

# Skagit Valley Herald

FRIDAY

JANUARY 27, 2012

A locally owned newspaper serving Northwest Washington since 1884

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**Jack Sekora, who owns a small farm north of Sedro-Woolley,** talks about new fencing that was installed to keep his horses out of a small stream that flows through his property.

## Conservation group gives tour of successful cleanup projects in the Samish watershed

By **WHITNEY PIPKIN**  
Staff Writer

Even as Eben Twaddle presented Hickson Farms' expansive new barn that was built to keep his 70 beef cows off muddy pastures in the winter, he admitted it's more than most farmers can afford — that is, unless they also own a successful construction company.

The barn was one of a handful of projects aimed at reducing pollution in the Samish watershed that was featured during a Skagit Conservation District tour

this week. A bus full of representatives from state departments and conservation agencies — many of which have provided grants for the projects, piled into a bus Wednesday afternoon to see results of an ongoing effort to clean up the watershed, called the Clean Samish Initiative.

Twaddle's barn, along with the 4,000 feet of fencing he installed to keep his cows and their manure out of the water, was a sort of shining example for the effort. The Skagit Conservation staff helped Twaddle develop a farm plan, but

he paid for all the improvements himself.

His company, Interwest Construction Inc. in Burlington — which built the \$10 million Chuckanut Park and Ride among other projects last year — provides much of the supplies and funding for the growing cattle farm. Twaddle said he hopes to make the farm, which has been in his family for three generations, a more full-time venture once he retires from the construction business.

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**Eben Twaddle (left), owner of Hickson Farms outside of Sedro-Woolley, talks to Eastern Washington conservation commissioner and wheat farmer Tracy Eriksen Wednesday during a conservation tour in the Samish watershed.**

# ► Cleanup

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He had planned to wait until retirement for major improvements like the barn, but the clean water effort in the Samish was the impetus he needed to move forward.

"I was told we had to conform here or pretty much not farm," Twaddle said, describing to the group of mostly conservationists how he warmed up to the idea himself.

"I always thought 'This is America, so you can do what you want on your property.' But that's not always true. You have to think about what it does downstream."

The tour group applauded his comment. It's exactly what they want to hear as they encourage residents in the watershed to make sure their properties and livestock aren't part of the problem.

## The problem

Fecal coliform levels, an indicator of harmful bacteria in the water, are often too high for shellfish farmers in the Samish Bay to safely harvest. As of last year, the state Department of Health automatically closes the bay to harvesting after heavy rainfalls, which typically wash more pollu-

tion into the bay. Those closures last five days or until water samples show safe levels of bacteria.

Only one of three automatic closures so far this year has been accompanied by too-high levels of fecal coliform. Twice the bay was immediately reopened, and this week the closure was lifted a day earlier than expected due to clean water samples.

Rick Haley, water quality analyst for Skagit County Public Works, told the group Wednesday that he sees this as progress.

The water samples they've been collecting for the past 14 years are trending "in the right direction," Haley said, showing a reduction in levels of fecal coliform — even if they aren't yet as low as they need to be.

If the bay is not closed at all during the March-through-May timeframe, the health department will change its status from "conditionally approved" to "approved," meaning closures will no longer be triggered by high rainfalls alone. That spring season, however, typically sees the highest number of closures (31 days total last year).

## A solution

A pair of horses may not seem like they'd contribute much to the watershed's

fecal problem, but their Sedro-Woolley owners, Jack and Wendy Sekora, said they wanted to be sure.

After taking Skagit Conservation's Watershed Masters program, which offers 40 hours of habitat and conservation training, Jack Sekora was concerned his two horses might be contributing to the "poop problem." When conservation representatives came to Sekora's property to see if he qualified for an improvement grant, the horses helped prove his case.

"The horses took a dump in the creek while they were here," Sekora said with a laugh. "We only have two horses, but just the two of them is enough to mess it up."

A grant through the county's Natural Resource Stewardship Program paid for more than 300 riparian plantings to filter soils along the creek and 1,200 feet of fencing to keep the horses away from it. The grant also built a culvert and livestock crossing to the adjacent pasture.

The Sekoras have offered up their property as an example to other residents and tour groups, like the one on Wednesday. Jack Sekora also serves on the Skagit Stream and Storm teams, collecting water samples to help monitor the area's progress.