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• GUEST OPINION •

Wetland Mitigation Banks –

A Sign of Failed Planning

By Ellen Bynum

Washington State laws are meant to protect wetlands whenever possible. The State recognizes, however, that projects such as highway construction often result in wetland loss because on-site mitigation is not feasible. When destruction of wetlands is unavoidable, mitigation can be accomplished on another site, but only as a last resort.

Natural wetlands are one key to a healthy environment. In comparison, man-made wetlands don't measure up to the original model's ability to filter water and reduce flooding. Many people feel the loss of natural wetlands is unacceptable and some experts are now questioning the efficacy of wetland mitigation planning. Despite the 51 percent failure rate of wetland mitigation nationwide, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Washington State Department of Ecology continue to experiment by authorizing privately owned wetland mitigation banks to accommodate large developments in areas where wetlands abound.

Meanwhile, Skagit County is required by state law to identify and protect "natural resource lands" that support farms, forests and mining operations. In addition, countywide planning

policies provide guidelines for the county planning department.

With the approval of two privately owned wetland mitigation banks in Skagit County – both in the Nookachamps basin – approximately 1,100 acres of farmland will be lost due to the wetland mitigation bank projects.

Agricultural land in food production represents only 83,000 acres in production, approximately 8 percent of the County's land base. In 2008 about 3,400 acres of Skagit farmland were converted to other uses by private entities, state, federal and local governments or through court settlements. Another 10,000 acres are proposed for removal from farmland production in coming years. Eventually the 7,500 acres protected by the Skagit County Farmland Legacy program may be all that remains.

Friends of Skagit County agrees with most local citizens that the loss of 1,100 acres of farmland is unacceptable, and is currently appealing the Hearing Examiner's decision to approve one of wetland mitigation banks.

The appeal hearing is open to the public on Tuesday, July 14 at the Commissioners Hearing Room, 1800 Continental Place, in Mount Vernon.

Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland and the Skagit Farm Bureau also appealed one of the wetland mitigation banks, but chose to settle out of court. The settlement reportedly includes a donation at some future date from the wetland mitigation bank owners to Skagit County's Farmland Legacy Program. In the interim, the County Commissioners have adopted an "emergency ordinance" which bans the permitting of additional wetland mitigation banks and forces the two existing enterprises to compete for mitigation credit sales at a time when local development is at its lowest in decades.

If successful, the two wetland mitigation bank owners will pocket an estimated \$31 million in profits, while future generations will be left with only faint memories of a naturally functioning environment, a thriving agricultural industry and one of the richest food-producing valleys in the world.

Who will they blame for the loss?

UPFRONT: *The writer is Director of Friends of Skagit County, a local non-profit group that has been advocating for good land use decisions for the past 16 years.*