

Paying farmers to maintain streamside vegetation one way to protect Fraser Valley fish streams

Incentives are needed to protect against damage to Fraser Valley's bio-diverse drainage ditches

BY LARRY PYNN, VANCOUVER SUN JUNE 9, 2014



Ditches such as this one off Sutherland Road in Agassiz provide important habitat for aquatic life and feed larger streams and creeks downstream, but can be threatened by farm operations.

AGASSIZ — When you stand on Sutherland Road near Highway 7 at Hamersley Prairie and look east, you see a grass-lined tributary meandering through flat, rich farmland. Swivel 180 degrees to the west and you see a completely different landscape: the tributary is gone, encased now in a field-wide culvert, covered over with soil, and the farmland oveltop planted in blueberries.

Detmar Schwichtenberg, chair of the Fraser Valley Watersheds Coalition and co-owner of a family dairy farm, says conversion to blueberries is a common trend in the valley.

“It raises the value quite substantially compared to pastureland.”

What's troubling is this tributary flows downstream into McCallum Ditch and Mountain Slough, which are home to two endangered species, the Salish sucker and Oregon spotted frog. There's no reason to think this tributary wasn't habitat for the same species — had anyone checked.

Now it's too late and the province has launched an investigation under the B.C. Water Act and regulations.

Greig Bethel, of the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, said the "in-stream works were done without the proper authorization" and that "efforts are now aimed at full restoration of the stream, or a reasonable compensation for the loss of habitat."

The landowner, Casey Guliker, refused to comment.

Many fish streams in the agricultural Fraser Valley are under attack from alteration of habitat, pollution and invasive plants.

Protecting them can be as simple as maintaining buffers of natural vegetation along the stream banks — or planting them where they've been removed.

These riparian areas hold the soil, act as windbreaks, help prevent manure and other pollutants from making their way into streams, and keep waters cool in summer for fish. They can also provide a corridor for the movement of wildlife.

The best way to maintain such corridors, Schwichtenberg argues, is to pay farmers for what is known as ecosystem services.

Schwichtenberg said agriculture causes environmental problems around the world. The sector uses vast amounts of water for irrigation, it is responsible for a lot of soil erosion, and manure and other farm pollutants get into waterways.

Buffers of vegetation are an important remedy.

"They're important not just for critters, but for human welfare, for the benefits they deliver," Schwichtenberg said.

In the District of Kent, the Fraser Valley Watersheds Coalition is already working with 13 willing landowners, planting trees, building fences and providing maintenance at no cost — and so far without payment — to improve the plight of fish dependent on farmland.

"How can we make doing the right thing (environmentally) also a good business decision?" Schwichtenberg asks.

A model already exists south of the border in Whatcom County, where millions of dollars are being spent to support farmers and create happy shade-grown fish.

The Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program is a federal-state program that aims to create forested buffers of 10 to 55 metres alongside salmon-bearing streams and more modest buffers of hedges almost five metres in width on lesser streams.

The U.S. program is voluntary — sort of. Landowners who want to clean the ditches around their properties and improve drainage must first obtain a permit, and they only get one by signing up to protect riparian areas.

Since 2000, the program has launched 359 projects, resulting in 265 kilometres of riparian area, averaging 36 metres in width across 950 hectares of farmland. More than one-million seedlings have been planted. Landowners signing a 10- or 15-year contract to preserve major riparian areas receive an average annual payment of about \$900 a hectare and an average signing bonus of \$660.

Overall, the program has spent \$16.8 million — two-thirds federal, one-third state — and is committed to spending \$23 million over the life of signed contracts.

That covers payments to farmers and the costs of the planting, including removal of invasive plants such as reed canary grass and Himalayan blackberry, fencing to keep livestock out of streams, and maintenance for three to five years.

“We want to grow food, we’re trying to keep people in business,” said George Boggs, executive director of the Whatcom Conservation District. “But we also want to protect the environment.”

When the program contracts expire, the hope is that the landowners have grown accustomed to the riparian areas, realize their benefits, and keep them. But that’s not always the case.

Chuck Timblin, resource specialist with the conservation district, pointed to an Everson-area property where the conservation contract recently expired. The Californian who bought the site is ripping up and burning the riparian area.

“It’s within his right to do it,” Timblin laments. Only about five per cent of program funding goes to high-quality farmland, meaning it generally makes economic sense to take the money and leave the land. “I think most farmers will leave the riparian areas in,” he says.

Given the higher price of land in the Fraser Valley, Schwichtenberg says an annual rental payment of \$2,500 a hectare might be more fitting locally. With an estimated 20 hectares of prime aquatic habitat to be protected, that would equate to an annual budget of \$50,000 a year for Kent District.

How would such a program be funded?

Residents of the Regional District of East Kootenay provided one model when they voted in 2008 to place a \$20 conservation tax on all properties from Canal Flats to Spillimacheen. More than 12,000 properties now contribute to the Columbia Valley Local Conservation Fund. In 2012, the tax provided \$700,000 to help the Nature Conservancy of Canada raise \$7.2 million to purchase and manage 127

hectares of critical wildlife habitat on Columbia Lake's east shore.

Administration is another matter. Farmers tend to view biologists and the federal Fisheries department with suspicion, Schwichtenberg said, which is why he supports a farmer-led, locally administered system.

The B.C. Agriculture Council is interested in running such a program through the existing Environmental Farm Plan, which is voluntary and allows farmers to tap federal-provincial subsidies for farm improvements that benefit the environment.

One experimental program has already begun in Kent District.

The Ecological Services Initiative is a collaboration of farmers, academics and conservationists. The provincial and federal governments have invested in the project through the Investment Agriculture Foundation of B.C. The B.C. Cattlemen's Association is participating.

Just 800 metres downstream of Sutherland Road, the McCallum ditch system flows through a sprawling Holstein dairy farm established by the Post family in 1960 — a total of 280 milking cows and about 160 hectares of farmable, deeded and rental land.

Third-generation farmer Duane Post received \$1,200 in exchange for preserving half a kilometre of tributary feeding McCallum Ditch for a year. "Everybody is opposed to regulation, right?" he said. "If the carrot is big enough, you don't need the stick. That's always the better route."

But he remains "a bit skeptical" of the ecological services program, saying it may restrict his ability to remove grasses and conduct drainage works as necessary.

He recently had a letter-to-the-editor published in the Agassiz Observer — signed, in part "species at risk habitat provider" — in which he pointed out that the ditches in the area were created for drainage and flood control. Today, however, the same waterways are critical aquatic habitat, including for endangered species.

Post takes The Sun on a ride aboard a golf cart to visit a stretch of fish stream flowing alongside fields planted with corn in summer and a grass cover crop in winter.

"This is probably the most sensitive area in the whole district, this stretch here," he explains. "We didn't change anything to do that. It's always been here."

He contends that part of the waterway will need to be excavated and cleared of grass at some point to improve water flow, arguing: "How are you going to shade a 50-foot-wide ditch other than with 50-to-80-foot trees and we're a long ways from that."

Post has decided not to renew his ecological services contract and plans to work instead with both the district and the federal Habitat Stewardship Program on a solution that protects endangered species

and meets farmers' needs.

"I'm interested less in the money than all these partners working together," he concluded. "I don't see why that can't happen."

lpynn@vancouversun.com

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