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Wetland bank plan awash in concerns

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An action alert directed against a proposed wetland mitigation bank on farmland in Skagit County, Wash., is picking up steam in the ag community. Retired dairy farmer Ken Johnson, who sent letters opposing the project earlier on, said he'll be sending another letter in response to the recent action alert.

"I think it's a tremendously backward step for farmland in general," he said, referring to the project, which will adjoin his farmland near Clear Lake. "When they allow developers to destroy wetlands and then take farmland out of production to compensate for it, that's wrong. It's a bad move."

And while the project, often referred to as the Clear Valley project, is planned for Skagit County, farmers in other counties have said that the issues involved in this "grab for farmland" are equally relevant in counties wrestling with intense development pressure.

In an e-mail response to Capital Press on Feb. 19, state Sen. Mary Margaret Haugen, D-Camano Island, said she is especially concerned about the potential of agriculturally significant lands being sacrificed for wetland mitigation banking in Skagit County - an area whose agricultural viability is already in jeopardy.

"If this plan goes forward, it would be a dangerous precedent for ag lands throughout our state," she said.

How it works

Developers of wetland mitigation banks sell credits to agencies, developers and other entities whose projects have destroyed existing wetlands.

In the rural areas of Washington state, wetland banking credits sell for about \$75,000 per credit. Those in areas where real estate values are high - Seattle or Bellevue, for example - credits can go for as high as \$400,000 to \$500,000 per credit.

The number of credits an agency or developer needs to buy is based on the quality of the wetlands that have been destroyed. Supporters of wetland mitigation banking say the banks provide considerably more wildlife and fish habitat than small isolated pockets of newly created wetlands.

And while most people believe the goals of wetland mitigation banking projects have merit, many people are opposed to establishing them on farmland.

Concerns

Opponents of the Clear Valley project - among them, farmers, ranchers and a range of agricultural, community and environmental organizations - want the county to deny the applicant's permit for the project. They point out that not only does the project violate the state's Growth Management Act, which mandates the protection of farmland, but that it also threatens surrounding farms by changing the drainage system.

In addition, the area serves as emergency flood storage for the Skagit River, a function opponents say will be lost if the land is converted from agriculture into wetlands.

County Senior Planner Betsy Stevenson said if the owners of the proposed wetlands mitigation bank go through all of the necessary procedures to get permitted, it wouldn't be wise for the county deny the project.

In other words, the county could be sued.

Skagit County Commissioner Don Munks said that's the dilemma the county finds itself in. It can either be sued for not letting the application go through the county's permitting process, or it can be sued if the project ends up causing problems - flooding, for example.

Referring to the specific project near Clear Lake, he said the county has never had the opportunity to discuss the entire project with the owners of the proposed project.

"The way it's set up now, the Ecology Department establishes what the end product will be," he said. "The commissioners have never seen the final version of what will take place - just bits and pieces of it. We were left out in the cold. How do we come out with something that's in the best interest for the county when we don't know all of the parameters?"

Allen Rozema, executive director of Skagitians to Preserve Farmland, agrees.

"The project keeps changing," he said. "We don't know what it really is. The county has an obligation to slow it down until the applicant makes full disclosure."

Skagitians' board plans to appeal an earlier ruling by the Skagit County Planning Department that the wetland bank will have no significant adverse impact on the environment.

Opponents say if the county approves the project, they'll take the issue up the legal ladder.

"We believe they're violating the Growth Management Act if they issue the permit," said Mary Heinrich of the Washington Agricultural Institute, an ag policy group.

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