

Eld Inlet on Puget Sound: A Conservation Easement Protects Important Coastal Habitat

by Ann Haas

"My wife and I bought part of the farm in 1975 and have added to it through the years. We fell in love with the place and didn't want to see it developed," said Ralph Munro about Triple Creek Farm. "Triple Creek Farm is on the Eld Inlet, one of Puget Sound's most intact estuary-inland complexes. A cornerstone property, the farm fits nicely into the partnership initiative led by Capitol Land Trust," explained Ginger Phalen from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) Coastal Program.

"Ralph and Karen Munro have been supporters for a long time," said Eric Erler, Executive Director of the Capitol Land Trust, an organization that acquires Puget Sound properties for permanent protection through conservation easements. The Trust is guided by a strategic goal to protect the marine and estuarine shoreline. "Waterfront property is in high demand and is being lost very rapidly," he said. "Three-fourths of the estuarine environment has been converted or fragmented." Thurston County's population is expected to grow by 50 percent during the next 20 years, the fastest rate in Washington state. The county is already experiencing impacts with the conversion of open space, farmland, and shoreline. Protecting habitat is critical to the long-term health of the area.

The Capitol Land Trust and The Trust for Public Land contacted other partners including the Service's Coastal Program in Puget Sound, the Washington Department of Ecology, and the Squaxin Island Tribe, to help ensure that the Triple Creek Farm will remain as it is now. The culmination is a conservation easement, limiting development and protecting the property in its existing state in perpetuity. The conservation easement protects 3.5 miles of

marine shoreline, 500 feet of stream, 160 acres of intertidal and freshwater wetland and riparian habitat, and 43 acres of coastal associated forested upland habitat.

Biologists from the Coastal Program in Puget Sound helped develop a proposal for the FWS National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program to acquire the easement and provided funding and technical assistance to implement the easement. The Washington Department of Ecology received the grant and gave the money to the Capitol Land Trust. The Department also added to the sum from its coastal protection fund, fines assessed from oil spills to restore damaged areas. In turn, the Capitol Land Trust generated support from partners such as Entrix, a private company that conducted a biological assessment as a donation. Financial contributions totaled more than \$1 million.

"We knew that Triple Creek Farm was important, but didn't know how important until we discovered the first fish net," said Erler, referring to the Squaxin Island Tribal village and fishing grounds. "The cedar bark fish net was more than 100 feet long, and it had jaw bones of salmon, so we know what kind of fish they were catching," added Ralph Munro. The property has yielded artifacts that turned out to be of national significance and have formed the core collection of a museum of the Squaxin Island Nation. The net may be 800 years old.

The property adds important habitat for five species of anadromous fish—fall Chinook salmon, coho salmon, winter steelhead, sea-run cutthroat trout, and chum salmon—providing a transition area to saltwater at the very

southern end of Puget Sound. "This is a pretty special place," Ralph Munro said. ■

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Eld Inlet intertidal and shoreline habitat protected by conservation easement. Photo courtesy of Rich Carlson, U.S. FWS.



Triple Creek Farm Conservation partners: Jean Koenings, Washington Department of Ecology, Eric Erler, Capitol Land Trust, landowners Karen and Ralph Munro, and Ginger Phalen, U.S. FWS. Photo courtesy of Taylor Pittman, U.S. FWS.