



The last viable farming areas in Puget Sound are threatened by calls for massive buffers statewide on rivers, streams and ditches statewide. Farmers provide valuable habitat for salmon and wildlife. Taking away this farmland will result in consolidation into a few large farms and the rapid conversion to urban development.

The right kind of buffers help salmon. Large, inflexible buffers will harm salmon recovery.

Save Family Farming exists to help protect the future of family farming in Washington state. One of the greatest threats to that future comes from a few activist voices calling for taking thousands of acres of our best farmland out of production and substituting it with massive riparian buffers. Salmon recovery would be harmed as farms will be converted to urban development.

What you will learn

- What are massive buffers and why activists claim these are needed for salmon
- How urban streams are the biggest habitat problem for salmon, and why these are exempted while farmland is targeted
- The science that is used to support the demand for these massive buffers on farmland
- What farmers and farmland do for salmon habitat
- What would happen to family farms if these buffers are mandatory
- What really needs to be done to support salmon
- What concerned citizens can do to help protect family farming in our state and aid salmon recovery



Rivers and streams flood as the Nooksack river in Whatcom County did in late 2021. Buffers would start at the furthest extent of possible floods. If imposed on farmland such as in the fertile Nooksack valley it would force many farmers out, result in consolidation into a few large farms, and cause the probable loss of most farm infrastructure. As one farmer said, "It would be the final nail in the coffin for farmers" particularly in the Puget Sound region.

Massive, inflexible buffers and salmon recovery

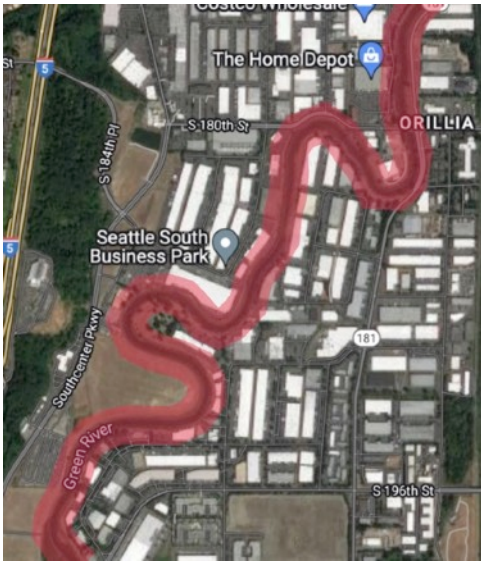
Sometimes called "big, dumb buffers," the huge inflexible buffers called for by activists are hundreds to thousands of feet of trees and bushes on both sides of all streams, rivers and even man-made drainage ditches. The buffer distance is measured from the edge of the flood plain; so if a stream or river floods occasionally, the buffer distance starts from where it possibly may flood. The width is based on the average height of a 200 year old tree, meaning that in Western Washington hundreds to thousands of feet -- or much more -- would be converted to buffer on either side of the waterways potential flow. They are called inflexible because of their standard size and design without considering local conditions.

Buffers can help salmon

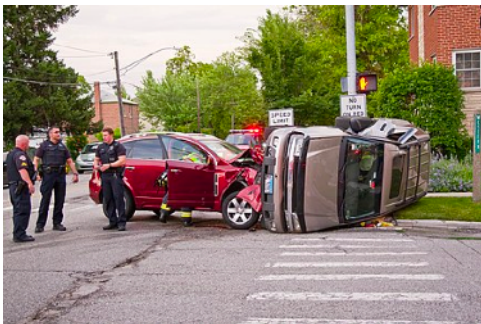
Riparian buffers help protect salmon by reducing water temperature in the summer, protecting against runoff from roads and fields, adding woody debris to streams, controlling sediments and protecting banks. That's why farmers voluntarily provide land for miles of buffers and continue to support implementing smart, flexible buffers.

Taking thousands of acres of farmland will harm salmon recovery

Buffer activists and some state leaders are focusing their demands for these buffers on farmland. But, this would harm farming and salmon recovery while ignoring the greatest challenges for salmon. As farmers point out, "Our whole farm is a buffer." Deer, coyotes, beavers and hundreds of thousands of migrating waterfowl show how important farmland is in wildlife habitat. But, instead of requiring these buffers where they will do the most good, the activists and government leaders who support them target farmland. By targeting farmland their demands would greatly accelerate the already devastating loss of farms and conversion of farmland to urban sprawl -- causing more problems for salmon. This land would no longer grow food and farmland would simply be taken out of production without compensation to the landowner. Smaller farms losing much of their farmland would be forced to sell to much larger farmer or to developers for roads, homes and businesses.



The Green river flows through southeast Seattle from the Duwamish water way. It is a popular salmon fishing stream for Seattleites. The many streams that flow through urban areas pose the greatest habitat loss and pollution danger to salmon. The map shows what would happen near Southcenter if the demands for massive buffers were applied to where they could do the most good.



Safety experts could design cars that would eliminate injury and death from accidents. Activists who demand the massive buffers are like car safety activists who say only cars that are indestructible can be used even if only a very few could afford them. The "fully functional" buffer recommendation from WDFW is not a policy recommendation as the document makes clear. It is up to political leaders to balance the ultimate protection with other considerations – like growing food.

Urban streams are a disaster for salmon

Streams and ditches in our cities and towns are a primary source of pollutants that harm salmon. These streams are in much more need of help to improve salmon than streams in forest and farmland. The Management Recommendations from the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife (WDFW) include urban streams and make clear the harm they pose to salmon. Despite the harm urban streams cause salmon, activists and state leaders exempt them from the demands for buffers.

Politics, not science, drives the demand for massive buffers on farmland

Activists and state leaders who support massive buffers on farmland cite the WDFW science report and management recommendations. The Department makes it clear they are not offering policy recommendations, but only answering the question about what buffers offer the maximum benefit for fish habitat. Their science studies are based almost exclusively on forest land, not farmland. Another state funded study showed how different farmland is and why buffers designed for forested areas do not apply to farmland. The WDFW also notes the need for taking into consideration local conditions, guidance ignored by activists.

The Department's report and science studies show that most of the benefit of buffers on farmland is provided within the first few yards. Effective buffers do not need to be as massive as recommended. Activists and leaders who insist on using the Department's recommendation are misusing them and either ignoring them or missing the intent.

By exempting the very streams and waterways that are the biggest problem for salmon, the activists make clear their demands are political. If protecting salmon is the motivation and if the Department's recommendations are to be used, then these massive buffers need to implemented first on our urban rivers, streams, storm drains and ditches.



Skagit farmer Jason VanderKooy explains that farmer-built drainage ditches like this one make farming in this area possible. These ditches are dry much of the year, flow directly to salt water and are not salmon habitat. Yet, the extremists calling for the massive buffers say these require buffers of hundreds of feet in width, taking away valuable remaining farmland with no benefit to salmon.



Karl Prisk, owner of Cougar Creek Ranch, explains how he participates in the Whatcom Conservation Easement Program. The farmland continues growing food but is permanently protected against urban development. It is one of many examples of voluntary stewardship by farmers aimed at helping salmon, wildlife and protecting the environment. Prisk's story and many others are at www.farmersforreal.org.

What farmers and farmland do for salmon

Farmers voluntarily provide riparian habitat on streams through programs like the Voluntary Stewardship Program and the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP). Nearly 1000 miles of streams have been protected and 6 million trees planted through the CREP program in our state. That's the distance from Olympia to Los Angeles! Farming protects land from urban sprawl which endangers salmon. Farmers also participate in numerous salmon recovery efforts as documented at www.farmersforreal.org. The buffers demanded by activists would greatly accelerate the conversion of family farms to urban development. It is urban areas — unaccountably left untouched by the activists — that represent the greatest harm to salmon habitat.

If the activists win this fight farmers throughout the state would lose thousands of acres of valuable farmland. Western Washington farms would be hit hardest with about 25% to 30% of existing farmland in this area converted to buffers. Some smaller farms could lose as much as 50% or even more of their land. Farms near rivers that flood like the Nooksack in Whatcom County would stand to lose much of their land. Similarly, Skagit County farmers would be hard hit. This land would simply be taken without compensation and could no longer be used to grow food.

The massive buffers would accelerate farmland conversion

Over 60% of farmland has already been lost to development over the last few decades in Puget Sound. The American Farmland Trust projects that Washington will lose between 200,000 and 250,000 acres of farmland between 2016 and 2040 – most of that would be the very best farmland. The last remaining viable farming areas of the Puget Sound region would be hit hardest because of the many streams and ditches.

We can't afford to lose more farms and local food production because as the number of farms decline, the support businesses essential for farming can't survive with only a few farms to serve. Imagine having a veterinarian or agronomist come from across the state. As they leave, expenses for the remaining farmers increase. Just look at how previous major farming areas on the urban fringes have changed once the tipping point is passed.



Harbor seal and sea lion populations have exploded since protected by federal law. But science studies show in the Salish Sea in particular they devastate salmon populations, eating more than 24 million smolts. Our state's leading science organization is joining with tribal leaders in calling for lethal removal noting that salmon recovery will be very challenging without it.



In the 2022 session the Lorraine Loomis Act was introduced which would have required the massive buffers on farmland and rural communities. No farming interests were even consulted. While voluntary efforts to improve buffers are emphasized now, activists voices continue to call for the massive buffers that would harm our state, our farms and salmon recovery.

Salmon recovery depends on the right focus

Habitat is important. But we don't need to destroy our family farms or take billions of dollars of our urban infrastructure to help salmon. Habitat is one of a number of factors affecting salmon. Ocean warming is a major factor. One very significant factor that can be addressed is seal and sea lion predation. Tribal leaders and the state's leading science body, the Washington Academy of Sciences, agree the impact on salmon from record numbers of protected seals and sea lions is harming salmon recovery and may require lethal removal of some of these predators.

Overcoming the political challenges to doing the right things

There are political challenges to addressing the habitat issues of urban streams. Taking homes and businesses in our cities will be opposed. There will also be political challenges to the removal of seals and sea lions. Some think that taking our valuable farmland out of production is the easiest political path. But it is also the path that offers the least benefit to salmon.

The facts show massive buffers on farmland will do little to help salmon but will destroy a great many family farms and put farming in some of our last viable farming areas at serious risk. That would make salmon recovery even harder. Farmers alone do not have a loud enough voice to overcome those demanding these buffers.

Save Family Farming is appealing to those who live in our cities and towns to get involved. We ask you to be informed and share what you learn. If enough speak out to protect our family farms and farmland, our state leaders will focus where their genuine concerns for salmon recovery will do the most good.

Sign up for updates and on how you can help: www.savefamilyfarming.org

