He bought land 25 years ago to ‘putter around in.’ Now, it’s a haven for this rare species

By Ysabelle Kempe, Bellingham Herald May 31, 2022

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What does it take to turn 71 acres of neglected pasture into a forest filled with native plant species? A lot, it turns out. Ask Bob Barker, the Sudden Valley resident in his 90s who has spent the last 25 years restoring a forest south of Van Zandt near the Nooksack River’s South Fork. Nelson Road Tree Farm, as the property is called, is a look at what years of dedicated tree planting can do:

Roughly 30,000 trees have been planted on the property since Barker purchased it, half of which he put in the ground personally, armed with a shovel. Healthy forests can improve local water and air quality, absorb planet-warming carbon and create high-quality habitat for fish and other wildlife. Some of these benefits can be seen in action at Nelson Road Tree Farm: The forest has attracted growing populations of the rare Oregon spotted frog, which is endangered in Washington.

Bathed in Saturday’s afternoon sun, Barker accepted the Washington Tree Farm Program’s 2022 Tree Farmer of the Year award in front of a small crowd of family members, several elected officials, local foresters and reporters. The Washington Tree Farm Program is a nonprofit that supports the state’s forestland owners. “Bob’s is really unique. Instead of inheriting a forest or buying a forest, he bought a field and made it into a forest,” said Tom Westergreen, a fourth-generation forest landowner near Sumas, in a video made by the Washington Tree Farm Program to celebrate Barker. “He was kind of a pioneer in doing this.”

Barker is not a lifelong forester by any means, although he briefly worked at a logging camp in British Columbia as a young man in 1948. Barker is an expert in biochemistry and served on the faculty at Michigan State University before spending more than 15 years in leadership roles at Cornell University in New York

After Barker retired in 1995, he and his wife Kazuko moved to Washington, where Barker began to search for a plot of land to “putter around in” and plant trees. He settled on the Nelson Road property, where the forest had been logged long ago, leaving wet pasture overtaken by weeds, blackberries and reed canary grass. This tall, non-native grass outcompetes native species in Washington’s natural wetlands, creating large, dense stands with little wildlife habitat value, according to the state’s Noxious Weed Control Board.

When Barker first purchased the land, he was busy tying up loose ends as he transitioned into retirement, so he hired a crew to plant the first 5,500 trees. The outcome was disappointing — voles and rabbits chewed off and killed most of the

young trees, leaving only about 800 standing. The high water table, or level at which the ground is saturated with water, also made it challenging to get plants to grow in some areas.

Barker tried again, this time implementing new strategies. He enshrined the bases of the young trees with blue plastic tubes, which prevented rodents from accessing them. The trees shed the tubes as they grow in diameter, and although the casings were marketed as biodegradable, light blue squares of plastic can still be seen scattered across the forest floor years later.

Bob Barker, left, and visitors tour Nelson Road Tree Farm south of Van Zandt near the Nooksack River's South Fork on Saturday, May 21, in Whatcom County. The Sudden Valley resident in his 90s has spent the last 25 years restoring 71 acres of neglected pasture into a forest filled with native plant species. He was honored Saturday at the Washington Tree Farm Program's 2022 Tree Farmer of the Year. Ysabelle Kempe The Bellingham Herald

Barker installed fences on the property to block beavers from gnawing on growing trees. He experimented with methods to get rid of reed canary grass, including mowing and herbicides. To address challenges posed by the high water table, Barker obtained permits to implement a practice called de-leveling, in which trees are planted on mounds of soil scooped out of the ground from nearby. "In a lot of ways, it was fun," Barker said of the challenges he faced.

Welcoming the Oregon spotted frog

As the trees matured, a shocking discovery was made — there were Oregon spotted frog on the property. These amphibians are designated as endangered by the state and weren't even known to occur in western Washington about a decade ago, said Stephen Nyman, lead scientist for the Whatcom County Amphibian Monitoring Program. Nyman said that Nelson Road Tree Farm was one of the sites where the frogs were first observed in western Washington, and Barker's daughter Robin said people initially didn't believe her when she said she had seen them on the Nelson Road property.

It makes sense that Oregon spotted frog are able to survive at Nelson Road Tree Farm: Their ideal breeding sites — shallow water with short vegetation and full sun exposure

— is rapidly being lost to unmanaged, invasive grasses, according to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Barker's restoration recreated some of this valuable habitat.

The active beaver population also helped by opening up the forest, Nyman said. A number of researchers have visited the forest to study stream habitat and the continuously growing Oregon spotted frog population.

Oregon spotted frog, which are endangered in Washington, have been seen at Nelson Road Tree Farm near Van Zandt. Robin Barker Courtesy to The Bellingham Herald

What does the future hold for the forest? Barker's son-in-law Dave Tempero said that Barker jokes that the decision of what to do with it is someone else's problem. In the early days of restoration, there were plans to potentially one day harvest it for timber. However, regulations governing timber harvest near streams have strengthened over the years, and much of the property can no longer be logged.

It would likely cost more money to build a road allowing logging equipment to access the property than the available timber is worth, Westergreen said on the Saturday tour through the forest. However, Barker was able to find other ways to help fund the restoration project. He enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program, a government-funded initiative that pays for native tree and shrub planting along creeks and ditches.

Over 1.4 million seedlings have been planted on more than 2,900 acres in Whatcom County through this program, according to the Whatcom Conservation District. These days, Barker visits Nelson Road Tree Farm much less frequently than he did when he began the project, when he would spend days on end working on the land. His daughters and sons-in-law have taken over most of the day-to-day management. "You can't ever tell what the future will bring," Barker said, strolling through the forest on Saturday. " In the relatively short term, it's just going to grow."