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Educational Field Day June 11, 2022. Photo by Elizabeth Coira

Washington Forests - A Place For All To Thrive: Lessons And Legacies In Stewardship

WSU Extension Forestry and DNR Hold Educational Field Day for Local Forest and Range Land Property Owners

By ElizaBeth Coira
SOUTH STEVENS COUNTY TIMES

On a sunny Saturday, June 11, in Chewelah, private property owners from across Washington gathered, curious to learn more about best practices in stewarding their holdings of range and forest lands in the state. The educational field day was organized by the Washington State University (WSU) Extension Forestry Program, in partnership with the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR), to offer practical training for the public from experts in forest and range health, wildlife habitat, grazing, soils, fire protection, and timber and non-timber forest products. Approximately 300 families attended the annual event, which hasn't occurred in-person since 2019 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The critical role private landowners play in keeping Washington ecologically and economically viable cannot be understated. DNR calculates that small forest landowners hold about 3.2 million acres of Washington's forests. WSU Extension Forester Sean Alexander explained, "Private land ownership constitutes 15% of all the forest land in Washington State. Across Washington, we have just under 220,000 private, non-industrial landowners. And Stevens County property owners specifically have the largest average privately owned parcel size in the state."

WSU Extension Forester Andy Perleberg shared, "We are here today to help landowners understand some fundamental and emerging information about forestry and forest stewardship…as well as to unite them with various resources available. The field day is their shot to talk to state-recognized experts on 30 different topics, to include concerns about wildfire, bark beetles, root disease, forest density, what's my fair share if I sell timber, how to work with forest contractors, and much more. In Stevens County, 60% of private forest owners don't actually live here. We also have a number of cattlemen that have mixed use lands to include forest and rangelands. We want you to know that there's help out there; you don't have to figure it all out on your own."

Some of that help falls under the umbrella of the Forest Landowner Assistance Programs that include no-cost forest health assessments from professional foresters, entomologists, and wildlife biologists, courtesy of DNR. And where action is recommended, DNR may provide financial assistance to landowners through cost-sharing and other incentive programs.

Steve Harris, DNR's Assistant Regional Manager for northeast Washington, based in Colville, emphasized, "We want to

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meet people out on their property before the smoke's in the air, before the bark beetles attack. We're seeing fire seasons getting longer and more intense. Fire conditions are very different than when I started 35+ years ago. Our forests are at more risk now than they were from catastrophic fire, and years and years of forests not being managed well. Poor management practices have encouraged a lot of the disease and beetle outbreaks that we're seeing. If we want to see healthy, resilient forests, we need to arm landowners with good education like we are today. DNR will not only send an expert out to your land to help assess the health of your woods free of charge, but we will also actually help cover the costs of any work that may need to be done. In partnership with WSU Extension Forestry, we also offer longer term training programs for those interested, in topics to include writing your own forest management plan."

Deer Park landowner and field day participant Fran Hailey shared, "It's been a really great day. I've enjoyed many of the classes, including [those] on wildlife habitat and chainsaw safety. I'm definitely going home to do some things differently. We have a lot of trees down on our property and my husband and I have been talking about clearing it out. After this class about wildlife habitat, maybe we don't want to get rid of all of it. We are hoping to improve wildlife habitat on our acreage."

Hailey and her family have also reseeded over 80 acres of their property, following crop failures, to return it to its originally forested state. "For me, being surrounded by trees is a spiritual haven of peace. We have family buried on our land, and our children have agreed to keep it forested after we're gone. We people, we need that connection to nature."

Lynn Miner, landowner and host of the field day at his Chewelah-based property, couldn't agree more. "We've planted 10,000 trees in our 28 years here. It's one of the few ways we can make the world a better place in our own little way." Miner, a retired research physicist, along with his wife Becky, have devoted their time and energy to creating a forest for birds, wildlife, and education."We've dramatically improved the health of our forest. We've brought in more wildlife, more birds, elk come through here, cougars, bears. Up in the tree over there, there's a nesting great horned owl that just had babies this year."

In addition to wildlife, the Miners have also been opening their woods to WSU students for research on forest enhancement efforts for years. Winters, however, are becoming increasingly difficult to manage in retirement for Miner. After some reflection, he happily announced, "We've decided we're going to donate our entire property to WSU to turn this into a research site. This is our legacy. If you're going to live on this planet, by the time you leave, someone should be able to say yeah, the world's a better place because this guy was here. It's not like I made a change to the world that the whole world recognizes, but my wife and I made a commitment and I think we've done a good thing here."

A day of practical lessons in stewardship thus transforms into what will surely be a powerful and lasting legacy of stewardship and care for the forests and families of Washington State. WSU Extension Forester Andy Perleberg concluded, "At the end of the day, we're trying to help improve people's quality of life. We're trying to help family forest owners become expert managers of their own property. For their own personal benefits. For a great quality of life. For a peaceful place to call home. Some may want a periodic income. For wildlife habitat. For pride of ownership and legacy. At the end of the day, we're here to keep the land healthy, for all of us to thrive, here and now, and for generations to come."

To learn more about the WSU Extension Forestry Program, visit forestry.wsu.edu. To learn about DNR resources and consultations available for small forest landowners, visit *dnr.wa.gov/cost-share*.

Lynn (right) and Becky (left) Miner, pictured above in brown, hosted the field day at their Chewelah-based property, Casa Becca del Norte Tree Farm. The couple addressed the lunchtime crowd with stories of their journey into forest stewardship in Stevens County. In addition to the 10,000 trees they've planted over the past 28 years, the Miners will also donate their property to WSU for forestry research, solidifying a generous legacy of love for the woods and wildlife of eastern Washington.

WSU Extension Forester Andy Perleberg highlighted, "We are here today to help landowners understand some fundamental and emerging information about forestry and forest stewardship...as well as to unite them with various resources available. We want you to know that there's help out there, you don't have to figure it all out on your own."

DNR Wildlife Biologist Ken Bevis inspires participants like Deer Park resident Fran Hailey to consider, maintain, and improve wildlife habitat on their lands. He noted, "Everybody has a good wildlife story or sighting from the last week. Take some time to reflect on that life."

DNR Assistant Regional Manager Steve Harris