Using water wisely for farming

Irrigators help stretch water supplies

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Agriculture has long shaped the landscape of the Dungeness Valley and depends on water from the Dungeness River. Agricultural irrigators hold the majority of the water rights to withdraw water directly from the river and play a major role in watershed planning and resource protection. Understanding the impact of farming in the area is critical to any discussion of water management.

Farming in the Dungeness Valley by non-Native American settlers dates back to the mid-1800s. Although the dry summers were not conducive to large-scale farming, the Dungeness River was an obvious supply of water and soon was exploited.

In 1895 farmers formed the Sequim Prairie Ditch Company and by 1923 nine large water rights had been issued for irrigation. About half went to private irrigation companies and the rest to irrigation districts, which are quasi-governmental agencies. The Dungeness Basin was by now fully appropriated—that is, all the water in the river had been legally "spoken for."

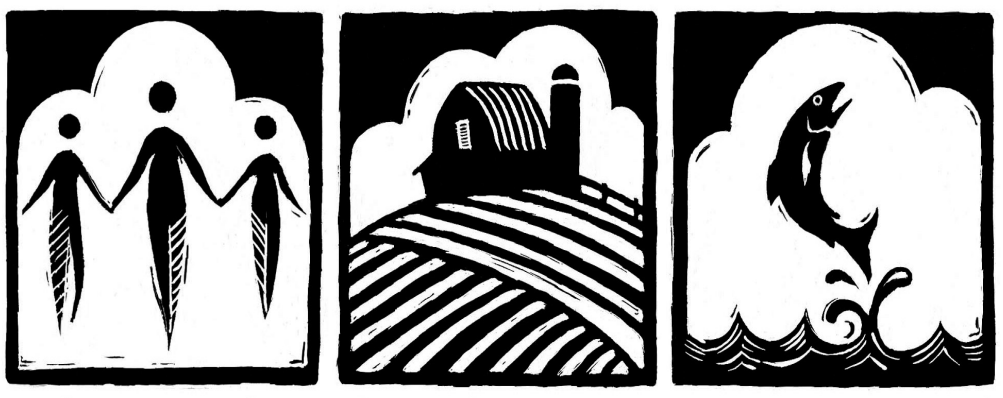
Local farming has seen many changes over the decades, both in what is grown and how it is irrigated. Irrigation currently supports alfalfa, hay, row and seed crops, berries, lavender and other crops, including organic produce, on about 5,000 acres. Improvements in irrigation practices, management and infrastructure have made it possible for the irrigation districts, companies and individual farmers to reduce their water diversions from the river.

In the early days of farming, river water was delivered by way of ditches to individual farms. Eventually pipe and sprinkler systems replaced much of the old "flood irrigation." Piping has reduced the amount of water previously lost from leaky open ditches, although there is still more work to do.

Improvements in irrigation have been supported by a broad coalition of those interested in water supply and salmon recovery. Irrigators are at the forefront of water conservation and efficiency efforts in the basin and actively are working to find solutions to meet diverse water needs.

The Dungeness River Management Team, rule advisory committees, interested local groups and citizens are collaborating with the Department of Ecology in the rule-making process. There are many opportunities for public involvement; see announcements in this newspaper and on the Ecology Web site (www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/wr/instream-flows/dungeness.html). Subscribe to the Dungeness e-mail list (scroll down to the e-mail heading at the Web site listed above) to receive periodic updates and new information. Questions? Contact Ecology's Cynthia Nelson at 360-407-0276 or Sam Gibboney at 360-379-4831.

Farming facts from Laura Arksey's May 2008 "thumbnail history" of Sequim, found at www.historylink.org:
- Agricultural patterns seen today in the Dungeness Valley are linked to a long history of settlement, development of irrigation systems and use of water law.
- Washington – like other Western states – adopted the Prior Appropriation Doctrine. The water management approach was designed to meet the needs of early settlers in arid lands so that their water rights would not be preempted by upstream farmers who arrived after them.
- In 1850 the first non-Native American settlers began arriving in the Dungeness Valley. Within a few years, they were exporting wheat, oats, peas, apples, hops and dressed meat to other Puget Sound settlements.
- In 1895 the Sequim Prairie Ditch Company was formed and by April 1896, a system of open ditches and wooden flumes was constructed. The community recognized the magnitude of this accomplishment and planned a May Day celebration – the first of what would come to be known as the Sequim Irrigation Festivals.
- Eventually, pipe and sprinkler systems replaced much of the old "flood irrigation" system and shortly after World War II nearly 25,000 acres were under irrigation. As far back as 1924, adjudication shows more water rights were legally appropriated than there was flow in the river for withdrawal.
- In the 1940s, there were 949 farms in Clallam County with milk cows.
- Today there are two commercial dairy farms in the valley, showing how much the agricultural picture, and consequently irrigation needs, have changed.



WATER for PEOPLE, FARMS & FISH

This is the seventh in a series of articles to inform Sequim-area residents on the complex issues surrounding water management in their watershed. Sam Gibboney holds an engineering degree and recently worked in Clallam County as project manager for the Jimmycomelately Creek restoration. Her firm, ISE Consultants of Port Townsend, has been hired by the Washington State Department of Ecology to assist with the public process for adopting an "instream flow and water management rule" for the Dungeness Basin.

The Sequim-Dungeness Valley Agricultural Water Users Association (WUA) is an association of the seven irrigation districts and companies. It promotes cooperation in managing irrigation water and maintains a response plan for drought years. The group also represents irrigation and farming interests in discussions with others interested in Dungeness River flows and water management.

In 1998, the WUA entered into a Trust Water Agreement with the state Department of Ecology. Historically, irrigators diverted up to 80 percent of the natural flow of the river, but now the companies and districts voluntarily limit diversions to no more than 50 percent of the flow of the Dungeness River at any time. Extensive investments of time and money have enabled the WUA to reduce its late-summer water use, when sufficient flows for salmon migration are crucial.

Sometimes additional measures are needed to increase water in the river during low flows. In 2001, and again in 2003-2005, the Department of Ecology purchased "split-season leases," whereby the irrigators agreed to water crops on certain lands only through July and for the remainder of the summer leave the water in the river to benefit fish, water quality and other values.

At one especially low-water time, irrigators agreed to stopped diverting for more than 24 hours so that all the available water would stay in the river. This gave Chinook salmon a critical window of opportunity to swim upstream and spawn, with the availability of more and cooler water.

Farming faces pressure on many fronts, including the conversion of cropland to residential and commercial developments. One goal of the water planning and management discussions over the past few years is the continuation of a strong agricultural community in the valley.

The agricultural community has been a part of the collaborative planning process since the beginning. The farmers of the Dungeness Valley are doing their part to use water wisely. Continuing to work together is the surest way to provide water for people, farms and fish.

The third community forum on future water management in the Dungeness watershed will be held this fall. Watch the *Sequim Gazette* for announcements.

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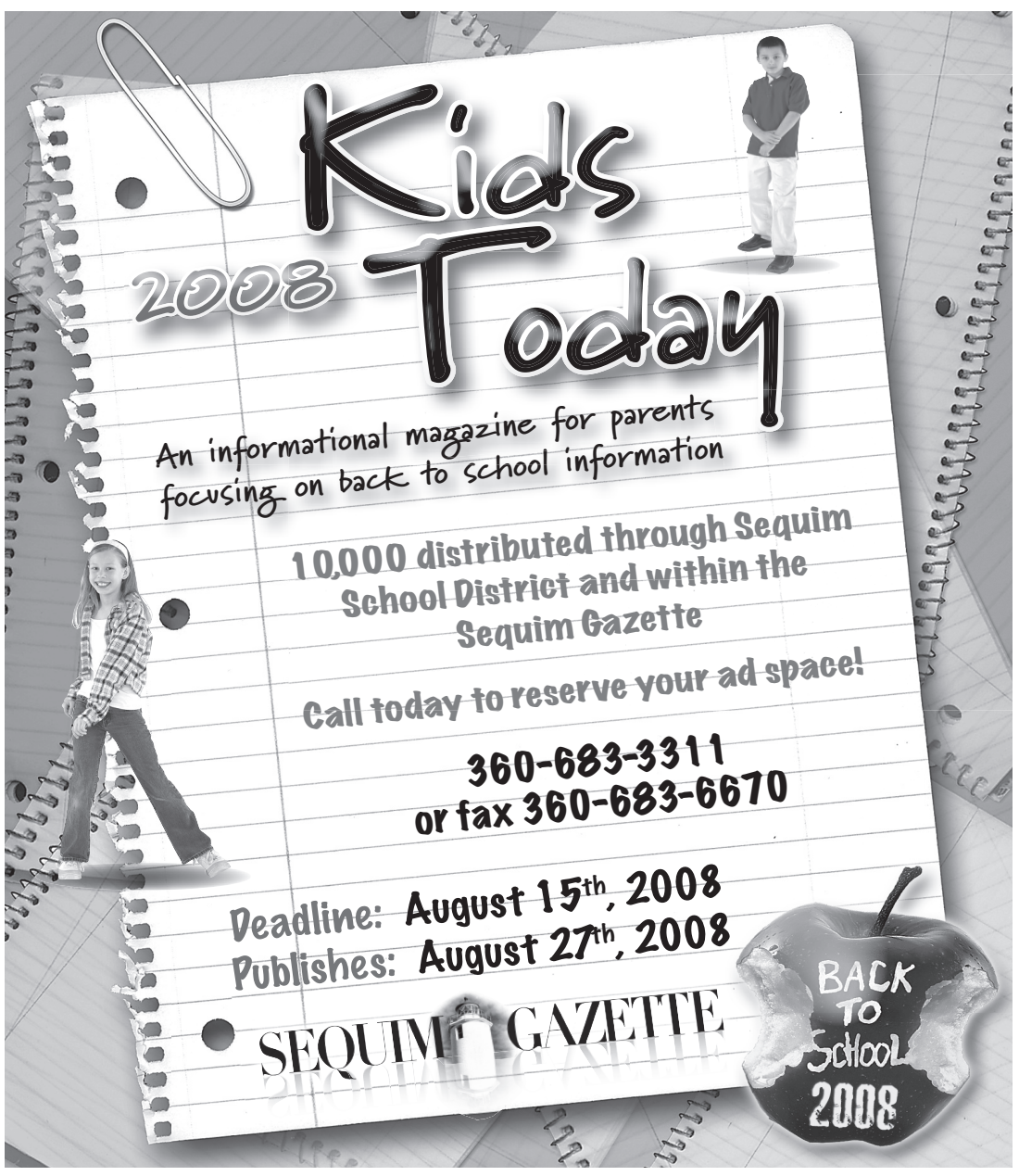
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