

Conservation Showcase

Growing a healthy forest: Landowners, NRCS, help nature take root

They thought they'd just let nature take its course. But after a few years, Donna and Leonard Albert realized that growing a natural, healthy forest would also require a healthy dose of nurture.

However, learning how to cultivate a healthy forest haven on their 75-acre forest in Thurston County, Washington, was a challenge for the Alberts. Like many of their neighbors who make their homes amid the firs and fauna, they are not foresters. They are not trained in the science and art of tree health and forest ecology.

The Alberts forest stewardship learning process began in 2003 when the couple sought tax relief on their property. To change the tax rate from a residential one, to a lower forest-agricultural rate, the Alberts hired a certified forester to help them develop a basic forest management plan. In addition to providing a method for reducing their property tax burden, the plan provided a blueprint for sustainable forest conservation practices.

“Our forest consultant told us that for the health of the forest we should do some thinning, harvesting and salvage harvesting. So we did some minimal

work, initially,” Donna Albert says.

Then, the Alberts received a flier in the mail and attended a workshop by Northwest Certified Forestry (NCF) on income opportunities for small woodlot owners. “That was followed by becoming

NRCS Resource Conservationist Jeff Swotek (left) and private forest landowner Donna Albert examine one of several thousand trees planted as part of their effort to improve the forest's health through the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.



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it’s just a wonderful place to be.”

-Donna Albert, landowner



members of NCF, who helped with our application for the EQIP program,” Ms. Albert says.

“In winter of 2008 I was encouraged by Kirk Hanson of NCF and by Jeff Swotek at NCRS-EQIP to attend the Forest Stewardship program presented by WSU Extension Service and DNR to learn more about forest stewardship,” she says.

to help us take the necessary steps to implement our plan.”

Ms. Albert says navigating her way through the program was taxing. “We’re all on this learning curve with the requirements and the deadlines and the cycles associated with the program,” she says.

New growth is evident on this young tree, which was planted as part of an NRCS Environmental Quality Incentives Program contract to improve the health of Washington’s private forests.



One of the first lessons the couple learned was that implementing the conservation practices outlined in the stewardship plan would take time and money. “It’s expensive to do all of the work,” she says, “but if owners can do some of the work themselves they can make their dollars go further.”

Jeff Swotek, a resource conservationist with the NRCS in Olympia says most of his private forest customers have never been involved with USDA programs in the past, which poses some initial challenges for his customers. “For people who are unfamiliar with the EQIP eligibility and application requirements, it can take some time to understand the process,” he says. “But with a little time and patience, those hurdles can be overcome.”

Ms. Albert agrees. “The process can be challenging,” she says, “but the NRCS people are wonderful.”

Fortunately, the Alberts also learned about USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service’s NRCS Environmental

Quality Incentives Program. She’s sold on the benefits of EQIP. “Everyday we take the dogs and go walking – and we can actually see through the woods. And I look at those habitat piles created with downed woody debris we created from the thinning and wonder what animal might be living there – and hope I’m bigger than it is,” she says laughing.

Quality Incentives Program.

“The program helped us make a priority of bringing the forest into a healthier state,” she says. “EQIP provided the funding

Would she get involved in the program again? “In a heartbeat,” Ms. Albert says. “Because everyday we reap the benefits of

our work. If you love the forest like I do, it's just a wonderful place to be."

Through the program, the Albert's have done forest thinning, planted some 4,000 trees and shrubs, and have focused on developing wildlife habitat for species of concern.

"I think it's important, especially near urban areas, for someone to maintain trees and forests – it's important for the wildlife as well as for our quality of life," she says.

NRCS' Swotek says the Albert's, and other forest stewards like them are providing additional benefits to their urban neighbors.

"They not only provide wildlife habitat but healthy forests also help control flooding by reducing peak flows during storm events," he says.

All around the Albert's forest, land continues to be converted at alarming rate. Large parcels of land are being sub-divided into five acre plots and sold at a handsome profit. Homes are being built in areas once reserved for alders and mixed conifers, and woodpeckers and salamanders.

"I feel it's really important for people to change the mind set of extracting every possible resource from the planet, to think beyond the profit that can be gained from developing subdivisions on every square foot of land available," Ms. Albert says.

For Donna and Leonard, their quest to maintain a healthy forest is a gift not to just themselves, but to the future. "We're

pleased that we can do our part and appreciate all the help we have received from the NRCS staff and from EQIP."

Ms. Albert says she hopes her land is never developed. "My husband and I will try to find a way to leave this land in perpetuity, maybe through a conservation easement or charitable organization," she says.

And now, with a little help from the Alberts, nature is well on its way to growing a healthy forest legacy for generations to come.



As part of improving the health of Washington's private forest, qualifying landowners are provided with technical and financial assistance through NRCS' Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

“In the end, we're trying to maintain this land for the community as well as our own pleasure.”
-Donna Albert, landowner