

Landowner Spotlight: Karen Thelen

Karen Thelen has been growing Christmas trees on her 17-acre farm in Cowlitz County, WA since the early 1980's. Her Christmas tree farm had transitioned into an almost entirely organic operation when she ended choose-and-cut sales a couple of years ago. Many of Karen's fast-growing Douglas-firs were getting too tall for the Christmas tree market, so she decided to manage most of her farm as a woodlot.

Karen became interested in oak conservation when Rachel Maggi, a NRCS representative explained to her that much of Cowlitz County was covered in Oregon white oak woodlands and savanna when the first settlers arrived. Karen was aware of the oaks on her farm, but hadn't thought about them too much about them until then. That changed when she realized that these old trees were a legacy of an important habitat type fast disappearing in Washington. Karen and Rachel soon began planning a savanna restoration project on a portion of the farm. Karen hired Mark Smith of Woodland Harvest & Landscape to do the on-the-ground work. Mark used a small skid-steer tractor with saw and grapple attachments. The machine makes it possible to cut and handle trees much faster than can be accomplished by manual felling and conventional tractor skidding. The tractor can also be used in small settings in which larger equipment would cause incidental damage to trees. This year, Karen is looking for sources of acorns and seedlings so that she can plant additional oaks.



A view of Karen Thelen's oak savanna restoration area.

Much of the restoration work already accomplished on Karen's farm was funded through the NRCS Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP). The long process of enrolling in the program, receiving approval for management activities, and getting paid seemed "as slow as molasses", Karen reports. In spite of the frustration with the centralized federal bureaucracy, Karen is grateful for the encouragement and technical assistance provided by Rachel Maggi and local NRCS staff. There is a tremendous amount of money available to support restoration projects on private lands. So, Karen still encourages other landowners to contact the agencies to see if there is a conservation program that will work for them. But it's important to remember that securing funding, like most other aspects of ecological restoration, demands patience and a long-range perspective.