



*Published: Wednesday, March 14, 2012*

## **Werkhoven Dairy's green efforts are rewarded**

*By Kurt Batdorf  
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MONROE — Jim and Andy Werkhoven's efforts to run a cleaner dairy operation have won them the Outstanding Dairy Farm Sustainability Award in the inaugural U.S. Dairy Sustainability Awards.

"We commend Werkhoven Dairy for the leadership role they took in developing this unique and collaborative partnership with a focus on resource conservation and preserving the environment in a way that makes good business sense," said Erin Fitzgerald, senior vice president of sustainability for the Innovation Center for U.S. Dairy, which was founded by dairy producers. "This story inspires all of us to work in new ways to achieve common goals."

But the award really belongs to the Sno-Sky Ag Alliance and Qualco Energy.

The alliance traces its roots back to the devastating Skykomish River floods of November 1990. Cattle farmer Dale Reiner said he and his brother were facing the prospect of losing a big piece of their land south of Monroe to the river as the current tried to cut a new channel through it. Their business partner suggested they meet with John Sayre, director of Northwest Chinook Recovery.

Sayre was immediately excited about the potential salmon rearing habitat on the Reiners' riverfront land, Dale Reiner said. Northwest Chinook Recovery became the lead agency on a project that diverted part of the Skykomish River into Haskell Slough. It created new salmon habitat and saved the Reiners' land.

"We hoped to gain traction with the environmentalists," Reiner said. "It was purely a fish project then. Fish projects incentivize people to do the right thing."

Building on the success of the Haskell Slough project, Reiner and Sayre got a few other farmers with substantial riverfront holdings to create the Lower Skykomish Habitat Conservation Group to expand their salmon enhancement efforts. Sayre said a friend of his told him he should get the Tulalip Tribes involved.

Daryl Williams, environmental liaison with the Tulalip Tribes, and his brother, Terry, started talking to the group and found they shared a lot of common values with the farmers.

Reiner said it was past Tulalip Tribes Chairman Herman Williams, Daryl and Terry's father, who declared "it was time the Tulalips recognized that other people were working for salmon."

Daryl Williams said it was his brother who suggested eight or nine years ago that the Sno-Sky Ag Alliance pursue an anaerobic digester to put cow manure to better use. Thousands of digesters are used across Europe to extract energy from liquid manure, but they're more of a novelty in the U.S.

The alliance created Qualco Energy, a nonprofit that operates an anaerobic digester on the former Washington State Reformatory Honor Farm, about a mile from the Werkhoven Dairy. The digester, which is 16 feet deep and holds 1,452,000 gallons, mixes liquid cow manure and pre-consumer food waste to produce methane that fuels a generator whose electricity goes on Snohomish County PUD's power grid. This process also creates grade A compost.

Electricity and compost sales help keep the Werkhovens' dairy viable while preserving air and water quality and

protecting salmon streams.

Andy Werkhoven has made it his job to find what other messy “slop” he can convert from problematic landfill waste into digester energy output. State law lets the alliance accept up to 30 percent of the digester's capacity from off-site sources. Reiner said about 73 percent of the alliance's \$700,000 annual revenue comes from tipping fees for grease from sewer line traps, cattle blood, fish processing waste — even expired beer, wine and soda.

“Slop has always been the problem,” Werkhoven said.

Sayre credited Werkhoven for learning how to make solid wastes work in the digester to improve its energy output without plugging it up. The group is looking at ways of using the methane to heat hothouses to grow vegetables and to make the methane clean enough to power vehicles.

As for the award itself, Werkhoven said, “It's exciting to be part of something that makes a difference.”

“We'll continue to expand and experiment,” Sayre said. “These things, if they work, will help us, the water and the fish.”

Clare Nordquist, a Qualco Energy board member and Seattle venture capitalist, said he's using his time on the board to teach the public about environmental challenges.

“This project is a statement on environmental advancement,” he said. “The trick is to show that it works.”

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### **Werkhoven Dairy**

Location: Monroe

Function: 1,000 cows are milked on the 700 acres of owned and leased land that belongs to Werkhoven Dairy

History: Established in 1959 by Sam Werkhoven, Jim and Andy Werkhoven began managing the dairy in 1984. The dairy originally began with 20 cows on 40 acres.

Employees: 14 full-time

Output: Milk production averages around 80 pounds per cow per day, for a volume of 24.4 million pounds of milk sold in the last 12 months.

Did you know? In Lushootseed, the language of the Coast Salish people, Qualco means “where two rivers come together.” Qualco Energy is located near the confluence of the Skykomish and Snoqualmie rivers, approximately 1-½ miles from Werkhoven Dairy.

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