

# CO-OP CONNECTION

Fall  
2019

## Co-op Growth



*By Tom Boland, General Manager*

In July 1976, a young man walked into the Skagit Grange in Burlington and asked for a job application. Recently graduated from college and a newlywed, Jeff Walker became employee number four for the co-op, whose primary business in those days was petroleum.

Jeff's career blossomed as the co-op grew out of the Skagit Valley and onto Whidbey Island. Jeff successfully managed the Oak Harbor Country Store for many years and that success helped pave the way for all four business units to serve customers on the island.

General Manager Ken Kadlec ushered in a new era of growth at the co-op which led to more opportunities in full-service agronomy and an expanded retail presence. Jeff was tasked by Ken to help transition the recently acquired Burlington Agronomy Center from UAP (Agri-Chem) to Skagit Farmers Supply. Jeff has overseen the turf and ornamental business ever since.

It's always a bittersweet moment in life when the great ones leave. See Jeff's retirement article on page 2. We have turnover at the co-op like everyone else. We can replace supervisors and train employees, but leadership, character and integrity are hard to find. We simply tip our caps and thank Jeff for the great example



SFS propane truck over Deception Pass

he continues to be for all who surround him. Jeff will work with us through December.

The co-op has gone through many changes during Jeff's long tenure, and we continue to grow. We recently signed a lease at a location in Lynden, as Elenbaas has exited the ag support business.

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### Fun Fact

Whidbey Island accounts for almost 40% of Skagit Farmers Supply's propane business and 20% of our retail sales.



Jeff Walker managed this Oak Harbor store for many years and paved the way for the success of our business on Whidbey Island.

# Forty-Three Years of Success; One Customer at a Time



**Jeff Walker**

Jeff Walker joined the cooperative in 1976 when it had only a handful of employees and a small number of Skagit Valley farmers as customers. That was 43 years ago. Today, Skagit Farmers Supply serves a much larger geography in northwest and eastern Washington, Montana and Idaho. The co-op started in energy and retail, but now offers full service agronomy and wholesale distribution and feed manufacturing. The co-op currently employs 340 people full and part-time. Over the years, Jeff played important roles in this growth.

A native of Mount Vernon, Jeff attended college in Arkansas where he met his wife Sherry. They returned to the Skagit Valley the summer after graduation to housesit for Jeff's grandparents. Jeff's father, James, an employee of Shell Oil, told his son that a neighbor, Mert McKee, was looking for someone to work at a co-op called Skagit Grange Supply.

Although he did not grow up on a farm, Jeff knew something about agriculture. He worked as a kid, picking strawberries, raspberries and cucumbers — and put up hay for local farmers. Skagit was a rural county, but he had no idea what a co-op was.

Initially, Mert hired Jeff to work at the Burlington store where he sold hardware and lube oil to farmers. In 1982, the growing co-op purchased the assets of Western Farmers, including farm stores in Mount Vernon and Oak Harbor on Whidbey Island. Jeff was promoted to manager of the Burlington Store.

In 1985, general manager, Ken Kadlec, gave Jeff the opportunity to move to Whidbey Island and manage the Oak Harbor Store. Jeff did so for 24 years. In 1988-89 Jeff was instrumental in establishing a second store on the island, at Freeland. In 1996, he led the project to replace the existing fueling station at Oak Harbor with a new updated facility. In 2005-06, Jeff worked with the contractor and the city to expand the Oak Harbor store from 2,500 to 10,000 square feet.

"The expansion enabled us to more fully serve the needs of the growing city," says Jeff.

**This fueling station at the Oak Harbor Country Store was built in 1996 under Jeff Walker's management.**



In 2009, Jeff accepted a position on the mainland, working with greenhouse, turf and ornamental customers of the cooperative. He also provided products and service to a small-but-growing group of organic growers in the Skagit Valley.

Jeff has been instrumental in the annual SFS grower meetings to educate growers on the latest products and farming techniques and help them earn credits toward recertification of their applicators' licenses. The meetings, one for traditional farms and the other for turf and ornamental growers, are always well-attended.

Jeff is excited by what he sees as the growth of biological products, many of which are approved for organic farming.

"Our business has flourished with the introduction of these products and the growth of the small organic farms," he states. "Even the larger commercial farms have put a portion of their acres into organic production. The advantage we have in western Washington is that we have the knowledge and support to transition acres to organic production. We have the only organic blending plant in the area."

But now, it's time for Jeff and his wife Sherry to shift their priorities. With grandkids on the east and west coasts, they will do more traveling. And Jeff will catch up on his passions for down-hill skiing and golf, which have taken a back-seat in recent years. "I may even try cross country skiing," he smiles.

Asked what advice he would give current and future employees of Skagit Farmers Supply, Jeff offers these thoughts:

1. Focus on relationships. "The fact is, people buy from people," says Jeff. "If your customers have a good experience dealing with you — they generally won't leave."
2. Be flexible and willing to embrace change. "Business is never static — it's a moving target," Jeff observes. "Above all, keep yourself marketable by always learning new things."
3. Be honest. "If someone asks you a question you can't answer, they'll respect you for not pretending to know everything," says Jeff. "Tell them, 'I can't answer that, but I'll help you find out.'"
4. Always be respectful of customers and fellow employees, even when you disagree with them. "Talking down to someone or talking about them will only hurt you," he states. "As an employee group, we're only as good as our weakest link."

"I'm blessed to work for a company that has given me an opportunity to do multiple jobs," concludes Jeff. "Every day has offered a new challenge, and I'm grateful for that." 🏔️

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Our board is committed to agriculture in northwest Washington, and the territory we now service extends from Monroe at the south end to well into Whatcom County to the north.

Consolidation continues to occur, and we're giving growers options in ag support and services in this geography. The plan is to open a Country Store and offer agronomic goods and services out of the location on Birch Bay-Lynden Road starting this winter.

We've finished up another successful year at the co-op. It was a year of record sales, growth in all four business units, and profitability in all four departments. Thank you for your continued support. 🏔️

## Corn Plot Attendance Soars

Our Corn Plot Luncheon, held early in September in a field west of Mount Vernon. Sponsored annually by Skagit Farmers Supply, the luncheon had its biggest turnout yet.

Growers attending the luncheon received information related to the different varieties of silage corn grown in northwest Washington, and also enjoyed some great food. 🏔️



Setting an LP tank on Whidbey Island.



# Dairies Must Be Willing to Change

In 1999, Jeremy Visser came back from college (where he had met his bride Shanna) to a partnership with his dad on the family's Sumas, Washington, farm. It was a 140-cow dairy near the Canadian border.

Jeremy and his dad made plans to expand the family herd to 500 cows in five years. They felt this would be an efficient plateau for the operation and would afford the newlyweds a comfortable life.

"We started with an FSA loan because no other lender would touch me," grins Jeremy.

Describing himself as idealistic and unrealistic, Jeremy says they hit their goal in four years. Then, an opportunity arose to acquire a satellite farm.

"Neighbors down the road were ready to quit dairying, so in 2004 we decided to lease their farm and expand that way," says Jeremy.

In 2007, the Vissers leased a third dairy farm near Stanwood, Washington. This is the farm where Jeremy and Shanna now live with their children: Justus, 11, Evan, 8 and Leia, 6. "We're about a mile from the interstate and five miles from the ocean," Jeremy states.

All told, the Vissers (who bought out Jeremy's father in 2014) own or lease seven dairy farms in Washington State with a combined milk cow herd of 8,000. They sell their milk to Darigold, the consumer-facing brand of Northwest Dairy Association.

"All of the 450 dairies in Washington State are members of Northwest Dairy," says Jeremy.

## A rough milk market

What does an 8,000-cow dairy do when the price of milk tanks?

"It's definitely a rough market at present," admits Jeremy. "The plan is to build in whatever kind of efficiencies we can — doing less of what we're not good at and more of what we can do best."

Part of that efficiency, for the Vissers, is to make sure they have good people working with them, good facilities and good cows.

"At (our Stanwood) farm, we've invested in labor-saving technology," says Jeremy. The labor market is tighter here in Snohomish County than it is on their home place in Whatcom County. "As you get closer to Seattle, there's a lot of construction, and it's a competitive market," continues Jeremy, "so it's important to make sure we attract good people."

As for good facilities, the Vissers are removing the concrete in front of their cows and replacing it with a new concrete footing with pipes. "It'll reduce mastitis and feed issues and be better adapted to

working with the cows," says Jeremy of the reconstruction process.

And as far as good animals, Jeremy says his company is trying not to raise every heifer they birth. "We've found that we can create too many," he states. "We're trying to cull so that the healthiest cows are left — not the best, but the healthiest."

## Dividing the crops and the cows

Because their seven-farm enterprise is quite spread out, the Vissers have found value in separating the people who manage the day-to-day operations of crop and forage production from those who manage the cow side.

The crop side of the business, which includes raising, harvesting and storing a variety of grasses, corn and a little alfalfa, is consolidated under a company called "Grasslands Farms, LLC," headed up by Shanna.

"We definitely rely on Skagit (Farmers Supply) for insight into the crops that are best suited for our climate," says Shanna. "They bring a lot of agronomy expertise and allow me to focus on the dairy side of things." Shanna says some crop production is outsourced to people who were running the farms they've purchased or leased and who still farm the land.

"Where I find the most value with Skagit is the trust I can place in them to do what they say they will do at the right time," she adds.

## Looking into the future

"It's more difficult to secure financing from lenders — because of current low milk prices. But we'll adapt," he says optimistically.

Jeremy points to an aerial photo of the Stanwood farm on his office wall. "That was taken by a photographer in an airplane, and we bought it in 2014," he states. Today, that aerial photography company is out of business because all bird's eye photos are taken by drones. Jeremy sees a lesson in that.

"We have to continue to move and adapt," he concludes. "Any sort of plan we have that goes past three years will be seriously modified before it comes to fruition." In the past, a dairyman could put together a 5-10 year plan and expect to carry it out, but the industry is evolving more swiftly now. "Whoever is unwilling to make changes today will soon be out of business," he states

"We've tried a lot of things that went wrong, and we humbly changed course," admits Jeremy. "I've seen a lot of change in the last 20 years in the dairy business, and I'd be pretty naïve to think that won't continue." 🌱



Front left to right: Leia, Justus, and Evan Visser. Back left to right: Jeremy and Shanna Visser, and Steve Groen, Agronomy Sales Manager, Skagit Farmers Supply.

# West Side Retreats Focus on DiSC Training and Fun!

Have you ever thought of why you work better with some people than others? Or, why you can't seem to get along with a co-worker? It could be because of each person's unique personality traits and preferred style of communication.

This year's Skagit Farmers Supply employee retreats were held in August at the Heritage Flight Museum in Burlington, Washington. The events included a session designed to help each of the 140 west-side employees who attended to better understand their own traits and communication styles and the styles of those with whom they work. Meisha Rouser, an organizational and leadership development specialist, led the exercise.

In addition, Tom Boland gave a company and financial update. Mike Hunsakor gave an HR update and Don Parker gave a safety update.

Local food trucks provided pizza and tacos along with Toppins Frozen Yogurt and everyone was able to enjoy an arcade and tours of the museum's vintage aircrafts.

*NOTE: Skagit Farmers Supply annually sponsors retreats for its employees, alternating between staff who work at locations east and west of the Cascade Mountains. 🏔️*



Employees discuss their DiSC profile

## Member Appreciation Picnic

Skagit Farmers Supply held its annual Member Appreciation Picnic on July 27, 2019, at the Conway Agronomy Center. Our employees and their spouses did the grilling and served about 700 people with our traditional salmon, oysters, steak, hot dogs and all the sides you can eat. 🏔️



Current & former employees serve up fresh salmon, steak and oysters to cooperative members.

# Scholarship Increase Is Good News

*By Raelene Smille, Company Administrator*

Steady increases in the number of applications we receive each year for our Skagit Farmers Supply “Careers in Agriculture” scholarships are welcome news for the cooperative. It’s a positive sign that the younger population has both an appreciation for the rural lifestyle and an interest in sourcing food for the world’s population.

Our annual program, initiated in 1991, has awarded over 100 scholarships. It was started, and continues to function, to help young people complete and use their education to further the future of agriculture. As fewer people have direct family ties to a farm, a formal education in agricultural issues and practices becomes even more important.

Six students enrolling in ag-related studies were selected to receive scholarships for the 2019-2020 school year. Awarded \$1,000 scholarships were Caleb Boon, Rylee Heath, Lindsay Koepke, Julia Layland, Austin Lenssen, and Derek Littrel.



**Caleb**, son of Steve and Melinda Boon, Mount Vernon, Washington, graduated this year from Mount Vernon Christian School. He is attending Dordt College in Sioux Center, Iowa, this fall, enrolled in a Pro Tech program where he will complete class studies while interning at a local farm. Caleb’s course of study combines practical experience with classroom knowledge to gain the competence necessary to run the family farm.



**Rylee**, son of Ron and Anita Heath of Okanogan, Washington, traveled to Texas to attend school at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville. A graduate of Okanogan High School, Rylee is pursuing a degree in Ag Business Management.



**Lindsay** graduated from Oroville High School this year and is now attending the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho. The daughter of Jarrod and Tina Koepke, she is enrolled in a Pre-Veterinary Animal Science program with her sights set on opening a mixed-animal vet practice in the future.



**Julia**, daughter of Kimm Layland, graduated from Sedro Woolley High School this past June. She is studying biochemistry and livestock sciences at Washington State University with plans to teach Agricultural Science and advise an FFA program upon completion of her college career.



**Austin** will be completing his final year of studies at Washington State University this December, obtaining a degree in Integrated Plant Sciences. The son of David and Heather Lenssen, he attended high school in Lynden, Washington, and has a passion for the agricultural industry. Austin interned this spring and summer for Skagit Farmers Supply agronomy department.



**Derek**, son of Scot and Stephanie Littrel, was awarded his second “Careers in Agriculture” scholarship. Derek’s hometown is Deer Park, Washington. He is continuing his studies in Dairy Science at Northeast Iowa Community College as a sophomore this fall. Derek served as a Dairy Ambassador throughout the state of Iowa this summer. His plans are to manage the family farm after completing his education.

*IMPORTANT NOTE: Students can qualify for a scholarship each year of their two- or four-year education by submitting an application by April 1 of each year. Applications may be obtained at [www.skagitfarmers.com](http://www.skagitfarmers.com).*



# Youth Rewards Spotlight: Lena Coggins



By Michelle Schell-Muir, Director of Marketing

This year, Lena Coggins started from the very beginning when raising her award-winning market rabbit. Lena, a 10-year-old from Stanwood, started her own breeding program to raise a litter of rabbits from birth as part of her 2019 4-H project.

"I learned that it was a lot of work," Lena said. "But my rabbit this year was really special to me."

Lena is one of 492 Youth Rewards Program members. The program, offered at our Country Stores, encourages children under 18 to learn and grow by raising an animal or a horticulture item. 4-H, FFA and Pony Club members who sign up for the program each year receive discounts on supplies for their projects. Their clubs receive a rebate at the end of the year, up to \$500, based on the amount spent by registered members. In addition, Country Store representatives attend livestock sales to purchase animals from our Youth Rewards Members who have met the program qualifications.

The Country Store purchased two market chickens from Lena at the Puget Sound Livestock Show and at Skagit County Fair. Both chickens won Grand Champion titles, and Lena's rabbit won Reserve Grand Champion.

Lena fed her animals only Aslin Finch products, specifically relying on Aslin Finch Boiler Start to Finish to help her animals gain and maintain healthy weight. Aslin Finch Feeds are manufactured by SFS employees at our mill in Spokane and sold in our Country Stores.

Lena said that, apart from winning Grand Champion, her biggest success this year was keeping alive all the rabbits in her breeding program's first litter.

"We had one little one that we had to nurse ourselves, because she was so small," Lena said. "We had to make sure she ate food to get bigger. But all of them lived."

Lena, who is a member of the Silvana Lads & Lassies 4-H Club, said she wants to be a herbalist when she grows up, because she loves plants. She said her favorite plants are those that are useful to people in some way.

To learn more about our Youth Rewards Program, visit [www.countrystore.com/youth/](http://www.countrystore.com/youth/). 




Lena Coggins holds one of her Grand Champion market chickens. Also in the photo are Lena's brothers Sterling (left) and Declan (right), and Wendy Ringhouse, Skagit Farmers Supply community outreach coordinator.

# Country Store Customers Give to Preserve Farmland

Our west side Country Stores held a fundraiser in August. All customers were asked, at the register, if they wanted to donate to support the Skagitonians to Preserve Farmland.

Together, our Country Stores took in over \$10,500 in donations. Skagit Farmers Supply added to that, making the total donation \$13,000.

Manager Danica Lisle-Crawley and employees of our Mount Vernon Country Store presented a check for \$13,000 to Allen Rozema and Carolyn Radakovich of the Skagitonians. 



# Mission Statement

To preserve and enhance viability of the local agriculture economy through cooperative profitability.

# Vision Statement

To be the premier cooperative in the Pacific Northwest by being:

- The producers' first choice
- The consumers' first choice
- The employees' first choice

# Core Values

Customer Commitment  
People - Integrity - Performance  
Quality - Safety - Community

# Directory

## Main Office—Burlington

360.757.6053

## AFCO Distribution & Milling

800.538.8700

## Agronomy—Conway

360.445.5015

## Agronomy—Burlington

360.757.7870

## Energy—Main Office

360.757.6053

## Petroleum & Propane Delivery

360.757.6053 // 888.757.6053

Emergency: 360.209.0310

## Country Stores

Farm · Pet · Home

Burlington	360.757.4055
Coeur d'Alene	208.772.2715
Colville	509.684.2232
Freeland	360.331.1970
Mount Vernon	360.424.4207
Oak Harbor	360.675.2277
Oroville	509.560.7088
Sedro Woolley	360.856.6567
Spokane Central	509.534.1412
Spokane Valley	509.926.6603
Stanwood	360.629.7033
Stevensville (Montana)	406.777.5527



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# Exploring Ag Leadership

If you've wondered about opportunities in agriculture, cooperatives or advocacy for ag, we might have an event for you. Skagit Farmers Supply will host another leadership development seminar at the Sleeping Lady Resort in Leavenworth, Washington, on December 2-3, 2019. Paul Hansen of Land O'Lakes and representatives of Skagit Farmers Supply will address the attendees.

This event is designed for couples who are interested in growth opportunities within the cooperative system and in advocating on behalf of cooperatives and agriculture.

This is an invite-only event and room at the seminar is limited, but if you'd like more information or to check on availability, contact Shannon Perkes ([shannonp@skagitfarmers.com](mailto:shannonp@skagitfarmers.com)) or Steve Groen ([steveg@skagitfarmers.com](mailto:steveg@skagitfarmers.com)). 🌱



# Introducing: Jose Rivera

Skagit Farmers Supply is excited to announce the addition of its newest agronomist, Jose Rivera. Jose comes to Skagit Farmers Supply with experience in agronomy and has spent the majority of his career working in agriculture in the Skagit Valley.

Jose was born south of Mexico City. He moved to the United States in 1990, when he was 15 years old. His family lived in Oregon for about six months before moving to and settling in Washington, where Jose attended Skagit Valley College.

His first job in the agriculture industry was with Sakuma Brothers Farms, Inc., a local berry producer in the Skagit Valley. He started as a strawberry picker and worked his way up to become a field manager for Sakuma Brothers' blueberry fields. Later, Jose worked as a sales representative for Elenbaas in Lynden, Washington, for four years.

Jose started with Skagit Farmers Supply in June this year. We're excited to have his expertise



Jose Rivera

and understanding of the area. Besides his knowledge of agriculture, Jose is tri-lingual. He speaks English, Spanish and Mixteco, his native language. Off the job, Jose enjoys spending time with his twin 15-year-old daughters and the rest of his family, as well as working in his garden and lawn. Jose may be reached at [JoseR@skagitfarmers.com](mailto:JoseR@skagitfarmers.com). Welcome to the team, Jose. 🌱