

# THE ISLANDS' WEEKLY

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## Congressional Aide Visits Lopez Farm

by Leta Currie Marshall

An aide from Congressman Rick Larsen's office visited Lopez last week to see firsthand some good reasons why the legislature should pass a bill supporting agricultural education.

Cherie Little, officially a Constituent Services Representative, arrived late due to a ferry breakdown and was driven to S&S Homestead Farm to chat with owners Henning Sehmsdorf and his wife Elizabeth Simpson, Lopez School agricultural students and staff members, and other visitors.

"It's great talking with these kids," Little said. "You can see their passion. We need to get them interested while they're young."

Congressman Larsen is a sponsor of H.R. 2626, the "Farm-To-Cafeteria Projects Act of 2003." This amendment to the Russell School Lunch Act would fund nutrition and agriculture education in the public schools and help bring fresh locally-grown foods into school cafeterias.

Larsen and Senators Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray were invited to Lopez by Jeanna Carter, Lopez School Public Relations Liaison, to see for themselves a model of the sorts of programs H.R. 2626 could make possible throughout the country.

Sehmsdorf and Simpson, both educators, are dedicated to the cause of sustainable living. Each year S&S Homestead Farm serves as a temporary home and classroom for a number of interns through WSU's Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources (CSANR), where Sehmsdorf is an Adjunct Professor.

The more recent collaboration between S&S Homestead and Lopez school is mainly thanks to



Cherie Little, aide from Congressman Rick Larsen's office, and Janelle Teasdale, mastermind of the Friday Harbor School Farm program, get a closer look at farmer Henning Sehmsdorf's organic compost, one of the secrets of his success. LCM photo

Sehmsdorf and Simpson also raise cattle, sheep, chickens and pigs, which provide organic meat and a source of rich manure. When one vegetable crop is harvested, the farmer simply spreads an inch of organic home-grown compost on the bed and plants again. "Anyone can do this," Sehmsdorf said.

The tour wended its way to a straw-bale house Sehmsdorf built for interns to live in while working and studying at his farm. The manure, mud, and barley straw to build the house all came from the farm—everything except the metal roof, hardware, and windows. The cottage was recently featured in a national magazine.

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### H.R. 2626 -In Brief:

The bill would provide up to 75% of funding, for a maximum of 3 years and a maximum of \$100,000, for Farm-to-Cafeteria projects designed to:

- A) - Procure local foods from small and medium-sized farms for school meals;
- B) - Support nutrition education activities or curriculum planning that incorporates the participation of school children in farm and agriculture education projects; and
- C) - Develop a sustained commitment to farm-to-cafeteria projects in the community by linking schools, agricultural producers, parents, and other community stakeholders.

H.R. 2626 also allows but does not require the Secretary to provide technical assistance regarding farm-to-cafeteria projects, processes, and development; and to share information concerning farm-to-cafeteria projects and issues among and between government, private for-profit and nonprofit groups, and the public through publications, conferences, and other appropriate means."

Sehmsdorf's donations of expertise, space, time, and materials. Becca Warren, of CSANR, said that as far she knows, the Lopez Farm-to-School program is the only such program for high school students in Washington.

Sehmsdorf has applied for a Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant to help establish an expanded program that will live and grow after he retires.

The grant would pay a part-time education coordinator and the development of educational materials and programs that would not only benefit Lopez kids but would be shared throughout the state.

Sehmsdorf gave Little and the rest of his guests a tour of the 2500 square foot garden that provides enough food for himself and his wife, their farm interns, and 25 island families who buy shares of the vegetables in a system known as Community Supported Agriculture. The double-dug raised beds in the fenced plot yield three or four crops each year, totaling \$10,000 worth of groceries.

## Lopez Farm

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The guests also admired the S&S lambs born so far this year, all named for constellations in honor of the astronomy course led by Lopez High School math teacher Jennifer McFarland.

McFarland collaborated with Sehmsdorf in teaching a class in food production last fall and will lead another unit next month.

In last fall's course, a small group of high schoolers grew 51 varieties of greens at S&S in a hoop house built by student Josh Marshak, charting which plants did best in this climate. Sehmsdorf sold the greens to the school at 1/4 the price he would have received from his CSA subscribers.

McFarland hopes to see a greenhouse built on the school campus, where K-12 students would get hands-on knowledge about growing food.

Toward the end of her visit, Little questioned Warren and Carter about Department of Health regulations and other obstacles preventing schools from buying food directly from farms. Some of the problems they listed were restrictions imposed under contracts with food-service companies, labor laws, and school budgets that only allow enough purchasing power for cheap food.

Nevertheless, it appears the notion of connecting kids, nutrition, and sustainable food production is one whose time has come.

Staff from the offices of Senators Cantwell and Murray are also expected to come to visit S&S Homestead and the Lopez Farm-to-School program in the next few weeks.

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