Make a Difference

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ADAPTING THE LAND: A WHIDBEY FAMILY'S STORY IN PROMOTING FOREST HEALTH AND PREPARING FOR WILDFIRE

"You know that smell when you go into woods that are not healthy? Musty... dank...rotting... it just has a funny smell to it? You don't always think of the smell of that forest, but our forest no longer smells like that. It smells completely different now."

Signed in to Zoom, headset secured, and camera phone at the ready, Freeland forest landowner Kirk Kirkconnell shares a poignant observation to me on our chat that demonstrates the sign of the times. Instead of taking a deep breath beside him and sharing the same experience, in our "new normal" I'm left to conjure up memories of smells whilst wandering woods, and nod in agreement with Kirk on the other side of my laptop. You see, I'm about to embark on a digital tour of the Kirkconnell's five-acre property, to learn more about his family's efforts the past two years in promoting forest health and reducing wildfire risk through active management. I'm on-screen though, along for the digital ride, and craving the fresh, healthy forest air.

"When we started looking to escape the suburbs and live a more rural lifestyle to raise our boys, with my wife growing up on Whidbey and working in Coupeville when I met her and family still on the island, Whidbey was a natural choice. We looked for many months here," recounted Kirk, his camera phone angled toward the driveway and house. "We knew we wanted to be more self-sufficient, grow our own food, and be closer to the water. We were not planning on being forest managers, though, but here we are."

In the spring of 2018, Kirk, his wife, Sarah, and three sons, found their new home on a five-acre property northwest of Freeland. "The property had the right balance of land and house we wanted to afford within the distance to the ferry that worked well."

Whidbey Island, this unique place with its special landscapes, is our shared home. Like the Kirkconnells, we are welcoming families new and old back to the island to join us in living here. As more move here, more homes are being built, often adjacent to forestland, which results in an increase in the Wildland/Urban Interface, or "WUI." This is a term coined by fire professionals to mean the area where homes and structures are more at risk to wildland fire because of their proximity to large, contiguous tracts of forestland. With more frequent and direct contact of us living near wildlands, we have a responsibility to know how to live in a way that balances our needs as residents with the ecological processes - wildfire included - that may occur on the land. In essence, to balance the health of the land and ourselves on it.

Over that first spring season of owning the property, the Kirkconnells spent considerable time observing it and noting its unique features. Nestled between Highway 525 and Mutiny Bay Road, their property slopes gently toward the west - two acres of previously cleared area for the existing house and the in-progress farm, with forest bordering three sides.

"Up above, it's a very sandy loam soil, and water drains through it quickly. It's all Pacific Madrone and Western hemlock with a few alders. In the lower section, we have a lot more Douglas firs, along with Western hemlocks. Most of the trees are about 40 to 50 years old, 80-plus feet tall, but only 6-10 inches in diameter," exclaimed Kirk, his camera phone tilting slightly as he positioned himself to point into the woods. "The trees were severely overcrowded, some areas as bad as a tree every 10-15 inches, and many were not healthy or already dead. The forest should have been thinned 20-plus years ago. I'm six-foot-four and could barely get through even when crouched down, crawling through branches. The woods were capped all the way to the ground, completely impenetrable."

Those first few months of the family's observation and connection to their land were critical, and it happened to time itself at the precipice of one of our region's most active wildfire seasons to-date. In Washington state, the summer of 2018 saw wildland firefighters put out over 1,850 wildfires, and nearly 440,000 acres burned. Granted, most of those wildfires were in central and eastern Washington, where fire regimes are naturally more frequent. But a growing trend of west-side wildfires is surfacing, in part due to increasing drought conditions among our shoulder seasons and in summer, and a growing WUI that puts more people in greater contact with wildlands. The summer of 2015, especially, with some of the hottest summer temperatures on record, saw fires crop up with more frequency on Whidbey. One especially notable fire that burned 10 acres of brush along a steep bluff slope adjacent to Fort Ebey State Park captured headlines, as it demonstrated that wildfire is not just a matter of if, but a matter of when. Wildfire knows no geographic boundaries; rather, it is a set of conditions – climate, topography, and fuels – which, when lined up, can affect any location.

As Kirk walked with his camera toward the top of his slope, he shared "Our forest borders the highway, so if someone flicks a cigarette butt in the middle of summer, well, it could burn from the highway down the property really easily. That is sort of the big thing."

For the Kirkconnells, a balance of wildfire preparedness and forest health were one of four key goals they identified as most important to apply to their new land.

"We want to have the open acreage produce at minimum 40 percent of our food needs, as well as have a healthy forest that is good for the plants in it, the wildlife, and for us to enjoy. We also want the forest to have a good balance between wildfire protection and forest health, and ultimately, leave the property in far better shape for generations to come. We did not know exactly where to go with it, what to do, what to plan for, and what resources were available to learn from." Kirk noted that when he first learned about the Whidbey Island Firewise Program in late summer of the first year owning the property, "I was taking the Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) course taught by the South Whidbey Fire Department in Freeland. Once I heard about the program, read up on it, and found out it was free, I knew that was the start we needed to get goals in place."

The Whidbey Island Firewise Program is an outreach and education program that started in 2016 and is available to all interested Whidbey residents. Partnerships between staff at the Whidbey Island Conservation District, Washington Dept. of Natural Resources Wildfire Division and our local fire districts bring together a breadth and depth of expertise in land management, forest health, and wildland fire and structure protection to benefit and empower residents on how they can proactively protect their homes and properties from wildfire. Resources and assistance can be accessed at www.whidbeycd.org/firewise/, and is tailored to the unique microclimates and niches spanning Whidbey Island, as well as to the individual homes and communities that request assistance.

One such service Kirk took advantage of was the free Firewise Home & Property Assessment, an informative and educational one-hour visit from the program's partners whereby they walk the property with the landowner, assess the exterior portions of structures on the property, note landowner successes, and offer suggestions for wildfire preparedness improvements based on the landowners' goals and questions asked.

"I didn't know what I didn't know," stated Kirk. "I needed more education on forest management. I figured it would be a useful thing having people that are local to the island come out and say 'Hey, for where you are, in your exact situation, this is what we recommend you do - and we'll help you find resources.' They stand there looking at your trees with you. It's not just some generic service. From talking with the firefighters, if we didn't try to have more distance between trees and remove fuel from the forest, if a wildfire were to come through here it would bounce between the trees and very likely take our house and shop with it. By some judicious tree thinning and limbing of low-hanging branches – a suggestion they made after visiting – we created a healthy understory, and are now less likely to have a crown fire."

Over the course of the next two years, the Kirkconnells spent a good amount of their free time tending to the forest and learning better forest management practices. "Thinning this overcrowded forest property and removing invasive weeds has been a lot of work. You could not walk through here when we first started," Kirk points to an area he deems a success from their efforts. The remaining trees are now spaced 10 to 15 feet apart. An understory of native shrubs is bouncing back and flourishing. "We have taken out approximately 600 trees in our three forested acres. I know that number sounds like a lot, but it was incredibly crowded and foul smelling. We chipped what we could and some of it we've kept for firewood. We use the chips on our farm or spread them back into the woods. We want to sequester as much carbon as we can, but some of the stuff we do burn and then use the biochar for soil health on the farm. There is definitely a balance to be struck between forest debris providing nutrients, habitat that wildlife need, and what might be fuel for a wildfire and thus prioritized for removal."

Circling back toward his home, having toured the far reaching spaces of the forest thus far, Kirk mentions the idea of "doing something" as resonating most with him after that initial Firewise Assessment. "Either we do something and maybe save the forest, or we do nothing and it will reset itself in the not-too-distant future." Kirk had been reading about and taking forestry management classes through the Washington State University Extension Forestry Program, and "resetting" is jargon for when a forest stand dies off and starts over. It is a natural form of forest disturbance when things are out of balance, but most people would find it undesirable.

Kirk chuckled when I inquired about how he and his family managed their time, and what motivated them to do so much in such a short timeframe, compared to many. In a sea of priorities, what made forest health and wildfire protection rise to the surface? "Why are we spending so much time on this? Well, both because we ended up liking to work on it, and also, I don't want whomever owns this property in the future to see the forest as being poorly managed and with no plan. I want them to be able to enjoy it, the beauty and the wildlife. I don't want them to have the poor opinion we have of the previous owner's efforts on this property."

He mentions he'd like to send me a photo after our Zoom chat has ended, demonstrative of the success he feels his family has accomplished in their efforts of managing the forest thus far. "The proof is in the data. We took a core sample of one of the trees we left in the first area we thinned two years ago, and this last year that tree grew more in diameter than it had in the previous five to eight years! I feel this is proof that what we are doing is helping the trees we want to keep. If you thin over time, trees will go 'Oh, I gotta put better roots down! I have space and food to grow bigger!' This also means they can fend off disease better, too. We have seen owls flying through the woods - there was no way that was possible before we thinned, created open areas, and before we took all the branches up to around 12 feet. There's more songbirds, predatory birds, more pollinators, and the huckleberry crop last year was amazing and this year's is looking to be even better. The salal is healthy and expanding like it should to fill in the understory."

He smiles when he recounts that through the family experience of active management in his forest, his eight-year-old son can now educate him - and other adults - on how to properly limb a tree. He shares that his son now proudly shares tips like: "You do an undercut on the branch so that the branch doesn't peel from the tree and come crashing down on you! Don't use a ladder on a tree with a chainsaw, use a pole saw!"

As we concluded the digital tour together, I inquired if Kirk had any words of wisdom he'd like to impart to fellow Whidbey landowners as they seek to promote the health of their own landscapes. Speaking passionately, Kirk shared, "The Whidbey Island Firewise Program can help you with where your land is now and where you might think about managing it for the future. It may take time, money and effort on your part, but there are people and resources to help. I mean, you don't have to do all of these things in six months. Maybe we were too aggressive, maybe we weren't. It's an individual process, kind of like pursuing zero waste. You're never going to be perfect. But the fact that you're on that journey is better than had you done nothing. Help be part of the solution.