

# El Dorado County tree growers become fish-friendly

By Debbie Arrington, Sacramento Bee

Some fresh-cut Christmas trees come with dividends downstream.

In their annual search for the perfect fir or cedar, visitors to the Sierra foothills may notice something different this holiday season. Some farms have joined California's "fish-friendly" movement and have posted their smiling salmon signs proudly.

These farms follow environmental practices to preserve water quality and be kind to wildlife. They're part of the same trends that bring us "slow food" and river-friendly landscaping. But instead of farm-to-fork, their product is farm to floor.

"We started talking about it five years ago," said Dee Kobervig, co-owner of Crystal Creek Tree Farm in Camino. "We got certified fish-friendly this year. We've got three tree farms so far in the program – all family farms. It helps keep our area rural. If people can't make a living farming, we lose those farms."

Also selling fish-friendly trees this season are Carson Ridge Evergreens and McGee's Christmas Tree Farm, both in Placerville.

Their customers will be folks who want to know where their tree grew – and that it helped wildlife and not hurt it.

"We're seeing a new demographic among our customers," said Kobervig, who also serves as president of the El Dorado County Christmas Tree Growers Association. "They want to start a new tradition, but they want to know what they're buying and where

it came from. They want to support local businesses, but they also want to be assured about how that product was grown.”

El Dorado County’s fish-friendly farming program was modeled after a similar one in Napa. As in wine country, it started with vineyards.

“I was so inspired by what people were already doing,” said Fred Hunt, who works with the El Dorado County and Georgetown Divide Resource Conservation Districts. “It was really neat to see how many people are actually doing this as part of their everyday business plan.”

So far, 44 sites in El Dorado County have joined the Fish-Friendly Farm program, Hunt said. Altogether, they encompass 2,755 acres including 14.3 miles of creeks. Part of the American River watershed, those little creeks affect the quality of water that flows down to the Valley and everything that uses that water – including fish and people.

“We have Christmas tree farms, a lot of vineyards, tree fruit orchards,” Hunt said. “We’ve been very proactive. We want to assure people that water leaving here is as pure as it can be.”

As part of a voluntary program run through the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, farms get intensive surveys of their property plus the advice to correct any issues.

“The goal is to keep your water – and what’s in it – on your property,” Kobervig said. “They started with an aerial view of our farm. We got a bird’s-eye view of our whole place – every slope, road, streambed on our 20 acres. Then, we came up with a plan.”

That plan included sediment ponds to catch runoff, erosion control on slopes, integrated pest management to fight bugs naturally, nesting boxes for birds and mulch to keep down

weeds.

Said Hunt, "What people are getting at no cost is a detailed plan for their property. We're being good stewards of the land."

With new grant money expected for 2013, the program is ready to expand. Hunt is accepting inquiries from farms and property owners; reach him at (530) 295-5638.

"We're hoping to open it up to cattle ground, traditional rangeland," Hunt said. "We could reach 10,000 to 15,000 acres.

"We've done quite a lot already, and it's only going to get better," he added. "That's what's really neat."

As for the trees, this year's crop should be wonderful.

"Last year and this year have been just phenomenal," Kobervig said. "The warm weather (in October) actually gave the trees a little growth spurt. But we had a little snow and a good cold snap; that sets the needles. And people love it with snow on the ground when they come up, looking for a Christmas tree. It just feels right."