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Wynne family at peace with major land conservation gift

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Standing with Capitol Land Trust executive director Amanda Reed (left) near a large scenic pond Nov. 5th Tom and Charlene Wynne's Schneider Creek Valley tree farm is preserved forever as part of their conservation easement with the organization totaling 535 acres.

STEVE BLOOM — Staff photographer | [Buy Photo](#)





A family tree farm that covers most of the upper Schneider Creek watershed northwest of Olympia has been protected permanently from development.

Tom and Charlene Wynne last week completed a conservation easement with the Capitol Land Trust on 530 acres of forestland, pasture and wetlands, plus 3.5 miles of stream, ensuring the tree farm will never be sold to developers.

It's property the Wynne family started accumulating in 1916. Family roots run deep in the narrow valley flanked by heavily forested hillsides and surrounded on three sides by the state Capitol Forest. But the Wynne family is not possessive about the land.

"We're not owners — we're stewards of the land," Charlene Wynne said during a tour of the tree farm. "I wanted to save the wildlife habitat. I didn't want the farm broken up."

That's music to the ears of Capitol Land Trust executive director Amanda Reed. "The Wynnes are true heroes in our community," she said. "They recognized the value of their lands — for open space, wildlife habitat and protecting our water — and made the ultimate commitment to ensure these values remain for future generations."

The Wynnes have received numerous conservation and forestry awards through the years, including the Lifelong Steward Award from the Thurston Conservation District in 2008.

A visitor to the Wynne tree farm quickly recognizes it as a special place. The farm's forested hillsides rise steeply from the valley floor where hay fields, flooded in part by beavers, provide habitat for native amphibians, ducks and great blue heron. Hawks and other raptors fly above, scanning the fields for rodents.

Elk, deer, bear and cougar — the Wynnes have seen all four — feed along the edge of the forests and fields. The clean, cool water of Schneider Creek flows through the property and the state Department of Natural Resources Kennedy Creek Natural Area Preserve before feeding into Totten Inlet's Oyster Bay.

Conservation of upper Schneider Creek, coupled with the Kennedy Creek preserve, protects about 10 percent of the stream's habitat.

One of the land trust's largest land conservation efforts began in 2004 when Tom Wynne approached land trust officials about preserving the property. In 2007, the two parties struck a deal on 355 acres that the Wynne family agreed to conserve without compensation. Then last week the remaining 175-acre piece of the family tree farm was placed in a conservation easement, with the Wynne family receiving \$125,000 from a Thurston County fund used to acquire and preserve open space. Taken as a whole, the family gift to the community is valued at about \$2 million, Reed said.

"It's been a very easy partnership," Reed said. "The way the Wynnes have managed this land is consistent with the land trust goals."

Tom Wynne, 77, grew up in the valley where his grandparents settled on 120 acres nearly a century ago and raised 10 children. Over the years, the family acquired additional property, including 120 acres and a home Tom Wynne and his wife purchased for \$12,000 when they married in 1964.

He's managed the forestland with a light touch, logging no more than eight acres a year and letting trees grow at least 75 years before cutting them. He's mindful of Schneider Creek water quality, doing what he can to make sure the stream — the second-largest feeding into pristine Totten Inlet — is free of pollution.

"I've had people approach me over the years to buy property and build homes," he said Wednesday. "But I didn't want pollution going into the bay."

The conservation easement allows the Wynne family and future owners of the property to grow agricultural products and continue to grow and harvest trees the way they have for decades in a sustainable way. A

home surrounded by six acres is not included in the easement.

The Wynnes don't have children, but a nephew and his son have expressed interest in keeping the tree farm going.

Tom and Charlene Wynne seem completely at peace with their decision. A permanent grin is etched on Tom's face, and Charlene believes she's fulfilled her role as a steward of the land.

"Now I can die happy," she said.

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