

# Nursery on the brink

## Fraser's Thimble Farms protests threatened loss of water permit

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**Everyone living on Salt Spring Island needs access to clean water, but for some it's also the key to their livelihood.**

Richard and Nancy Fraser of Fraser's Thimble Farms on Arbutus Road at the north end of the island know that more acutely than anyone.

Established in 1972, the nursery's specialty is the growing of rare and native plants, although all kinds of flowering plants and shrubs, fruit trees and berries are available there. Despite practising extreme water conservation from years of experience — using well water, storage ponds, roof run-off, shade structures and specialized techniques — they are still completely dependent on St. Mary Lake water arriving at their property through a three-quarter-inch pipe installed by the North Salt Spring Waterworks District several decades ago.

Without access to that water during the summer months, they will no longer have a business.

"We could last three days without water and then we would start incurring losses," said Richard. "And that's exceptionally long for a nursery. Most last one day."

And it would only take about a month without adequate watering for the nursery business to be defunct. Investments of 10 or more years in some plants would be lost.

That's why the Frasers experienced an incredibly stressful summer of 2016, when the NSSWD threatened to revoke the nursery's water permit on more than one occasion. At the end of June, when Level 4 conservation restrictions were implemented, the NSSWD sent them an email advising they should expect their water permit to be rescinded the following week.

Without a special water permit, the nursery faces the same Level 4 restrictions as anyone else: watering of gardens and plants for one hour every other day between the hours of 6 and 10 a.m., and 6 and 10 p.m.

"So basically they were saying 'find your own water within a week,'" said Nancy.

The Frasers wrote back to the NSSWD, detailing the other sources of water and conservation actions the farm already uses, and received no response.

On July 22, they received a letter stating their permit was extended to July 27, at which time it would be reviewed again.

"It suggested we weren't conserving the voluntary provincial requirement for Level 4 drought, which is 30 per cent," said Richard.

The Frasers couldn't believe that so dug out their water bills to check.

"Lo and behold our reduction from 2015 was 36 per cent from the start of the conservation Level 2, which was on May 1," said Richard.

He wrote back to the NSSWD to point out their error and again emphasized their conservation efforts. He also explained how nurseries need support from their area water managers and hoped for continued support from the NSSWD.

The response? "Whether or not you have a sustainable business model that factors in your needs for available [water] supply is a matter for you to deal with and not the district."

Richard said it made him realize that the NSSWD couldn't possibly care about supporting local business.

"They don't care that we've been here for 44 and a half years and they don't care if we're employing people or using water efficiently."

Another letter from NSSWD arrived at the end of August. It stated that the permit had been extended, but stressed how "issuing a permit and reviewing it each month is not permission for you to carry on this way next year."

Again, the Frasers were upset by the tone of the correspondence, and by the way their situation was portrayed in public NSSWD board minutes, which contained some incorrect information. One statement claimed the nursery had expanded, which it has not done for more than 20 years.

"It implies that we are abusing water and that is the most frustrating thing," said Richard.

The Frasers' conservation-mindedness permeates all aspects of their business, which includes growing plants for ecological rehabilitation purposes. Government and non-profit agencies are among their customers.

"Reclamation and restoration of damaged ecosystems has been a very important, key part of our business and philosophy over the years," said Richard.

### PETITION LAUNCHED

Not wanting to endure last summer's scenario again, the Frasers have created a petition they would like residents and customers to sign. It urges the NSSWD to continue to provide water to Fraser's Thimble Farms during times of drought and to make nurseries exempt from water permits as they are in other districts like the Cowichan Valley Regional District.

It can be signed at the farm at 175 Arbutus Rd. or through [www.change.org](http://www.change.org) — search for "Fraser's Thimble Farms."

The Frasers were reluctant to seek publicity for their situation, but feel they have no other choice.

"Our customers have been fantastic," said Richard. "The support has been overwhelming."

### NSSWD POSITION

Marshall Heinekey is the chair of the North Salt Spring Waterworks District board of trustees.

From the district's point of view, the issue is a simple matter of water quantity.



PHOTOS BY GAIL SJUBERG  
Richard and Nancy Fraser with information about their NSSWD petition. Below, right, fall colours at their nursery.

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"There is a finite amount of water," he told the Driftwood in explaining the NSSWD's hard line against supplying water to the Frasers.

While acknowledging that the Frasers have made a serious effort to meet their water needs, they are still a significant consumer, he said.

Heinekey also said how nurseries are treated in other parts of B.C. is not relevant since their water supplies are potentially less limited than on an island. Richard Fraser had presented data from various reports and nearby jurisdictions to show how much more water other nursery operations use and how those businesses are valued in their communities.

"They were important to him, but not relevant to us," said Heinekey.

He explained how the NSSWD is concerned about St. Mary Lake dropping below the 40.0-metre level allowed by its licence with the provincial government. If that looks like it will occur, the district needs to apply for a permit, which costs \$10,000 just to make the application, with further expenses beyond that.

Heinekey also defended NSSWD's leak rate, which the Frasers had criticized. A 2014 NSSWD water audit found more than 28 million gallons of water had been lost through the system before reaching customers — 18 per cent of all water withdrawn from St. Mary Lake and 21 per cent of water from Maxwell Lake.

"St. Mary is now down to 10 per cent and Maxwell is at 16 per cent," said Heinekey.

The NSSWD also needs people to understand that even if the island receives ample rainfall in winter months, as it did last year, that doesn't avoid the need for extreme conservation during the summer. St. Mary and Maxwell lakes can only hold so much water before the excess spills over and flows away.

And while raising the weir at St. Mary Lake is in the works and will increase the amount of water available, completion of that project is not imminent.

Heinekey and NSSWD manager Ron Stepaniuk met with the Frasers after the launch of their petition, but no promise to provide a water permit next summer was given.



### DROP BY DROP

Fraser's Thimble Farms has always pieced together a water supply and reduced the amount it needs through conservation measures since it began operating in 1972. Before that, Richard Fraser's family had a market garden on their 3.5-acre property and spearheaded a push for NSSWD expansion to Southey Point.

"When I was a kid, we ran out of water every summer," says Richard Fraser, which is why conservation efforts have always been part of their operation.

- Catchment ponds were created in the late 1970s and '80s.
- Rainwater is taken off the roof of the buildings and charged down to the ponds. (That was first done 25 years ago.)
- Despite brackish groundwater, a new well was drilled in the 1980s to augment ones from the 1950s and '60s, and some well water is always part of the water equation. The farm uses between 120,000 and 150,000 gallons of pond and well water per year. All non-NSSWD water must be treated before use on plants.
- From 2014 through 2016 they increased pond storage capacity by extending a liner. They also added 6,000 square feet of shade structures used in the summer months.
- In September 2016 they expanded an existing pond and lined it, adding an estimated 50,000 gallons of storage capacity for next year.
- Various containers are used to collect rainwater.
- Many plants are hand watered.
- They institute a practice of "waiting for wilt" before watering plants.
- Many plants are rooted into the ground, which means they need less water.
- Plants are moved closer together and in reduced areas as warmer weather arrives so they can be watered as efficiently as possible.

Richard Fraser says their farm uses 90 per cent less water than the recommended use for growing container plants in B.C.

"We believe we have the most efficient farm of our type in B.C."

### How much NSSWD summertime water does Fraser's Thimble Farms use?

- July & August 2016: 97,790 gallons
- July & August 2015: 204,140 gallons

Way back in 2006, the farm used 214,750 gallons in July and August.

Because April of 2016 was exceptionally dry, they used more water than normal for that month, which may have caused the NSSWD to scrutinize them more carefully. Coincidentally, in May the Frasers had also requested some financial relief since their NSSWD water costs rose by 396 per cent from 2006 to 2016.

### How does that compare to an average NSSWD household?

In 2014, the average NSSWD household of two people used 118 gallons per day, calculated on a year-round basis. (Source: NSSWD Sustainable Water Management Strategy, June 2015)

That makes the Frasers' 2016 summertime NSSWD water consumption of 1,577 gallons per day only 13.3 times that of the average NSSWD household year-round. Average NSSWD household use in summer months was calculated by a March 2016 Opus DaytonKnight study for the Salt Spring Local Trust Committee to be 36 per higher than in winter.