

Washington sets aside 2,000 acres of forest for conservation, cancels timber sale near Elwha River

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Washington Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz has announced a proposal to conserve some 2,000 acres of state forest land.

The proposal includes 69 acres within the Elwha River watershed that were part of a controversial timber sale, which is now canceled.

"The community has raised significant concerns about the Elwha," Franz told The Seattle Times in an interview. "We have a salmon crisis. That is an area where we have seen unbelievable return of habitat. We've seen an unbelievable return of our salmon. ... So let's include it in this 2,000 acres, which was all about ensuring that we had highly ecologically valuable forests."

The Elwha River has flown freely since 2014 in what was the largest dam removal project ever undertaken, after decades of advocacy on behalf of the salmon and river by tribal nations and conservationists.

The announcement comes shortly after the final auction in the first year of the state's carbon-pricing market, which makes the state's largest polluting businesses or institutions pay for the greenhouse gases they release into the atmosphere. The program has raised nearly \$2 billion so far.

Lawmakers earmarked \$83 million from the carbon-auction revenue for the state Department of Natural Resources to set aside up to 2,000 acres of Western Washington forests for conservation—and purchase replacement lands that will be available for harvest. The agency worked with counties to identify lands that could best protect fish and wildlife habitat and natural and cultural values.

The lands set aside in Clallam, Jefferson, King, Snohomish and Whatcom counties encompass popular hiking areas, salmon, owl and big cat habitats and will continue to serve as places carbon is absorbed from the air.

These are all forests that were previously managed for harvesting timber,

and will join the more than 900,000 acres of forests that the state already manages for conservation in Western Washington.

Franz said the first 2,000 acres is just a "down payment."

"We need more of these solutions and I'll be frank: We need to double down," Franz said. The agency plans to go back to the Legislature and request additional funding to conserve state lands.

DNR will need agreement from county leadership before the lands can be transferred for conservation. If accepted, DNR will present its final list to the Board of Natural Resources. If the board accepts the list of properties to be conserved, land transfers will occur as replacement lands are acquired.

Most of the replacement lands to be available for harvest are the 9,000-plus acres in Wahkiakum County that the agency agreed to purchase earlier this fall.

DNR manages nearly 6 million acres of forest, range, agricultural, aquatic and commercial lands. Under law, DNR is only allowed to sell "valuable materials" from state-owned lands. In [rural communities](#), the proceeds from timber sales often help fund things like schools, libraries, fire and emergency services.

Trees—especially mature forests—are among the cheapest, fastest, most reliable forms of carbon storage.

Trees suck in carbon dioxide, storing more as they grow. The amount of carbon sequestered each year increases with the size and health of the trees. A mature tree can absorb more than 48 pounds of carbon dioxide per year, storing it in its fibers until the tree burns or decomposes.

But some of that natural carbon sequestering power among the state's iconic evergreens has been lost to wildfire and development. Climate change is adding an additional layer of stress on the trees, which are becoming weaker and increasingly vulnerable to disease amid more frequent extreme heat and drought.

"We are the Evergreen State for reason. We have some of the most beautiful forests, from our ponderosa pines in Central and Eastern Washington to our Douglas firs and hemlocks and red cedars in Western Washington," Franz said, standing before a sea of green salal, ferns, cedar and fir Monday near Tiger Mountain in King County.

But for the first time ever, Washington was less than 50% forested, Franz said.

Eight Western Washington counties were interested in conserving forests that exceeded the acreage provided for conservation in the budget, according to an analysis by nonprofit Center for Responsible Forestry.

The largest tract, of about 950 acres, will be preserved in two sites in east Jefferson County, including near Dabob Bay Natural Area, Mount Walker and Notch Pass.

"The over 650 acres of set asides for further conservation in Dabob Bay and the surrounding watershed in Jefferson County are a big win for current and future residents of, and visitors to, this part of our county," Jefferson County Commissioner Heidi Eisenhour said in an emailed statement to the Times.

DNR has also called for the protection of about 650 acres in Whatcom County, within the Lake Whatcom watershed and south of the Middle Fork Nooksack River.

The proposal will set aside nearly 300 acres in Tiger Mountain State Forest abutting the West Tiger Mountain Natural Resources Conservation Area, to create contiguous habitat for cougar, bobcat, elk and pygmy owl.

An additional 70 acres, spanning a sensitive wetland along Marsh Creek north of Sultan, will be preserved. And the nearly 70 acres of [forest](#) will be left standing near the Elwha River.

Pierce, Thurston and Kitsap counties expressed interest in conserving forests, but did not make the cut.

Thurston County Commissioner Tye Menser said he's disappointed that DNR didn't find any of the state lands within the county to meet the definition of what's worth conserving.

The problem Thurston County faces is that the Capitol State Forest is such a timber workhorse that it's all chopped up, he said in a phone interview. From DNR's perspective, that may mean it's not worth preserving, Menser said. But from the county's perspective, as mature forests become more scarce, it's all the more worth preserving.

Meanwhile, the state continues to auction off timber across Western Washington.

Recently, the state sold roughly 100 acres of timber about 15 miles west of Oakville to a logging company despite a request from the Confederated Tribes of the Chehalis Reservation to halt the sale.

"The combination of land use impacts, over-harvesting and [climate change](#) have already damaged the fish and wildlife populations in our watershed and has had direct damaging effects on the tribal community," Chehalis Chairman Dustin Klatush wrote.

The Center for Responsible Forestry estimates that 70,000 acres of mature forests in Western Washington are on the chopping block.

Brel Froebe, executive director of the Center for Responsible Forestry, said they hope this initial investment can guide the development of a broader policy to protect mature forests and make rural communities that depend on timber revenue whole.

Former Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark, who was raised on a family ranch in the Okanogan highlands, has been advocating for the state to use public lands for a higher purpose: combating the climate crisis.

He and former lands Commissioner Jennifer Belcher (1993–2001) took a proposal to Franz to gradually stop all commercial harvest of state forests west of the Cascades.

Now, he said, a 2022 state Supreme Court decision has opened the path for using forests for something other than just maximizing revenue.

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