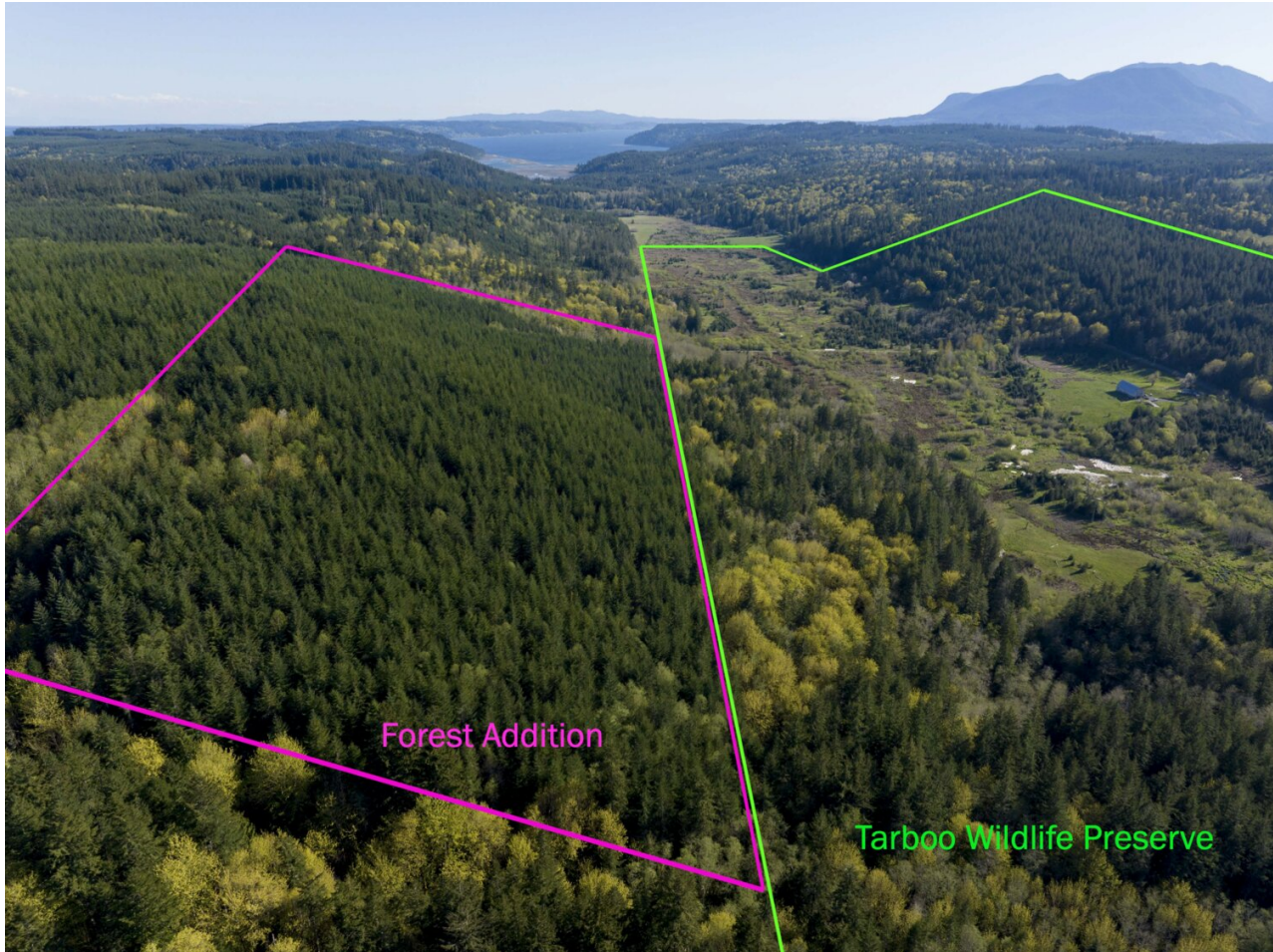


The Leader

Northwest Watershed Institute purchases forest for addition to Tarboo Wildlife Preserve



An aerial view south of the forest addition to Northwest Watershed Institute's Tarboo Wildlife Preserve in the Tarboo Valley. Dabob Bay is visible in the background.

PHOTO CREDIT JOHN GUSSMAN

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Leader Staff

The Northwest Watershed Institute (NWI) has acquired 81 acres of forest and wetlands that will be permanently protected and stewarded as part of the institute's 500-acre Tarboo Wildlife Preserve in the Tarboo valley near Quilcene in Jefferson County.

NWI has led conservation and habitat restoration efforts along Tarboo Creek and Dabob Bay for more than 20 years.

“I’m very happy to see this land now included as part of the preserve,” said Peter Bahls, executive director and biologist at NWI. “The property has forested slopes, streams, and wetlands and its long-term conservation is critical to the overall health of Tarboo Creek and fish and wildlife in the Tarboo valley and downstream Dabob Bay.”

The property purchase is one piece of a landscape-scale effort to protect the Tarboo Creek-Dabob Bay ecosystem, which is nationally recognized for its rich marine resources and shellfish, according to Bahls. The larger effort involves more than 40 partnering organizations who, working with NWI, have protected 4,800 acres in the watershed since 2002.

“Forests and wetlands on the property include a diversity of habitat for iconic birds, amphibians and mammals native to the Pacific Northwest. The parcel is also now part of a larger wildlife habitat corridor for state endangered fish and other wildlife that stretches from the headwaters of Tarboo Creek to Dabob Bay,” said Bahls. “When NWI first inquired about buying the property in 2024, a two-year old male cougar named Sewect, that had been radio-collared as part of the Panthera project, traveled down the Tarboo Creek valley and then apparently bedded down in this forest for a while. I took that as a good sign.”

Preservation of the steep forested slopes, which includes tributary streams and wetlands, will also help maintain fish habitat and the water quality of downstream Tarboo Creek. The creek supports habitat for many at-risk native species including federally listed steelhead salmon, coho salmon, coastal cutthroat trout, and western brook lamprey, said Bahls.

Tarboo Creek is also the largest freshwater source to Tarboo-Dabob Bay, said Bahls. The bay is important for public recreation and commercial shellfish production and the clean waters sustain one of the largest shellfish hatcheries in the world, owned by Taylor Shellfish Co.

“We are pleased to see this land preserved,” said Roma Call, director of natural resources for the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe. “Conserving forestland in the Tarboo watershed is key to the health of wildlife and downstream waters. Tribal members have harvested shellfish, crab, shrimp, salmon, and other estuarine

species from Dabob Bay for thousands of years and the bay continues to provide for tribes that share treaty rights in this region.”

Growing forests also help fight the climate crisis, according to Bahls. “Forests of the Pacific Northwest are among the best in the world for sequestering and storing carbon. This 34-year-old forest is storing roughly the same amount of carbon as would be emitted by burning 15 million pounds of coal — and the forest will continue to sequester more carbon from the atmosphere as it grows toward old growth conditions.”

The property was purchased from Rayonier for \$1.29 million with funding from federal, county, tribal, and private sources, said Bahls.

The acquisition was mostly funded through a \$995,000 National Coastal Wetlands Conservation program grant award by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, secured through the Washington Department of Ecology (Ecology). Jefferson County’s Conservation Futures Program provided \$150,000 in matching funds.

In addition, NWI worked with Jefferson Land Trust and the U.S. Navy to secure matching funds through the Navy’s Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration (REPI) Program. The Navy’s funding purchased a restrictive easement on the land that prevents development but does not grant any rights to the military for use of the property.

Additional financial contributors to the project included Taylor Shellfish Company, the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe, and local citizens.

“Rayonier is proud to work with Northwest Watershed Institute to protect this important 81-acre property,” said Chad McClung, Rayonier’s senior manager for real estate operations. “As sustainable forest managers, we protect water on all our properties. We also recognize that there are special places with a higher purpose, and this is one of those places.”

NWI’s future stewardship of the property will include removal of invasive plants such as English ivy and English holly, and selective forestry and thinning of plantation forests to help encourage the growth of diverse older forests over time. NWI also plans to conduct tours, education workshops, and long-term biological monitoring.

“Our coastal streams, wetlands and estuaries provide vital nurseries and cool, clean water for salmon and other important fish and wildlife species. This project will help ensure the long-term environmental health of Tarboo Creek and Dabob Bay that future generations can explore and enjoy,” said Lauren Driscoll, who oversees statewide wetland management activities at Ecology.