

PENINSULA DAILY NEWS

Dabob Bay conservation area expands by nearly 4,000 acres

State, local partners collaborate on preservation effort

By [Elijah Sussman](#)

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State and local officials toured Dabob Bay forests in 2022. Back row, left to right, Mary Jean Ryan of Quilcene; Rachel Bollens; Bill Taylor, Taylor Shellfish Co.; Jeromy Sullivan, Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribe; Justin Allegro, The Nature Conservancy; and Greg Brotherton, Jefferson County Commissioner. Front row, left to right, Duane Emmons, DNR staff; Jean Ball of Quilcene; Hilary Franz, state Commissioner of Public Lands; Mike Chapman, state Representative; and Peter Bahls, director of Northwest Watershed Institute. (Keith Lazelle)

QUILCENE — The Dabob Bay Natural Resources Conservation Area has been expanded by 3,943 acres to include more than 11,000 acres around the bay.

Hilary Franz, the state Commissioner of Public Lands, signed an order on Sept. 23.

“Dabob Bay is a unique and special landscape, and I am incredibly happy to protect and preserve public lands there so that future generations get to enjoy its beauty and ecological importance,” Franz said. “This further expansion is a testament to years of hard work from stakeholders and staff to find a solution that protects these rare ecosystems while still supporting local services in east Jefferson County.”

The Dabob Bay natural area has seen conservation efforts since 1984.

The expansion came as one of a series of ecological wins after years of collaborative effort between the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR), the Board of Jefferson County Commissioners and local environmental groups.

“Dabob Bay Natural Area is unusual in that it is not near any major highways and the steep shorelines have seen limited development,” said Peter Bahls, director of Northwest Watershed Institute. “It is one of the highest-quality estuarine bays remaining in Puget Sound.

“In a 2011 study by the Point No Point Treaty Council, it was found to be the largest intact and functional saltmarsh system in Hood Canal and the Strait of Juan de Fuca. The Dabob Bay Natural Area expansion will help protect the saltmarshes, feeder bluffs and overall ecosystem of Dabob Bay for a great diversity of species, including the prized Hood Canal spotted shrimp, clams, oysters, salmon and orca.”

The expansion area also will protect the world’s largest example of a rare and globally endangered rhododendron forest, a high priority for conservation efforts, Bahls said.

“It is one of those areas that truly meets the definition of our conservation areas, set under statute,” Franz said. “They represent lands that have high priority for conservation, natural systems and wildlife. It’s an area where the flora and the fauna and the geological beauty of the area is critically important. It’s one that’s important for the ecology, but also for the local economy, from fishing to shellfish. It’s an area that demands and cries out for the kind of protection that the Natural Resource Conservation Act set out to achieve.”

Jefferson County is well-known for its shellfish production. These protections also will protect that industry, said Bill Taylor, owner of Taylor Shellfish.

“The expansion will help protect Dabob Bay’s excellent water quality for the shellfish industry, the largest employer in south county,” Taylor said.

Additional work

While inclusion into the Natural Resources Conservation Area (NRCA) is an important milestone in protecting the land, there are still some steps before the land can be classified as conservation land, a process that will happen over some years, Franz said.

Twenty-six hundred acres of the expansion are public forest lands. These working forests are meant to benefit junior taxing districts, mostly schools and fire districts within Jefferson County. For this land to be placed in conservation, it must be replaced by more profitable working forest land, Franz said.

“We have fiduciary responsibility to manage those lands to meet the objectives of the beneficiaries,” Franz said.

In this part of the state, available land is not the issue; funding and timing are, she said.

“For me, the only trick has been having enough money ready to actually play in those big investments,” Franz said. “We have been very successful — you know the Deep River purchase we did last year, which was the biggest land transaction in the nation — was an example of the ingenuity and creativity that our team, DNR, myself, along with other partners, was able to do.”

The department may seek funding from the Trust Land Transfer program, the state Department of Ecology and the state Recreation and Conservation Office, among others.

Trust Land Transfer is a DNR program which funds the department when trust lands it manages are either limited in how much revenue they can generate or possess qualities that would make them eligible for ecological protection.

The Climate Commitment Act (CCA) places a cap on greenhouse gas emissions, charging businesses for allowances of emissions. The limit is to be reduced intermittently. Monies made by CCA are to be spent on conservation land. The program has raised more than \$2 billion since its establishment in 2023.

“Expansion of the Dabob Bay Natural Area boundary will protect two different types of older forests on state land classified as globally imperiled by DNR’s Natural Heritage Program, as well as important marine shorelines, wetlands and stream habitats around the bay,” Bahls said. “I’m grateful for the leadership by Commissioner Franz and the many years of collaborative effort by DNR, Jefferson County, local citizens, shellfish industry, tribes and local and regional conservation groups that led to this moment.”

Reporter Elijah Sussman can be reached by email at elijah.sussman@sequimgazette.com.