



## Dabob Bay area could expand

DNR may use state funds for program

By [Peter Segall](#)

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Dabob Bay – photo added by NWI

Keith Lazelle

PORT TOWNSEND — The Jefferson County Commissioners sent a letter Monday, asking the state Department of Natural Resources to begin the process of expanding the Dabob Bay Natural Area, paving the way for the department to use state programs to acquire new revenue-generating lands on the county's behalf.

The Department of Natural Resources manages lands for the benefit of several beneficiaries, including local junior taxing districts and a statewide school construction fund, but not all of the department's lands are currently available for harvest.

"When DNR wants to protect lands, they need to find a way to do that while keeping the trusts whole," said Peter Bahls, executive director of the Northwest Watershed Institute, a Port Townsend-based organization that's been working on expanding the Dabob Bay Natural Area for years.

Bahls said the lands county commissioners are asking to be placed into the Dabob Bay Natural Area are older forests with unique levels of biodiversity and are home to a rare type of rhododendron forests. The state is obligated to protect those areas under its Sustainable Forestry Initiative and the lands are not currently generating revenue through harvest.

If those areas are placed into conservation status, DNR could then use state funding through its Trust Land Transfer program and the Natural Climate Solutions account to purchase replacement lands that would be available for harvest and generate money for the county and its junior taxing districts.

The Trust Land Transfer program was first established in 1989, but in 2021 and 2022, the state Legislature reworked the program to make it more effective and provided it with more consistent funding. The Natural Climate Solutions account was created by the Legislature in 2021 to provide funding for projects that help mitigate the impacts of climate change.

"They can't do Trust Land Transfer until that land is in an approved boundary," Bahls said.

Expanding the natural area's boundaries will require DNR to go through a public process with multiple hearings, but Bahls and the commissioners say there's significant local support for the move.

"The proposed Dabob Bay (Natural Area) expansion will allow Jefferson County and its junior taxing districts the opportunity to be compensated for the protection of these areas through the TLT and NCS programs," the commissioners said in their letter addressed to Hilary Franz, the state Commissioner of Public Lands.

Commissioners said the county and its partners have identified up to 5,000 acres near the northern borders of the natural area currently owned by Rayonier Inc. that the company is potentially willing to sell. The Trust Land Transfer program would also allow DNR to purchase lands from small private landowners in the area.

"After years of groundwork by DNR, the State Legislature, and many partnering organizations to improve TLT, develop new NCS funding, assess the rare forests of Dabob Bay, and build a broad base of public support, we believe that it is time for DNR

to move ahead to expand the Dabob Bay Natural Area without further delay,” the letter said.

Bahls said the expansion of the Dabob Bay Natural Area will require a public process with multiple public hearings, and once that’s completed, the Trust Land Transfer process will require another public approval process.

There’s no deadline for DNR to approve the expansion, and the Trust Land Transfer program has a limited amount of funds each year to purchase replacement lands.

“We’re really hoping for leadership from Franz and her team on this because the county has been sitting on this incredible habitat, incredible timber land,” Bahls said. “This proposal has been in the works for a number of years. It was initially sent to the commissioner as a coalition of support from shellfish farmers, tribes and conservationists. The county has broad-based support for the proposal, we just see it as a win all the way around if it works out.”

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