

The Leader

More steps left for Dabob Bay conservation area expansion to deliver ‘big wins’



Dabob Bay shoreline and forested bluffs along the Toandos Peninsula, to be protected within the state’s expanded Dabob Bay Natural Area boundary. Photo by Keith Lazelle.

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By Kirk Boxleitner

With the Dabob Bay Natural Resources Conservation Area (NRCA) set to expand by approximately 3,943 acres, those who advocated for the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to implement this expansion are aiming to address what comes next.

After the expansion order was signed by Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz Sept. 23, it received positive comments from county commissioners, heads of industry, state legislators and Peter Bahls, director of the Northwest Watershed Institute.

As Bahls said, “there’s still work to do.”

The Northwest Watershed Institute has focused on the conservation and restoration of Tarboo Creek and Dabob Bay, in partnership with other organizations and citizens, for more than 20 years. This marks the third major expansion of the Natural Area boundaries during that time.

Franz touted this boundary expansion as a means to protect and preserve the public lands of Dabob Bay, “so that future generations get to enjoy (the) beauty and ecological importance ... of the unique and special landscape.” Bahls outlined the steps ahead for the project that are necessary to continue to deliver “big wins” on both conservation and economic fronts.

Bill Taylor, owner of Taylor Shellfish, credited the expansion with helping to protect Dabob Bay’s “excellent water quality for the shellfish industry, the largest employer in south County.” Bahls cited the need for DNR to purchase private industrial timber lands as well, outside the Natural Area boundary, as replacement trust lands. He asserted those lands “are better suited for long-term continued timber production, (thereby) providing revenue for the county’s taxing districts.”

According to Bahls, DNR has already started seeking replacement timber lands for purchase.

Last year, DNR selected 671 acres of older forest that lies within the new boundary for conservation using Climate Commitment Act funding approved by the legislature. Bahls also advised that additional funding, from the state’s Trust Land Transfer program, would be needed to fully replace the trust lands that are being protected within the boundary.



State and local officials toured Dabob Bay forests in 2022. Back row, from left: Mary Jean Ryan of Quilcene, Rachel Bollens, Taylor Shellfish owner Bill Taylor, Jeromy Sullivan of the Port Gamble S’Klallam Tribe, Justin Allegro of the Nature Conservancy and Jefferson County District 3 Commissioner Greg Brotherton. 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.

“For private lands within the boundary, DNR now has the ability to seek grant funding, and work with interested landowners, to preserve natural habitats, by acquisition or conservation easement,” Bahls said.

About 2,600 acres within the expanded NRCA boundary are public forest lands to be preserved.

The total Natural Area boundary now includes more than 11,000 acres around the bay.

Within that boundary, approximately 4,300 acres are already protected as state Natural Area: either state timber lands that were transferred into the Natural Area, or private lands purchased from willing sellers.

In the meantime, an Oct. 2 press statement from DNR predicted the Dabob Bay NRCA boundary expansion would provide “more complete protection and improved long-term viability” of the current ecosystem’s “productive fish and wildlife habitats, and water quality, by further protecting hydrologic influences on streams, wetlands and bays, expanding terrestrial-aquatic linkages, and improving connectivity of forest habitats.”

Bahls and Jefferson County District 2 Commissioner Heidi Eisenhour expressed a similarly optimistic outlook, as they each described the Dabob Bay area as possessing a preservation-worthy degree of biological diversity, within what they agreed are some of the most “pristine” marine and coastal forest habitats in not only Jefferson County, but Puget Sound as a whole.

Bahls said the estuarine bays include 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.

“I’m grateful for the leadership by Commissioner Franz and the many years of collaborative effort by DNR, Jefferson County, local citizens, the shellfish industry, the Tribes, and local and regional conservation groups that led to this moment,” said Bahls.