

PENINSULA DAILY NEWS

Legislature: Support Trust Land Transfer for state forests

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OPINION



W. Ron Allen, left, is the Tribal Chair/CEO of the Jamestown S’Klallam Tribe. Heidi Eisenhour, center, is a Jefferson County commissioner. Bill Taylor, right, is the vice president of Taylor Shellfish Farms.

People on the Olympic Peninsula benefit from our state forest lands in many ways, whether it is a job in the timber industry, the revenue that such logging provides for public institutions, wildlife habitat, outdoor recreation or the climate protection benefits that forests provide.

However, as community and business leaders with a long history here, we are well aware of the public conflict and gridlock that management of state forests can provoke.

Thus, we are alarmed that funding for one of the state's best tools for solving problems in state forestland management — the Trust Land Transfer program — is at risk in Olympia.

The Trust Land Transfer (TLT) program has been used by the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for more than 30 years to conserve over 128,000 acres of critical habitat and outdoor recreation areas by repositioning trust lands to keep the trusts economically whole.

TLT has proven an invaluable tool in creating solutions for preserving outstanding areas — such as Mount Si, Mount Blanchard and Dabob Bay — while strengthening the financial value of the trusts. Yet despite the program's long record of success, the funding for TLT is now in jeopardy.

The DNR sale of timber from state forests held in trust for the “public good” provides millions of dollars toward county services and school construction, while also supporting jobs in the timber industry. However, some trust lands are simply not well suited for timber production or are more valuable to the public by being preserved.

For example, rather than attempt a logging operation on the slopes of Mount Walker near Quilcene, DNR proposed it as an addition to Devils Lake Natural Area in 2016. The area includes one mile of steep slopes along Quilcene Bay and a globally rare type of old forest. If it were to be logged, this heritage forest would be destroyed and there would be a high risk of water quality impacts to shellfish resources.

DNR's proposal for expanding the Devils Lake Natural Area was approved in 2016 by the Commissioner of Public Lands after a public hearing and with strong support from the Jefferson County commissioners, tribes, the shellfish industry, and citizens. However, five years later, the forest remains in limbo — neither formally protected nor with the trust reimbursed.

For this to be a winning solution, we need the state Legislature to follow through with TLT funding, so the forest can be preserved and DNR can reimburse the School Trust for lost timber revenue and also buy more productive replacement lands.

TLT has strong support this legislative session including a coalition of 54 statewide and local conservation groups, leading education advocates such as State Superintendent of Public Instruction Reykdal, and the Jamestown S'Klallam and Port Gamble S'Klallam Tribes.

Four TLT projects are proposed for funding now: Devils Lake, Blakely Island in San Juan County, Morningstar in the Cascades, and Eglon Forest in north Kitsap County — all part of a larger backlog of unfunded TLT projects. Delay in funding not only jeopardizes preservation of these important areas, but the future of the TLT program itself.

Fortunately, we in Legislative District 24 are represented by three state legislators who are among the most influential voices on natural resource policy in Olympia.

Rep. Mike Chapman and Sen. Kevin Van De Wege chair committees in their respective chambers setting natural resource policy. And Rep. Steve Tharinger chairs the House Capital Budget Committee. Collectively, they have done a great job securing important TLT successes in recent years, including protection of Dabob Bay and Gibbs Lake County Park in Jefferson County.

We urge them to keep up the good work to make sure Trust Land Transfer funding can continue to provide win-win solutions that allow DNR to preserve outstanding forests of great public value while also funding school construction and related jobs, and investing in more productive land for long-term timber production.

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