

The Leader

Dabob Bay Natural Area awaiting approval for 4,000-acre expansion



Jeff and Georgia Vincent helped organize the celebration of the Dabob Bay Natural Area's proposed expansion, at the Laurel Johnson Community Center in Coyle. They both contributed to and bid on items in the event's silent auction.



Posted Wednesday, July 31, 2024 12:00 am

By Kirk Boxleitner

The Northwest Watershed Institute invited community members and elected officials to celebrate the Department of Natural Resources' proposal to expand the Dabob Bay Natural Area by nearly 4,000 acres.

The Laurel Johnson Community Center in Coyle hosted the party on the afternoon of Saturday, July 27. It included not only a silent auction, catering truck meals and a live band, but also information displays and speeches from the Northwest Watershed Institute, plus remarks from state legislators Mike Chapman and Steve Tharinger, as well as Jefferson County Commissioner Heidi Eisenhour.

With roughly 150 people in attendance, Northwest Watershed Institute Executive Director Peter Bahls touted the Dabob Bay Natural Area as “the largest landscape-scale conservation project on the eastern Olympic Peninsula,” on behalf of “one of the least developed and most ecologically intact salt marsh bays in Puget Sound.”

The proposed expansion of the Dabob Bay Natural Area would follow DNR's selection, in December of 2023, of some of the old forests remaining on state lands around Dabob Bay for protection under Climate Commitment Act legislation.

The proposed Dabob Bay Natural Area boundary expansion includes these old forest groves, which Bahls asserted represent “the largest remaining rhododendron forest of its type left in the world,” as well as various streams, wetlands, shorelines and other connecting forest habitat around Dabob Bay.

DNR held a public hearing on the boundary expansion on June 17, also at the Coyle community center, that Bahls characterized as being met with “strong and broad support” from Jefferson County Commissioners, Native American tribes, the shellfish industry, regional and statewide conservation groups, and landowners.

Bahls said that this boundary expansion has been in the works for years, so while Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz has delayed an expected decision to approve the boundary proposal as she deals with a spate of wildfires across the state, Bahls confidently predicted that “we can wait a few more days.”

The Dabob Bay Natural Area was originally established by DNR in 1984 to protect roughly 195 acres of coastal splits.

It's been expanded twice since then, first to more than 7,000 acres in 2009, and in December of 2023, under the state's new Climate Commitment Act, DNR selected 671 acres of older forest near the Dabob Bay Natural Area for protection as part of 2,000 acres of carbon-storing forests across the state.

This was accomplished by securing \$70 million in funding through the Climate Commitment Act, for which Bahls credited Tharinger, Chapman and Eisenhour, as well as former state Senator Christine Rolfes and area landowner Mary Jean Ryan, with playing key roles.

Bahls specifically cited Tharinger and Chapman's roles in "revitalizing" the Trust Land Transfer program in 2023 and 2023, as well as securing the 2023 Natural Climate Solutions appropriation.

And while Bahls thanked all three county commissioners, he singled out Eisenhour for "setting a record for the number of DNR work groups" she's participated in, just as he lauded Rolfes, who's now serving as a Kitsap County Commissioner, for bringing the Trust Land Transfer program "back from the dead."

Although Tharinger is not running for re-election, he was the first to mention that the fate of the Climate Commitment Act is on the ballot, as Initiative 2117, on which he urged his constituents to vote "no," in order to safeguard such forests.

Chapman is also not running for re-election in his existing seat, but he's running to fill Tharinger's open seat, and he pledged to reintroduce a bill that he'd previously supported which would allow DNR to sell carbon credits, which he touted as providing revenue without relying on clearcutting.

"You should all be so proud of what you've done with Dabob Bay," Eisenhour said to the crowd at the community center, as she urged them to "keep going" in their efforts, in tandem with their elected officials, because "look at what we've achieved together."