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## ENVIRONMENT

# Bellingham makes largest land purchase yet in Lake Whatcom watershed

754 acres in Blue Canyon area will be protected from logging, development

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A fire began in August 2023 in the forested area above Lake Whatcom. The City of Bellingham will purchase 754 acres in the Lake Whatcom watershed from the Nielsen Brothers logging company to protect the community's drinking water source and improve climate resilience. (Photo courtesy of City of Bellingham)

By **JULIA TELLMAN**

Local News Reporter



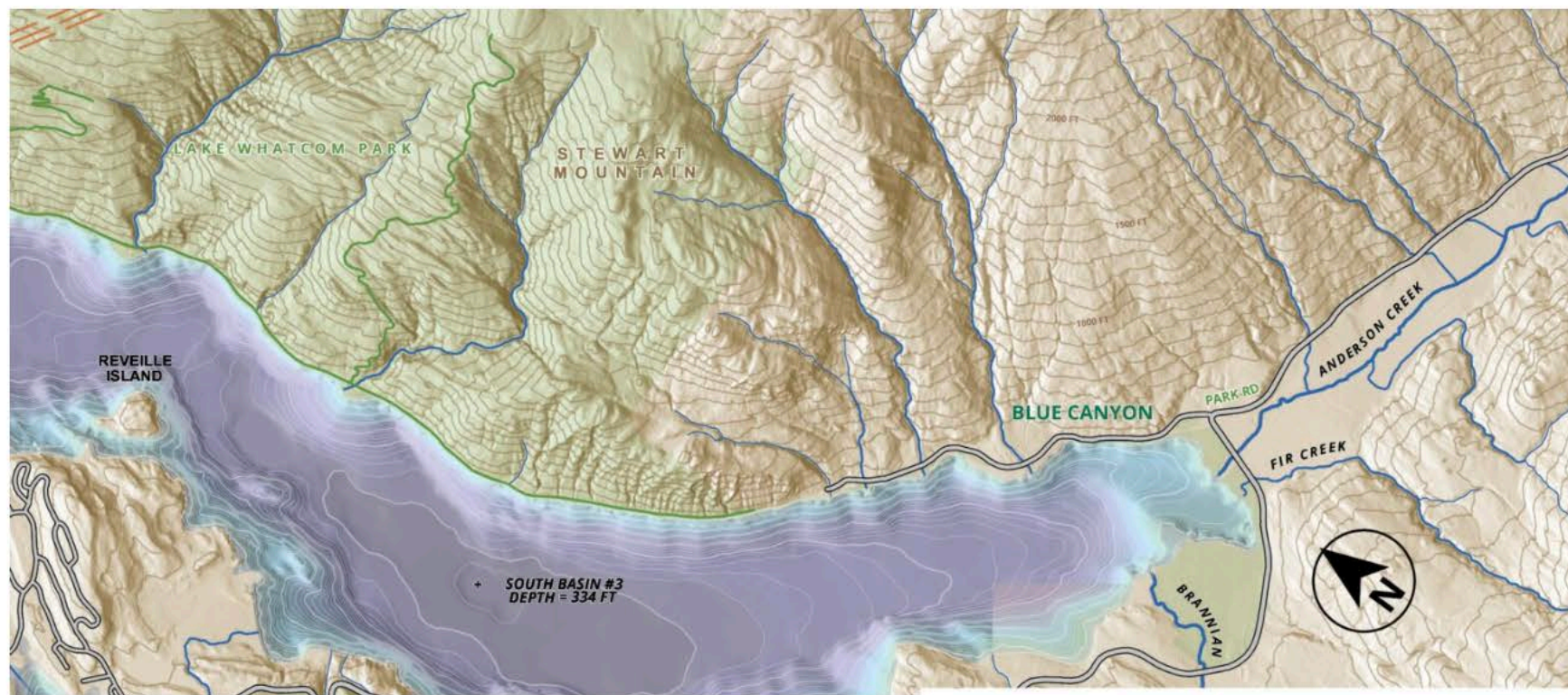
The City of Bellingham will purchase 754 forested acres on the southeast side of Lake Whatcom from a local timber company, adding to more than 3,500 acres of land acquisitions in the watershed.

City council approved on Monday, Jan. 27 the city's largest single land purchase since the [Lake Whatcom Land Acquisition and Preservation Program](#) began 20 years ago. For comparison, in 2024 the city purchased a total of 52.47 acres, removing 13 potential development units from the Lake Whatcom watershed.

Lake Whatcom is the drinking water source for more than 100,000 residents, a well-used recreational asset, and an irreplaceable habitat for plants and animals. It is also polluted by runoff and at risk from climate change, invasive species and human activities, which is why since 2001 the city and county have been buying land or easements to prevent development or further degradation of the essential resource.

"Years in the making, this purchase is a major step forward in protecting one of our community's most valuable assets, strengthening our ability to continue providing clean, safe drinking water," Bellingham Mayor Kim Lund said in a statement. "This accomplishment also supports our goals to sustain a healthy environment for people, native flora and fauna, and increases our community's resilience to wildfires and other effects of a changing climate."

The site, sold by family-owned-and-operated logging company Nielsen Brothers, is made up of five parcels on the flank of Stewart Mountain, accessible from Blue Canyon Road. Conservation nonprofit Whatcom Million Trees Project connected the city with the company in 2021 after unsuccessful attempts at contact years earlier.



The 754 acres of forestland purchased by the city is on the flank of Stewart Mountain off Blue Canyon Road, contiguous with other public land and home to several drainages and creeks. (Photo courtesy of Lake Whatcom Management Program)

"We are delighted that the city and the Niensens persevered to close this important deal," Whatcom Million Trees Project founder and director Michael Feerer said in a news release. "It's a big win for the community, for the Lake Whatcom watershed, and for Bellingham's drinking water quality."

The Nielsen property is contiguous with the county-owned Lake Whatcom Park and near the proposed [Stewart Mountain Community Forest](#). While no trails are planned for the site, the city intends to manage the property to enhance wildlife habitat and improve forest health and water quality. The property was last logged several decades ago and its forests will now be allowed to mature into older growth that will stabilize steep slopes, capture carbon and filter runoff.

The city will pay \$3.65 million for the property using watershed fees on utility bills, and will spend \$184,400 in designated forest land compensating taxes and \$96,800 in real estate excise taxes. The sale is expected to close on or around Feb. 14.

Council member Michael Lilliquist acknowledged the hefty price tag but pointed out that the \$5,000 or so per acre cost was a "bargain" when compared to the expense of preserving and treating drinking water in Lake Whatcom.

"It's a good investment and I'm excited we've been able to broker this deal," agreed council member Lisa Anderson.

On the same day, the council reviewed the draft [Lake Whatcom Management Program 5-Year Work Plan for 2025-29](#). The work plan will be adopted in April during the Annual Lake Whatcom Joint Councils and Commission.

The program — a partnership between Whatcom County, the city, and the Lake Whatcom Water and Sewer District to improve the health of the lake — comprises 12 focus areas, one of which is land acquisition and protection.

*Julia Tellman writes about civic issues and anything else that happens to cross her desk; contact her at [juliatellman@cascadiadaily.com](mailto:juliatellman@cascadiadaily.com).*