

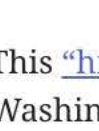
These Whatcom forests are protected from logging in WA's 'historic' new carbon project

BY YSABELLE KEMPE

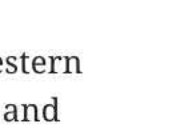
UPDATED APRIL 07, 2022 5:21 PM



Speaking from the McLane Creek Nature Trail west of Olympia on April 6, 2022, Washington state Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz announced an inaugural carbon project that will be located in selected locations on state trust lands. BY STEVE BLOOM



Only have a minute? Listen instead
Powered by Trinity Audio



00:00

09:31

Nearly 1,400 acres of state-owned forests near Lake Whatcom will be newly protected from logging as part of an initiative [announced Wednesday, April 6, by Washington's Department of Natural Resources](#). Instead, the trees will be monetized for their ability to combat worsening climate change.

This [“historic carbon project,”](#) as the agency described it, will allow Western Washington’s “most ecologically valuable” forests to continue growing and absorbing planet-warming carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. This stored carbon will generate “carbon credits,” or permits that can be purchased by organizations or individuals to offset, or cancel out, their own greenhouse gas emissions.

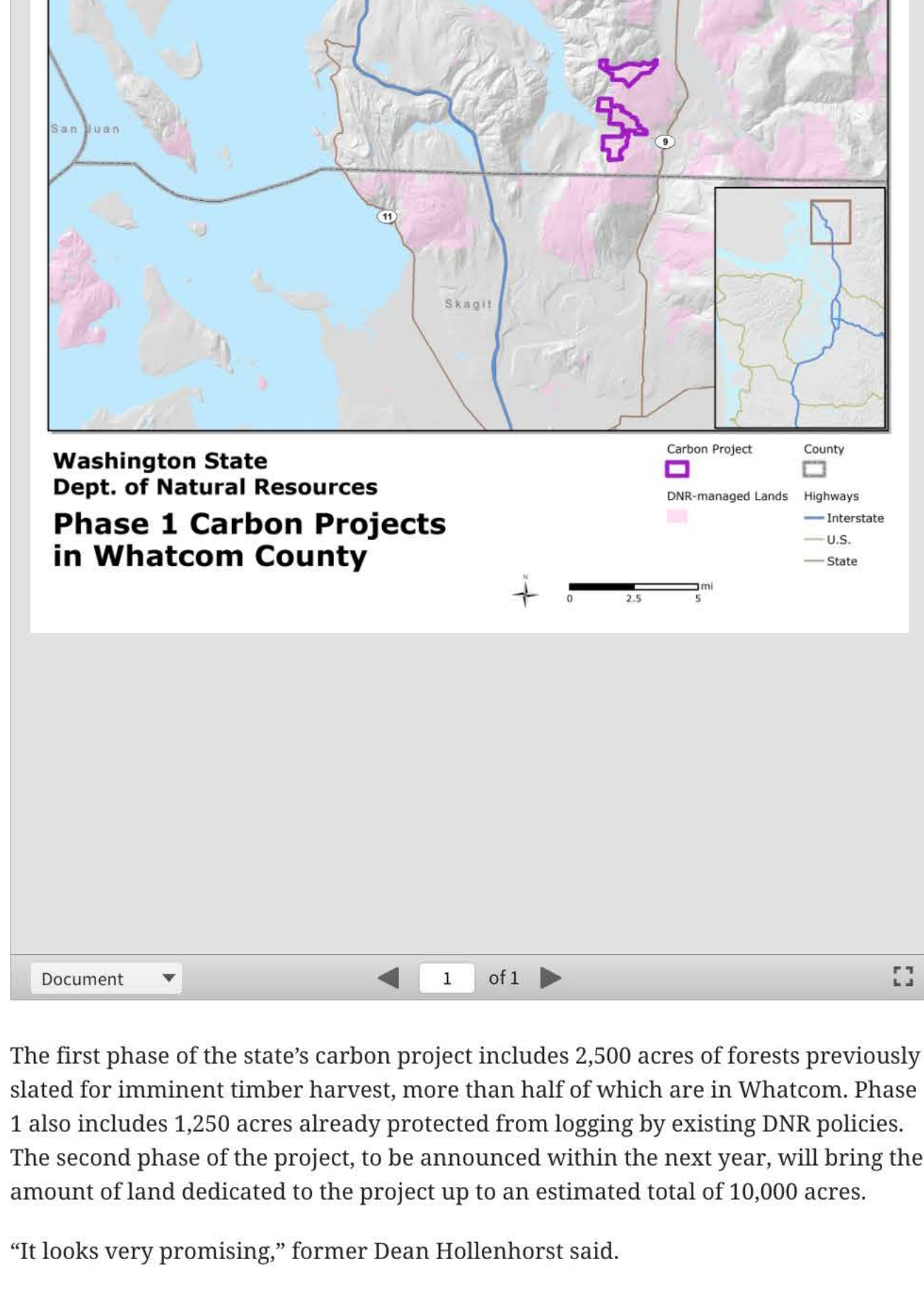
“Instead of high-tech solutions to suck carbon out of the atmosphere, we are using natural processes like photosynthesis,” said Steve Hollenhorst, who served as dean of Western Washington University’s College of the Environment from 2012 to 2021. “It’s sort of low-hanging fruit. We can do this now.”

Included in the protected areas is Unit 2 of the Bessie timber sale, marking an unexpected resolution to months of public debate about whether the state should move ahead with plans to log this century-old forest. Trees make for cleaner air and water, and opponents of the timber sale were [concerned about the potential impact on water quality](#) in Lake Whatcom, which is the drinking water source for about 100,000 people. The lake [struggles with excessive levels of phosphorus](#), which can spur growth of [harmful algae](#).

“Water is life,” said Whatcom County Councilmember Kaylee Galloway, who [in January prompted the council](#) to send DNR leaders a letter asking them to reconsider the Bessie timber sale. “It’s one of our most valuable resources in Whatcom County.”

Other Whatcom forests protected by the carbon project include Anderson Creek, Jones Creek and Olsen Creek, said DNR communications director Sarah Ford in an email.

Revenue from the DNR initiative is expected to generate tens of millions of dollars in the coming years, which will help fund public schools and county services. The DNR is legally required to manage “trust lands” to generate revenue for these “trust beneficiaries.” The agency generates a good portion of that revenue through timber sales.



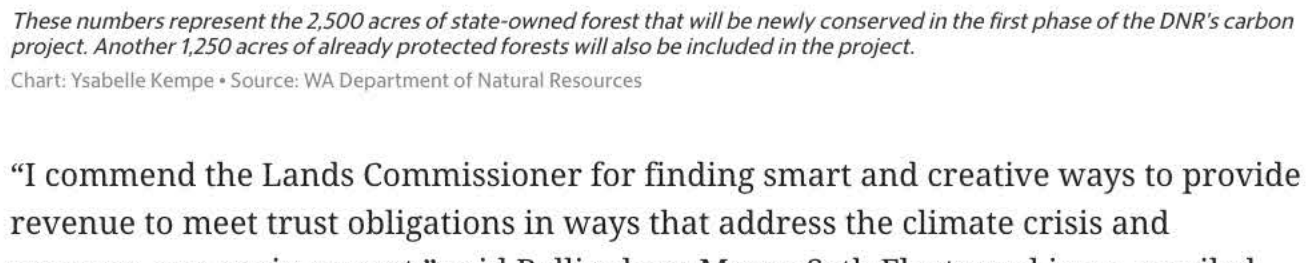
The first phase of the state’s carbon project includes 2,500 acres of forests previously slated for imminent timber harvest, more than half of which are in Whatcom. Phase 1 also includes 1,250 acres already protected from logging by existing DNR policies. The second phase of the project, to be announced within the next year, will bring the amount of land dedicated to the project up to an estimated total of 10,000 acres.

“It looks very promising,” former Dean Hollenhorst said.

The DNR’s announcement of the project comes days after an international group of climate scientists warned that it’s [almost inevitable that global temperatures will increase](#) by more than 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, as people continue to burn fossil fuels. Passing that temperature benchmark would mean a [significant increase in dangerous extreme weather](#), including heat waves, drought, sea-level rise and storms, scientists warn.

ACRES OF STATE FOREST NEWLY PROTECTED BY DNR CARBON PROJECT

Forests in four Western Washington counties will now be protected from logging.



“I commend the Lands Commissioner for finding smart and creative ways to provide revenue to meet trust obligations in ways that address the climate crisis and preserve our environment,” said Bellingham Mayor Seth Fleetwood in an emailed statement to The Bellingham Herald.

CONCERN FROM TIMBER INDUSTRY

Although the project’s announcement was celebrated by many in the community, it also elicited worry and frustration from some in the local timber industry.

Tom Westergreen, who is a fourth-generation forest landowner near Sumas, said that the Pacific Northwest boasts some of the world’s most productive land for growing high-quality wood. He feels that people often overlook where their products come from.

Both Sierra Pacific and Westergreen pointed to wood as a more sustainable building material than concrete or steel, which produce large amounts of greenhouse gas emissions when manufactured. When wood is used in construction, it continues to store the carbon that had been captured by the living tree. Sierra Pacific and Westergreen warned that sourcing Washington’s timber from elsewhere could create additional greenhouse gas emissions from transportation.

Hollenhorst, the former College of the Environment dean, echoed that wood can be a sustainable building material, but only if grown and used “right.”

“Wood, if used right and done the right way, can actually have a net benefit when it comes to this carbon world,” Hollenhorst said. “But the devil is in details. If it’s not done right — if the rotation is too short, if there’s no restoration — there are huge emissions that can come from that.”

Local proponents of the DNR’s carbon project say they aren’t opposed to all logging but do believe certain forests deserve more stringent protections.



Members of the Center for Responsible Forestry explored Unit 2 of the DNR’s Bessie timber sale in Whatcom County on Dec. 14, 2021. They said they measured a few dozen trees, 10 of which were more than 4 feet in diameter. Center for Responsible Forestry *COURTESY TO THE BELLINGHAM HERALD*

“Where is it best to have active forest management?” County Councilmember Galloway said. “The answer might be not in a drinking watershed.”

Hollenhorst argued that the option to monetize forests’ climate benefits through carbon markets can help small landowners diversify their revenue sources. It also encourages them to grow more, healthier trees, he said.

“It creates incentives for people to reforest their land and create more forest productivity system-wide,” he said. “It will take years for some of these areas to become economically productive from a logging perspective, but that is the big picture.”

WHAT NOW?

Local forest conservation advocates said the DNR’s new carbon project adds legitimacy to their efforts to get society to financially value forests for climate and ecological benefits rather than only as timber.

“This is another tool in the tool belt of ways to hopefully protect legacy forests in the future,” said Brel Froebe, communications coordinator for the nonprofit Center for Responsible Forestry.



Forests in Washington state can be classified based on their age, structure, biodiversity and other factors. BY WARREN STERLING

Legacy forests refer to older, structurally complex forests allowed to naturally regrow after being logged by the Pacific Northwest’s early settlers. They feel very different from plantation forests, which are replanted by humans, often consist of only one or a few tree species and are highly managed.

Froebe hopes that Whatcom areas protected in the second phase of the DNR’s carbon project are older forests in the Nooksack River watershed. Older, more biodiverse forests [store more carbon](#), although younger forests can grow more quickly and often absorb carbon at a faster rate.

An important detail of the DNR’s carbon project is that the protected forest land will be leased out and required to be managed to generate carbon credits. There is a chance the forest is no longer protected from logging when the lease ends, although it is the agency’s intention to keep the areas protected, according to DNR communications director Ford. No buyers have been formalized, so Ford could not speak to how long the leases might be.

“This isn’t quite what we were hoping for,” said Michael Feerer, executive director of the Whatcom Million Trees Project, in an email to The Herald. “But perhaps since the carbon marketplace is expected to get stronger and more valuable per acre over time, that will disincentive any reversion by (the Department of Natural Resources) to clear-cutting the sites in the future.”

This story was originally published April 7, 2022 10:55 AM.



YSABELLE KEMPE



Ysabelle Kempe joined The Bellingham Herald in summer 2021 to cover environmental affairs. She’s a graduate of Northeastern University in Boston and has worked for The Boston Globe and Grist.