

**Lake Whatcom Watershed Forest Preserve  
Conservation Northwest  
Frequently Asked Questions**

**Where and what is Lake Whatcom?**

Lake Whatcom is a large lake just east of Bellingham. It serves as the drinking water source for approximately 85,700 people, over half the county population. The Lake Whatcom watershed is 31,127 acres. Of that, approximately 59% is zoned commercial forestry, 14% is developed, 8% protected and about 18% is undeveloped but zoned for development.

**What's the problem with Lake Whatcom?**

Lake Whatcom is becoming polluted due to activities such as development and logging in the watershed. Development is likely the largest polluter: there are approximately 5,000 homes in the watershed and about 265 homes added each year. Logging is likely a huge contributor to pollution because clearcutting and logging road building result in silt running into the lake, and increase the risk of landslides.

**What is the proposed Lake Whatcom Watershed Forest Preserve?**

The 2007 County budget included funds to move forward on plans to place approximately 8,400 acres of Whatcom County Forest Board Lands into a low-impact park status. This will be a forest preserve that is slightly more than half the size of Bellingham within biking distance of the city limits. Creation of a forest preserve would protect about 8,100 acres within the watershed or about 25% of the watershed.

**Where is the proposed Lake Whatcom Forest Preserve?**

The initial county proposal is for a forest preserve in two sections within the Lake Whatcom watershed: one above Sudden Valley in an area of steep slopes stretching toward Squires Lake Park, and another on the mountainous terrain on the east side of the lake above the Hertz (Northshore) trail.

**How will this benefit Lake Whatcom and water quality?**

Phosphorus is the major pollutant in Lake Whatcom. Phosphorus is found naturally in soil and enters the lake when disturbances such as development and logging erode soil. Natural forests enhance water quality because they protect soil from erosion, filter it, keep water cool and release it slowly. The County has been clear in its intent to focus management of the forest preserve on protecting water quality and restoring old-growth forests. This proposal will discontinue current Department of Natural Resources (DNR) management which includes plan to log the area in order to generate revenue.

**What kind of lands make up the forest preserve?**

These lands are heavily forested mostly with native, older second and third growth forest, and a few areas of virgin old-growth forest. The area is very wet, the higher elevations have annual precipitation levels twice that of

Bellingham. The terrain is steep and the streams flow through deep ravines. The area is prone to landslides. In 1983, a storm dumped rain on these steep lands. Logging debris clogged streams and unstable logging roads failed, resulting in major landslides. Eighty acres of soil, logging debris, several homes, cars and even a woman were washed into Lake Whatcom.

**What is the public process?**

The public process is still being developed. It is anticipated that the County Council and DNR will hold public hearings on the proposal prior to taking action. The eventual decision would be made by the County Council via a vote.

**What types of uses will be allowed in the Lake Whatcom Forest Preserve?**

The county recognizes that protecting water quality is the first and foremost priority. State law stipulates that counties limit activities on these types of lands to recreation purposes only. The County Parks Director envisions the proposed forest preserve would be managed as low impact, with activities such as hiking, biking, and hike-in camping. The current parks map shows that access to the forest preserve would be on existing roads. Back-country camping would be very limited and sited on old logging landings parking can be accommodated on existing county park properties (Trailheads with parking up to 30 vehicles in Commercial Forestry zoning is permitted). Trails would be maintained on a few of the existing logging roads and a handful of new connector trails would be built. There may be some non-commercial thinning in order to restore diversity and old-growth forest characteristics to lands that are now industrial timberlands.

**How are the lands currently managed?**

The lands are currently managed as commercial timberland by the DNR with the goal of generating revenue for beneficiaries. Because of the high risk of landslides the Lake Whatcom Landscape Plan restricts logging to some extent, but clearcut logging and road building is currently allowed and planned by the DNR. Currently two timber sales are up for bid in the proposed Forest Reserve. Transferring ownership and management of this land from DNR to County Parks will remove the threat of commercial logging.

**Will the Landscape Plan still apply to the Forest Preserve?**

Yes. The Lake Whatcom Landscape Plan is a set of rules that the State Legislature passed in 2000 to protect Lake Whatcom from logging impacts on public lands in this sensitive watershed. If the county chooses to pursue restoration forestry the Landscape Plan will continue to apply within the county forest preserve because the state of Washington will remain the trustee of these lands.

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**How much latitude would future County governments have to change the management of the Lake Whatcom Forest Preserve?**

State law has strict mandates which govern the use of Forest Board lands that are reconveyed from DNR to County ownership and management. These laws require that the lands be managed for public park purposes as specified by a recreation plan. State law enables the state to recoup the lands if the lands cease to be used for park purposes.

**Does DNR support this?**

Under state law, counties can transfer forest board lands from DNR management for recreation purposes regardless of whether or not DNR is in agreement. We understand that DNR has agreed to work with the county because DNR sees this as an opportunity to consolidate the other types of commercial timberlands that they plan to continue managing for timber production.

**Will creation of the forest preserve require a change in zoning?**

No. These lands are zoned Commercial Forestry which allows trails and trailheads.

**Will this forest preserve lead to development of adjacent land?** Adjacent land is zoned Commercial Forestry which does not allow development of homes. We believe this area will remain in forestry far into the future. However, if a landowner were to request a zoning change, we believe that would face legal hurdles such as the state Growth Management Act and be denied by the County Council similar to such requests for rezoning Galbraith Mt.. The creation of a forest preserve will lead to greater awareness of the threat that development poses to water quality and the protection that old-growth forests provide. We believe hikers and water users will be even more motivated to join us in strong opposition to any zoning change requests.

**How much will this cost?**

This will cost very little because the County will not buy these lands, rather they will simply take over management from DNR. The County Parks Department estimates one-time transaction costs (appraisals, surveys, etc) will cost approximately \$296,000 and annual maintenance and operations will cost approximately \$100,000-\$150,000. There will be a small loss in revenue that would have been generated by DNR logging. While the loss in revenue is difficult to forecast due to fluctuating timber prices and other unknowns, DNR documents estimated these lands would have generated about \$185,000 in annual local revenue for the next 200 years. Regardless, the value of clean drinking water is priceless, and the residents of Bellingham recognize the tremendous value in having intact old-growth forests act as filtration for their water supply.

**Instead of creating a forest preserve, could the DNR revenue be used to protect Lake Whatcom from threats like development?**

We do not see logging as an appropriate or feasible pathway to generating revenue for Lake Whatcom protection because like development, logging causes sediment erosion and exacerbates the phosphorus pollution problem. Furthermore, only a very small percentage of the county monies could be utilized for lake protection efforts. For example, if the proposed forest preserve lands were logged and revenue were generated by DNR, state law mandates that funds generated be distributed in a similar manner to property taxes. Some money would go to the DNR, some to the state general fund, some to local taxing districts such as the Port, the School District, the Library, the County, etc.

**Why does Conservation Northwest support this?**

Aside from the enormous drinking water protection and recreational benefits, Conservation Northwest supports this proposal for its potential to provide habitat for wildlife. The forest preserve will ensure two large areas of native forest remain intact. These forests are mostly second growth and include some old-growth. Currently, these areas are home to marbled murrelet nesting sites and over time, we envision this area will become old-growth forest for families to enjoy and habitat for sensitive species.

**Is DNR planning to log while the County considers creating the forest preserve?**

Yes. While the County is working to create a forest preserve, DNR is proceeding with conventional logging. There are two timber sales proposed and they are a good example of what type of management we can expect from DNR if the forest preserve is not created. The "White Chanterelle" timber sale is 37 acres located above the Northshore trail and could result in a 1/2 mile of new logging roads. The "Look North" timber sale is 47 acres of mature second growth forest located on Lookout Mountain above Sudden Valley and could result in 2 miles of new logging roads. The timber sales are better than some, but still involve logging road building and clearcutting. The County Executive has asked DNR to postpone all logging within the proposed forest preserve.