

January 21, 2024

Whatcom County Climate Impact Advisory Committee

Whatcom County Council
311 Grand Avenue, Suite 105
Bellingham, WA 98225

Whatcom County Executive
311 Grand Avenue, Suite 108
Bellingham, WA 98225

RE: Candidate Parcels for DNR Natural Carbon Solutions Program Supported by the Climate Commitment Act

Dear Whatcom County Council and Executive Sidhu,

We appreciate Council's request for our committee's feedback on the recent proposal by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to use Climate Commitment Act (CCA) revenue to conserve 627 acres of structurally complex state forest lands in Whatcom County. We support Council's draft concurrence letter and urge you to move forward with DNR's carbon program.

Biodiverse and structurally complex forests provide numerous benefits, or ecosystem services, to our community. The CIAC recognizes the value of preserving the DNR-identified forest parcels in the Lake Whatcom Watershed (Anderson Creek) and along the middle fork of the Nooksack River (Brokedown Palace) to address climate change. Conserving these areas can sequester and store carbon for long periods of time and can also provide climate resilience benefits for our communities, our watersheds, and the broader ecosystem. The County needs to affirm the numerous co-benefits of preserving these forests, such as providing valuable wildlife habitat, improving our County's watershed health, and providing recreation, education and cultural opportunities.

In developing the County's 2021 Climate Action Plan, our committee determined that forest ecosystems in Whatcom County constitute its main carbon sink, yet these ecosystems have "high vulnerability" to climate change impacts such as wildfire, pest/disease outbreaks, and drought stress. Since biodiverse, maturing, and structurally complex forests are generally more resilient to climate impacts, preserving them is critical. The Climate Action Plan also identifies the need to enhance the resilience of our watersheds to climate impacts that threaten our freshwater resources, which support important economic sectors within Whatcom County such as agriculture and fisheries. Conserving these forests will alleviate potential threats to these water resources.

We were encouraged to see the legislature allocate funds from the CCA to compensate trust beneficiaries in perpetuity for state lands transferred to the DNR Natural Carbon Solutions Program. At the same time, we encourage you, as you move forward, to work with trust beneficiaries and the DNR to ensure that the transfer of lands does not cause hardship to beneficiaries who may face temporary deferral of potential trust income.

In light of the numerous potential benefits to our ecosystems and communities, we recommend that the county send a letter of concurrence authorizing DNR to move forward with this program before DNR's January 31 deadline.

We look forward to continuing to advise the County on topics relating to climate change mitigation and adaptation. Please reach out if you have any questions.

Whatcom County Climate Impact Advisory Committee by Unanimous Vote:

Charles Bailey, Suneeta Eisenberg, Derek Gremban, Stevan Harrell, Ray Kamada, Ellyn Murphy, Imran Sheikh, Phil Thompson, and Eddy Ury