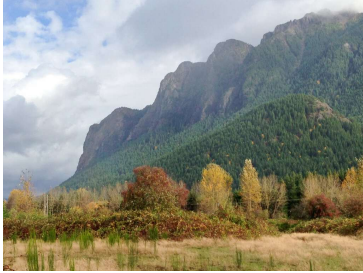


Opinion

The Seattle Times

We can't remain the Evergreen State without trust-land transfers

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The Mount Si Natural Resources Conservation Area protects more than 13,000 acres of forests, wildlife habitat and hiking destinations... (Luis Prado / Department of Natural Resources)

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Special to The Times

What if the public had a way to protect more iconic places like Mount Si and West Tiger Mountain? Don't you think we should be taking advantage of that opportunity? Oddly, the Legislature has defunded a tool called trust-land transfer in recent years, and it's time to reverse the trend.

A quick history lesson: Washington was given millions of acres at statehood by the federal government to provide nontax revenue for schools and other public institutions. In 1957, the Legislature created the Department of Natural Resources to oversee these state "trust lands" and improve their financial performance. The trust lands now total more than 3 million acres. Most trust lands are forests, so timber sales are the primary way for DNR to provide ongoing revenue for the state.

However, DNR has recognized that some trust lands are too valuable or too difficult to log. And the public has come to expect more from the state than just clear-cuts.

Under the trust-land transfer program, DNR uses state funding to "buy" trust land from itself. A portion of the funds generated from the purchase are used to buy revenue-

generating land elsewhere. But the bulk of the Legislature's funds are used for school construction, just as the timber revenue would have done. The trust land is then protected by DNR or other government agencies. It's a rare feat when the Legislature can fund schools and protect the environment without resorting to budget tricks.

DNR often targets timberland for trust-land transfer that is difficult to manage. The timber may be on slopes too steep to log or on small parcels that are inefficient from a cost perspective. By removing these nonproductive assets from the state trust and replacing them with revenue-generating assets, we are improving the financial condition of the state's balance sheet.

Since 1989, the trust-land transfer program has preserved our state's image as the Evergreen State. The transfer program ensures that the first glimpse of the San Juan Islands for ferry-going tourists isn't of clear-cuts. Today, Cypress Island stands as a beacon of nature to the world and the last largely undeveloped island in the San Juans.

If we keep trust-land transfer going, we can protect Devils Lake, a rare piece of undisturbed Hood Canal shoreline. We could save land along the Cascade River, home to challenging whitewater paddling and multiple salmon runs. And we could preserve ancient forests in a place called Morning Star that hosts at least six rare plant species.

Trust-land transfer is an extremely versatile tool. It can be used to protect endangered species, drinking water or regional trails. It also keeps millions of trees alive to sequester carbon from the atmosphere, key to fighting climate change.

Yet another upside to the transfer program is that much of this state land is located close to urban centers, so it's easy to access for recreation. You may have been hiking on a trail that exists only because of trust-land transfer, but you didn't know it. Hiked Mount Si? West Tiger? Mailbox Peak? Oyster Dome? All trust-land transfer projects.

The state is facing major challenges — a deadly pandemic, a budget crisis, thousands of residents unemployed and uncontrollable wildfires. Because of all these problems, DNR has reasonably decided that we shouldn't invest in big new trust-land transfers right now. But we can't let go of trust-land transfer completely. It's just too valuable.

Sadly, the Legislature has been shortsighted and limited funding for trust-land transfers recently. Luckily, our Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz has committed to a brighter future for trust-land transfer. She realizes its potential. But we, the public, need to advocate for the program if it is to continue.

Tell your legislators to keep trust-land transfers alive. Keep funding trust-land transfers like Devils Lake, Cascade River and Morning Star. It's key to making sure we remain the Evergreen State.

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