

New Law Expands Habitat Open Space Program

Local News

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OLYMPIA - Gov. Chris Gregoire today signed Senate Bill 5401, creating a habitat open space program to facilitate strategic acquisitions of the Northern Spotted Owl and other endangered species habitat located on private lands. The Washington State Legislature expanded the Riparian Open Space Program to include protection of state critical habitat for threatened or endangered species. The bill uses a market-based approach to acquire habitat from willing sellers, as funding is available. The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) currently purchases qualifying land and manages that land for ecological protection or fisheries enhancement. Under this new law, the Forest Practices Board will establish by rule a program for acquisition of riparian open space and critical habitat for threatened or endangered species. This acquisition must be a conservation easement.

A special work group of public, private, environmental and forestry interests appointed by the Washington State Forest Practices Board endorsed this legislation as a measure that will allow a way for non-federal lands in Washington to make strategic contributions to spotted owl conservation. The work group wants to thank the legislature for unanimously endorsing this incentive to protect critical habitat for threatened and endangered species. Also the group acknowledges the leadership of Senator Bob Morton of Kettle Falls and Representative Kevin Van De Wege from the Olympic Peninsula for sponsoring the bill. "This collaborative effort is an example of positive steps that can be taken when we all work together," said Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark. Shawn Cantrell, Executive Director for Seattle Audubon said, "This provides a valuable tool for protecting Northern Spotted Owls. Conservation easements can help on private forestlands with habitat for endangered species." Mark Doumit, Executive Director of the Washington Forest Protection Association stated, "This is landmark legislation. It creates an incentive for private landowners to enhance survival of an endangered species on their land." Robert Meier, Manager for Rayonier said, "This bill recognizes the value of wildlife habitat and private property in a way that brings people together to protect the environment." Dave Whipple, Forest Policy Coordinator, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife stated, "The Department believes incentives for forest landowners are very important, so the presence of threatened and endangered species can be an asset, not a liability." Miguel Perez-Gibson, Representative for National Audubon said, "During these tough economic times, we are encouraged the legislature increased safeguards for endangered species. This legislation is a good example of the market-based solutions we need." The Forest Practices Board Policy Working Group will make progress reports to the Forest Practices Board throughout the year. The group is scheduled to complete its work by November 2009. DNR managing your public lands Administered by Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark, DNR manages more than 5.6 million acres of state-owned forest, range, commercial, agricultural, conservation, and aquatic lands. DNR also: Provides wildfire protection for 12.7 million acres of private and state-owned forestlands. Administers Forest Practices rules and surface mine reclamation on state and private lands. Gives technical assistance for forestry and mining. Provides financial and grant assistance to local communities and individuals.