

Community partnerships protect forestland



Admiring the trees, a group of supporters learn about a 21-acre forest addition to NWI's Tarboo Wildlife Preserve, protected with easements held by the U.S. Navy and Jefferson Land Trust.

PHOTO COURTESY NORTHWEST WATERSHED INSTITUTE

Posted Wednesday, April 29, 2020 3:00 am

Leader news staff
news@ptleader.com

Driving down Center Road toward Quilcene, miles of trees flash by the car window, becoming a blur of green.

But the thick forests that border the road are more than just a pretty view on an afternoon drive.

These acres of forestland are teeming with life: salmon spawn in the streams shaded by native shrubs and trees. Beavers build dams and engineer the land. Owls and eagles make nests in the decaying tree snags, while bears crash through the undergrowth and coyotes silently slip through bushes.

Forests also store carbon, playing a role in fighting climate change and keeping the air healthy for humans and animals to breathe.

That's why when Jean Ball, a farmer and Quilcene resident, noticed three parcels that make up a 21-acre forest neighboring her land was going to be sold in 2018 and was likely to be clear cut for development, she jumped into action.

"The land has these beautiful, mature, huge fir and cedar trees," she said. "There are wetlands and habitat supporting various species, including apex predators like bears."

Ball was trying to figure out how she could borrow \$250,000 to buy the parcels, when she was contacted by Peter Bahls, director of the Northwest Watershed Institute, an organization that has been acquiring land in the Tarboo Watershed to protect and restore habitat since 2001.

He explained the three parcels were adjacent to land owned by NWI, as part of its restoration and permanent protection project in the watershed, and that NWI wanted to purchase them.

"So I said, 'How can I help?'" Ball said.

A little more than a year after that initial phone call, two separate forest properties on Center Road—Ball's neighboring 21-acre parcel, and another 30-acre parcel—have been conserved because of a coordinated effort by NWI and many local partners, including conservation lenders, the Jefferson Land Trust, the U.S. Navy, Jefferson County government, donors and a conservation buyer.

The forest land will make a 51-acre addition to NWI's Tarboo Wildlife Preserve, a 400-acre refuge for salmon that is part of the larger Tarboo Creek ecosystem, a place that 40 partners and landowners have worked to conserve since 2001.

According to Bahls, the land is a native older forest with outstanding wildlife habitat that stores tons of carbon in the trees and soil.

"Every acre of this mature forest is storing the rough equivalent of seven years of carbon emissions by an average American," he said. "Forests of the Pacific Northwest can store more carbon per acre than most other types of forests in the world and can play a key role in fighting climate change."

Soon after Bahls was alerted the original 21-acre parcel was for sale, a group of people in the community stepped forward to provide low-interest loans for the \$225,000 purchase of the land.

"We sent out a bunch of emails and within three days we had raised the money," Ball said.

Then, the NWI began raising money to pay back the loans and permanently conserve the forest for wildlife habitat and sustainable forestry.

The organization raised money by hosting field tours of the forestland, inspiring local community members to donate money. More than 100 people contributed.

NWI then worked with Jefferson Land Trust to protect the property in perpetuity. With funding from its Readiness and Environmental Protection Integration Program (REPI), the U.S. Navy purchased a restrictive easement on the property. REPI funding allows the land trust and the U.S. Navy to partner with willing landowners to conserve high-value farm, forest and wildlife habitat, thus protecting military installations and operating areas from development. These easements only remove development potential; they don't grant any rights to the military for use of the properties.

A second conservation easement that further restricts development was purchased by Jefferson Land Trust through Jefferson County's Conservation Futures Program. This county grant program is funded by a tax levy intended to support a system of open space, working farms, forests and habitat that provides public benefits. Last spring, the Tarboo forest project was reviewed and recommended for funding by the Conservation Futures Citizens Committee and approved by the Jefferson Board of County Commissioners.

The easement restrictions prevent development of the property and restricts logging to light selective harvests compatible with the restoration of mature forest habitat and carbon storage.

"It's really astonishing how much important farmland, forestland and wildlife habitat in Jefferson County has been protected through partnerships with the Navy and Jefferson County," said Sarah Spaeth, director of conservation at the Jefferson Land Trust.

After the 21-acre parcel was preserved, another 30-acre parcel of forestland came up for sale. Again, NWI reached out to community lenders to help the organization purchase the land.

Then, NWI got a call from a stranger in Seattle looking for land to preserve. The caller had attended a reading by Scott and Susan Freeman, whose book *Saving Tarboo Creek*, describes their work with NWI's Tarboo Watershed Project and makes the case for action at the local level.

"The conservation buyer was specifically looking for a piece of forestland to steward," Bahls said. "I said, 'We might just have something.'"

Last week, NWI worked with Jefferson Land Trust and the U.S Navy to place a restrictive easement on the 30-acre property, which was then sold to the anonymous conservation buyer.

According to Bahls, the new owner's plan is to allow logged patches to grow back, recover older forest habitat through selective thinning and to store carbon. The forest management plan for the property allows selective harvesting of timber products compatible with maintaining biologically diverse older forest habitats.

When social distancing protocols end, Northwest Watershed Institute will celebrate the new 21-acre addition to the Tarboo Wildlife Preserve with a party for donors and lenders. The event will be the first in an upcoming program to offer outdoor restoration education and stewardship activities in the Tarboo Watershed to the public by donation. Until then, the protected area remains closed and is monitored.

To request information about special hikes and events to be offered in the future, contact Jude Rubin, Director of Stewardship and Public Involvement: jude@nwwatershed.org. Potential conservation buyers and lenders interested in participating in the Tarboo watershed conservation effort should contact Northwest Watershed Institute at peter@wwatershed.org.