

# Why the plan to set aside 77,000 acres of forest won't help WA

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Washington's working forests system works; it should be strengthened, not undermined, writes the author. Pictured is a tree that was part of the Cabbage Patch Timber Sale in the Capitol Forest southwest of Olympia. (Erika Schultz / The Seattle Times, 2024)

By [Travis Joseph](#)

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Washington's Department of Natural Resources state trust lands are among the best-managed public forests in the nation. For decades, these working forests have provided funding for schools, fire districts, hospitals, libraries and counties. They also deliver clean water and air, wildlife habitat and sustainable, Washington-grown timber that is then turned into housing, utility poles and other renewable products.

Few states can point to a system that produces so many economic, social and environmental benefits from the same acres. By law, these lands must be managed to generate reliable revenue while meeting strict environmental standards.

[Every harvested acre is replanted](#); streams, habitat and cultural resources are protected. In Western Washington, about half of all trust lands are already off-limits to harvest, much of it older forests that will remain in reserve.

This balance is a success story. It's why schools and communities depend on timber revenues, and why Washington families rely on good-paying jobs in the woods and mills. That is why it is so disappointing to see Commissioner of Public Lands Dave Upthegrove, unilaterally and without a public process, disrupt this balance by ordering tens of thousands of acres of these forests closed to timber management.

On his first day in office, Upthegrove paused more than two dozen timber sales. That "six-month" pause stretched to eight, pushing DNR's timber program to its lowest output in 20 years. By the end of fiscal year 2025, DNR sold just 389 million board feet, nearly 200 million below plan. That shortfall cost schools and local governments an estimated \$60 million to \$70 million and left DNR with a \$25 million hole in management fees used for silviculture, staff salaries and stewardship.

Now the commissioner has removed 77,000 acres of mature forests with an estimated timber value of \$2 billion from DNR's working land base. If left to stand, this will inevitably result in a loss of revenue to trust beneficiaries and reduced harvest volumes. For schools, fire districts, hospitals and libraries, those lost revenues mean fewer teachers, resources and services. For rural economies, they mean fewer family-wage jobs.

Rather than rely on the proven balance of working forests, Upthegrove suggests replacing timber revenues with "ecosystem services" such as carbon offsets. That is a false solution. Offsets allow polluters to continue emitting while shifting the costs onto rural communities. Worse still, substituting offsets for Washington-grown wood means importing lumber or using more carbon-intensive materials, such as concrete and steel, which could increase global emissions. And no offset program can generate anywhere near the billions that sustainable timber harvests provide for schools and services.

Earlier this year, Upthegrove said his pause was needed to measure conservation goals under DNR's Habitat Conservation Plan. But the agency's own modeling, obtained through public records, showed those goals were already met. The HCP calls for 10%-15% of trust lands to be set aside as older, structurally complex forests. Today, 15.1% already meet that standard, with some planning units as high as 19.8%. Washington is decades ahead of schedule.

Shrinking the working forest base now will worsen Washington's housing shortage, weaken rural job markets, and destabilize the funding stream that trust beneficiaries rely on. Most concerning, Upthegrove announced this action unilaterally, bypassing the Board of Natural Resources and the Legislature, the institutions created to weigh major changes in trust land policy with transparency and public input.

Washington's working forests already achieve what many say is impossible: They support schools, sustain communities, protect habitat, and supply renewable wood products that store carbon and displace energy-intensive alternatives. They do all this under some of the strictest forest practices in the world. The system works. It should be strengthened, not undermined.

Undoing this balance jeopardizes revenues, jobs and public services while offering no measurable environmental gain. Beneficiaries, rural communities and the public should demand better. The Board of Natural Resources and the Legislature must restore stability and predictability for Washington's schools, services and communities.

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