



# Understanding the Elwha Watershed Study



**In 2025, the Washington State Legislature directed the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to analyze the ecological and conservation values of state trust lands in the Elwha watershed.** This work is funded by a \$250,000 appropriation in the Fiscal Year 2025 to 2027 Capital Budget ([SSB 5195](#), Sec. 3120).

The Elwha watershed is located on the northern Olympic Peninsula of Washington state. Most of the watershed lies within Olympic National Park. However, the lower portion of the watershed includes lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service, Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, private landowners, and DNR.

Within this watershed and across the state, DNR manages state trust lands to generate revenue for trust beneficiaries like counties and schools, and to meet a host of ecological and other goals. Revenue from timber harvest and other activities provides non-tax revenue for essential services and infrastructure.

## What Does the Elwha Watershed Study Involve?

This project involves gathering information on state trust lands in the Elwha watershed and preparing a report for the Legislature.

The DNR project team will gather information on the following:

- Structurally complex forests and scenic or natural features.
- Current uses of these lands, including recreation and cultural practices.
- Rare plants and native ecological communities in the watershed that are listed in the [2025 State of Washington Natural Heritage Plan](#). This “Natural Heritage” survey will be performed by team members in DNR’s [Natural Heritage Program](#).
- Public input and feedback, gathered through a series of public meetings.

As part of this process, DNR will conduct Government-to-Government consultations with the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe.



Due on October 1, 2026, the legislative report will summarize the team’s findings, including whether any of the state trust lands within the watershed should be included in a new DNR natural area. If yes, the report will include a proposed natural area boundary.

## What is a DNR Natural Area?

DNR designates and manages two types of Natural Areas. [Natural Area Preserves](#) (NAPs) protect the best remaining examples of many ecological communities, including rare plant and animal habitat. NAPs are managed solely for biodiversity conservation and research and education opportunities associated with these features. DNR manages 58 NAPs totaling 44,404 acres.

[Natural Resources Conservation Areas](#) (NRCA) protect outstanding examples of native ecosystems, habitat for endangered, threatened and sensitive plants and animals, and scenic landscapes. DNR manages 39 NRCA’s totaling 128,870 acres.

## Where is DNR in this Process?

DNR has assembled a project team and initiated the Natural Heritage survey. DNR has also [launched a project webpage](#), and initiated Government-to-Government Tribal consultation.

## Potential Next Steps After the Report is Submitted

Once the report is submitted, and if appropriate based on findings, DNR may initiate its formal process to establish a new natural area. This process requires a recommendation from the [Natural Heritage Advisory Council](#) and approval from the Commissioner for Public Lands, and will involve additional public outreach and Tribal consultation.

## How Do I Stay Informed?

[Visit the website](#) frequently for project updates and the dates, times, locations, and registration information for public meetings.

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