



Twin Sisters Range looking east from Skookum Creek Trail



A poignant symbol of the past and future of Skookum II found in Arlecho Creek near junction with Skookum Creek

Whatcom Land Trust Conservation Futures Grant Application for Acquisition of 1,000-Acre Skookum II Property January 7, 2021



Many tributaries cross the trail through Skookum II



The logging road across the valley divides the fate of Skookum II below the road if protected and above the road if not protected

Request: Whatcom Land Trust (WLT) requests a 1.5 million-dollar matching grant from the Conservation Futures Fund to purchase 1,000 acres of riparian forest land running nearly 2.5 miles on both sides of Skookum Creek, the major tributary supplying cold, clear water to the Nooksack's South Fork. Whatcom Land Trust now has the property, referred to as Skookum II, under contract for the appraised price of 3 million dollars. The grant would be a pledge payable on our raising the remaining money necessary to complete the transaction.

Accommodating the huge projected population increase in western Washington induced by climate change makes Skookum II an ideal farsighted, landscape scale project with multiple public benefits for Conservation Futures funding.

Background: In 2019, in what we call Skookum I, the Land Trust raised 2.6 million dollars to purchase 1,147 forested acres along lower Skookum Creek and adjacent Mustoe Marsh. In supporting that acquisition, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) wrote: "This purchase is one of the largest near-term conservation opportunities for the South Fork Nooksack and has outsized significance to the water quality, quantity and habitat benefits to all the living communities that rely on the South Fork Nooksack." Upstream Skookum II will have a like impact, connecting a wildlife corridor from the South Fork of the Nooksack River to an old growth forest at the base of the Twin Sisters.

The combined 2,147 acres of Skookum I and II, together with the WLT owned parcels along the South Fork, will enable us to manage this rich conservation resource on a long-term landscape scale. See attached map.

Aquatic Habitat: During times of low river flow, Skookum Creek supplies 22% of the South Fork's volume, ensuring a continuous supply of the cold, clear water needed for salmon reproduction. The Lummi Nation's Skookum Creek Hatchery, located near where Skookum Creeks joins the South Fork, depends on Skookum's water quality to pursue its mission to restore the South Fork's endangered spring Chinook run.

The South Fork is habitat for spring Chinook, late fall Chinook, coho, pink, chum and sockeye salmon, summer-and winter-run steelhead, bull trout, cutthroat, rainbow, and Dolly Varden trout. Spring Chinook and bull trout (a salmonoid species) are listed as threatened under the Federal Endangered Species Act. The viability of this habitat is at risk from high water temperature and turbidity.

Numerous landslides associated with logging and roads exist throughout the Skookum Creek watershed. Over a 40-year period, 263 landslides delivered sediment to streams in the Skookum Creek watershed. Of these, 75% were associated with timber harvest, landings and roads. Even with the degree of protection afforded by regulations on tree cutting in the immediate proximity of the waterway, ongoing clearcutting in the Skookum Creek basin accelerates runoff and raises the temperature of water running into the creek.

Protecting Skookum Creek's upstream riparian forest will help ensure a continued vital supply of cold, clear water to the Lummi Hatchery and South Fork of the Nooksack.

Terrestrial Habitat: Skookum Creek provides a critical link in the Cascades-to-Chuckanut Natural Area, the last relatively undeveloped corridor connecting the shores of the Salish Sea to

the Cascade Mountains. Elk, bear, cougar, deer, beaver, bobcat, and other species, increasingly likely to include wolves, inhabit the forested watershed, along with numerous smaller creature essential to the ecosystem. Nooksack elk utilize the corridor to move between winter foraging in the South Fork Valley and summer calving at the base of the Twin Sisters, as do black bears for seasonal migration.

Skookum II shares .6-mile border with The Nature Conservancy's 520-acre Arlecho Creek Old Growth Douglas Fir Forest Preserve. The preserve has one of the highest breeding densities for marbled murrelets in Washington. These small birds are referred to by the Audubon Society as "a strange, mysterious little seabird," and by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology as "a seabird that's also a forest bird." Marbled murrelets nest on old moss-covered Douglas fir and hemlock limbs and fly at dawn to forage in the saltwater, returning at dusk to feed their young fish. They are listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act and as endangered ("seriously threatened with extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range within the state") in Washington State.

Protection of Skookum II's 196 acre stand of 83-year-old Douglas fir and 192 acres of predominantly 68-73-year-old western hemlocks in the riparian management zone, both close to the Arlecho Preserve, will soon, if not already, support a 75% expansion of the nesting area. Even at the present, preserving the whole 1,000-acre Skookum Creek forest helps protect nesting murrelets from predators. Ravens, crows, and jays have all been documented to eat murrelet eggs and hatchlings. These predators are attracted to the wild berries that grow in clear-cuts. Permanently maintaining the Skookum II forest cover will deter this predatory practice.

The northern spotted owl, federally listed as threatened, and Washington State listed as endangered, is another species of interest given the proximity of Skookum II to TNC's old growth forest. Though we could find no record of spotted owls in this remote region, the Skookum Creek watershed is within the habitat range of the northern spotted owl and contains the requisite developing mature forests with abundant snags next to established old growth forests. Recent landscape-level analyses suggest that a mosaic of older forest habitat interspersed with other vegetation types, such as exists here, may benefit northern spotted owls more than large, homogeneous expanses of older forests.

Spotted owl conservation is a long-term project. Creating blocks of older habitat will serve as building blocks for bringing the species back. Upper Skookum Creek next to the Arlecho Creek old growth forest is an excellent place to start in Whatcom County.

Carbon Sequestering: "[I]n order to meet our climate goals, we have to have greater sequestration by natural systems now. So that entails protecting the carbon stocks that we already have in forests, or at least a large enough fraction of them that they matter.... The most effective thing that we can do is to allow trees that are already planted, that are already growing, to continue growing to reach their full ecological potential, to store carbon, and develop a forest that has its full complement of environmental services." William Moomaw (Helped found the Center for International Environment and Resource Policy; lead author on five reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change). This is exactly what we propose for Skookum II, and for Skookum I for that matter.

Recent research shows that while old growth forests store more carbon and continue to add carbon at a slowed pace, younger forest, forests less than 140 years old, sequester carbon at a faster rate than old growth forests. If protected, the 1,000 acres of Skookum II forest, with 389 acres in the 68 to 83-year-old age range and the rest less than 30-years-old, will have many decades, if not a century, of expeditious carbon sequestering.

Public Access: When combined with Skookum I, Skookum II will provide in a beautiful natural setting 5.3 miles of non-motorized public access along an existing forest roadway for hiking, biking, horseback riding, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing. The trail will terminate at Arlecho Creek with stunning views of the Twin Sisters Range. It will also enable public access to remote DNR state forestland northeast of Skookum II.

This Conservation Futures grant will benefit the public by creating exceptional recreation opportunities, by helping ensure cold, clear water essential to salmonoid species at the Lummi Hatchery and in the South Fork of the Nooksack, by protecting valuable wildlife habitat and the ecological integrity of a corridor connecting the South Fork Valley to the western slopes of the Cascade Mountains, and by sequestering carbon in the battle against the devastating consequences of global warming. All of these public benefits address the purpose and hopes of the voter approved Conservation Futures Fund, and all are critical ingredients to a sustainable future here in the Pacific Northwest.

Gabe Epperson, WLT Executive Director

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Exhibit A

