

“State sued over timber sale near Wallace Falls State Park” NOAH HAGLUND, EVERETT HERALD
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EVERETT — Environmental groups are suing to stop a company from logging a forest next to Wallace Falls State Park, following a state timber auction Wednesday.

The conflict involves the Singletary sale. The state land was the subject of a deal earlier this year between the Department of Natural Resources and Snohomish County. By removing 25 acres from the harvest, the sides aimed to protect scenery and trail networks at the popular state park. That left about 166 acres to log.

Three environmental groups sued Tuesday to stop the harvest, but the state went ahead with the auction the next day. Sierra Pacific Industries, which operates a mill in Burlington, put in the winning \$1.3 million bid.

“I’ve never seen a sale that makes less sense,” said Peter Goldman, a Seattle attorney working with the plaintiffs. “This is a logical expansion area for the park.”

Logging the Singletary tract would require building roads and bridges — an expense the lawsuit estimates at \$1 million. That infrastructure could open up future logging on another 1,500 acres of trust land near Wallace Falls.

The suit accuses the DNR of taking an aggressive approach to logging the area and neglecting to follow laws designed to keep impacts in check. The agency denies the allegations.

Pilchuck Audubon Society, Friends of the Wild Sky and Skykomish Valley Environmental & Economic Alliance brought the suit. They want to void the sale, force the state to perform a full environmental impact statement and recoup any legal expenses. The case was filed in Snohomish County Superior Court by Wyatt F. Golding, an attorney with offices in Seattle.

While state officials say they took appropriate steps to study the likely effects of logging, the suit claims they didn’t go far enough. The plaintiffs say the sale needs to be re-examined in light of removing 25 acres for what essentially would become a county park adjoining Wallace Falls. The suit says the trees that would be logged date from the 1930s to the 1950s.

Along with the DNR, defendants in the case include the agency’s leader, Hilary Franz, who was elected state commissioner of public lands in November. It also names the Board of Natural Resources, whose responsibilities include approving DNR timber sales. Franz serves as the board chairperson.

A DNR supervisor said the agency has tried to balance its responsibilities to support local governments, protect the environment and give people chances to enjoy the outdoors.

“In this instance, a great deal of work has gone into finding a solution around the Singletary sale that satisfies, to the best of our ability, DNR’s trust mandate, the health of the habitat and providing ample recreational opportunities in the area,” said Angus Brodie, DNR’s deputy supervisor of state uplands. “This sale has been in the works for nearly a decade and the Board of Natural Resources had decided to vote on the sale even before the new commissioner of public lands had arrived in office.”

The forest is managed by the state in trust for the county. Of the \$1.3 million sales price, the state takes a 25 percent management cut. The rest goes to local governments and the state's schools budget.

The largest piece — more than \$400,000 — is headed to the Sultan School District, according to DNR estimates. More than \$230,000 will go to state school funds. The county's roads budget will get another \$150,000, the county general budget \$87,000 and the local fire district \$50,000. Smaller chunks get parceled out to Sno-Isle Libraries, Valley General Hospital and a county program to preserve land as open space and natural areas.

Sierra Pacific Industries has until Sept. 30, 2020 to log the land. The Anderson, California-based company operates four mills in Washington. Timber from Singletary would be processed at its Burlington mill, which employs more than 200 people, company spokeswoman Lisa Perry said. It was too early to provide a timetable for when the harvest might take place, she said.

From the company's point of view, the state has already studied the environmental impacts. Recreation won't suffer because of the logging, Perry contends.

"They aren't mutually exclusive," she said. "That's a common misconception that's out there. A lot of the lands we enjoy hiking on are working forests."

Wallace Falls State Park draws about 175,000 visitors each year. The logging area also is close to the federally managed Wild Sky Wilderness Area.

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