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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Victory for Conservation: State Budget Secures Critical Funding to Protect Elwha Watershed

OLYMPIA, WA — In a major win for environmental protection, the final Washington State legislative budget agreement includes \$250,000 to begin the process to secure protection for the Elwha River Watershed — a vital source of drinking water, critical habitat for salmon and other wildlife, as well as cultural heritage.

The newly approved budget allocates funding for the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to begin formal assessments required for the creation of a Natural Resources Conservation Area (NRCA) in the Elwha Watershed. This move should help bring forest practices into alignment with the \$328 million already spent on river restoration after the Elwha River became one of the largest dam removal projects in US history.

The City of Port Angeles has asked DNR multiple times to pause logging in the Elwha Watershed and consider different stewardship approaches. The Elwha River is the sole water source for Port Angeles and for 25% of Clallam County.

NRCAs protect native ecosystems, habitat for endangered, threatened and sensitive plants and animals, scenic landscapes, and places of cultural and historical significance. Currently, more than 127,000 acres are protected across Washington's 39 NRCAs — and the Elwha may soon join their ranks.

Senator Mike Chapman, Chair of the State Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee explained that he championed the measure because “we need a well thought out solution to what’s happening with the forest lands in the Elwha Watershed. This gives us the opportunity to work collaboratively on the bigger picture, to identify priority areas for conservation, and to use the tools we have to buy replacement lands in areas better suited for logging.”

The push to conserve the Elwha watershed has grown steadily since 2022, when community outcry followed a major DNR timber sale that clearcut mature forests near the river. That outcry sparked the formation of the Elwha Legacy Forests Coalition, a broad alliance of tribal citizens, conservationists, scientists, and local leaders calling for a more sustainable vision for forest and ecosystem management in the watershed.

In 2023, legal action from the Earth Law Center challenged another proposed timber sale — and former Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz ultimately canceled it. “Exploring the creation of an NRCA in the Elwha Watershed is an important next step toward a stewardship framework that sees the forest, river, salmon, and all of us an interconnected whole,” said Elizabeth Dunne, Earth Law Center’s Director of Legal Advocacy.

“We worked tirelessly to remove the dams that blocked salmon from migrating up the Elwha River. Our Salmon are returning, but intact forest ecosystems are essential to the success of restoration efforts led by our people. Nature has to be in balance. My hope is that this work will return us to a more respectful relationship with the landscape,” said Ms. Linda Wiechman, Lower Elwha Klallam Tribal elder and member of the Elwha Legacy Forests Coalition. “We have harvested native plants from these forests since time immemorial. These are our usual and accustomed gathering areas. Part of our way of life,” she said.

Center for Responsible Forestry and Earth Law Center, which has an ongoing campaign to protect the Elwha Watershed, assisted with the measure.