



Board of County Commissioners
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Port Townsend, WA 98368

Heather Dudley-Nollette, District 1 Heidi Eisenhour, District 2 Greg Brotherton, District 3

August 3rd, 2026

Representative Emily Randall
1531 Longworth House Bldg
Washington, D.C. 20515

RE: Input Regarding The Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe Land Transfer Act of 2026

Dear Representative Randall:

On behalf of Jefferson County, Washington, we write to convey input we've received regarding "The Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe Land Transfer Act of 2026." As you well know, this legislation proposes to transfer National Wildlife Refuge lands, including the Dungeness and Protection Island National Wildlife Refuges, to the Bureau of Indian Affairs to be held in trust for the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe. One central piece of input we've gotten from residents of Jefferson County is a desire for more public engagement about this proposal. There are folks who still live in Jefferson County who were part of getting Protection Island, located within Jefferson County, designated as a National Wildlife Refuge originally in 1982 with passage of Public Law 97-383 by the U.S. Congress. You can probably understand why they feel 'caught off guard' by the transfer idea.

That said, The Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe is a highly collaborative and well-respected partner to Jefferson County, and we recognize the deep historical and cultural connections that the Tribe maintains with the lands and waters impacted by this legislation. These sites are not only central to the Tribe's heritage but are also integral to the ecological health and quality of life for our entire region. Protection Island is of particular importance as critical nesting habitat for tufted puffins, rhinoceros auklets, glaucous-winged gulls, and many other species of seabirds and raptors. The waters surrounding the island provide essential grounds for a variety of marine mammals, and its shoreline supports a WA Department of Natural Resources-designated marine aquatic reserve.

While the County recognizes the historical and cultural ties the Tribe maintains with these lands, we've received several questions as to whether title transfer is necessary for long-term stewardship. The Tribe's 2024 self-governance agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) has demonstrated success in habitat research and infrastructure improvements. And there is concern about losing protections provided with oversight by the USFWS. We've also heard concern regarding the Trump Administration's issuance of an order in late 2025 for a 'comprehensive review' of all wildlife refuges including Protection Island. Given the current proven model of collaborative management, we've been asked whether maintaining or expanding this agreement could serve as a viable, permanent alternative to a transfer into trust status, ensuring continued federal oversight while honoring Tribal expertise.

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Since assuming management of the island, the Tribe has revitalized habitat research studies, rebuilt the access road, and initiated vegetative management to support island prairie habitat. They are doing a good job. It is our sense that if the island were transferred into trust, the Tribe would continue to manage it to a standard that would meet or exceed federal requirements. Jefferson County has familiarity with the Tribe's land management through the Tamanowas Rock Sanctuary and trail network, which are open to the public and well monitored by the Tribe. Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe and Jefferson Land Trust partnered on the acquisition of Tamanowas Rock sanctuary lands in Chimacum from 2009 to 2012, and the area showcases the Tribe's ability to steward lands for cultural purposes, conservation, and public access. However, we've also heard concerns from several constituents that the Tribe may take a more business-forward approach in managing Protection Island and, in neighboring Clallam County, Dungeness Spit Refuge lands.

Furthermore, we have observed a recurring argument among some opponents who use the phrase "public land in public hands" to justify federal retention. Within the context of our region's history, there is a certain irony and arrogance in this framing. It overlooks the historical reality of colonization and the systemic dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands. To claim these areas are only "public" when under federal control ignores the thousands of years of stewardship practiced by Tribes prior to European arrival.

The County is also monitoring broader concerns regarding the current erosion of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Specifically, the recent redefinition of "harm" to habitat creates uncertainty regarding the long-term protection of sensitive species like the tufted puffin and rhinoceros auklet. There is a clear concern as to what these shifting federal definitions imply for the future of specialized habitats if they are removed from the explicit protections of the National Wildlife Refuge System under the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Finally, we acknowledge that our office has received ongoing questions from constituents regarding the deeper Tribal history associated with these lands. There is a clear and urgent need for a more comprehensive and transparent dialogue on these topics. Before proceeding with such a significant legislative change, it is essential that all stakeholders have a thorough understanding of the historical and ecological stakes involved.

For these reasons, Jefferson County urges the delegation to carefully consider these complexities before advancing the Act. We appreciate your consideration of these concerns as we seek solutions that protect our region's ecological integrity and honor its complex history.

Sincerely,

Heather Dudley-Nollette, Dist. 1

Heidi Eisenhour, Dist. 2

Greg Brotherton, Dist. 3- Chair

CC: W. Ron Allen, Chairman
Hansi Hals, Natural Resources Director
Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe