

HOUSE BILL REPORT

ESSB 6231

As Reported By House Committee On:
Natural Resources

Title: An act relating to natural area preserves.

Brief Description: Limiting the near-term growth of the natural area preserve program, and providing for a study of the program.

Sponsors: Senate Committee on Natural Resources & Parks (originally sponsored by Senators Hargrove, Anderson, Snyder, Swecker, T. Sheldon, Oke and Goings).

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Natural Resources: 2/25/98, 2/27/98 [DPA].

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES

Majority Report: Do pass as amended. Signed by 10 members: Representatives Buck, Chairman; Sump, Vice Chairman; Thompson, Vice Chairman; Regala, Ranking Minority Member; Butler, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Alexander; Chandler; Eickmeyer; Hatfield and Pennington.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 1 member: Representative Anderson.

Staff: Linda Byers (786-7129).

Background: In 1972, the Legislature chose to create a state system of natural area preserves. Natural area preserves are areas of land or water which have retained their natural character, although not necessarily completely natural or undisturbed, or which are important in preserving rare or vanishing flora, fauna, geological, natural historical or similar features of scientific or educational value. The Legislature assigned management responsibility for state-owned natural area preserves to the Department of Natural Resources. The department currently manages 45 such preserves encompassing approximately 25,000 acres.

In 1987, the Legislature chose to create a system of natural resources conservation areas. These are state properties managed for "conservation purposes," which include maintaining, enhancing, and restoring ecological systems, maintaining exceptional scenic

landscapes, maintaining habitat for threatened, endangered, and sensitive species, enhancing sites for primitive recreational purposes, and outdoor environmental education. The Legislature also assigned management responsibility for these areas to the Department of Natural Resources. The department currently manages 24 natural resources conservation areas encompassing approximately 51,000 acres.

Of the 45 natural area preserves, six are in Grays Harbor County: Carlisle Bog (310 acres), Chehalis River Surge Plain (2,307 acres), Goose Island (12 acres), North Bay (659 acres), Sand Island (8 acres), and Whitcomb Flats (5 acres). Four are in Pacific County: Bone River (2,444 acres), Gunpowder Island (152 acres), Niawiakum River (797 acres) and Willapa Divide (275 acres). The department reports that it is in the process of developing a management plan for the Chehalis River Surge Plain preserve and that a management plan revision is in process for the Bone River preserve.

Summary of Amended Bill: The Department of Natural Resources is precluded from adopting a new management plan for any natural area preserve in Grays Harbor and Pacific counties before January 10, 1999.

The Senate Natural Resources and Parks Committee must study the following aspects of the natural area preserves program: (1) the potential impact, if any, of defining preserve boundaries which encompass land that has not yet been purchased for the program; (2) the correlation between the goals and purposes of the preserve program and the conservation areas program and the potential use of both programs in selected areas; (3) the current procedures that ensure the adequacy of local public input concerning preserve boundaries and management; and (4) the criteria and scientific methods used to ensure that preserves fulfill the purposes of the program.

Amended Bill Compared to Engrossed Substitute Bill: In the underlying bill, one of the subjects to be studied by the Senate committee was the correlation between the goals and purposes of the preserve program and the conservation areas program and the potential integration of the two programs in selected areas. The amended bill directs the committee to study the potential use of both programs in selected areas.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date of Amended Bill: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: The Chehalis River Surge Plain does not really fit the criteria for a preserve. Local residents do not want condominiums or other development in the area, but they do have concerns about the proposed management. Perhaps only part of it should be a preserve. People in the Elk River conservation area do not want to be within

the boundary and cannot get out. The Senate wants to look at these issues over the interim before more management plans are adopted. We need this study to address a number of concerns about the program. Keeping people off of public lands does not bring in tourist dollars. It is too bad that this only applies to two counties and one year. The study is needed. The program has been underway for some 30 years so it is timely to see where it has been, where it is going, and where to fine-tune. Much of the controversy is over reasonable public access. Some groups have long wanted to create a rails-to-trails project in the surge plain area.

Testimony Against: We support expansion of the preserve program in all counties. Integrating the two programs will not offer the needed level of protection. The preserves take up only a small percentage of lands in the state. A House bill this year will open the program to more public involvement, which will help. Far too little land is preserved now. There is twice as much land in conservation areas as in preserves. The lands that are designated preserves have been studied thoroughly to designate them as preserves.

Testified: Senator Hargrove, prime sponsor; Brian Blake, Grays Harbor citizen; Allan Hollingsworth; Mark Paulsen, land owner; Jay Sterling, Grays Harbor citizen (all in favor); Marie Poland, Washington citizen; Josh Baldi, Washington Environmental Council; Markus Tengesdal, U.S. and Washington citizen (all opposed); and Susie Tracy and Len Barson, The Nature Conservancy.