

This is KPTZ 91.9FM in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Nigel O'Shea bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, August 12, 2026.

In the swirling waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, a small, windswept island has become part of a collision between tribal sovereignty, conservation, and public access. Protection Island National Wildlife Refuge, a home for thousands of seabirds and marine mammals and one stubborn human holdout, is now at the heart of an emotional debate over who should control America's public lands.

The debate stems from a developing proposal to transfer the land from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which currently co-manages it with the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe, to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, where the land would be fully managed by the Tribe. Protection Island's journey to protected status began in the 1930s when ornithologists recognized it as critical seabird habitat. In the 1960s, Seattle Audubon Society member Zella Schultz began studying and banding glaucous-winged gulls there, launching a campaign to convince the state or federal government to purchase and protect the island.

When Schultz died in 1974, her friend Eleanor Stopps vowed to continue the fight. Stopps testified before the Washington State Legislature and U.S. Congress, leading a nine-year grassroots effort that finally succeeded in 1982 when Congress allocated four million dollars to create Protection Island National Wildlife Refuge. Stopps was later named Jefferson County's Citizen of the Century.

The refuge designation came not a moment too soon. In the late 1960s, Seattle investors had subdivided the island into some eight hundred vacation lots, complete with plans for roads, a marina, and an airstrip. Today, the 370-acre island hosts 72% of the nesting seabirds in Puget Sound, including an estimated 36,000 pairs of rhinoceros auklets, one of the largest colonies in North America, and one of the last remaining nesting colonies of tufted puffins in the region. Approximately one thousand harbor seals depend upon the island for pupping and rest.

One of those 1970s buyers was Marty Bluewater, then twenty-three years old. In 1971 he purchased a lot on the island's high bluff for seven thousand dollars. When the conservationists prevailed in 1982, landowners were offered buyouts. Those who had built homes were offered residencies of fifteen years, twenty-five years, or lifetime use. Bluewater was the only one who chose the lifetime option. Today, he remains the island's sole resident in a cabin without electricity, heated by a wood-burning stove fueled with driftwood.

Bluewater, who has Native American heritage and served as CEO of the United Indians of All Tribes Foundation, has become a supporter of the Tribe's management efforts. In a recent exchange with the *Beacon*, he said, "I am totally supportive of this moving forward. The Tribe will do a much better job in protecting the wildlife values of both Dungeness and Protection Island....They have already, under the present short-term agreement, completed many improvements that were in limbo with the Fish and Wildlife folks."

In August 2024, the Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe signed a historic co-management agreement with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the first of its kind in Washington state. Under the agreement, tribal staff took over day-to-day operations at both Dungeness and Protection Island refuges through the Self-Governance Program established by the 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act. The Tribe is now seeking full ownership through transfer to the Bureau of Indian Affairs, held in trust for the Tribe. The Jamestown S'Klallam Tribe Land Transfer Act of 2026, still in early development, is a proposed federal piece of legislation supported by U.S. Representative Emily Randall and U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell.

An online petition opposing the transfer has gathered over seventeen hundred signatures, started by Port Angeles retiree Rose Marschall on behalf of the Clallam Freedom Alliance, a group launched in 2020 to oppose COVID-19 public health mandates. Opposing concerns expressed to Jefferson County commissioners range from worries about loss of public voice regarding management, to concerns about wildlife welfare and whether bird protections would remain, to fears that plans may change and include development, to questions about accountability if management moves from U.S. Fish and Wildlife to the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The local land transfer legislation has not been introduced in Congress. Jefferson County commissioners have delayed action on sending letters of support, citing the need for more public engagement and clarity on federal funding and protections.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and five Tuesday through Thursday partnering on Wednesday to bring you stories from the Jefferson County *Beacon*. This is Nigel O'Shea, thanks so much for listening.