Deal secures 3,000 acres of forest near Mount St. Helens

In 2013, Columbia Land Trust purchased about 2,300 acres of land on the east side of Pine Creek near Mount St. Helens. The Vancouver-based nonprofit on Monday announced a conservation easement and purchase that will together secure another 3,000 acres west of Pine Creek. The land will be protected from development, but remain in active forestry.

By **Eric Florip**, Columbian Transportation & Environment Reporter
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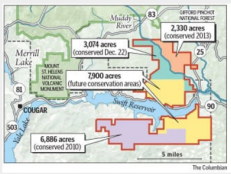

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Columbia Land Trust on Monday announced the conservation of more than 3,000 acres of forestland near Mount St. Helens, the latest phase in an ongoing effort by the organization to prevent development in the area.

The Vancouver-based nonprofit purchased development rights on the land, which will remain under the ownership of timber company Pope Resources. It will also remain in active forestry and produce tax-generating timber harvests, according to the land trust.

"This landmark project shows what can be achieved when a timber company, a conservation group and public leaders put their heads together to find lasting conservation solutions that benefit both people and nature," Columbia Land Trust Executive Director Glenn Lamb said in a released statement.

The $1.1 million deal is part of the Mount St. Helens Forest Conservation project, which aims to protect more than 20,000 acres of land near Swift Reservoir in Skamania County from development. The land trust secured nearly 6,900 acres south of the reservoir through a conservation easement in 2010. The organization acquired another 2,300 acres in the outright purchase of a second parcel along the east side of Pine Creek in 2013. This agreement added 3,087 acres mostly through an easement, though the land trust also purchased 210 acres along the west bank of Pine Creek, protecting critical habitat for endangered bull trout and other wildlife, according to the organization. The deal was funded by a grant from the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program.

For the fourth and final phase of the project, the land trust has its eyes on another 7,900 acres spanning both sides of Swift Reservoir. All four parcels sit to the south of Mount St. Helens.

The project has been generally welcomed by leaders in Skamania County, which depends more heavily on timber revenue than other counties. About 80 percent of the county is federally owned — most of that in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest — and another 10 percent is private timberland.

"We do support it because it keeps it in a working forest capacity, where at some point in time it does pay (taxes)," said Skamania County Commissioner Chris Brong.

The effort began several years ago after controversy swirled around housing developments popping up on privately owned forests in the area. Columbia Land Trust began working with Skamania County and Pope Resources, the county's largest private landowner, around 2006. The goal was a pragmatic solution, said Jon Rose, president of Olympic Property Group, Pope Resources' real estate subsidiary.

"Rather than viewing conservation, forestry and development as competing interests, the partners' goal was to achieve a balance of these interests with a special emphasis on the long-term maintenance of working forests," Rose said in a released statement.

Columbia Land Trust hopes to complete the final phase of the Mount St. Helens Forest Conservation project in 2016.

Eric Florip
Columbian Transportation & Environment Reporter
360-735-4541
@ericflorip
Send an Email