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Columbia Land Trust Conserves 20,000 acres at Mount St. Helens

Conservation group Columbia Land Trust and a timber company Pope Resources find common ground, complete decade-long plan benefitting local forestry and wildlife.

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VANCOUVER, WA— Columbia Land Trust today announced the culmination of a conservation effort more than a decade in the making on the southern slopes of Mount St. Helens. In the fourth and final phase of the effort, the Land Trust, in partnership with Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR), facilitated the purchase of a conservation easement on 7,800 acres of working forestland in Skamania County.

Across four phases, the Land Trust's Mount St. Helens Forest Conservation Plan permanently protects from development 20,000 acres of forestland surrounding the east end of Swift Reservoir.

"The plan we put forward a decade ago represented a shift in the Land Trust's approach to landscape-scale strategies that take time," said Cherie Kearney, forest conservation director for Columbia Land Trust.

Columbia Land Trust, Poulsbo-based timber company Pope Resources, and Skamania County developed the conservation plan in response to a crisis of unchecked development. In the mid-2000s, real estate developers started purchasing forest land, building cabins, and planning resort communities around Swift Reservoir in the far reaches of northeast Skamania County. Concerned about the county's ability to provide services to the remote area, commissioners considered re-zoning—a move that prompted Pope Resources, the largest private landowner in the area, to threaten litigation.

The Land Trust offered a way forward—a balanced plan to avert the fragmentation of working forestlands and wildlife habitat, while also allowing Pope Resources to continue forestry operations and retain some ability to develop its land.

"To build an informal partnership between a county government, a conservation group and a timber company, we all had to challenge our preconceived notions a little bit," said Jon Rose, president of Olympic Property Group, Pope Resources' real estate subsidiary. "It required a great deal of trust."

Three of the four phases of the plan involved purchasing conservation easements on working forest lands owned by Pope Resources. Collectively, these easements extinguished development rights on 17,600 acres

while allowing them to remain in active forestry, providing vital tax revenue to the county. Funding for the most recent and final phase of the Mount St. Helens Forest Conservation Plan was provided by the U.S. Forest Service through a Forest Legacy grant.

"Thanks to generous funding from the U.S. Forest Service, this large swath of prime forest will remain just that: forest, never to be developed," said state Lands Commissioner Hilary Franz, who oversees the Department of Natural Resources which retains several of the new easements and helped to secure funding for three of the plan's four phases. "The people of Washington gain the assurance that this working forest will continue to provide jobs to the local economy, clean water, habitat and open land for generations to come."

In 2013, during the second phase of the deal, Columbia Land Trust purchased a 2,330-acre property from Pope Resources dubbed Pine Creek East. With this purchase, the Land Trust protected the area along Pine Creek, a tributary of the Lewis River and critical habitat for threatened bull trout. In the five years since acquiring the property, Columbia Land Trust has begun a forest restoration effort that will help the area develop the complex characteristics of a natural, old-growth forest.

The area provides vital habitat for a diverse array of wildlife, including black bear, cougar, deer, elk, spotted owl, and potentially even long-extirpated species such as fisher, wolverine, and gray wolf.

"Congratulations to the Land Trust, Pope Resources, and the funding partners who have created a new way to conserve the environment and assure community well-being" said Tom Tuchmann, President of US Forest Capital, whom the Land Trust engaged to help develop and negotiate the conservation strategy.

The Land Trust's 12-year journey to protect a vital swath of forest habitat between the Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument and the Gifford Pinchot National Forest offers a framework for collaborative forest conservation throughout the Northwest. Moving forward, the Land Trust is working to replicate this approach in vital landscapes across the lower Columbia River region through its 25-year conservation agenda.

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About Columbia Land Trust

Founded in 1990, Columbia Land Trust conserves and cares for the vital lands, waters and wildlife of the Columbia River region. The nonprofit has 3,000 members and has conserved more than 32,000 acres of land in 14 counties around the Columbia River, from the John Day River near The Dalles, Oregon, to the Pacific Ocean. Columbia Land Trust has earned accreditation from the Land Trust Alliance, which recognizes those land trusts that adhere to national standards for excellence, uphold public trust with rigorous ethical standards, and take steps to ensure that conservation efforts are permanent.

In 2017, Columbia Land Trust launched its conservation agenda, a 25-year vision for a Northwest that is vibrant, thriving, and wild. The agenda prioritizes vital lands across the five ecologically distinct regions of the lower Columbia River, and outlines objectives in each region. Learn more at columbialandtrust.org/fearless