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BLM's Ore. Monument Expansion Applauded by Enviro Groups

By Taryn Luntz, E&E Reporter

Oregon's Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument – the nation's first monument created solely for the preservation of biodiversity – gained 900 acres this month using proceeds from offshore gas and oil drilling.

In what advocates hope could be the first of many such sales, the Bureau of Land Management made the \$1 million purchase from the conservation group Pacific Forest Trust using money appropriated from the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Pacific Forest Trust owns 4,100 more acres in the monument's planning area, land the group purchased from timber companies as it became available and that it hopes to sell to BLM in the future.

"We're hoping that funding will become more available under the current administration, and we've heard a lot of hints to that effect," said John Bernstein, the trust's vice president for conservation. "Of course, we're in a federal budget crisis, so all we can do is hope."

Adding to the monument is a "very high priority" for BLM, as it would help the agency connect a checkerboard of federally owned land and improve passageways and flyways for a variety of wildlife in the area, said Howard Hunter, assistant monument manager for BLM. "But it would have to be important to Congress and the new administration, as well," he said.

While the Land and Water Conservation Fund has been authorized to receive up to \$900 million a year

since 1977, funding has reached that limit only once, with the unappropriated money diverted to the federal Treasury.



A view of the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument.
Courtesy of the Pacific Forest Trust.

Former President George W. Bush's budget request for the fund for fiscal 2009 was \$50 million, a 67 percent drop from the 2008 level.

The monument itself sits in one of the most biodiverse areas in the world, nestled in southern Oregon at the convergence of the rough Siskiyou Mountains, volcanic Northern Cascade Mountains and dry Great Basin.

It was established in 2000 to help conserve a region that is home to more than 3,500 plant and animal species, many of which are found nowhere else.

The monument holds the most biodiverse conifer forests in the world, according to Bernstein, and is home to critical wetlands, pristine trout streams and a portion of the Pacific Crest Trail.

But the 52,000-acre monument is only 60 percent federally owned and conserved, giving it the dubious honor of having the highest percentage of privately owned land of any monument in the country.

Both Bernstein and Hunter are cautiously optimistic about connecting more of the monument's fragmented territories, but neither is certain the money will come soon.

"This is a priority project in the state and the BLM, but there are no guarantees right now," Hunter said.