

Editorial: Easement has a little something for everybody

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Every once in a while every one of us should take the time to stop and look around. It's so easy to get used to being surrounded by lush forests (even in the drought) and majestic volcanoes, that we sometimes forget what an important part those resources play in our lives.

After all, we live here. So maybe the report last week about the latest hunk of private property to be slated for a conservation easement didn't exactly whip up grand excitement. But it should.

The property in question is 12,805 acres straddling the Shasta and Siskiyou county lines west of McCloud. The land is owned by the Hancock Timber Resource Group, the world's largest timberland investment manager for institutional investors.

The Pacific Forest Trust, based in San Francisco, includes this particular forest land in its larger plan to preserve major parcels in the Klamath-Cascade Region. The trust's website says the land was threatened by encroaching residential development. Buying the easement that would protect Hancock's holdings is a step in the right direction.

But the easement comes at a price — \$11.7 million, to be precise. Some \$9 million of that money comes by way of a state Wildlife Conservation Board grant recently awarded for the purpose. The trust is hoping for federal dollars and donations to pay the rest. (www.pacificforest.org).

In return, Hancock will continue to log the forest — sustainably — and open it to the public.

Laurie Wayburn, president and CEO of the forest trust, said the goal is to allow the public access by next summer. Motorized vehicles and overnight camping won't be allowed, but there will be access to the McCloud River, 68 miles of other watercourses and 16 miles of fish-bearing streams, which should thrill kayakers and fishers. There are miles of logging roads and trails.

In addition, there are springs aplenty — 131 of them, and wet meadows. Some 8 percent of the property is old forest growth and in addition to all the conifers, there are aspen groves and oak stands.

An estimated 127 different species live on the land, including 17 special status plants and animals like the spotted owl and the McCloud redband trout.

The land is a working forest, which means over time that various areas will be blocked off while loggers do their work.

The working forest is the second important component of the plan and it's vital. The conservation agreement essentially guarantees that the forest will continue to offer employment where unemployment is rampant.

On its website the trust notes that there are only two mills now operating in Siskiyou County, down from 20 in 1970. Hancock Timber Resource Group employs 10 full-time workers and uses another 30-to-50 part-timers in its logging operation. That's good news for Siskiyou County loggers.

It's good to see such a beautiful and diverse piece of property preserved for all of us. And it's comforting to know this part of our North State heritage will remain as it is, jobs intact, for generations to come.

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