

# Forests around reservoir protected.

## Deal will protect 20,000 acres from development

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*The Columbia Land Trust has reached an agreement that will protect 20,000 acres of commercial forestland south of Mount St. Helens on both sides of Swift Reservoir from development. (FILES/The Columbian)*

A 20,000-acre swath of commercial forestland south of Mount St. Helens on both sides of Swift Reservoir will be protected from development under an agreement between the land's owner, Pope Resources, and the Columbia Land Trust.

The agreement, the largest ever negotiated by the Vancouver-based trust, will set aside private forestland that provides critical habitat for fish and wildlife in an area that has been fragmented by residential development in recent years. The land trust will buy development rights or purchase land outright to save it from further development.

Glenn Lamb, the trust's executive director, said the agreement is the first step in the realization of a long-held goal.

"We've had a vision of tens of thousands of acres of interconnected lands, with people and communities engaged in and committed to their conservation," he said. "This project is a dramatic step forward in accomplishing that vision. But we still have some work to do."

For its part, Pope Resources hopes to eventually develop about 4,000 acres of its property north of the reservoir with home sites, a hotel, restaurants and other amenities to serve tourists visiting Mount St. Helens and the Columbia River Gorge.

That would require a zoning and land use change from Skamania County.

The company's tree farm represents 25 percent of all private land in Skamania County. Property for which development rights have been sold would remain on the county's tax rolls as commercial forest land.

Lamb said his staff approached Pope a year and a half ago, soon after Olympic Property Group, the company's real estate division, subdivided its 24,000-acre tree farm into 20-acre lots to protect its development options.

The company took that defensive action after the county rejected its application to build 800 homes on about 400 acres north of Swift Reservoir. But Olympic Properties president Jon

Rose said at the time that the company's preference was to reach a compromise that would allow it to develop a small portion of its land while still protecting the environment.

That's what caught Lamb's attention. He got in touch with Rose.

"We suggested there could be an outcome that was conservation-oriented," Lamb said. "They were skeptical. They hadn't done something like this before. But once we broached the idea, they have been very enthusiastic."

"This provides our company with some fairness as landowners," Rose said Tuesday in an interview. "We can take the time to develop a proper plan that allows us to realize some property value from conservation easements. Timberlands are under all kinds of economic pressures. We've got to be able to have some flexibility, but you hope to come out with a balance."

In the past, he said, the way the company achieved a balance of economic and environmental interests was through difficult public and court battles. "This project aims to achieve a sustainable balance among natural resource conservation, working forests, local jobs, and tax revenue for the county through collaboration rather than confrontation."

The company will continue to allow nonmotorized recreation, including fishing, hunting and hiking on its land, Rose said.

The land trust undertook the project as part of its Working Forest Initiative, an effort to protect large-scale working forests that are under threat of conversion to development.

"We've seen 75 percent of the nation's private forests change hands in the last decade, and those same trends are happening here in the Northwest, where our forest economy is part of our identity," said Cherie Kearney, who manages the initiative.

The land to be protected is in two parcels and conservation easements would be protected in two phases, starting with about 5,500 acres that extends along the southwest side of Swift Reservoir.

Parcel 2 extends north from the north shore of the reservoir's eastern end to the southern flank of Mount St. Helens. It includes a section of Pine Creek in the Lewis River watershed, which provides critical habitat for threatened bull trout. Important wintering habitat for elk is nearby.

Some residential development already has occurred along Pine Creek, in an area where the county imposed virtually no restrictions on development until recently.

"Pine Creek was called to our attention because of the bull trout," Lamb said. The area also has important value for wildlife because it is the largest block of working forest south of Mount St. Helens and is surrounded by federal and state forests, he said. Its size means that preserving it will help protect corridors for the movement of large animals and large watersheds.

No fundraising target has yet been set for the project. Lamb said the trust will pursue at least two sources of funding to allow it to buy development rights.

- It will work with a committee representing state agencies, Indian tribes and nonprofit groups that manages funds from PacifiCorp that are dedicated to purchasing habitat

as mitigation for Lewis River hydroelectric projects. The Portland-based utility operates three dams on the Lewis River, including the one at Swift Reservoir.

- It will also pursue \$2.5 million in funding through the Forest Legacy Fund, a federal program administered by the state Department of Natural Resources that funds projects to protect working forests from the encroachment of roads and development.

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NOTES FROM SUSAN: See attached map of land affected by the agreement. No one has posted a comment on this story on The Columbian's website. Interesting lack of reaction.

