



Photos by Damian Mulinix/For EO Media group

Private groups and public agencies have acquired tens of thousands of acres of forests and other natural habitats in Pacific County.

## Pacific County: Public agencies have major conservation holdings

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In the 1980s and early 1990s, these residents — concentrated in the county's north half — went by the name Concrete Use. (The group's name was a long acronym: Citizens Opposed to New Code Restrictions Exceeding Tolerable Extremes Using Selective Enforcement.) Though no longer in existence, Concrete Use's spirit lives on, for example turning back efforts to create a National Heritage Area in portions of south Pacific and north Clatsop counties in 2010. The heritage area would not have increased federal ownership of land here, however opponents feared it would bring increased interference with the use of private property.

### Tide of humanity coming

For conservation groups and their supporters, setting aside land in Pacific County and neighboring areas of southwest Washington offers the prospect of preserving a slice of the Pacific Northwest's wild side before population growth and development consume it.

Between 2010 and 2040, Washington's population is expected to grow by about 2.25 million people, reaching 8,970,500 in 2040, according to an estimate published this month by the state Office of Financial Management. This is the equivalent of adding more than three additional Seattles-worth of residents, primarily west of the Cascades.

Last fall, an anonymous benefactor told Columbia Land Trust's Fieldbook magazine his reasons for making a donation of 80 acres of forest in Pacific County's West Fork Grays River watershed.

"I'm amazed that so few people have discovered Pacific and Wahkiakum counties, despite their being only two hours from both Portland and Seattle," said the landowner. "But I know it's only a matter of time. In 20 years, I'll be gone and it will be up to the next generation to care enough to leave our natural places intact."

### Private efforts

There are three major private entities involved in acquiring and managing land in Pacific County for wildlife habitat, open space or other purposes. Together, they own 10,342 acres, or 16.16 square miles of Pacific County land with a market value of about \$8 million, according to an analysis Pacific County Assessor Bruce Walker conducted at the Chinook Observer's request. Most of the property is forestland.

The largest conservation landowner in the county is The Nature Conservancy, whose largest block of land centers on the Ellsworth Creek watershed off Parpala Road near Naselle, adjacent to Willapa National Wildlife Refuge's Headquarters Unit. Countywide, the Seattle-based conservancy owns 8,107 tax-exempt acres valued at \$4.9 million.

In second place is Vancouver, Washington-based Columbia Land Trust with 984 tax-exempt acres valued at \$2.4 million, plus another 298 acres with a value of \$75,000 that are still subject to tax, according to the assessor's office. (Its website places its Pacific County land holdings at 1,032 acres.) The trust has conserved tracts in the Long Beach Peninsula's central lands region, along with a number of parcels along Baker Bay and the Columbia

River estuary. It was recently in the news, working to acquire wetlands located just north of the town of Chinook. Columbia Land Trust also owns 1,626 acres in the Grays River watershed, which is mostly in Western Wahkiakum County.

In third place is Seattle-based Forterra, also known as Cascade Land Trust, which owns 953 acres with a taxable market value of \$137,800; and 396 acres exempt from taxes, market value of \$427,500. Forterra has been buying land around the mouth of the Naselle River, Cedar River and North Rivers on north side of Willapa Bay and then giving it to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Without taking a position on conservation purchases, County Assessor Walker noted they do impact tax collections.

"The shift per year isn't that great but the loss comes in because most of these acres are in timber, which will probably never be harvested and therefore the harvest tax (used to help pay bonds and school M&Os) is always lost," Walker said.

### Context

Sixteen square miles of private conservation land sounds like a lot, but is it? In all, Pacific County has a land area of 933 square miles, so conservation group ownership amounts to slightly more than 1.7 percent of the total.

Public agencies also have major conservation holdings in Pacific County. The federal government — primarily the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service — owns more than 25.6 square miles here, according to the Washington Public Lands Inventory (<http://publiclands-inventory.wa.gov>). The Washington State Parks Department owns about 7.4 square miles and the Department of Fish and Wildlife owns 8.4 square miles.

In addition, the Department of Natural Resources owns 136 square miles of uplands (mostly forest) and 219 square miles of aquatic lands, primarily in Willapa Bay. Some DNR forestlands in the county are exclusively managed for conservation, including the roughly four-square mile South Nema Natural Resources Conservation Area, a nesting site for endangered marbled murrelets. In all, Natural Resources designates about 11.7 square miles of its land in Pacific County for conservation; some fraction of this is likely to be aquatic in character. The bulk of Natural Resources' land is managed for timber income.

Finally, cities and Pacific County agencies own 8 square miles of the county's land surface. An undetermined portion of this consists of parks, open spaces, wetlands and other classifications of land that serve conservation functions.

The county's 16.16 miles of private conservation preserves compare with the city of Seattle's 9.7 miles of parks, Portland's 18.3 miles and San Francisco's 6.4 miles. New York City's Central Park is less than 1/12th as large as the Pacific County acreage owned by the conservation groups.

In contrast, the various public agencies own a total of roughly 50 to 55 square miles of land in Pacific County designed for conservation, wildlife habitat and recreation functions — approximately 1/20th of the county's land surface.

Public and private conservation land ownership pales in comparison to industrial forestry in Pacific County. As of 2013, industry giant Weyerhaeuser owned more than 225 square miles and second-place Rayonier owned 130 square miles.



ABOVE LEFT: Twisted roots are among many scenic wonders in the Teal Slough Natural Resources Conservation Area. ABOVE RIGHT: An old-growth tree towers into the sky in the Teal Slough Natural Resources Conservation Area on the shore of Willapa Bay. The 8.5-acre site features a nature trail and is a small part of the Washington State Department of Natural Resources' large inventory of Pacific County forestlands held in conservation status.



Humans leave signs of our presence, even in areas treasured as examples of how wild all the Pacific Northwest once was.



Bird feathers litter the forest floor in one of many conservation areas set aside in Pacific County.

