

Land trust signs deal to buy 3,300 coast acres



RANDALL HENDERSON/SUBMITTED PHOTO

Onion Peak complex is at the heart of a proposed North Coast Land Conservancy acquisition.

Conservancy has five years to raise funds

By R.J. Marx
Seaside Signal

What could be the largest private land preservation deal in western Oregon was signed Friday, Nov. 18.

The Seaside-based North Coast Land Conservancy and private investment equity firm Onion Peak Holdings took the first steps toward the acquisition of 3,300 acres of timberland from Stimson Lumber Co. as the conservancy raises funds to meet the costs over a five-year period.

For the purchase price, "We're looking somewhere about \$10 million," Jon Wickersham, board president of the North Coast Land Con-

servancy, said after the sale. Conservancy Executive Director Katie Voelke called the deal a "monumental act of preservation."

The property is in the heart of what the conservancy characterizes as the "Coastal Edge," an area between Tillamook Head and Nehalem Bay.

Together with Oswald West State Park and Cape Falcon Marine Reserve, the acquisition would create a conservation corridor of more than 29 square miles linking land and sea. According to the conservancy, the property will be the first place in Oregon, and one of the few in the world, where an entire coastal watershed is permanently conserved from the headwaters to the ocean. The purchase would mark the largest single private acquisi-

tion of land for conservation in western Oregon.

The property is part of 5,000 acres sold by Stimson, which has owned the property since 2004, to Onion Peak Holdings. The agreement gives the North Coast Land Conservancy an opportunity to arrange funds from public agencies and private donations to acquire the property in phases within the next five years.

The conservancy intends to transition the property to long-term, local, conservation-oriented ownership and management. In the interim, the property will be managed by Ecotrust Forest Management on behalf of Onion Peak Holdings. During this period Onion Peak Holdings and the conservancy will collaborate on a management plan to return the forest to

late old-growth conditions. The land will be managed with a recreation component, allowing people to enjoy the property while protecting the sensitivity of the site.

If the conservancy can't raise the funds to buy the land, there is a "high probability" that the property would be returned to an industrial timber farm.

If the sale is completed, Stimson will reinvest the funds raised from the sale in other timberlands in Oregon and other regions.

Scott Gray, Stimson's director of western resources, said in a statement that the lumber company was "compelled by the uniqueness of the property and the Coastal Edge vision and the potential long-term benefit to the public through the realization of this vision."

Bonamici tour highlights Circle Creek restoration

US representative tours floodplain restoration project in Seaside

By Lyra Fontaine
EO Media Group

U.S. Rep. Suzanne Bonamici got a bird's eye view of the North Coast Land Conservancy's floodplain restoration project from an area on Boneyard Ridge, overlooking Circle Creek and U.S. Highway 101 and the ocean.

Bonamici, D-Ore., visited the land conservancy's Circle Creek Habitat Reserve and Boneyard Ridge property on Monday, Nov. 21, to speak with staff and see how the project alleviated yearly flooding.

During high tides and heavy rains, Highway 101 would flood every winter and the road would have to close, said Melissa Reich, the organization's stewardship director. When the highway was impassable, Cannon Beach residents were unable to get to the hospital by ambulance.

The plan

To restore the floodplain, the land conservancy and its partners — including Clatsop County and the Oregon Department of Transportation — excavated sections of a berm that was built along the Necanicum River, leaving certain areas to maintain older trees.

The partial berm removal in 2013 allowed water from the Necanicum River to naturally flood the Circle Creek floodplain, instead of the adjacent Highway 101, thus preventing unsafe driving conditions, delays and road closures.

"If we had come up here in a flood event, you would see that the whole property is underwater," Reich said. "Everywhere that's green is underwater."

"Not a lot of properties are excited about having their property flooded, but we are,"

said Conservancy Associate Director Jon Wickersham.

An analysis after the first year of the project showed that the floodplain restoration prevented the road from having to close at least three times that winter, Reich said. When the highway was closed elsewhere during last winter's big rainstorm, it was passable by Circle Creek, she said.

Since the summer 2013 project, the land conservancy has planted 10,000 trees each winter, Reich said.

"It's a win-win for the community because it not only addressed the flooding, but also provided the restoration and recreation opportunities," said Bonamici, adding that the project was an example of finding "smarter, better ways to do things."

The habitat

The land conservancy acquired the 364-acre Circle Creek property in 2004. The site now includes the Circle Creek Conservation Center event venue and two walking trails that are publicly accessible daily.

Circle Creek is home to native wildlife such as coho salmon, red-legged frogs, salamanders, beaver, coyote, waterfowl, nesting bald eagles and an elk herd. The winter floods encourage more wildlife to come onto the land, according to the organization.

In July, the land conservancy purchased the 340-acre Boneyard Ridge property, just west of Circle Creek. The acquisition connects 3,500 acres of conserved land.

Wickersham told Bonamici about the conservancy's plan to acquire 3,300 acres of timberland at Onion Peak within the next five years and informed her of the organization's 30th year anniversary.

"We've seen our base of supporters grow tremendously, even in the last five to 10 years," Wickersham said. "We really started taking our message out to the community."

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