

# Snoqualmie Pass land buy: A big deal for fish, wildlife and people

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The Nature Conservancy is buying 47,921 acres of timber company land between Snoqualmie Pass and Cle Elum, a move that will provide habitat corridors for critters, water for fish and recreation wildlands for people on both sides of the "Cascade Curtain."

The 75-square-mile acquisition is part of a \$134 million deal with the Plum Creek Timber Co. that includes 117,000 acres of the Blackfoot Valley in Montana. It continues a process of bringing together public and private holdings long under fragmented ownership and management.

"One hundred fifty years ago, we gave away public lands to induce railroads to traverse the West: Now we are reassembling those lands, which is an absolute necessity for connected wildlife habitats and for outdoor recreation," said Bill Chapman of the Mountains to Sound Greenway.

The Nature Conservancy will nearly double its holdings in Washington, to more than 102,000 acres. "This is our largest land acquisition in Washington," said Melissa Garvey of TNC.

The Conservancy's philosophy in Washington can be summed up in two words: Think bigger.

In the 1970's, it specialized in acquiring small and unique places: The eagles nesting atop Point Disney on Waldron Island in the San Juans owe thanks to the Conservancy. A tiny gem in the San Juans, Yellow Island, boasts unique wildflowers.

Larger projects have come more recently: Ellsworth Creek is an 8,800-acre watershed in Southwest Washington, with 1,500 magnificent acres of old growth forest shielding one of the state's premier salmon streams. The Conservancy is protecting giant cedars that shield spawning pools, and restoring cut-over surrounding lands.

And, in Eastern Washington, the Conservancy has acquired land in Moses Coulee, preserving plant species and habitat for the endangered sage grouse.

Of Monday's acquisition, Garvey said: "Our intent is this land will be actively managed for restoration as has been done in Ellsworth Creek. ... Some of it has been thinned, some of it is dense forest. The land is in a lot of different conditions."

Snoqualmie Pass was, 40 years ago, in active danger of becoming a mountain slum. Sprawl was moving east. Timber companies were liquidating old growth forests in their land holdings, sending the raw logs for export to Japan.

A sea change has since taken place in the high country.

With money from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, slopes and streams bordering on the Alpine Lakes Wilderness were acquired in the 1990s. A pair of key riparian zones, along the upper Yakima River, were preserved thanks to generosity by the late philanthropist Patsy Bullitt Collins.

The Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River, once domain of dumping parties and chop shops and a big meth lab, was rescued for recreation.

Proposed legislation would add the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River to the protected Alpine Wilderness Lakes area, Saturday Jun 21, 2013.

And, last year, the state of Washington acquired 45,000 acres of timber lands in the Teanaway River north of Cle Elum: The Teanaway offers some of the best rainshadow hiking in the Cascades, car camping, and is home to a wolf pack that lives in its remote west fork.

The Nature Conservancy acquisition includes land bordering on three reservoirs — Lakes Keechelus, Kachess and Cle Elum — as well as 390 miles of rivers and streams. It safeguards headwaters of the Yakima River, site of a major plan to store additional water for both irrigation and salmon restoration.

“We’re absolutely not locking it up,” said Garvey. “We’re not just about forest restoration, we’re allowing public access for recreation.”

The preserved lands form “a mosaic,” Chapman said. The just-acquired Plum Creek lands adjoin the newly created Teanaway Community Forest.

Plum Creek is one of the largest private landowners in America, with about 6.7 million acres in the Northwest, Northern Rockies and Southeast U.S. Its forests in these parts are a legacy of the Northern Pacific Land Grant, an inducement to building a transcontinental railroad, signed into law by President Abraham Lincoln.

Conservationists long treated Plum Creek as a villain, for its clearcuts in the Rockies and its efforts to keep company lands from becoming part of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness.

But the company’s CEO Rick Holley spoke Monday of “ecological and recreational values” and said the sale would “accommodate the public interest.”

“This is an important conservation project that recognizes the highest benefit these lands offer — protecting ecological values and helping to maintain public access,” Holley said.

The full task of preserving and protecting the I-90 corridor is not “done,” Chapman emphasized, but “what happened today completes a substantial percentage of what we need to do. It’s of huge, significant benefit to Seattle and Kittitas County, to the Mountains to Sound Greenway, and to the integrity of the land itself.”

The lands being acquired stretch for 25 miles on either side of Interstate 90. The biggest chunk runs along slopes above and east of Lake Cle Elum.