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Conservation Fund buys 16,000 forest acres

\$48.5 million Mendocino Coast deal new conservation model that balances logging, protection

By MIKE GENIELLA

The nonprofit Conservation Fund has completed purchase of 16,000 acres of Mendocino Coast timberland for \$48.5 million.

A \$25 million loan from the state Water Resources Control Board was key to acquisition of the former Georgia-Pacific land, which is located in the Big River watershed.

With the Big River acreage, the Conservation Fund now owns and manages 40,000 acres of Mendocino County timberland. In 2004, the fund purchased 24,000 acres in the Garcia River drainage for \$18million from Coastal Forestlands Ltd.

The purchases of commercially zoned timberlands by nonprofit environmental groups is the new model for large-scale forest preservation across the Pacific Northwest, said Conservation Fund President Larry Selzer.

"By balancing economic and environmental objectives, we are pioneering a unique brand of conservation," Selzer said.

Mendocino sawmill owner Art Harwood of Branscomb supports the fund's purchases. "I think this sort of collaboration is innovative and cost-effective conservation, while ensuring local jobs," he said.

But Harwood, Selzer and others involved in the deal expressed caution.

"Acquiring the lands is a critical part of protecting watersheds, but the hardest part is yet

to come," said Chris Kelly, the fund's state director.

The notion of conservationists' managing commercial forests is "new territory," Kelly added. "We're learning as we go."

Sustainable timber harvest practices will be implemented across both coastal forests, Kelly said. Past logging volumes will decrease, while the time in between timber harvests will grow.

The management plan developed for the Garcia River property calls for two-thirds of the land to be open to limited timber production, with the balance set aside as a reserve.

The fund's purchase forever protects the timberland from being broken up, developed or converted to nonforest uses.

State water board member Charles Hoppin described the deal as a "creative, innovative and unique approach to improving water quality and preserving watersheds."

Hoppin said the water board approved the \$25 million loan because of the fund's plan to manage the timberland for production while ensuring environmental safeguards.

Besides the water board loan, the Conservation Fund received grants of \$7.5 million each from the state Coastal Conservancy and Wildlife Conservation Board. The balance of the purchase price is being raised through private philanthropic sources.