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Legislation allows Interior Department to Purchase Privately Held Land in the CSNM

By Paul Fattig

The Interior Department appropriations bill now before the Senate includes \$1 million to help pay for the purchase of private holdings from willing landowners in the Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument.

The funding is part of \$8 million in the bill earmarked for the state. The legislation is supported by Oregon U.S. Sens. Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, both Democrats.

"The monument funding in this bill would be used to complete the transfer of land from the Pacific Forest Trust to the federal government," explained Merkley spokeswoman Julie Edwards. "This will allow the trust to continue to work with willing private landowners who want to sell their land."

Based in San Francisco, the nonprofit trust whose mission is to help preserve forestlands began working with landowners shortly after the monument was created in 2000. Thus far, it has purchased nearly 5,000 acres, much of it former timber company land, that it is transferring to the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.

The 52,940-acre monument is in the BLM's Medford District in the mountainous region immediately east of Ashland where the Cascade, Klamath and Siskiyou ranges converge.

Although some 60 percent of the land within the monument's boundaries is federally owned, there are thousands of acres in private ownership that aren't being preserved, according to the trust. The

trust's goal is to purchase those open spaces as possible when they come up for sale, then transfer the property to the BLM when Uncle Sam can purchase it at cost, according to trust spokeswoman Christine Harrison in San Francisco.

"This is a long-term project," she said. "When we find willing sellers, we try to find help from foundations so we can buy the property and hold it in trust. When federal money becomes available, we transfer it to the government for public ownership and pay back our partners."

The monument was created because of its rich diversity of plant and animal species, some found nowhere else on earth. For example, 120 species of butterflies dwell within the monument.

Earlier this year, the BLM paid a little more than \$1 million to buy 890 acres of private land within the monument boundaries from the trust. The sale marked the first transfer to public ownership of private holdings in the monument the trust has purchased.

The trust isn't the only entity buying land for the monument. A few years ago, a Grants Pass couple who requested anonymity purchased 2,900 acres surrounded by the monument to preserve for wildlife habitat. Each land acquisition will be managed to protect the resource, said district spokesman Jim Whittington.

For more information about the trust, visit www.PacificForest.org.