

With public funds, conservation effort moves forward

Coastal Conservancy to spend \$2M on forest with more expected

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DAVENPORT — Last week, the state Coastal Conservancy approved spending \$2 million to preserve and open up for the public 8,500 acres of redwood forest above Davenport, praising the project as an unparalleled opportunity to preserve a massive sweep of North Coast mountains.

The vote was also one of the last major puzzle pieces in a complex deal to save what are now known as the Cemex Redwoods, coming after four Bay Area nonprofits committed \$30 million to buy the land from the Mexico City-based cement manufacturer in 2011. That move came with the state sidelined by financial woes, but last week's decision is a reminder that taxpayers have a big role to play in securing the property for perpetuity.

"This property has so many attributes, it's hard to say no to," said Janet Diehl, program manager for the Coastal Conservancy, which separate grants at a meeting last week in Fort Bragg. "By the virtue of its size, pro-

tecting it means protecting (wildlife) habitat and many important streams that shelter not only endangered fish, but supply drinking water to the communities of Davenport and even Santa Cruz."

The vote was hailed by the Bay Area conservation groups that moved quickly to snap up the land for preservation.

"We're delighted about it," said Catherine Elliott of Save the Redwoods League, which is leading the effort to secure a conservation easement that eliminates the possibility of development on the land.

One grant, for \$1.9 million, comes from a state Habitat Conservation Fund used to protect lands inhabited by mountain lions and other species. Save the Redwoods League will seek another \$8 million from the California Wildlife Conservation Board.

"We're down to the last piece because of the Coastal Conservancy vote. It's huge. We can talk about the state being involved, but now they are involved," said Reed Holder-



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There was once an active limestone quarry on the property near Davenport.

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man, executive director of the Los Altos-based Sempervirens Fund.

Under the deal, Sempervirens Fund and especially Palo Alto-based Peninsula Open Space Trust fronted much of the money to buy the land after Cemex announced it would shutter the plant. Another \$10 million was raised through private foundation grants.

It was a massive financial commitment that speaks to uniqueness of the property. All four groups, which include the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County, are plowing \$2.5 million of their own money into the deal.

But Peninsula Open Space Trust, at \$16 million, and Sempervirens Fund, at about \$5 million, are already in for more than that. They hope to replenish the difference in a variety of ways, and the conservation easement is one way, with Save the Redwoods League using public funds to buy it from Peninsula Open Space Trust and Sempervirens Fund.

That also represents a reversal of sorts from the traditional state park model, where private groups secure property and turned it over to public agencies to operate. Here, public money is going toward the conservation of land that will be held in private hands, though open to the public.

"It's become even more critical that land trusts can jump in and capture these opportunities when they arise, given that public agencies are less able to take advantage of these opportunities in these economic times," said Walter Moore, president of the Peninsula Open Space Trust.

The Coastal Conservancy last week also awarded \$100,000 to the Land Trust toward drawing up a \$250,000 public

access plan for the expansive property. The Land Trust is already working with a consultant, and hopes to have a draft ready by next summer.

Land Trust Conservation Director Bryan Largay said an environmental review will be part of the process, and the county is required to sign off on the plan.

"We hope to have some access in two years if everything goes according to plan," Largay said.

By next month, the Land Trust expects to have a website up to take public input on the plan, and at least two public meetings are planned. The Coastal Conservancy will also review the plan for adequacy.

"I'm very happy that they're taking this on," Diehl said. "I think the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County is ideally suited to develop the plan. They're in the community, they know the people around there, they have a commitment to public access."

Land Trust Executive Director Teresa Corwin said that due to ecological concerns, motorized off-road vehicles, car camping or dirt bikes are likely off the table, but that her groups wants to explore a variety of other uses.

"If people don't get out and enjoy the land, they're less

invested in it," Corwin said.

Public access is also complicated by the fact that continued timber logging is expecting to be a piece of the financing puzzle for property. While covering a relatively small portion of the property, the Land Trust's experience can be valuable in that area: it manages the Byrne-Milliron Forest above Corralitos, which is also open to the public and subject to periodic timber harvests.

In addition, the Soquel Demonstration Forest is a renowned mountain biking destination actively logged by the state Department of Forestry.

Elliott, whose group was founded to protect old-growth redwoods, pointed out that 95 percent of redwood forests have been logged, and thinning second- and third-generation trees can help restore old-growth characteristics.

And while pointing out that ecologically sensitive areas have been set aside through a conservation plan, Elliott did acknowledge that the Cemex Redwoods project is a new world for Save the Redwoods League.

"The idea of working forests is new to us and our members," Elliott said.

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