

Thousands of acres of Sierra conserved in new deal

Greyson Howard, Associated Press, 6-30-10

TRUCKEE, Calif. -- The Truckee Donner Land Trust is in the business of conserving open space, and business is good.

The down economy that has many other non-profits cutting back and bunkering down has created unique land acquisition opportunities for the group founded in 1990 in the Sierra Nevada north of Lake Tahoe.

Most recently, working with the Trust for Public Land, the group scooped up more than 4,000 acres in conservation easements on Sierra Pacific Industries' land north of Truckee - the first-such conservation deal ever brokered with the timber company.

Plans call for the addition of another 3,000 acres as part of the package that primarily straddles watersheds for the Little Truckee River and the Yuba River. It includes sections of the Pacific Crest Trail on its way from Mexico to Canada.

"This is not just the conservation and protection of over 7,500 acres in the Little Truckee Watershed," said Perry Norris, executive director of the Truckee Donner Land Trust.

"We have consummated a conservation transaction with the largest private land owner in California," he said. "That's precedent-setting."

The private property runs in a checkerboard pattern of national forest land and private land along the historic Henness Pass Road, running from west of Highway 89 north to the hills around Jackson Meadows Reservoir.

The easements prevent clear-cutting and the use of herbicides while still allowing some logging and opening the nearly 12 square miles of land to public access and potentially new trail construction, said John Svahn, stewardship director with the land trust.

The property is made up of rolling forests, meadows, streams and lakes, Svahn said, and will be open to hikers, bikers, off-road vehicle and snowmobilers.

Norris said it was made possible thanks to a \$1.83 million grant from the Northern Sierra Partnership and \$6.42 million from the Wildlife Conservation Board.

Dave Sutton, Northern California and Nevada director for the Trust for Public Land, said the group has been working in the region for 15 years toward a larger goal.

"The recommendation we're consistently getting from the scientific community regarding climate change is to accommodate species adaptation, large blocks of land about 50,000 acres or larger are critical," Sutton said. "If you look at this easement together with the rest of the work we've been doing up there, we're getting close."

That space allows for plant and animal species to move freely generally uphill in response to changing temperatures, rather than running up against developed land, Sutton said.

Henness Pass Road itself is steeped in history. The major east-west thoroughfare during the Gold Rush was

built around 1850 from Marysville, Calif., to Virginia City, Nev., Svahn said. That was shortly after the Donner Party met its fate near Truckee in 1846.

"It was so heavily used in its day they ran freight during the day with huge wagons and teams, then stagecoaches ran at night it was that popular," Norris said.

And one of its hotels, spaced 30 miles apart for a day's journey, became one of the first recreation destinations in the Sierra Nevada.

Norris said the first-ever conservation easement with Sierra Pacific Industries also possibly prevents serious development in the forests north of Truckee.

"This is the same 7,500 acres SPI was petitioning Sierra County to take out of timber production zone and put into general forestry, which mean it could have been subdivided into 160-acre ranchettes," Norris said.

And if enough development goes in and roads start to be plowed year-round, the flood gates open and residential zones appear speckled in among forest service lands, creating a lands-management quagmire for wildlife, ecology and firefighting.

Mark Pawlicki of Sierra Pacific Industries said the deal will benefit both the lumber company and the public.

"The area is very desirable both from a recreation standpoint, high water quality and wildlife habitat ... this puts development off limits," Pawlicki said.

He said Sierra Pacific Industries has transferred more than 100,000 acres to public ownership in the past, but compared to an outright sale or transfer, the conservation easements along Henness Pass mean SPI can continue to harvest wood for mills in the area, keeping jobs in the northern Sierra.

"You can't do conservation work in this economy without thinking about the socio-economic impacts," Norris said. "Allowing timber harvest helps keep 300 jobs in Quincy."

Norris said this deal could open opportunities for conservation easements like it across the state.

"If SPI finds this lucrative, it creates a win-win for business and conservation that could continue on to other lands in the Western United States," Norris said.