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Information in this article, originally published September 3, was corrected September 4. A previous version of this article on King County's purchase of development rights on 90,000 acres of Hancock Timber Resource Group's Snoqualmie Forest erroneously reported that discussions had been held about a possible full buyout of the land in King County if authorizing legislation is passed by Congress. No such discussions have taken place, said Hancock's Western regional manager, John Davis. The initial discussions Hancock has had with the Cascade Land Conservancy involved the possible purchase of development rights on 5,000 acres of Snoqualmie Forest timberland in Snohomish County.

King County expected to preserve 90,000 acres of forest

By [Keith Ervin](#)

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A forested swath of the Cascade foothills will remain green

under an agreement between King County and the company that operates the land as a tree farm.

County Executive Ron Sims, who announced the deal yesterday, said it would be the largest public purchase of development rights in the Pacific Northwest and one of the biggest such contracts in U.S. history.

If the agreement is approved by the Metropolitan King County Council as expected, it will preserve as a working tree farm an area nearly twice the size of Seattle.

The county would pay Hancock Timber Resource Group \$22 million for development rights on 90,000 acres of the company's Snoqualmie Forest. The deal would more than triple the amount of open space preserved by the county over the past 35 years through a variety of programs.

The county would also purchase full title to 150 acres of critical chinook-salmon spawning habitat on the Tolt River.

Backed by representatives of Hancock Timber, the Cascade Land Conservancy and the County Council, Sims signed the agreement at a news conference on the 75th floor of the Bank of America Building.

"For \$244 per acre, we are guaranteeing that this land will forever remain a working tree farm," Sims said. "One hundred years from now, no one will remember who was responsible for this. What they will notice and what they will appreciate is that there aren't any housing developments up there in that forest."

Sims said the deal would assure that "the wall against sprawl will never be broken."

While environmentalists have sought to prevent logging in pristine areas, many see continued logging in the Snoqualmie Forest as a use preferable to residential or commercial development.

Under the county's agricultural zoning, the forest could have been broken into 80-acre estates, and Sims said the market would have welcomed that kind of development.

"If you've visited this area, you realize how attractive it would be," he said.

Gene Duvernoy, president of the Cascade Land Conservancy, called the forest "this elusive crown jewel of open space and conservation that we have been striving for [for] years."

He said the price negotiated with the company was "an incredible bargain."

The Snoqualmie Forest was one of the main targets of the Cascade Foothills Initiative, a six-month-old agreement among the executives of King, Pierce and Snohomish counties to find ways to protect 600,000 acres in the three counties from development.

The agreement followed several years of effort by the county and the Cascade Land Conservancy to pre-empt development of Weyerhaeuser's Snoqualmie Tree Farm, now known as the Snoqualmie Forest.

Weyerhaeuser agreed in 2002 to sell the entire 104,000-acre tree farm to the newly founded Evergreen Forest Trust for \$185 million. The deal was contingent on the U.S. Congress authorizing a novel financing mechanism.

A year after that tentative deal, Congress still had not passed the legislation, and Weyerhaeuser sold the land to Hancock, which is part of MFC Global Investments, to help pay acquisition-related debts. Conservationists then opened discussions with Hancock, which has struck deals that have protected 200,000 acres in Washington and other states.

County Council Chair Larry Phillips, D-Seattle, who has been part of the preservation effort, obtained the council's authorization last fall to spend \$15 million to buy development rights on the Snoqualmie Forest.

The deal announced yesterday would require an additional \$7 million authorization from the County Council. The money would come from the sale of bonds to be repaid from the county's "conservation futures" tax.

That tax has funded the purchase of 15,000 acres for \$175 million over the past 15 years for a cost of \$11,666 per acre — well above the \$244 an acre to buy Snoqualmie Forest development rights.

Phillips, who camped and hiked the Snoqualmie Forest as a Boy Scout, said he had no idea then that "I'd be working as an adult to save it for my son and generations to follow."

The amount of land in the deal is smaller than the 104,000-acre purchase originally envisioned by the Evergreen Forest Trust. Because the deal is financed exclusively through King County taxes, it does not include the portion of the forest that lies in Snohomish County.

Also excluded from the agreement are several thousand acres south of the Tolt River Reservoir, which Weyerhaeuser has the right to buy back for mining use.

Yesterday's agreement comes two days after officials celebrated another deal that will protect 150 acres across from Snoqualmie Falls and 9,450 acres south of Snoqualmie.

Both houses of Congress have approved legislation that would allow the Evergreen Forest Trust to buy the Snoqualmie Forest with tax-exempt bonds backed by the sale of timber. They have not reconciled differing versions of the bill, however.

If the legislation becomes law, Duvernoy said conservationists might consider making a new attempt to buy the forest outright.

John Davis, Hancock Timber's Western regional manager, said the company bought the land to generate revenue for pension-fund investors, and he doesn't know how executives would respond to an offer from conservationists to buy it.

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