

Noyo River stand of old-growth redwoods saved

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Regan Ranoa of the Save the Redwoods League walks across a fallen log above the Noyo River, a breeding ground for coho, steelhead and chinook salmon that also hosts other rare species.

A San Francisco nonprofit dedicated to the preservation of ancient redwoods announced Thursday that it will exercise its option to buy a huge swath of the lush Noyo River canyon in Mendocino County, the largest old-growth forest still in private hands on the West Coast.

The group, Save the Redwoods League, raised \$7.5 million to buy the spectacular 426-acre plot of land along the historic Skunk Train route, beating the April 1 deadline set by the Willits Redwood Co., which was threatening to log the big trees if the money didn't come through.

"We've had remarkable success raising money in a tough economy, and now we get to purchase that land and ensure that the trees won't be harvested," said Ruskin Hartley, executive director of Save the Redwoods League. "People up in Mendocino County have been fighting to preserve this grove for 30 years, and we're just following their lead."

The league's board of directors voted Thursday to pull \$4 million from a reserve fund and add it to the \$3.5 million in donations raised over the past five months. The sale, which is expected to be completed April 29, allows the league to turn the land over to a conservation organization, which will protect the trees in perpetuity.

The league raised more than the \$7 million purchase price so that \$500,000 could be spent managing the property and building infrastructure, including shoring up failed culverts along the river.

Abundant wildlife

"It's a landmark for us," Hartley said. "We've worked on bigger and more expensive projects, but this had some pretty unique attributes."

The ancient redwoods, many of them more than 1,500 years old, cover 123 acres of the property, which also contains huge stands of old-growth Douglas fir. They provide habitat for threatened and endangered species, including the northern spotted owl, marbled murrelet, bald eagle and the Pacific fisher. Bats live in the charred hollows, and the thick, sprawling branches are home to red tree voles and a wide variety of birds.

The Noyo canyon features granite cliffs and shimmering pools surrounded by lush moss and ferns. Waterfalls dot the pristine Noyo River, a breeding ground for coho, steelhead and chinook salmon as it winds its way through the vast forested region between the towns of Willits and Fort Bragg.

The headwaters are teeming with rare species like the northern red-legged frog and the southern torrent salamander.

The league received donations from almost 4,000 individuals since the campaign to buy the land started in October, including \$1 million from Bill Hayward, owner of the Hayward Lumber Company, in honor of his late father, lumberman Homer Hayward.

Beating the clock

The sale came just in time. Chris Baldo and Bruce Burton, co-owners of the Willits Redwood Co., had obtained a timber harvest plan for the old-growth trees, which can fetch up to \$10 a board foot compared with \$1.80 a board foot for second-growth redwood.

Hartley's vision is to bring schoolchildren and other interested groups into the region on the Skunk Train, which was first established in 1885 to haul lumber out of the area and owns the right of way over six miles of zigzagging tracks through the Noyo canyon. The train, which got its moniker because of the acrid fumes it used to emit, is now owned by Robert Pinoli and has been used for tourists since the last time old-growth trees were harvested on the property in the late 1970s.

Education on wheels

Hartley envisions onboard biologists explaining the redwood forest ecosystem during tours and camping expeditions that will also include information about the long-abandoned mining camps, shacks and rusted lumberjack equipment that pepper the route.

The Mendocino Land Trust is the most likely candidate to become permanent steward of the land, according to several sources. The conveyance of land to a trust will be a departure for the league, which usually gives land it purchases to the California State Parks, but the state's recent budget crisis has closed off that option.

"These are the types of solutions that we need to protect these last scattered groves of redwoods," Hartley said. "It is very critical to get the local community involved in protecting this forest over time."

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