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Water District in Clatsop County secures property to establish Arch Cape Community Forest

ARCH CAPE, Ore. —The Arch Cape Domestic Water Supply District realized the vision of connecting the community to its drinking-water source with the purchase of roughly 1,500 acres of forestland. The purchase, finalized in June 2022, was made possible with \$5.5 million in federal funding and \$250,000 in Clatsop County funding. It will establish the publicly owned Arch Cape Forest.

The district finalized the acquisition with the current owner, Ecotrust Forests II LLC, on June 9 for \$4.7 million. Purchasing the watershed—which is adjacent to Oswald West State Park, North Coast Land Conservancy’s Rainforest Reserve, and the Cape Falcon Marine Reserve—will permanently protect the source of Arch Cape’s drinking water, from the headwaters to the tap.

“The health and resilience of the surrounding forest directly controls both the quantity and the quality of our domestic drinking water,” said Phil Chick, District Manager of the Arch Cape Domestic Water Supply District. “The acquisition of the forest permits watershed management primarily for the protection of our water while providing potential conservation, recreation and economic benefits.”

A healthy forest with diverse streamside vegetation is vital to holding soil in place, preventing erosion, and improving downstream water quality. All the water consumed in Arch Cape arrives first as rain falling on spruce, hemlock and cedar trees in the upper reaches of the watershed. The headlands rise nearly 3,000 feet in the two miles between the Pacific Ocean and Onion Peak, the second highest peak in Clatsop County and one of the taller peaks in the Oregon Coast Range. Ultimately, this water makes its way down Shark and Asbury creeks to be used as a community drinking water supply.

According to Amy Singh, an administrator with the Oregon Department of Forestry’s (ODF) Forest Legacy Program, \$3.5 million for this purchase came from the USDA Forest Service



through its Land and Water Conservation Fund, which supports the nationally competitive Forest Legacy Program.

“ODF partners with the Forest Service to evaluate worthwhile projects in Oregon where local people want to keep forestlands intact to benefit their community and economy,” Singh said. “Arch Cape is a great example of how the program does that while benefitting the environment and protecting the forested character of the area.”

Business Oregon provided another \$2 million in funds from the federal American Rescue Plan Act to help secure the land. North Coast Land Conservancy (NCLC) used the land value of a portion of the Rainforest Reserve as an in-kind match to help meet requirements of the Forest Legacy grants. Remaining match requirements were met by \$250,000 from Clatsop County and nearly \$300,000 from community contributions.

Attorneys Greg Fullem and Janna Davydova provided legal counsel through the pro-bono program at the Portland-based firm of Schwabe, Williamson, and Wyatt.

A shared vision for the north coast

“The Arch Cape Forest and Rainforest Reserve are two unique projects that have a shared vision: protecting our forest and our water and sustaining a high quality of life for people, plants, fish and wildlife,” NCLC Executive Director Katie Voelke said. “This is why it was such an honor to work with the district, providing support services and our expertise with fundraising, grant writing, and transactional due diligence.”

The Water District will remain the owner of the property and is advised by a community advisory committee. Sustainable Northwest, a regional nonprofit, provided strategic planning and project management to the core group of local volunteers and leaders over the course of the five-year campaign.

In 2019, representatives of the Water District board, district staff, consultants, and community members with extensive financial and timber industry experience assembled a baseline financial plan that confirmed the feasibility for the purchase and long-term management of the property.

In 2021, a seven-member community advisory committee voted to adopt a set of forest management policies created through a dialogue with the consulting forester, Springboard Forestry, LLC. Going forward, the community advisory committee will engage the broader public before drafting a 10-year operating plan.



“The community forest governance model ensures that local people enjoy secure and reliable access to the ecological, social and economic benefits produced by forests,” said Ben Dair Rothfuss, Conservation Finance Senior Manager for Sustainable Northwest. “The residents and community leaders in Arch Cape volunteered hundreds of hours to make this project possible. We believe that local engagement and ownership will make for a durable and balanced outcome as the community becomes the long-term stewards of the forest.”

The water district is currently working with NCLC and the Nuveen Natural Capital property management staff at Lewis & Clark Timberlands’ Gearhart office—with support from consulting planners at the NPS Rivers Trails and Conservation Assistance Program—to outline a thoughtful and balanced approach to public access that will allow people to enjoy the natural beauty of the forest while preserving its ecological value.

A broad public stakeholder engagement process is set to begin in July.

For more information on the Arch Cape Forest, visit www.archcapeforest.org/ and archcapewater.org

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