

News Release

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Invaluable Salmon Streams Protected at Willapa Bay with Addition of 2,366 Acres to Willapa National Wildlife Refuge

PACIFIC COUNTY, Washington—A network of outstanding Willapa Bay salmon streams and critical stands of temperate forest were permanently protected last month when Western Rivers Conservancy transferred the 2,366-acre Willapa Coastal Forest property to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The property is now part of the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge.

Conservation of the property helps advance the refuge's decade-long Bear River Estuary Restoration Project downstream, and it will improve public recreational access to the refuge. The transfer follows WRC's acquisition of the Willapa Coastal Forest from Forest Investment Associates, an investment manager specialized in sustainable forestry.

"The Willapa Coastal Forest is an otherworldly kind of place," said Alex Barton, project manager for Western Rivers Conservancy. "There are still pockets of mature coastal forest where giant trees tower over the Bear River. When you're there amidst those trees and you see wild salmon swimming upstream, it's impossible not to recognize just how important this property is."

The second largest estuary on the West Coast, Willapa Bay lies just north of the mouth of the Columbia River. Much of it is protected within the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge, which was created in 1937. The refuge's abundant salt marshes and tidal mudflats, coastal dunes and beaches, grasslands, freshwater wetlands and old-growth forests are home to abundant fish and wildlife. Over 200 species of birds are documented annually at Willapa Bay, including the endangered marbled murrelet.

While much of the Willapa Coastal Forest property was industrial timberland, it also includes critically important stands of old-growth forest, as well as younger trees that will be allowed to mature. Some 39 miles of perennial and intermittent streams flow through the property, including three miles of the Bear River, a vital salmon-bearing stream that flows into Willapa Bay.

Chum salmon, fall Chinook, coho, winter steelhead, coastal cutthroat trout and Pacific lamprey all spawn in the Bear River and its tributaries, and many of the young fish rear in the revitalized estuary downstream.

“Adding the Willapa Coastal Forest to the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge brings multiple benefits to one of Washington’s natural treasures,” said Jackie Ferrier, project leader at the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge Complex. “Conserving habitat in and around the Bear River will complement the refuge’s recent restoration work in the estuary, and adding land to the refuge will improve access to the area for hikers, hunters, wildlife watchers and others.”

Recognizing the immense ecological importance of the Willapa Coastal Forest, Western Rivers Conservancy set out to buy and protect it in 2020. It spent over three years working with Forest Investments Associates and assembled funding for the project from the Land and Water Conservation Fund and Washington state’s Salmon Recovery Funding Board. Once funding was in place, Western Rivers Conservancy was able to purchase the property and convey it to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to become part of the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge.

“Congratulations to Western Rivers Conservancy and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on this tremendous outcome for the Willapa National Wildlife Refuge,” said Jack Stover, Director of U.S. Operations for FIA. “Our stewardship approach blends sustainable production forestry with old-growth conservation and best management practices for watershed protection. We are thrilled that responsible management will continue with expanded recreation access for this locally vital property.”

Now that the property is part of the refuge, the USFWS will work toward opening it in 2025 or 2026 for hiking, bird watching, wildlife viewing and other compatible recreation. The state lands adjacent to the Willapa Coastal Forest have historically been very difficult to access, and the addition of this property to the refuge will make that access easier.

“Conserving miles of salmon spawning habitat immediately upstream of the newly restored Bear River estuary is a potential game-changer for fish,” said Barton. “It’s the perfect project at the perfect time.”

This project was made possible through funding and support from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Salmon Recovery Funding Board, The Conservation Alliance, The James M Lea Foundation, Giles W. and Elise G Mead Foundation, The Gary and Carol Milgard Family, Horizons Foundation, onX Maps, TOTE Maritime Alaska and Betlach Family Foundation.

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ABOUT

Western Rivers Conservancy acquires lands along rivers throughout the West to conserve critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By cooperating with local agencies and organizations and by applying decades of land acquisition experience, Western Rivers Conservancy secures the health of whole ecosystems. Western Rivers Conservancy has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great western rivers,

including the Hoh, Methow, Nisqually, John Day, Salmon, Snake, North Umpqua and Madison Rivers. To learn more, visit www.westernrivers.org.

Forest Investment Associates leverages more than 37 years of timberland investment experience to help clients around the world grow value through investing in sustainable forestry. The firm's mission is to provide high-quality, sustainable forest investments that deliver superior investment performance while cultivating client relationships based on mutual trust and exceptional service. FIA is majority employee-owned and manages more than 2 million acres of certified forests in the United States, Brazil, and Chile. To learn more, visit www.forestinvest.com.

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