

Drilling Fees Pay for New National Forest Lands

JEFF BARNARD, AP Environmental Writer



Offshore drilling fees are financing the purchase of \$41.6 million worth of new national forest lands in 15 states.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said Thursday the 28 different purchases from North Carolina to Oregon will protect clean water and fish and wildlife habitat, absorb private inholdings within wilderness areas, and support outdoor recreation spending that contributes \$14.5 billion annually to the economy.

The purchases from willing sellers represent about 20,000 acres, which were chosen from 68 applications.

The money comes from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, created in 1964. Congress taps mitigation fees paid by companies drilling for offshore oil and gas to finance the fund year to year. The fund is capped at \$900 million a year. Other federal agencies also use it.

Projects are typically proposed by local organizations and evaluated by the U.S. Forest Service. Purchases often are arranged with help from organizations like the Trust for Public Lands and Nature conservancy.

In California, Trust for Public Lands arranged the purchase of the Fleming Ranch for \$1.5 million to add to the San Bernardino National Forest.

The 1,288 acres has been used as a retreat by the Fleming family since the early 1900s, and is surrounded by the national forest, said Brent Handley, who oversees acquisitions for the trust. The property abuts the Pacific Crest Trail and the San Jacinto Wilderness, and is covered with oak, pine and Douglas fir. The Forest Service said it planned to do thinning projects to reduce fire danger and promote carbon sequestration in the trees.

The fund is paying \$1.4 million to complete the purchase of 1,481 acres previously

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marketed for vacation home sites along the Imnaha River in northeastern Oregon and add them to the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

The transaction completes the sale to the Forest Service of 6,695 acres the Nature Conservancy bought in 2008 from the Gazelle Land and Timber Co., said conservancy spokesman Stephen Anderson. Since 2008, the land has been open to the public for fishing along the Imnaha River, and they accounted for 35 percent of the spring chinook caught in the river in 2009.

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