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Deal conserves acres of forest

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In a historic conservation deal, the state has secured protection for 3,486 acres of forest in Leverett and Shutesbury from W.D. Cows, Inc.

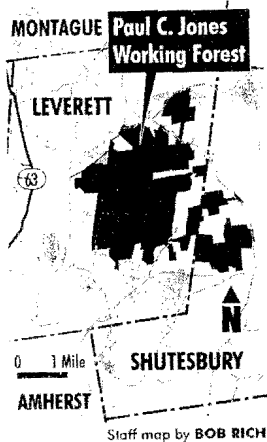
The Amherst-based company, which has owned and logged the land for centuries, sold the conservation restriction on it to the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game for \$8.8 million Friday.

According to Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs Richard K. Sullivan, the acquisition is the largest involving a block of contiguous, privately owned land in the history of Massachusetts.

"It's a very significant statement," Sullivan said, noting that the state partnered with nonprofit land trusts and the federal government to leverage federal money for the purchase.

"This is a model we'll continue to be using," he said.

In addition to \$3 million in state money, Kestrel Land Trust and Franklin Land Trust secured \$839,600 for the acquisition, with other funding coming from the federal government.



Staff map by BOB RICH

The 5.4 square miles of forested land spans the two towns and includes Brushy Mountain and the scenic Rattlesnake Gutter, a popular local hiking spot named one of the state's "Best 1,000 Places" by the Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism. The land is already used for hunting, hiking and fishing, among other recreational activities.

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Under the agreement, Cows will continue to log the land, though under higher standards for sustainable forestry.

"This is the most significant acquisition of its size," said Kristin DeBoer, the executive director of Kestrel Trust. "We've saved thousands of acres in one transaction."

By way of comparison, DeBoer pointed out that Mount Holyoke State Park, which comprises 3,000 acres, took decades to assemble. DeBoer called the spectacular Rattlesnake Gutter "a local treasure," noting that the deal protects the developable land in that area.

The Metacomet-Monadnock Trail, which runs from Connecticut to New Hampshire, passed through a portion of the property before it was rerouted. The parcel is home to moose, bear, bobcats and a wealth of deep forest songbirds. It is also within walking distance of the Shutesbury and North Leverett

town centers.

Among the land's users is U.S. Rep. John W. Olver, D-Amherst, who has hiked Brushy Mountain.

"It's gratifying to know that it will always remain both a recreational and an economic asset in the Valley," he said.

Cinda Jones, who co-owns Cows with her brother, Evan Jones, said DeBoer was instrumental in getting her to sell the development rights to the land.

"She convinced me it was an appropriate and wise thing to do and promised I wouldn't regret it," Jones said. "And I don't."

The parcel is formally named for her father, the late Paul C. Jones, who died suddenly this year at the age of 69. Paul Jones spearheaded the forestry and lumber operations on the land and also promoted its public access to sportsmen.

Although he was privy to the deal, Jones didn't live to see it finalized. "He was proud of

us and excited it was happening," his daughter said.

W.D. Cows, Inc. is the biggest private landowner in Massachusetts, with timberland in 28 towns. The family started buying land in 1741 and purchased the first parcels connected to the conservation deal in the 1880s, according to Cinda Jones.

She herself has used the land recreationally for hiking and hunting. "I used to take my college friends to Rattlesnake Gutter," she said.

Jones said she is interesting in making similar deals involving the company's extensive holdings but will wait to see how this transaction plays out.

"I'd like to see how our world changes from doing this," she said.

Sullivan called the deal a testament to the Patrick Administration's commitment to land conservation. The state has conserved 88,000 acres of land over the past four years under the governorship of Deval Patrick, according to Sullivan's estimate.