A view of Brushy Mountain in Leverett, part of a nearly 3,500-acre tract of land owned by W.D. Cowls Co. that is now preserved from development. It is seen from Peawaddie Hill Road in Leverett.

W.D. Cowls Co. sells development rights to 3,486 acres in Leverett, Shutesbury

By NICK GRABBE
Staff Writer

LEVERETT — A tract of Valley forestland will be permanently protected from development but remain open for public recreation under the largest conservation deal in the state's history, involving an Amherst lumber company, local land trusts and state and federal agencies.

The 3,486 acres, the equivalent of 5.8 square miles, is centered on Brushy Mountain in Leverett but includes adjacent land in Shutesbury. It has been owned for 125 years by the W.D. Cowls Co. of North Amherst, which has managed it for timber and will continue to do so.

Four years of negotiation, involving the Kestrel Land Trust of Amherst and the Franklin Land Trust of Shutesbury Falls, resulted in the payment of $8.8 million Friday to Cowls for the development rights. The company relinquished all rights to build residences or businesses — and accepted restrictions such as no cell phones or wind towers — and agreed to adhere to the highest level of forest management.

"This successful and historic land conservation initiative is the result of a unique partnerships that will protect this treasure for generations," said Gov. Deval Patrick in a

Cinda Jones, president of W.D. Cowls in Amherst, left, and Kristin DeBoer, executive director of Kestrel Land Trust, stand in front of Brushy Mountain in Leverett.

This map of the Cowls property in Leverett and Shutesbury shows the land that falls under the new conservation restriction.
Conservation deal protects extensive forest tract in Leverett, Shutesbury

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"We're on the ninth generation and I want nice, more, and this will help guarantee that if we don't continually change our business model and reinvent, it won't survive," DeBoer said.

"What we had to do to sustain our family business," she said. "We're on the ninth generation and I want nice, more, and this will help guarantee that if we don't continually change our business model and reinvent, it won't survive." DeBoer called the price of $8.8 million "the best price we could ever have for a 174-acre tract of land in the state of Massachusetts." The $8.8 million purchase includes 300 acres from the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program, which protects environmentally important forest lands threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. The two land tracts secured $38,680,000 from the Western Massachusetts Land Protection Fund and $5,276,000 from the state's Department of Fish and Game.

"The focus is on public use and visitors' experience," DeBoer said. "This is a great day for the town of Leverett and the state of Massachusetts. It's a great day for all of us." DeBoer said she is looking forward to working with the town of Leverett and the state of Massachusetts to create a park, and the intention is to be responsive to the needs of the public.

Rep. Steven Kulik, D-Worthington, represents Leverett in the Legislature. "I am pleased that the land will continue to be sustainably managed, thus contributing to our region's natural resource-based economy," he said in a statement.

DeBoer said the deal does not create a park, and the intention is to use the land to develop a highly accessible public area. "It's a great place to walk around. That's what the Valley is all about. We have the opportunity to go to great schools and then spend an afternoon hiking with our family in the woods."