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Idaho forest land near Mount Spokane protected from development

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A large chunk of private forest land near Mount Spokane is now permanently protected from development.

The Idaho Department of Lands announced Wednesday that more than 22,000 acres of Inland Empire Paper Co. is now protected under a conservation easement.

Inland Empire is owned by the Cowles Co., which also owns The Spokesman-Review.

The property is between Mount Spokane and Spirit Lake in Bonner and Kootenai counties. It borders state property near the Idaho-Washington border and horseshoes around Spirit Lake, covering land on the north and south sides of the body of water.

It includes habitat for a variety of wildlife, such as elk, deer and westslope cutthroat trout, according to a Department of Lands news release. It also covers part of the Spokane Valley-Rathdrum Prairie Aquifer, which provides drinking water for people in Spokane and Kootenai counties.

The deal locks in public access for the property, which has long been used by hunters, hikers, berry pickers and other recreationists. Jennifer Barker, the Forest Legacy Program manager for the Idaho Department of Lands, said maintaining that access in perpetuity is especially important as housing development pressure continues to increase in North Idaho.

“It’s going to be available for generations,” Barker said. “That’s pretty important as those lands surrounding it continue to develop.”

It is the first phase in a long-term project called the Spirit of Mount Spokane Forest Legacy Project, a partnership between Inland Empire, the nonprofit Trust for Public Land, the state of Idaho and the U.S. Forest Service. Over time, the plan is to protect more than 40,000 acres of Inland Empire land in northeast Washington and North Idaho, according to the Trust for Public Land’s website.

David Weinstein, an associate vice president at the Trust for Public Land, said in a statement that the easement “keeps these forests working while permanently protecting public access, safeguarding clean drinking water and conserving critical wildlife habitat across the region.”

Through the easement, Inland Empire sold its development rights to the property, which was valued at about \$34 million. The U.S. Forest Service’s Forest Legacy Program awarded the project \$26 million. That money was used to compensate Inland Empire for the development rights. The paper company fulfilled a 25% nonfederal matching requirement by donating the rest of the easement’s value.

The company still will own the land and timber production will continue. Public access will change slightly. In the past, all forms of access required a paid permit from Inland Empire. Under the new easement, non-motorized access will be free on that particular property. Motorized access still will require a permit.

Chris Robinson, Inland Empire’s president and general manager, said in a statement that the easement “allows us to continue managing this land as a working forest.”

“This land supports a 100% renewable and sustainable natural resource,” Robinson said. “Ensuring this land is protected from future development is a win for the region and the local communities it surrounds.”

Plans are in the works for the next phase of the Spirit of Mount Spokane project. Barker said an application has been filed for the next piece on the Idaho side, and that they’re waiting for word from the Forest Legacy Program on whether it will receive funding.

An application for Forest Legacy Program funding on the Washington side has been approved but no easements have been finalized, Barker said.