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## **Butte Falls obtains 430 acres for community forest**

By Nick Morgan

Updated: Feb 14, 2022 07:29 AM



Gary Halvorson/Oregon State Archives The town of Butte Falls now owns 430 acres of land that includes the falls at Big Butte Creek for a planned community forest that's been decades in the making.

Town now owns Big Butte Creek waterfall

Owing to a team effort that involved a timber products company, the governor's office, the state Legislature and a federal grant, the town of Butte Falls is now the proud owner of 430 acres of forest land, including the town's namesake waterfall.

The deed for property — containing landmarks such as the falls of Big Butte Creek and the historic Butte Falls Company sawmill — arrived in the mail Monday morning, according to Mayor Linda Spencer, completing an effort to obtain the land spanning two decades and the start of the town's new community forest.

"The town had been trying to acquire the falls for a long, long time," Spencer said.

The town of fewer than 500 people — a 2019 feasibility study lists the population at 447 — had been interested in turning the forest near the town into a park since the late 1990s, but those talks fizzled out due to a lack of funding, according to Spencer.

The project got a second wind about 2-1/2 years ago, early in Spencer's tenure as mayor, when Weyerhaeuser reached out to the town with plans to sell the land at market rates.

Spencer said she was "very interested," in part because of the town's past efforts to turn the land into a recreation area, and concerns about severe wildfires.

The 2018 fire that destroyed Paradise, California, was fresh in the town's mind, according to the May 2019 feasibility study conducted with help from the state's collaborative problem-solving program Oregon Solutions.

"We were becoming extremely concerned about wildfires," Spencer said. "The land is right adjacent to us."

The town couldn't afford to purchase the land outright — the 430-acre parcel combining 300 acres of formerly Weyerhaeuser land with other working forestland ultimately came to \$1.1 million — so Spencer reached out first to the governor's Regional Solutions office, which Spencer said helped connect the town to help on the project from the governor's office and Oregon Solutions.

Weyerhaeuser, meanwhile, reached out to the nonprofit Trust for Public Land to get the ball rolling on a land trust, according to Spencer and the nonprofit's Oregon program director Kristin Kovalik.

"It's a role that we play all the time with different agencies — local, state and federal — to facilitate the acquisition of lands for parks and open space," Kovalik said. "It was a natural fit for us having a willing seller."

Siskiyou Timberlands, a subsidiary of natural capital investment firm Chinook Forest Partners, served as an intermediary, managed the land and worked with the nonprofit until the grants were completed, according to Kovalik.

Oregon Solutions worked with members of the Butte Falls Community Forest Project for an updated assessment, released in May 2019, that sought the governor's designation on the project.

The national nonprofit provided the town with grantwriting resources, according to Kovalik, along with "property due diligence" that included appraisals and title reviews, Kovalik said.

Two six-figure grants got the \$1.1 million property over the finish line.

The Trust for Public Lands helped the town write a \$400,000 U.S. Forest Service Community Forest Grant awarded to the city last summer among other private and public grants.

Kovalik said the federal grant program shows preference for submissions that focus on a combination of forest health, recreation, education, and fish and wildlife habitat preservation, which "squarely aligned" with the town's goals for the community forest.

The Butte Falls Community Forest Commission got another \$700,000 from the state Legislature that matched those grants, which included the U.S. Forest Service grant.

According to Kovalik and Spencer, the town officially became owner of the property Feb. 3, but aside from a “big celebration” planned for April 15, the community forest is months away from opening to the public.

Butte Falls will need to start implementing the forest management that the Butte Falls Community Forest Commission devised over the past two years with help from a contractor and a part-time city employee.

“This spring and summer they’re going to get on the ground and start improving the health of the forest,” Kovalik said.

“We want to create a mature forest that is resilient to fire,” Spencer said.

A recreation committee is working with the National Park Service’s River, Trails and Conservation Assistance Program on designing trails for the community forest.

Spencer said other ideas being floated include a forest garden, but those plans are still developing.

“We’ll just see where we go from there,” Spencer said. “We have some ideas, but they’re not mature yet.”

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