

## Groups raise \$35 million to save Down East forest

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AUGUSTA — A major fundraising effort that will protect 342,000 acres of Down East forest and hundreds of miles of remote waterfront from developers has been completed, preservation groups and Gov. John Baldacci announced Tuesday.

The nonprofit New England Forestry Foundation and the Downeast Lakes Land Trust said the nearly \$35 million raised will protect 445 miles of shore frontage on 60 lakes and 1,500 miles of riverfront in Maine's easternmost county.

Acreage protected under the program is in interior Washington County and the St. Croix and Machias river watersheds.

The network of preserved land will connect with publicly owned land in Canada to create a block of 1.3 million contiguous acres spanning both sides of the Maine-New Brunswick border.

About a third of the money for the Maine transactions comes from federal and state grants, a third from foundations and the other third from individuals. A small portion of the land is being purchased, but the vast majority is being protected through easements.

The project ensures that the land will remain open forever for traditional uses, such as hunting, fishing and other types of outdoor recreation. But the effort will also allow a continuation of timber production, an important contributor to the local economy.

"You may think of this as a conservation project," said Baldacci. "It is, but it's more than that. It's all about sustaining a local economy that's dependent on a natural resources base."

The governor congratulated the participating groups for what he described as "an enormous undertaking," and said it will help to preserve an internationally popular recreational fishery and benefit the area's guides, sporting camp owners and their employees.

The effort was spawned several years ago by residents in the Grand Lake Stream area, which is known for its landlocked salmon and picturesque landscape. They became concerned that as forests were sold off, land long used for outdoor activities and timber harvesting would become off-limits as it was sold as vacation home lots.

It led to the formation of the Downeast Lakes Land Trust in 2001, which in turn teamed up with the Massachusetts-based New England Forestry Foundation and Woodie Wheaton Land Trust of Maine.

Among the largest private donors was Elmina Sewall of Kennebunk and a foundation in her name, with a total contribution of \$7.2 million, and Wal-Mart's "Acres for America" program, which gave \$6.1 million. Government-sponsored grants came from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Land for Maine's Future program.