A new mechanism allows landowners the best of two worlds: retaining ownership of their forested lands and preserving the tract from development—forever.

Our Forest Legacy

Story By Kathy Andrews
Photos By Dave Gillespie

High on the bluffs over the Mississippi River near Alton are 155 acres of land guaranteed to remain forested throughout the ages.

Oblate Woods, owned by the Oblate Fathers, a Catholic order, was the first property protected in Illinois under the Forest Legacy Program (FLP), a partnership between the USDA Forest Service, 43 states and three territories to identify and help protect environmentally important forests from conversion to nonforest uses.

In 1820, 38 percent—nearly 13.8 million acres—of Illinois was forested. While a 1996 satellite imagery study showed 4.9 million forested acres (14 percent), the trend was on the rise, with an estimated 10 percent increase in forest cover between 1962 and 1985.

Responsibility for the majority (nearly 90 percent) of the wooded acres in Illinois lies in the hands of groups like the Oblate Fathers—private landowners. One tool for protecting these important resources is a conservation easement.

"Conservation easements are legal agreements made with property owners to restrict development on their property—a restriction that transfers with sale of the property into the future," explained Dave Gillespie, Illinois Forest Legacy Program coordinator. "The owner retains ownership of the land, but the title for the easement is held by the state."

Illinois has four sites designated as Forest Legacy Areas (FLA)—specific areas containing important forests threatened by development. The Great Rivers Bluff FLA starts on the west side of Alton, continuing west past Pere Marquette State Park then north along the Illinois River. Also along the Illinois River is the Peoria Bluffs FLA, including lands on both sides of the river north of Peoria. Stretches of the Rock River south of Rockford to Dixon are included in the Rock River FLA. The newest area is the Southwestern Illinois-Lower Kaskaskia FLA.

Designation of Chautauqua Woods as a Forest Legacy tract ensures preservation of a spectacular bluff-top view of the confluence of the Illinois and Mississippi rivers.

Ed Weilbacher, coordinator for Southwestern Illinois Resource Conservation and Development, Inc., was involved throughout the summer of 2004 in informational meetings for landowners residing within the now-approved FLA along the lower Kaskaskia River.

"Not only is the Kaskaskia FLA the new kid on the block, it is unusual because it encompasses forests in a seven-county area," Weilbacher said. "This voluntary program provides landowners a great tool for protecting upland and bottomland forest resources—important in this area because timber stands are so scattered."

"The program is effective because it relies on a willing seller/willing buyer approach," Gillespie continued. "Only development rights have been purchased through this program. After a landowner initiates an application for the program, they decide specifically what rights they will sell and which they will keep—mineral, hunting, fishing, camping, grazing, farming, motorized access, mushroom collection and more. The purpose of the program is not to open the land for public use, but allow landowners to continue recreational and consumptive resource uses, and protect the land from development."

Forest lands on the legacy tracts are managed through a Forest Stewardship Plan developed by the landowner and the local Department of Natural Resources (DNR) district forester.

The motivating factor for most participating landowners is the desire to ensure that these significant remnant forests are not bulldozed and lost forever, although the annual tax advantages are certainly icing on the cake. Many property owners have been willing to make a donation of the easement for tax purposes.

The federal government, through the U.S. Forest Service, contributes 75 percent of the money required to acquire conservation easements from landowners, with state agencies, donations from landowners and local conservation organizations responsible for the remainder of the financial agreement.

The Great Rivers Land Trust has been an active partner in the legacy program.

"The Forest Legacy Program has been an effective tool in helping the Great Rivers Land Trust," concluded Alley Ringhausen, executive director of the organization dedicated to promoting the preservation and improvement of natural resources principally in, but not limited to, the watershed of the Mississippi River. "Working with DNR, we have made great strides in our mutual goal of protecting forest land for future generations."

To learn more about the Forest Legacy Program, contact Dave Gillespie, program coordinator, at (217) 785-8766 or dgillespie@dnrmail.state.il.us.

Since Illinois was approved for the program in November 1994, eight projects have been completed, or are pending final closure, and nine additional projects have been sent to the USFS for approval and funding.

Rock River FLA:
one tract totaling 93 acres, one pending tract totaling 75 acres and one 300-acre tract proposed for 2007 funding, all in Ogle County.

Great Rivers Bluffs FLA:
Pere Marquette Project Area: one tract totaling 79 acres and two additional tracts totaling 736 acres proposed for 2007 funding, all in Jersey County.
Oblate/LaVista Project Area: five tracts totaling 220 acres and one 44-acre tract proposed for 2007 funding.
Calhoun Project Area: three tracts totaling 480 acres proposed for 2007 funding.

Southwestern Illinois Lower Kaskaskia FLA:
Kaskaskia Project Area: one 54-acre tract proposed for 2007 funding.
Karst Project Area: one 750-acre tract proposed for 2007 funding.

Part of the Great Rivers Bluffs Forest Legacy Area, Youngblood Hollow is now protected from development through a conservation easement.