$5.5M to preserve forest proposed
Federal budget would include funds toward Rensselaer Plateau
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Grafton

The proposed federal budget contains $5.5 million to protect thousands of acres of forest in the Rensselaer Plateau, a part of Rensselaer County that contains such popular tourist attractions as Grafton Lakes and Cherry Plains state parks.

That was welcome news Tuesday for the Rensselaer Plateau Alliance, a grassroots group formed six years ago to promote the plateau, a 105,000-acre high-country swath that is the state's fifth-largest intact forest.

Last year, the alliance issued a potential road map for the area, which imagined a future of sustainable forestry, land protection and outdoor-based tourism.

Funds from the federal Forest Legacy Program, run through the U.S. Forest Service, could help promote that vision, said alliance President Jim Bonesteel.

If the budget request is ultimately approved by Congress, the cash would go toward purchase of conservation easements on more than 12,300 acres with 15 different owners, he said. Those easements would bar future development of the property, which would remain in private ownership.

"Owners would continue to pay taxes, and to use the land for the purposes that they have been using it for — everything, but no future development," said Bonesteel. Easement purchases would likely take place over the next three to five years, he said.

One of the largest landowners expected to seek easement funds, said Bonesteel, is North Carolina-based Heartwood Forestland, a real estate investment trust that several years ago purchased about 17,500 acres on the plateau from W.J. Cowee in Berlin, a forestry company that operated for more than a century.

Land targeted for protection includes about 3.5 miles along the Poestenkill, a nationally recognized trout stream and important tributary to the Hudson River.

Currently, about 8,500 acres on the plateau are protected in some fashion.

The area covers the towns of Berlin, Brunswick, Grafton, Hoosick, Nassau, Petersburgh, Pittstown, Poestenkill, Stephentown, and Sand Lake, plus the village of East Nassau.

Bounded roughly by Route 7 in the north and Route 43 in the south, the land is rugged and rocky, and rich in wildlife, as well as home to about 8,200 people.
Running like a spine down the plateau from the north are the Tibbetts State Forest in Hoosick, Pittstown State Forest in Pittstown, the county-owned Dyken Pond Center, the little-known Capital District Wildlife Management Area and Cherry Plain State Park in Berlin.

Last winter, the plateau alliance announced it was buying its first-ever "demonstration" forest, a 350-acre parcel in Poestenkill off Legenbauer Road, and had plans to develop it for outdoor recreation, as well as a training site where loggers will be taught sustainable forestry techniques.

The potential federal funding was praised by U.S. Rep. Chris Gibson, a Kinderhook Republican; Rensselaer County Executive Kathy Jimino; and Poestenkill Supervisor Dominic Jacangelo.

"Forest Legacy funds help all of us by paying private landowners to protect the public benefits of their forests while allowing them to do what they want with their land, including hunting, snowmobiling, and logging," said Jimino.

"This project will help keep forests working for local jobs and support landowners' rights to sell interests in their land without reducing the tax base."

The federal program requires a state match of 25 percent of the easement purchase price, Bonesteel said.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation, which through its Hudson River Estuary Program helped put together the funding application to the Forest Service, had no comment about the proposed funding.

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