

4/22/2005

**Contact: Mel Taylor, Business Affairs, 509/335-2447, mhtaylor@wsu.edu
Rod Sayler, Natural Resource Sciences, 509/335-6167, rdsayler@wsu.edu
James Tinney, WSU News Service, 509/335-8055, jltinney@wsu.edu**

WSU Announces Plan to Purchase Magpie Forest

PULLMAN, Wash. -- In celebration of Earth Day, 2005, Washington State University announced today (April 22) its plans to purchase Magpie Forest, a 14-acre patch of endangered Palouse Prairie still surviving on the northern edge of Pullman.

Magpie Forest has long been valued by local conservation groups and researchers for the rich biological diversity of its native plants, but the explosive growth of housing in Pullman caused many to worry that the land soon would be divided up for housing developments.

Mel Taylor, director of special projects and external relations for WSU Business Affairs, said, "Faculty, local conservation groups and city officials all strongly supported the purchase and conservation of Magpie Forest and we have reached an agreement to purchase Magpie Forest from a local landowner."

"We were able to justify purchasing Magpie Forest as a nearby outdoor environmental science laboratory for use by our faculty and students and also to be part of a package of native prairie habitat protection," Taylor said.

Taylor said the purchase would allow the university, working with faculty and conservation groups and the city of Pullman, to expand the protection of native prairie, to help manage the property and to preserve public access to it.

Alan Davis Pullman parks superintendent, said that with this purchase, "The city now can better plan for future land use and open green space, because the Pullman Environmental Quality Commission identified Magpie Forest as one of the city's most important and endangered critical areas. The comprehensive plan for the city of Pullman estimates a growth increase of 23 percent by the year 2020. So if this land was not protected now, it would likely have succumbed to major development."

Rod Sayler, a conservation biologist in the WSU Department of Natural Resource Sciences, said, "Native Palouse Prairie is one of the most endangered grassland ecosystems in the U.S. and this small patch of forest and grassland is more valuable to researchers than many people would suspect. Over 160 species of plants, birds, and other animals live in or use Magpie Forest, so the land is quite important to WSU and University of Idaho researchers as a long-term ecological study site."

Sayler said that faculty and students will be able to study the ecology of declining native bees and butterflies, conservation of rare native plants, and a host of issues related to restoration ecology. “We can use the latest molecular ecology techniques to better understand how we can protect and conserve the genetic diversity of organisms surviving in these isolated prairie fragments,” he said.

“With the growth of development in Pullman, natural areas such as Magpie Forest are becoming increasingly important as a reprieve from the expansion of the urban environment. Ninety-six percent of Whitman County is privately owned, most of the remaining public property being the roads you drive on, leaving very few public natural areas,” said Tim Myers, Whitman County parks director. “The vision and persistence of the Pullman Civic Trust and the community spirit of Washington State University have made it possible for citizens and students alike to benefit from this unique area.”

Taylor says that once the purchase is official, a cooperative management plan will be put together that might include a primitive walking path with interpretive educational signs. In addition to providing access to WSU researchers, the land could be used in environmental education activities by local Boy and Girl Scout troops and other grade school and community groups.