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## Saving the blueberry barrens

Partnership helps preserve more than 500 acres of land in Wells

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**WELLS** — More than 500 acres of unique wild land along the Branch Brook in Wells will be preserved as the result of a purchase by a unique partnership between a conservation group and a public utility company.

The Wells Barren, known to locals as the former Hardy's Blueberries, was bought last week by the Nature Conservancy and the Kennebunk Kennebunkport &

Wells Water District. The purchase of the 560-acre tract of land along nearly one and a half miles of the Branch Brook will be preserved for wildlife and as a water resource.

It is a joint venture between "friendly neighbors that are protecting this large tract of land for the benefit of the public and the environment," said Norm Labbe, Monday, the water district's superintendent. The two conservation-minded groups have compatible goals, he said.

The habitat is considered "exquisitely rare," said Keith Fletcher, Southern Maine program manager for the Nature Conservancy.

"It was the Nature Conservancy's highest priority tract in Southern Maine," he said Monday. Fletcher characterized the joint venture between the conservation group and the water district as "a wonderful marriage" that will serve to protect extremely scarce wild land.

"There are probably less

than 10,000 acres like this left in the world," Fletcher said of the nearly 400-acre rare natural community, known as sandplains grassland. It serves as habitat for several endangered and threatened species including the grasshopper sparrow, upland sandpiper, vesper sparrow, black racer snake and the New England cottontail, in addition to larger wildlife like moose and bear.

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The Branch Brook serves as the primary water supply for four towns — the Kennebunks, Wells and Ogunquit — whose population vacillates between 30,000 to nearly 100,000 seasonally, according to Labbe, and the water resources there are also unique. The property consists of deep sandy glacial deposits situated atop a clay table, which creates springs that were previously tapped by a water bottling company.

Through the purchase agreement, the water district will hold title to an existing 4,000 square-foot structure that, though originally developed as a bottling facility, served only for water extraction and loading by the spring water company. The district will also retain water rights and the title to 180 acres of woodland on the property.

It may be feasible, Labbe said Monday, for the district to reinstate spring water extraction at the site "with the idea of not starving the resource but to use the excess capacity to benefit our customers."

There is no evidence to indicate that the pumping facility contributed to abutters' well issues during the 2002 and 2003 drought period, he said. Also, trucks will not be rumbling

down Wire Road, "a residential country road" that abuts the property and had been another complaint of nearby neighbors, he said.

"We want to eliminate that issue," Labbe said. Profits from spring water sales "could stem the tide of future cost increases" for water district customers, he said.

The spring water company had a lease from the Massachusetts-based landowner and when that lease was not renewed in early 2006, the two agencies recognized the opportunity to acquire the property. There was also a certain sense of urgency, according to both Fletcher and Labbe.

"It's a highly developable plot," Fletcher said, adding that the land could easily support a 300-lot subdivision.

"It's taken most of 2007 to hammer out the deal," he said, though the conservancy has been negotiating with the landowner for well over 10 years, he added.

The land was bought based on its appraised value, according to Fletcher, whose group committed \$1.9 million to the purchase price. The water district's contribution was \$1.1 million funded from the agency's dedicated watershed fund. The sale was privately financed with the former owner

on a 10-year loan and the Nature Conservancy will need to raise around \$900,000 for their part of the purchase. They will also need to raise funds for a stewardship endowment, according to a written statement from the group.

The property will be maintained and managed in a similar fashion to the adjacent state Kennebunk Plains Wildlife Management Area. It will be open to the public with continuing maintenance of existing trails and allowances for limited snowmobiling as currently exists there.

The two agency representatives were outwardly excited about their partnership to protect public open space, wildlife, the environment and drinking water.

"It's a model that should and could be implemented between other entities to allow for more of these opportunities in the future," said Labbe.

Pointing to the Nature Conservancy's newly designed logo and slogan, "Protecting nature. Preserving life," Fletcher reflected on the new acquisition.

"I cannot think of a better project that better reflects that," he said.

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