

UN LEGADO PARA AJUNTAS PUERTO RICO Y LA MANIADA



STAR photo by Ingrid Torres

Members and supporters of the Utuado-area citizens group CasaPueblo celebrate on Wednesday the expected establishment of a state-owned forest in the mining lands of Utuado and Adjuntas. The group, which made

the announcement at the Institute for Puerto Rican Culture, has lobbied for the creation of the 700-acre forest. From left are Danny Torres, Ariel Massol, Alexis Massol and Tinti Deya.

Utuado, Adjuntas may be site of 15th state-owned forest

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The mining lands of Utuado and Adjuntas became the likely future site of the 15th state-owned forest Wednesday and the first one that would be established as the direct result of work done by a group of citizens, according to forestry experts.

Gov. Rosselló on Wednesday promised to sign an executive order turning 700 acres that were once designated for a multimillion-dollar gold and copper mining industry into a protected forest.

The governor's signature would authorize the land to be turned over directly to the Department of Natural and Environmental Resources, said Edgardo González, director of the DNER's forestry division. He said this would allow the DNER to bypass lengthy negotiations with the current owner, the Land Administration.

"It will make the steps easier," González said.

The Utuado forest would be the first state-run forest to be established in more than three decades and the first time since 1919 that a forest would be created by executive order, González said.

Normally the establishment of a forest involves lengthy negotiations between government agencies and landowners, the forestry expert said.

But "if the governor signs that order, the title of the land is passed directly to [the natural resources department]," he added.

The last forest established in Puerto Rico, through an agreement of federal and state governments, was Toro Negro in Villalba, according to DNER records. The U.S. government turned over federal land to the state in exchange for the Puerto Rican government's agreement to give up some of its land in what is now the Caribbean National Forest, González said.

Members of CasaPueblo, the Utuado citizens group that first proposed the creation of the forest, called the government's endorsement a "triumph for the people of Puerto Rico."

Only 2.7 percent — or 60,000 acres — of the island's terrain falls under protected state forest land, according to U.S. Forest Service figures. The federally run Caribbean National Forest takes up an additional 28,000 acres.

"This is the culmination of the 35-year fight of people defending their land against mining," said group leader Alexis Massol, at a press conference at the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture. He was accompanied by group members, Utuado residents and IPRC officials.

CasaPueblo, which successfully fought plans by two U.S. firms in 1992 to turn the area into an open-pit mining region, gathered 3,000 signatures supporting the establishment of a forest and delivered them to La Fortaleza in April.

The governor's office in turn asked the DNER to evaluate the area's potential as

a forest. Last month, DNER Secretary Pedro Gelabert told the governor in a letter that his department favored the area's designation as a state-run forest.

When questioned about the issue by reporters on Wednesday, Gov. Rosselló said he will sign the executive order "before the elections," according to the Associated Press.

The protection of the Utuado-Adjuntas area won't mean an outright ban on mining in the area, according to González. But it will make it "more difficult" for outside groups to get permission to use the land, he said.

Puerto Rico's forestry law requires there to be a "major need" by outsiders to use protected lands, he said. Once that need is established, the user must give up other areas to compensate for the land taken.

The Utuado forest would also create a "biological corridor" between the Río Abajo and the Guilarte forests, González said.

Ecologists view the area around Río Abajo as an important "liberation" ground for the Puerto Rican parrot. The Utuado forest's location between that area and Guilarte would provide the endangered bird with a much larger protected aviary, González said.

Other endangered birds that inhabit the area are the Sierra Falcon, the Puerto Rican broad-winged hawk and the Banan-aquí, according to CasaPueblo.