

Partnership And Luck Protect Elk Creek

Eye on the Environment

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Good luck and good partners enabled Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC) on September 15 to acquire 320 acres of prime fish and wildlife habitat in the Swan Valley where Elk Creek joins the Swan River. This first acquisition is Phase I of SEC's strategy to protect land along this important bull trout spawning stream.

The federal Bonneville Power Administration provided the funding to purchase Section 35 from Plum Creek Timber Company for the first parcel of the Elk Creek Conservation Area. BPA in return earned mitigation credits for habitat lost during construction of its hydroelectric dam at Hungry Horse.

An unusual turn of events resulted in Swan Ecosystem Center and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) sharing ownership of the square-mile section, with SEC acquiring the west half and the CSKT the east half.

Plum Creek officials had announced the company's intention to sell the land on the open market next year if a conservation solution could not be found. Trust for Public Land (TPL), a national nonprofit land trust organization, had an option to buy the section if funds could be raised in time. TPL has been effective working with Plum Creek to protect important conservation lands in the Swan Valley.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) had an interest in Elk Creek because of its vital fish and wildlife habitat. In spring 2006, FWP's Gael Bissell and Alan Wood applied for a BPA grant and received approval for funds sufficient to purchase half of the 640-acre section.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks wanted to protect the land but the wildlife agency was not interested in owning it. Bissell and Wood were aware SEC was trying to acquire land for community benefit, so a cooperative strategy took shape.

Swan Valley resident and Section 35 neighbor, Terry Quinn, said, "It's critical habitat because of the bears and bull trout. Everything comes through there. We've seen moose, elk, bears, eagles and sandhill cranes."

Swan Ecosystem Center began fundraising for the remaining dollars needed to purchase the full section and received several generous contributions from Swan Valley residents. But there wasn't much time to raise the needed capital because SEC's BPA funds had to be spent by the end of September 2006.

Luckily, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes were also granted BPA funds for fiscal year 2006. The partnership expanded when Lynn Ducharme, CSKT's BPA liaison, met with the Tribal Council in late summer and the Council agreed to use their BPA allocation to help protect Elk Creek.

Led by Eric Love and Robert Rasmussen of Trust for Public Land, the partners assembled the necessary paperwork in time for the September 15 closing, and Section 35 was transferred from Plum Creek to SEC and CSKT.

Swan Ecosystem Center is assembling a team of Swan Valley residents and people with wildlife and forestry skills to work on a cooperative management plan, which will address goals and strategies for wildlife protection, weed management, timber growth and other stewardship activities. The team will have one year to work with Tribal natural resource professionals and develop a BPA-approved plan. A BPA conservation easement disallows subdivision.

Neighbor Quinn said, "Now the land will stay like it was, or better. Now we can manage the weeds." Spotted knapweed, oxeye daisy and Canadian thistle are thriving along the forest roads and in old log landings.

Swan Ecosystem Center is participating this fall with the Missoula County Weed District, residents and other partners on a cooperative weed management grant proposal. The group is seeking funds for herbicide spraying and native seeds to reestablish treated sites. SEC is also raising funds for an endowment to support restoration activities until funds can be generated from future harvesting.

Vigorous stands of 30-40-year-old lodgepole and some larch are growing on the uplands and there are a few scattered stands of larger Douglas-fir and larch. It will be several years before any timber will be harvested. But the section is relatively flat and is prime timber growing land, according to Swan Valley resident and Tree Farm owner Dave Owen who recently visited Section 35.

Several year-round and seasonal ponds and wetlands are scattered around the section. These wet areas attract migratory birds, turtles and frogs and they provide important habitat for most other wildlife species native to the Swan Valley.

The Elk Creek streamside area carves a wide swathe, joining the Swan River in the northeast corner. Most of the creek and river are now on CSKT land, yet the SEC half includes an old creek channel that will likely reestablish itself sometime in the future as the stream naturally moves from side to side. The broad flood plains have been logged, but cottonwoods, spruce and other tree species grow along the banks.

Swan Ecosystem Center will use the land for educational programs, including forest stewardship activities, amphibian surveys and stream monitoring. SEC's After School Club, which includes public elementary school and home schooled students, will visit

the section for three-season field studies.

Allen Branine, DNRC service forester, said, “Section 35 is an excellent place to establish permanent monitoring plots and use SEC’s forest stewardship educational truck for teaching students and adults how to be good forest stewards.”

“The growth and yield capability of the stands can be determined to assure a sustained forest,” Branine said.

With Phase I of the Elk Creek Conservation Area completed, Swan Ecosystem Center is amplifying its fundraising to purchase Plum Creek’s Sections 3 and 9, upstream from Section 35. SEC will continue working with Trust for Public Land and Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks as primary partners to acquire these sections.

Much of Section 3 has been recently harvested, while Section 9 has a slightly older diverse forest of mixed tree species and numerous ponds and wetlands critical for wildlife. When all three sections have been secured, nearly all of Elk Creek will be protected from subdivision development. Only a tiny corner of land bordering Elk Creek is privately owned.

The creek’s headwaters are at Elk Lake high in the Mission Mountains Wilderness. In the early 1990’s the Flathead National Forest traded Plum Creek for two and half sections of land outside of wilderness. In return Plum Creek received three sections of national forest land in the Squeezer Creek area.

The Elk Creek Conservation Area will complete the conservation of this vital tributary of Swan River watershed.