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Eye on the Environment: It Takes A Legacy For Land

By Anne Dahl

The Montana Legacy Project, announced at Lone Pine State Park near Kalispell on June 30, will have enormous consequences for the future of the Swan Valley's timberlands, wildlife habitat, and recreation opportunities. Yet little will change.

The project makes it evident life may stay pretty much the same in the Swan Valley. Rather than face a dramatic shift to expansive development, we can expect gradual change—which many in the Swan Valley had always counted on, until Plum Creek Timber Company entered the real estate business a few years ago and began selling land.

Under the Montana Legacy Project, over 60,000 acres of Plum Creek timberland in the Swan Valley will be transferred to The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and The Trust for Public Land (TPL) for temporary ownership. TNC and TPL are the two national nonprofit land trust organizations that have been active in the Swan and Blackfoot Valleys in recent years, helping our communities cope with the sale of timberlands and the potential loss of access for hunting and fishing.

TPL and TNC negotiated with Plum Creek for the purchase of 320,000 acres of the Company's lands in western Montana. Although the final ownership of these lands is still undetermined, much of the colorful checkerboard on Forest Service maps of the Swan Valley may be replaced with large, solid blocks of green and lavender blue

representing federal and state lands. The private lands, usually shown in white, will expand somewhat, but the former Plum Creek lands will be protected from most subdivision development with conservation easements.

New housing construction will continue on existing private residential and commercial lands that are already subdivided, or that pass muster for future subdivision with the Missoula and Lake County planning offices. Local real estate agents will make their living as they always have, helping people buy and sell property as they come and go in the Swan Valley.

The new web site, themontanalegacyproject.org, is the place to go for facts about the land transactions, a map, and answers to questions.

According to the map provided on the website, it appears that most of the Swan Valley's Plum Creek lands are included in the agreement. The transition will take place in three phases at the end of 2008, 2009 and 2010.

A variety of funding sources will be necessary to implement this agreement. A provision in the 2008 farm bill, introduced by Senator Baucus, creates a mechanism that would allow funding for lands that would ultimately transfer to the national forest system. Private investment and state funding are also anticipated, as well as private contributions.

The Swan Valley's rich wildlife habitat, which supports healthy populations of nearly all the species common in western Montana, will remain intact. Hunters will continue to have access to thousands of forested acres, as they always have. Our streams will continue to run clear and cold for fish and anglers, and citizens will have a say in how the lands that become public are managed. This would not be possible if the lands were privately owned.

The agreement also ensures that these former Plum Creek lands in western Montana will be maintained as working timberlands, helping to keep the timber industry afloat in this challenging economy. A 10-15-year "fiber supply" agreement will

help provide stability for Plum Creek's four Montana mills and its millworkers. In the future, logging contractors will have restoration and logging work on lands that are added to the national forest and state holdings, as well as on new and existing private residential lands.

The Montana Legacy Project came about through a cooperative effort among Senator Max Baucus, Plum Creek Timber Company, The Nature Conservancy and The Trust for Public Land. Swan Ecosystem Center was not involved at the negotiating table, yet SEC's board of directors applauds the process and supports the conservation results.

Swan Ecosystem Center's long relationship with The Trust for Public Land began in the late 1990's when several Plum Creek parcels near Lindbergh Lake were acquired by the Flathead National Forest. Since then, SEC and TPL have worked cooperatively with federal and state agencies and other nonprofit groups to ensure conservation outcomes for additional Plum Creek lands that allow for timber management but prevent subdivision development.

Despite these efforts, it became clear there would not be enough time or money to continue protecting land a few parcels at a time and that a "big picture" solution would be needed if the Swan Valley were to retain its rural character. Land in the Swan Valley had become too expensive for parcel-by-parcel conservation. The Montana Legacy Project, because it covers a large geographic area, allowed TNC and TPL to negotiate a fair price for the timberlands, effectively solving this dilemma.

Swan Ecosystem Center is looking for opportunities to further its community forestry goals through the Montana Legacy Project. SEC initiated its community forestry program in 2006 with the acquisition of the Elk Creek Conservation Area, a 640-acre parcel at the confluence of Elk Creek and the Swan River owned by SEC and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes.

The Montana Legacy Project may offer opportunities for SEC to acquire additional land for a community forest. Or SEC could realize its goals by working with landowners who are willing to share stewardship responsibilities with SEC on former Plum Creek lands.

People in the Swan Valley could learn about forest restoration and stewardship through a community forestry program. A partnership with the University of Montana using the experimental forest model of the Lubrecht Forest is another idea being considered. University researchers could study land management in the moist forests of the Swan Valley while gaining experience working with an interested community.

Swan Ecosystem Center will continue its partnership with TPL and TNC as details of the Montana Legacy Project unfold, helping to provide information on how Swan Valley residents can be involved and gathering public input when appropriate.