

## **\$8.5 million in grants go to Blackfoot, Swan conservation**

*By JOHN CRAMER - Missoulian - 04/05/08*

OVANDO — The Blackfoot and Swan valleys, two of Montana's most picturesque landscapes, appear largely unchanged by the development pressure sweeping much of the West.

Among the nation's most biologically diverse ecosystems, the Blackfoot and Swan also are home to cattle ranchers, timber companies and a growing number of well-to-do retirees and telecommuters, all drawn by the land's natural bounty.

But the two valleys have had to work hard to retain their rural way of life as Plum Creek Timber Co., the largest private landowner in the nation, sells off much of its timberland for development.

In the past decade, the Blackfoot and Swan valleys have combined to permanently protect nearly 225,000 acres, most of it Plum Creek land, using \$120 million in federal grants and \$16 million in private donations.

The latest grants in recent weeks included \$6.5 million for the Blackfoot and \$2 million for the Swan.

Raised by public-private partnerships in each valley, the money is used to buy private land and transfer ownership to public agencies or community land trusts and to buy conservation easements from private landowners.

The partnerships' strategies are to stop excessive development, while protecting water quality, fish and wildlife, public recreation and a rural way of life that includes environmentally friendly ranching and logging.

Despite their success, the partnerships' members are worried that huge chunks of remaining Plum Creek land will be sold off for subdivisions and that traditional sources of federal grants are drying up.

"We're starting to scratch the gravel with the chickens," said Hank Goetz, lands director for the nonprofit Blackfoot Challenge. "The gap is widening between the available federal money for land conservation and the price of land that developers are willing to pay Plum Creek."

In recent decades, Blackfoot Valley landowners, nonprofit groups and government agencies have permanently protected nearly 200,000 acres, or a third of the valley's privately owned property.

With another 900,000 acres already under public ownership, that means the bulk of the 1.5 million acres that make up the Blackfoot watershed have been put off limits for large-scale development.

The move to protect the valley's landscape started in the 1970s when private landowners and land trusts signed the first conservation easements in Montana.

Conservation easements restrict a landowner's development rights in exchange for cash payments, tax benefits and other financial incentives.

Those independent efforts, which have protected nearly 100,000 acres today, have been bolstered since 2004 when the Plum

Creek Timber Co., the Nature Conservancy, the Blackfoot Challenge and other nonprofit and government agencies created the Blackfoot Community Project.

The project has protected another 89,000 acres and arranged to protect another 10,000 acres in the next few years.

“We have a long way to go, but we’ve accomplished a lot,” said Goetz.

Since 2004, the Nature Conservancy has secured more than \$70 million in loans to buy the 89,000 acres in large parcels from Plum Creek and to buy conservation easements on other private tracts in the Blackfoot Valley.

“Incremental sale of Plum Creek lands would result in widely divergent, uncoordinated and inconsistent land management with significant cumulative impacts to the valley’s outstanding natural resource values,” said Jay Kolbe, a wildlife biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

The Nature Conservancy is reselling the land to federal and state land agencies and to private owners with conservation easements.

The conservancy is being repaid from federal grants, with more than \$50 million secured so far.

The most recent federal grant was for \$6.5 million, which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service awarded last month for conservation planning and acquisition of vital fish and wildlife habitat.

But traditional federal funding for preservation the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Habitat Conservation plan, the U.S. Forest Service’s Forest Legacy

program, Congress’ Land and Water Conservation Fund and also the Bonneville Power Administration have tightened in recent years. The programs are designed to bolster endangered species, private timberland, watersheds and fisheries.

Restoration projects have been started on 45 tributaries and fisheries across 460 stream miles in the Blackfoot Valley, which provides habitat and migration corridors for protected species such as grizzly bears, bull trout, wolves and other species.

“The continued success of this project is critical,” Kolbe said. “The conservation strategy being pioneered by the Blackfoot Challenge and the Nature Conservancy will be a model for addressing the imminent divestiture of millions of acres of corporate timberland nationwide.”

In the nearby Swan Valley, another coalition of landowners, nonprofit groups and government agencies has permanently protected about 25,000 acres through land purchases and conservation easement over the past decade.

The Swan Valley Conservation’s efforts have been funded by \$70 million in public funding and another \$6 million in private donations. The latest federal grant came recently when the Swan Valley received a \$2 million Forest Legacy grant.

Like the Blackfoot Valley, the Swan Valley is a checkerboard of public and private land ownership, but the Swan land prices have risen even faster as developers seek to take advantage of waterfront property and mountain views.

Of the roughly 388,000 acres in the upper Swan Valley watershed, about 286,000 acres are federal and state lands. Of the remaining

102,000 privately owned acres, about 67,000 acres are owned by Plum Creek.

“At some point, our ecosystem will start to unravel and we’ll lose our working timberland,” said Anne Dahl, executive director of the nonprofit Swan Ecosystem Center. “I’m very concerned. I feel proud of what we’ve accomplished, but I don’t think we have a lot more time and there’s so much more that needs to be done.”

Robert Rasmussen, a field representative for the Trust for Public Land, which is a partner in the Swan coalition, said the Swan and Blackfoot valleys have been successful in winning federal grants because of their wealth of natural resources.

“We’ve been very successful, but some of these federal funding programs have had their ups and downs” with changeovers in Congress and the White House,” he said. “We’ve weathered some economic difficulties, but we’ll just have to keep working.”