

Missoulian

Donor's \$35M funds Montana Legacy Project, but years of work remain

By **ROB CHANEY** of the Missoulian | Posted: Monday, December 13, 2010 10:00 pm

The Nature Conservancy may need several years to transform thousands of acres of Plum Creek timberland into public property, Montana chapter director Kat Imhoff said on Monday.

"Our goal remains to do as much transfer to state and federal partners as possible," Imhoff said from her Helena office. "We're working very hard to make sure the Swan River State Forest lands and the other areas in the Swan end up in state hands."

News that a TNC donor, Hansjorg Wyss, contributed \$35 million to the effort has not changed any plans in the Montana Legacy Project, in which TNC and the Trust for Public Lands raised about \$500 million to acquire 310,000 acres of Plum Creek land for conservation.

The third and final phase of the deal closed Dec. 1 with TNC taking title to 24,208 acres in the Clearwater River area, 24,506 acres in Mill Creek between Missoula and Frenchtown, and 20,809 acres in the Upper Swan River drainage near Condon. Much of the property is in checkerboard ownership, mixed with state or federal lands.

"Mr. Wyss' gift was over the whole project," Imhoff said. "He is a donor to The Nature Conservancy, and The Nature Conservancy is the one that bought the land from Plum Creek. None of it is owned by him. He's just very enthralled with large-landscape conservation."

No other major donors have stepped forward publicly, Imhoff said. Wyss initially planned to remain anonymous as well, but recently discussed his actions with the Associated Press.

The Legacy Project has already transferred at least 150,000 acres to public hands. That includes 23,169 acres of the third phase, which Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks either bought outright or took conservation easements on worth \$25.2 million. FWP also paid \$17.35 million for 41,000 acres of the Fish Creek drainage south of Alberton.

The two conservation groups financed the first phase of 130,000 acres with internal loans and donations worth about \$150 million. The federal government paid \$250 million in 2009 for 111,740 more acres, most of which went to the U.S. Forest Service. The third phase cost \$89 million for 69,000 acres.

"We're going to be chipping away at that for years," Imhoff said. "We don't know where all the funding will come from yet. We've always had a \$100 million dollar goal on our private side of the equation. When the land is sold, we pay ourselves back."

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