

Statement of Melanie Parker
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U. S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on National Parks,
Forests and Public Lands

Oversight hearing: *“Locally Grown: Creating Rural Jobs With
America’s Public Lands”*

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, thank you for inviting me here today to share my experience from Montana’s Swan Valley.

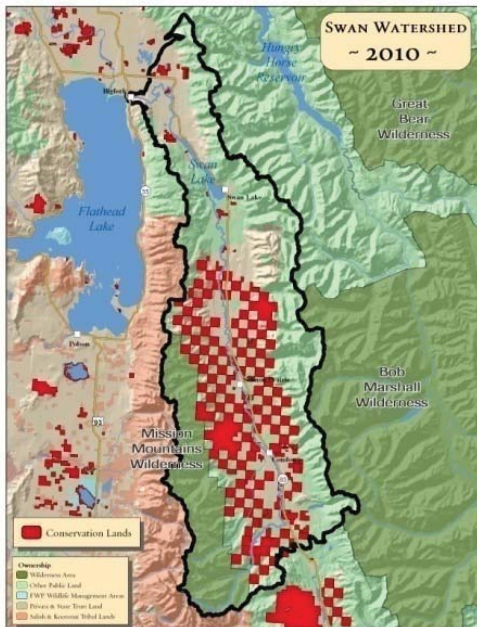
My name is Melanie Parker and I live and work in a rural, forested valley in Western Montana. My husband has owned and operated a traditional hunting and guide service there for 33 years. My own background is in ecology and education. Together he and I formed Northwest Connections, a not-for-profit business that conducts citizen science, engages in restoration projects, leads collaborative planning efforts, and teaches field ecology courses to young conservation professionals from around the country.

The Swan Valley is situated between two wilderness areas about 100 miles south of Glacier National Park. The valley is home to grizzly bears, wolves, lynx, bull trout and many other threatened and sensitive wildlife species. This richness is in no small part due to the 4000 wetlands that are strung across the valley bottom. The culture of the Swan Valley is tied directly to the abundant natural resources. Logging and log home building, along with outfitting and other outdoor related businesses characterize the economy. Historically, the community had very close ties to the Forest Service, as the ranger station was located in the small town of Condon, but 20 years ago that ranger station was closed as districts were consolidated and now all of the Forest Service personnel who administer the Swan Valley live and raise their families in the Kalispell area 75 miles to the north.

Life in the Swan Valley has been dominated by the checkerboard land ownership pattern. As a result of the railroad land grants of 1864, nearly every other square mile has been owned and managed by corporate timber interests. In the mid-1900’s, roads were improved enough in the Swan Valley to make commercial timber harvest viable. While it was the Forest Service who was most active in the middle part of the last century, it was Burlington Northern, later Plum Creek Timber Co., that extracted the bulk of the timber in the 1980’s and 90’s. Environmental concerns about the cumulative effects to the watershed, as well as a swell of environmentalism nationally, all but shut down activity on federal lands in the Swan Valley. This resulted in a landscape that we began describing in the late 1990’s as the land of “too much and not enough” as nearly every acre suffered from either too much disturbance from road building and logging, or too little disturbance from the suppression of fire and the shutdown of active management.

If the diminished Forest Service presence and the accelerated harvest of corporate lands were not enough, just over ten years ago we began to face a new challenge: corporate timber lands increasingly put on the real estate market and sold off for development. All of these challenges have driven our community to organize, to define our own vision of rural prosperity, and to develop strong partnerships with governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations to realize that vision.

The dramatic success for which the Swan Valley is gaining notoriety at present, is our project to stem the tide of real estate development. After a decade of hard effort, we are celebrating the conservation of 310,000 acres of Plum Creek Timber Co. land in Western Montana including all of the remaining corporate lands in the Swan Valley. We succeeded at building partnerships between local and national groups, and at putting together federal, state and private funding sources to secure these lands.



There are a lot of reasons this project has met with success, but I would like to highlight perhaps the most important and least visible reason. In rural communities all across the west we are speaking a new language. It is a language that has profound new meaning, and it is not the language of the past. We are talking more and more about the conservation of working landscapes. The conservation of working landscapes is something that resonates very deeply with rural communities and that vision is what has allowed us to garner such widespread political support for this Plum Creek lands project.

What are working landscapes? They are vast areas outside of designated parks and wilderness areas that have high biological values. They are private lands and public lands that provide food, fiber, clean water, and wildlife habitat. They are lands that support the lives and livelihoods of rural farms, rural ranches and rural forest communities. They are lands on which millions of Americans rediscover the great outdoors: camping, fishing, hunting, hiking, biking, climbing. Working landscapes are not parks, and they are not sacrifice zones. They represent, in fact, the next great challenge in conservation across the West which is to say how do we use land and take care of it.

When our community began struggling with the challenge of corporate timber land divestment, we did not know what the final outcome would be, but we did know that we wanted a working landscape, one where we could balance the use and care of the land. We had been weathering the boom and bust cycles for decades just like so many other rural communities across the West, the cycles that follow this country's alternating impulses to exploit or protect the resources of our region. Our community was not then, and is not now, interested in being the victim of this nation's polarizing wars on natural resource management; we are looking at every

juncture for opportunities to chart our own destiny as leaders in a movement to prove that landscapes like the Swan Valley can provide good work, locally delivered resources and environmental stewardship.

And so now, in 2010, the Swan Valley finds itself in transition. The Trust for Public Land and The Nature Conservancy have worked with us to purchase and convey much of the former Plum Creek lands in the Swan Valley to the U.S. Forest Service. That is a dramatic conservation success of the first order. But our success will only be complete when we establish a long term program of stewardship work on those public lands.

Our collaborative efforts in the Swan Valley have broken the gridlock on federal lands management and we have begun to see a few good projects employ local people, but our transition is tenuous at best right now. We have seen a steady erosion of economic vitality in recent years. The Swan Valley has roughly half the number of businesses it had 15 years ago, and only one third the number of children enrolled in the local elementary school. Our ability to retain and create family wage jobs tied to public land management has never been so critical

My testimony at this point divides into two segments. The first addresses the tools that are important to communities like ours to arrest the accelerating development of private lands that adjoin and are integrally connected to public lands across the West. These tools help communities secure the land base that support rural economic activity. The second segment addresses tools that can help us transition the old economies of extraction and protection into the new economy of stewardship.

STEMMING DEVELOPMENT PRESSURE

The Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) is critical and I hope this congress supports full and permanent funding for the program. When Plum Creek put up their first “higher and better use” land sale in 1997 along the shores of Lindbergh Lake adjacent to the Mission Mountain Wilderness, the Trust for Public Land helped us secure LWCF dollars to acquire those acres and convey them to the Flathead National Forest. It continues to be an important program to our project and to many other landscapes and communities with which I am familiar.

Congress should give direction to federal and state agencies to make LWCF more flexible for the purchase of conservation easements on private lands. In many public lands dominated communities there is a strong desire to retain valuable private landholdings, and for those areas an easement option is essential.

In the Swan Valley, we have also made use of the Forest Legacy program as well as Habitat Conservation Plan programs to address development pressure and I see great value in maintaining and expanding those programs for western communities facing large scale land conversion issues.

Rural communities like ours are also very interested developing new forms of land tenure. Because most of the forces that determine our fate are external and remote – whether the land base is federal, corporate, or state land – we are interested in programs that will help us

acquire and manage community-owned lands. In the Swan Valley we have one such community conservation area which we are currently hoping to expand. Two programs will help communities like ours. The first, the Community Forest and Open Space Program provides funds to local governments and qualifying non-profit organization to purchase community lands. The second is the authorization of the Community Forestry Conservation Act, which would give communities the ability to issue bonds to purchase land and secure the bonds with future sustainable timber harvest.

For the small private forest land owner who wants to stave off the temptation to sell or subdivide, we need to maintain programs like the Forest Stewardship Program within State and Private Forestry and the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program within NRCS. I have heard from several land owners that they would be more likely to use those programs if the matching requirement could be in the form of donated value, rather than cash. The cash match is simply too expensive for most traditional rural land owners.

Investments in these kinds of programs are very strategic, and reduce costs to the American tax payer. I can tell you that the rural sprawl across every other square mile that we were facing in the Swan Valley would have meant huge increases in firefighting costs, as well as increased demands for wildlife recovery dollars. According to one Forest Service report if homes were built in only half of the private lands bordering public land the annual federal firefighting costs would range from \$2.3 Billion to \$4.3 Billion per year. Each of the programs I mentioned above help conserve working landscapes, curb future costs to the public, and secure the land base for rural economic activities.

PROMOTING A LAND STEWARDSHIP ECONOMY

In the Swan Valley, the first building block to economic success has come from pulling diverse stakeholders together to forge common ground. Without social agreement on what constitutes land stewardship in our specific site, we quickly get locked up in contentious appeals and litigation. There can be no economic stability for our community until all of the groups interested in our landscape can work hand in hand with state and federal agencies to chart a long term program of work.

Federal programs that link federal investment dollars to successful collaboration are key. This past year, communities in the Swan Valley, in Seeley Lake and across the Blackfoot Valley have submitted a proposal to the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program (CFLRP). If we are successful, our federal agency partners will receive \$4M/year for ten years to accomplish restoration work on public lands across 1.5 million acres. CFLRP is very good legislation that requires a broad coalition of interests to assess the landscape together, identify priorities and sketch out a plan for action in order to be successful. CFLRP should receive full funding for the next ten years. I should also be used as a template for other programs to invest in restoration and land stewardship across the west.

Collaboration is the foundation for economic prosperity in the west, and yet it lacks support from federal agencies and from most federal programs. In many communities like the Swan Valley citizens have organized themselves into non-governmental organizations (NGO's) that

have the capacity to partner with government agencies, private land owners and other associations and interests. Federal programs to support NGO partners, however, are few and far between. The National Forest Foundation has been an important support system for many community based organizations in our region, and congress should fully fund their appropriations, but we also need to look for other opportunities to invest in local and regional collaborative conservation efforts.

Another key to success relates to the capacity of federal land managers to put the necessary staff time into collaborative conservation efforts. Right now federal employees have very few incentives to partner with our community organizations. Performance measures that put a value on collaboration in rural western communities need to be developed and strengthened.

In the Swan Valley we have faced additional challenges related to the remoteness of our federal agency staff and by the turnover in key leadership positions. Federal agencies should recognize the value of keeping land management professionals in place over time. The resulting trust and understanding that is built between agencies, NGO's and rural residents sets the stage for successful design and implementation of land stewardship projects.

Stewardship has become a key concept for us as it connotes both work on and care for the land. Stewardship contracting is one of the very best tools to come along in the past decade and it needs to be reauthorized and its use expanded across the West. In stewardship contracts, the government can choose the BEST contractor, not necessarily the one who delivers the highest dollar amount back to the government. This has really helped to incentivize our workforce to prove its capacity to do good work, not just fast work. We whole heartedly support the re-authorization of stewardship contracting and we hope to see the federal agencies use it as the dominant form of doing business.

All of this said and done, we are still faced with a situation where the American people are asking agencies like the Forest Service to do stewardship, but the agencies are still funded through old categories like timber. We need a new integrated budget structure that incentivizes holistic integrated stewardship. This year the President's budget recommended the Integrated Resource Restoration (IRR) line item. I have talked to many on my district, my forest, and across Western Montana who think IRR has great promise, but they have fears that their particular special interest – timber, fire, wildlife – will lose funding. We need to hammer out the right guidelines for such an integrated budget structure, and that may take another year, but I do enthusiastically support such a budget structure reform and believe it will produce better projects that garner broader support.

CONCLUSION

In July 2010 I can report to you that we in the Swan Valley are making progress. We have built strong local and regional collaborations. Those diverse stakeholders have worked together to erase the checkerboard land ownership pattern and they have made strong progress in articulating goals for the restoration and stewardship of the entire landscape. Now we need federal agencies that are ready, willing and able to partner with us. And we need a firm

commitment from congress to invest in the conservation and stewardship of working lands in our valley and all across the West.

I hope that as you listen to the testimony of all my fellow panelists you realize that we represent something very important. We are new voices. We are not the voices of industry and we are not the voices of environmentalism. We are a third way and we are rapidly becoming the new way of doing business in the West. It may not be visible to you at this hearing, but many of us now know each other. We didn't used to, but we started bumping into one another, telling our stories, and realizing the parallels. Now we are formalizing new networks. My group, Northwest Connections, is a member of the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition, convened by Sustainable Northwest. But for Sustainable Northwest's support, my voice and several others here would likely not be here today. Jim Stone's group the Blackfoot Challenge is also helping to coordinate a regional network known as the Partners for Conservation. We are organizing and we are aggregating, because we know something deep in our hearts. We know that land and people are inextricably linked and that until this country figures out how to protect resources and use them responsibly, we are sunk.

We are in it for the long haul and we hope you will partner with us.

Thank you.