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## Groups look into future of Swan Valley, forest land

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Predicting the future of land-use in the Swan Valley is as possible as predicting the future of anything in life--impossible. In its uncertainty, the valley's future is of grave interest to both business and conservation factions alike.

At the start of 2006, Plum Creek Timber Company, Inc. was the largest and most geographically diverse private landowner in the U.S. Plum Creek owns property in 18 states, and its more than 1.2 million acres in Montana are more than in any other state. Similarly, Plum Creek is the largest industrial owner of property in the Swan Valley, owning more than 84,000 acres. Of concern to some conservation interests is the future of more than 65,000 of those acres, which have yet to be designated for conservation or real estate uses.

Northwest Connections (NwC) is one such conservation interest, promoting the importance of combining local citizen knowledge and input with science to "identify, protect and restore critical wildlife habitat connections."

On the conservation side of things, more than 13,000 acres of Plum Creek land in the Swan Valley have been committed to conservation uses through cooperative relationships between Swan Valley residents, public agencies, conservation partners and Plum Creek. Conservation efforts have transferred 7,200 acres to the Flathead National Forest. Much of that acreage is around Lindbergh and Van lakes and others are parcels considered grizzly bear linkage zones and critical wildlife crossing areas. Development rights of an additional 6,100 acres intermixed with the Swan River State Forest were sold by Plum Creek to the state of Montana in the form of a conservation easement.

As for real estate development, 4,000 acres of 10,000 acres slated for real estate sale, primarily surrounding the town of Condon, have been sold by the timber company.

Kathy Budinick, Plum Creek director of communications, said Plum Creek's "core business" is timber, but she noted "we're looking at lots of different uses of our land." Plum Creek owns acreage not considered prime timber producing lands--selling those acres to adjacent landowners or other entities can sometimes better serve both the company and the surrounding community, she said. As a result, Budinick said the company constantly assesses its property and weighs parcels against the value of keeping them in timber production. "Certainly as a part of our ongoing business we look at other values of our lands so we can re-invest in timber lands," she said.

Budinick admitted that selling property for real estate is an option that Plum Creek has chosen in the past and likely will continue to exercise in the Swan Valley, but she dispelled comments that the company has changed its land-use and ownership emphasis from timber production to real estate development. She said the timber market ultimately dictates what decision the company makes regarding its land-uses.

The potential sale of more than 65,000 acres of Plum Creek lands in the Swan Valley is NwC's greatest concern, according to NwC Executive Director Melanie Parker. Parker said a massive sell off of Plum Creek land to development risks is turning the Swan Valley into "a string of gated communities with 'no trespassing', 'no hunting' posted at every turn, and wildlife habitats irreversibly changed and fragmented." Parker warned that such a conversion would "reach far beyond the footprint of the Plum Creek lands themselves because so many species like elk, deer, and both species of bears come to the Swan Valley for winter or early spring habitats that don't exist across the surrounding wilderness landscapes."

A proposed Elk Creek Conservation Area on Plum Creek land totaling 2,000 acres is a step in a direction NwC and Plum Creek mutually agree is a positive one. The conservation area would benefit Elk Creek wildlife as the creek flows from the Mission Mountains to the Swan River. A mid-1990s trade of Plum Creek lands allowed for protection of bull trout spawning areas in the Elk Creek headwaters.

Swan Ecosystem Center is working with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the Trust for Public Land to protect Plum Creek's remaining Elk Creek sections. The center considers Elk Creek the most important bull trout stream in the Flathead National Forest. Review of a Plum Creek appraisal of the acreage is being conducted and funding sources are being researched with the intent of protecting the remaining bull trout habitat this year.

In the wake of unknown future uses of Plum Creek land in the Swan Valley by both Plum Creek and NwC, Parker said local citizen involvement is important. "We need more Montana residents, businesses, sportsman's clubs and organizations to sign on as supporters of a conservation option for Swan Valley lands," she said.

Parker said NwC works toward that end and has involved a number of rural residents in wildlife monitoring and research projects providing individuals with opportunities to be a part of the conservation process. "We feel like this is an important part of 'de-professionalizing' natural resource management and building a broader constituency for conservation in Montana."

"People tend to think of conservation as being in opposition to rural economies," Parker said. "In fact, rural residents quite often understand the specifics of the lands around them in ways that experts from somewhere else completely miss. In Montana, we have a rare opportunity to show the world that there is a middle ground between preservation and exploitation and that animals like grizzly bears and lynx can coexist with people in rural landscapes."

NwC's Forest Stewardship Workshop for private landowners and logging contractors is scheduled for July 11-13 in Condon. Parker said the purpose of the event is to "get people out in the forest and observe things first-hand."

For more information about NwC, visit [www.northwestconnections.org](http://www.northwestconnections.org) or call (406) 754-3185. Individuals can send contact information to Northwest Connections; PO Box 1309; Swan Valley, MT 59826 to receive NwC notices about timely land-use issues in the Swan Valley.

For more information about Plum Creek Timber Company, Inc., visit [www.plumcreek.com](http://www.plumcreek.com).