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Eye on the Environment
Policy Brief: Land Conversion—the Fate of our Rural Places

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Our privately owned working forest and ranchlands are an integral part of the Seeley-Swan and Blackfoot Valleys. They provide wildlife habitat, sustain our economic well-being and cultural heritage, and provide open space and recreational access.

In the past decade the future use and enjoyment from these private lands have been put at risk as landowners face increasing pressure to convert working forests and ranches into residential real estate.

Development pressure on our private forest and ranchlands is not just a challenge faced locally in our Western Montana valleys, but a challenge many rural places in the West are struggling with every day. These private lands that provide numerous benefits to local residents, avid recreationists, and wildlife species are threatened by wholesale conversion as the real estate market outpaces the timber and ranching industries.

Although we see and feel the impacts of land conversion locally, it behooves rural communities like ours to partner with other organizations in order to foster heightened national concern and assistance on this issue.

Northwest Connections (NwC) has become an active member of a group called the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC). This coalition is comprised of rural organizations working towards balanced conservation-based approaches to the ecological and economic problems facing the West. This group is committed to finding and promoting policy solutions through collaborative, place-based work that recognizes the inextricable link between the long-term health of the land and the well-being of rural communities.

During the past 2 years NwC has been working with our partners in RVCC on various rural policy issues and we are now playing a lead role with this coalition on the land conversion issue.

During this year's RVCC Annual Policy Meeting held in Stevenson, Washington, I moderated a panel focused on land conversion to help those attending better understand the current status and impacts faced by rural communities.

The panelists presented on the overarching trends, the driving factors, and social, economic and ecological impacts to rural landscapes and communities. They also provided an overview of national policy developments to assist in our effort to bring a strong rural voice to the national table.

More specifically, this panel discussed the impacts and opportunities of land conversion from a ranching and forestry perspective. Jim Stone and Ali Duvall from the Blackfoot Challenge participated in our panel. Jim and Ali discussed the steps the Blackfoot Challenge has taken to address the risk for land conversion in the Blackfoot.

Stone, a rancher and chair of the Challenge, grabbed the audience's attention by stressing the importance of sustaining a community voice and vision when finding

solutions to development pressures in rural areas.

The Blackfoot Challenge has done an amazing job through the “Blackfoot Community Project” to find solutions to help sustain their rural culture and working landscape. This BC Project is a community-based and locally developed effort to guide the future ownership and management of key lands formerly owned by Plum Creek Timber in the Blackfoot Valley.

Land Conversion Facts

- Every day, America loses more than 4,000 acres of open space to development. That’s around three acres per minute.
- Over the past decade there has been a 1.6 million acre decrease in ranchlands per year.
- About 1.5 million acres of private forests lost each year to development and other non-forest uses.
- Between 1995 and 2004 half of the nearly 70 million acres of private industrial land (timber industry) in the U.S. changed hands.

Offering examples of how the Blackfoot communities are addressing this issue offered insight to other Western communities attending the meeting.

As land conversion increases in the West, we continue to look for policy solutions to assist our efforts to protect our livelihoods and landscapes. Many of the policy solutions have fallen to state and local governments—often in

the guise of planning and zoning. However, with this issue affecting millions of acres nationally, we need to look towards Washington D.C. for assistance; it is beyond the scope of just the counties and states.

RVCC’s diverse members continue to influence national policy decisions by writing papers and traveling to D.C. as a coalition to ensure that rural voices are heard on these issues. Last June a group of RVCC members met with Western Congressmen to discuss the threat of land conversion and to influence important legislation like the Farm Bill; a bill that has provided important funding to protect working forest and ranchlands threatened by conversion.

NwC’s participation in RVCC has provided us with the ability to work with other rural communities facing similar challenges, allowing all of us to better influence national policies that protect our working lands. Our story alone matters; our story told in the context of a diverse coalition with similar stories elevates us to a new level.

Every day, America loses more than 4,000 acres of open space to development. Much of this is in rural areas like the Seeley-Swan and Blackfoot Valleys. We need to work together to find solutions and opportunities so that all rural communities can hold onto their rural culture, abundant wildlife habitat and endless recreational opportunities. ∞

*To find out more on RVCC and the many policy issues this groups work on please visit:
<http://www.sustainablenorthwest.org/programs/rvcc.php>.*