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Eye on the Environment Plans For TNC's Land Holdings in Valley

This week Northwest Connections asked Chris Bryant of The Nature Conservancy to update the communities of the Seeley-Swan on their project to purchase and conserve many of the Plum Creek Timber Co. lands.

By CHRIS BRYANT, Western Montana Director of Outreach, The Nature Conservancy

At the end of last year, The Nature Conservancy and The Trust for Public Land purchased about 129,000 acres of Plum Creek Timber Company land in Western Montana – including holdings in the Potomac Valley and lands near Morrison Peak just north of Potomac.

The deal was the first phase of a project to conserve more than 310,000 acres in western Montana. The final two phases, scheduled for later this year and December of 2010, will include all of the Plum Creek holdings in the Swan Valley, about a dozen sections of lands east of Highway 83 in the Clearwater drainage and nearly 25,000 acres of the big block of land surrounding Marshall Lake.

Currently, Plum Creek owns more than a million acres of western Montana forest lands, most of it in 640-acre, or one-square-mile, blocks that are intermixed with public lands. This pattern of land ownership seen across the West is a relic of land grants made to railroad companies in the 1860s.

In western Montana, ownership of the “railroad” lands eventually went to timber production companies, including Champion International and Plum Creek Timber Company. This

ownership pattern results in stark contrasts in management, timber harvesting, weed control and wildlife habitat across the landscape.

In recent years, land prices in these scenic areas have skyrocketed as people have moved here to build their dream homes in the woods. The demand for remote homesites has encouraged timber companies across the country to divest those acres that seem to have a ‘higher and better use’ than long term timber harvest.

This trend toward rural, backcountry sprawl is widely recognized as a national phenomenon. In Montana, this trend leads to the loss of public access for recreation, the loss of working forests, the increased costs of providing community services and fire suppression, the loss of wildlife habitat, and the undoing of western Montana’s rural way of life.

The purchase of this land from Plum Creek by TNC and the TPL has been informed and inspired by years of collaborative partnerships forged in western Montana. A good example is TNC’s work in the Blackfoot Valley.

Five years ago, The Nature Conservancy purchased about 89,000 acres of Plum Creek land in that watershed. We’ve worked hand in hand with the Blackfoot Challenge and local communities to make sure our work serves the needs of both the human and the wild communities that call it home. More than half these Blackfoot Valley lands have now been transferred to new public and private owners – including 5600 acres that will be managed by the community itself under the auspices of the Blackfoot Challenge.

In addition to their work in the Swan Valley, The Trust for Public Land worked with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to purchase conservation easements from Plum Creek on over 140,000 acres of land in the Thompson and Fisher river valleys in northwestern Montana.

In addition to permanently securing access for the public to hunt, fish, hike, and camp, the easements eliminate all current and future development threats, and carry conditions for

maintaining sustainable forestry in the valleys, ensuring that vital timber jobs and the local forest-based economy are not adversely affected.

TNC and TPL don't plan to own this land forever. We don't know all the details of who will finally own each parcel. We do know that about a third of it will go to the Forest Service—some of this in the Swan and Clearwater drainages—filling in those checkerboards and enabling better management planning.

We also know the State of Montana has shown an interest in owning more than a third of it—including the checkerboarded lands in the Swan River State Forest. About 26,000 acres in the Potomac Valley are targeted for acquisition by the state through a bonding provision enabled by House Bill 14—sponsored by Rep. Bill Nooney. The State of Montana has other potential funding mechanisms that could be used to purchase lands including land banking, Bonneville Power Administration mitigation funds and a potential settlement from Pennsylvania Power and Light.

While we're the owners, we'll continue to pay taxes at the same rate as Plum Creek. We'll be responsible for weed management, road maintenance and all of the other responsibilities of land ownership. Part of the deal with Plum Creek requires that The Nature Conservancy supply Plum Creek mills with timber over the next ten years. Local contractors will be hired to do this work as well as other stewardship and restoration work.

We also intend to keep open the forest roads that have been open. Those that have been closed will stay gated. People will still have access to hunt, fish, snowmobile, ride horses, hike and use the land the way they did when Plum Creek owned it.

Folks who are familiar with this land know that we've asked a lot of it through the years. And it really delivered. These forests have been logged for generations – providing jobs and wood for homes and industry. But it also encompasses some of the least developed lower elevation lands in the region. It provides important habitat

for elk, deer and big and small predators. The natural resource value of this land is priceless. The commercial potential of its forests remains rich.

We're trying hard to work closely with the counties and community groups as this purchase moves forward and we intend to continue the collaboration as we pass the land to new ownership. If you have any questions about the project, give me a call at (406) 543-6681.

This is the beginning of a process that may take years. When it's all said and done, we hope the generations that follow us still have the options we have today to hunt and fish, work in the woods, ski and snowmobile, pick huckleberries or just wander around and enjoy Montana.