

Missoulian

Update 2010: Conservation, land ownership changes in past year all over map

By **ROB CHANEY** of the Missoulian | Posted: Saturday, January 1, 2011 8:00 pm

Editor's note: As a new year begins, the Missoulian is looking back and updating a few of the stories that graced our pages during 2010.

The folks who color the property ownership maps have a lot of work to do after 2010.

"It was a big year, wasn't it," said Chris Bryant of The Nature Conservancy's Missoula office, which oversaw the transfer of more than 200,000 acres of former timberland into public hands in the past 10 months. "Given all that's going on with the economy, we're very lucky in Montana to see conservation in the forefront of people's minds. People recognize the value of keeping Montana intact."

Bryant and his colleagues wrapped up the first half of the Montana Legacy Project this past year, buying the final phases of Plum Creek Timber Co.'s 310,000-acre divestiture. Now they're almost two-thirds finished passing it to public hands, including the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and even the city of Missoula.

But that wasn't the only map-changer of the year. FWP made some big buys of its own, as did the Forest Service. Those properties will open new recreation opportunities for Montanans in the coming years.

The Legacy Project was the whopper in terms of acreage. In March, The Nature Conservancy took possession of 112,000 acres. Then in December, another 69,000 acres went off the Plum Creek books. The whole deal was worth about \$500 million.

Most of the 2010 purchases were in the northern Seeley-Swan Valley, the Mill Creek drainage above Frenchtown and the Marshall Block near Seeley Lake.

The deal included several small but noticeable bits close to Missoula. A 216-acre rectangle on the east side of Mount Jumbo will make access to the saddle much more secure for East Missoula residents. Missoula open space bond money picked that up, along with an easement on another 320 acres in the North Hills that will remain as grazing land for a while before opening to public use.

And in Bonner, FWP took two parcels of 47 and 11 acres along the Blackfoot River and one 19-acre piece overlooking the Clark Fork that will become future park properties. Bonner Elementary School got 102 acres of Bonner Hill that it will use as an outdoor classroom, exercise facility and viewshed protection.

Much of The Nature Conservancy's 2010 activity was transferring lands to public owners. The biggest move took place in Fish Creek, the 41,000-acre drainage south of Alberton. FWP plans a 6,000-acre state park at the northern end to capitalize on its Alberton Gorge holdings along the popular rafting reach of the Clark Fork River.

The remaining drainage will be managed for wildlife habitat, with the network of open and closed roads maintained the same way as Plum Creek did. The Nature Conservancy has partnered with several volunteer groups to do weed control, fish habitat improvement and other land management chores.

The conservation group also passed 112,000 acres of checkerboarded land in the Swan Valley, Lolo Creek watershed, Clearwater watershed, Rock Creek watershed and land southeast of Missoula to the Forest Service for \$250 million in Qualified Forest Conservation Bonds provided by the Department of Agriculture's Farm Bill.

The state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation took title to 32,000 acres in the foothills surrounding the Potomac Valley, which will remain in active use as grazing leases. FWP also bought almost 14,000 acres in the upper Clearwater River drainage to be managed as the Marshall Creek wildlife management area, using \$13.5 million in U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Habitat Conservation Program funds. The state also took a conservation easement on about 9,300 acres of land intermingled with the Swan River State Forest for about \$14.8 million in FWS and Bonneville Power Administration dollars.

Beyond the Legacy Project, thousands more acres came into the public sphere. They included:

Spotted Dog

The rolling grasslands east of Garrison became the latest wildlife management area for outdoor recreation. The roughly 60 square miles of former ranchland hold elk and deer, as well as traces of the old Mullan Road, early homesteads and the perfect backdrop for the next John Wayne horse opera. FWP bought the land for \$16.6 million to replace wildlife habitat lost to mining pollution in the Upper Clark Fork River Basin.

Paracini ponds

The problem with restoring a century's worth of mining damage in the upper Clark Fork River was no one could see the good work: Virtually all the river between Warm Springs Ponds and Deer Lodge runs through private land.

Then the George Grant chapter of Trout Unlimited pounced on an opportunity to buy 275 acres of former ranch land just off the Racetrack exit of Interstate 90. The deal, funded through the state Natural Resource Damage Program, put a 30-acre fishing pond and 6,000 feet of riverbank in public hands. Plans are already under way to add a boat launch and picnic facilities to the property.

Route of the Olympian

The former railroad beds where trains used to climb toward Lookout Pass have long tempted cross-country travelers. But while the stretch on the Idaho side of the border has become the famous Trail of the Hiawatha bike route, the Montana side was tangled in a snarl of mixed ownership, competing uses, and underfunded bank accounts. Then the Forest Service and Five Valleys Land Trust cut a deal that brought nearly all of a 30-mile stretch between Taft and St. Regis into public hands. Unlike the Idaho side, the Route of the Olympian will allow snowmobiles in winter and ATVs in summer. And an \$850,000 federal stimulus grant paid for rebuilding a famous trestle bridge and tunnel that start the route at Taft. The trail should be ready for public use in summer 2011.

Elbow Lake

You may never have heard of it, but every four-legged critter in the Clearwater River drainage dreads this place. The stretch of Highway 83 running north from Clearwater Junction cuts a major wildlife corridor between the Swan and Mission mountains.

To fix it, Montana's Department of Transportation and FWP brokered a land swap that gives the road guys more room to improve the road where it winds against the Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area, and in return, gives the outdoor recreationists better access to the Clearwater River and Elbow Lake. The deal exchanged 53 acres along the river for 19 acres in narrow strips along the highway. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service underwrote the deal. Road improvement should begin in 2012.

Jacobs Ranch

The Five Valleys Land Trust was watching development of state park plans around the confluence of the Clark Fork and Blackfoot rivers, and noticed a missing link. There was a gap between the popular Kim Williams Trail on the Clark Fork's south bank and the former Milltown Dam. But a big stretch of that gap could be filled by a 69-acre meadow at the base of University Mountain bounded by the same railroad bed the Kim Williams Trail followed. In December, FVCC and the Jacobs family completed a deal that will eventually put that link back in the chain, nearly completing the pedestrian access to the future Two Rivers State Park.