

July 9, 2008

People will benefit from Plum Creek deal, too

Guest Column by MELANIE PARKER

The historic Montana timberland purchase announced last week is most certainly a great deal for Montana's land, water and wildlife, but what about the people? I believe rural communities stand to benefit from this conservation project as much as elk and grizzly bears.

To agree with me, you need only to value the rural communities and outdoor traditions of Montana, and concede that places like Jackson Hole, Aspen and the Yellowstone Club in Big Sky no longer honor these values. In the Swan Valley we've long feared that the sale of Plum Creek's high-end real estate would turn our communities into high-end resort towns. Now, thanks to this Plum Creek purchase project, we have the opportunity to retain our rural lands and way of life for all Montanans to enjoy.

A rural community is economically and culturally connected to the land. The working forests of the Swan Valley are as much a part of the community as the homes, fences, schools, firehalls and citizens that line our streets. In the Swan Valley we work and recreate in these forests everyday, from timber production to snowmobile trails, from hunting to hiking. This purchase will give us the chance to hold on to the forests that define our community.

*

Simply said, this project secures the fundamental aspect of our rural infrastructure: the land. And we all know that they aren't making any more of it.

The logging agreement signed between the conservation groups and Plum Creek Timber Co. contributes to maintaining our wood milling capacity in western Montana, another important aspect of our infrastructure. And the project gives us half a chance n more than we had before n of maintaining our local jobs in the forest. The challenges facing the timber industry are steep, and there is no silver bullet answer, but there are no timber jobs without trees to cut. By keeping these lands open for timber production, and out of residential development, this project represents our best hope of holding on to our jobs in the woods. And keeping our jobs in the woods, keeps us connected to the land.

For as long as we can remember, all Montanans have enjoyed free public access to Plum Creek lands. As these lands were sold off, there was no guarantee we would continue to enjoy access for recreation, and for hunting, fishing and gathering ... all activities important to a rural lifestyle. This project will maintain access to Plum Creek lands, as well as the public lands that are intermixed and that development could have easily cut off from use.

All across the West we are losing the places we love. Converting ranching, farming and logging communities into gated recreational resorts fragments habitat and divorces people from the land. This separation has very serious consequences for us as people and communities, particularly if we ever hope to develop sustainable ways of providing our daily needs for food, water and shelter.

In the Swan Valley, citizens have identified a goal of keeping the land "rural and wild." This project gives us our best chance to do both.

Melanie Parker is executive director of Northwest Connections, a nonprofit organization that integrates science, community and education to conserve and restore working landscapes. She writes from Condon.