



Plum Creek land transfer totals 111,740 acres

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By *ROB CHANEY* of the *Missoulian*

One of the biggest land deals western Montana may ever see came together Tuesday with little fanfare.

Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., got diverted to Colorado for President Barack Obama's signing of the \$787 billion federal economic stimulus bill. So he missed the planned gathering of conservationists and Plum Creek Timber Co. representatives who were going to memorialize a \$250 million land transfer.

And Tuesday became a quiet paper-shuffling day, as title to 111,740 acres of forest in the Seeley, Swan, Lolo and Blackfoot valleys moved from Plum Creek to the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Lands.

But the lack of a news conference didn't diminish the enthusiasm of spectators who'd waited a decade or more for the moment.

"I think this is an incredible deal for the public," said Condon resident Melanie Parker. "We'd been chasing parcel after parcel, first Lindbergh Lake, then Van Lake, then the Swan River (drainage). We were paying retail prices acre by acre. The only way to break that was a wholesale transaction."

Parker and her husband Tom run Northwest Connections, an outdoor education program in Condon. Tom Parker also has a guiding and outfitting business. Melanie said their observations on the ground in the Seeley-Swan convinced them the land had long-term value.

While much of the Plum Creek property has been logged at various times over the decades, it's woven in with national forest land that has been under different management. Eliminating those checkerboards and most of the private development potential does two things, Parker said.

First, it allows forestry and wildlife managers to work their craft by drainage and altitude, rather than by section line. And second, it means local counties are spared the management costs of private driveways, fire protection and backyard wildlife management that would come with a sprinkling of trophy homes in the woods.

Hellgate Hunters and Anglers board member Pelah Hoyt agreed on the backcountry home matter.

"Some areas have been harvested pretty hard, and many of us would like to see better forest management there," Hoyt said. "Trees will come back, but you put big trophy homes on it and it's never going to be wildlife habitat again."

The deal remains a challenging work in progress for the conservation groups. They've already financed the first 130,000-acre phase with \$150 million that's mostly made of loans against the Nature Conservancy's and Trust for Public Lands' own assets.

While the second phase is covered by \$250 million in federal dollars, the land must pass muster for delivery to the U.S. Forest Service. The money's appropriation last fall partially implied that the deal was OK, but the two groups are still gambling that boots-on-the-ground review will back up their good intentions.

And the third phase of 70,000 acres in 2010 assumes a deal can be worked out with Montana state agencies that have an interest in some land. The bargain expects the state to pick up about \$100 million of the tab, from a variety of pots.

The 2009 Legislature is now considering a "Working Forests Initiative" worth about \$22 million that would pick up much of the acreage around Potomac.

Some might become new school trust land for timber harvest. Other sections might be bought through funds that Bonneville Power Administration provides to mitigate the impact of Hungry Horse Dam. Still more might come from an expected settlement with Pennsylvania Power and Light over back rent for its power-generating properties on state waterways.

Some money must come from a fiber agreement between the nonprofits and Plum Creek. That deal allows the timber company to buy logs from its former lands at market rates to keep its mills supplied over the next 15 years.

"It keeps some of the land in timber production and helps the economy," Plum Creek spokeswoman Kathy Budinick said Tuesday. "We want to be doing all we can to keep those mills running."

And finally, the two groups expect to raise about \$40 million from land sales to private buyers. Another \$100 million is planned to come from a charitable capital campaign.

"We know we were getting more land than what it's worth," said Nature Conservancy land protection specialist Jim Berkey. "We had to prove to our members we were getting good value for their money."

So although there was no ceremony, and a lot of work remains, the two groups' leadership in Missoula sounded excited.

"We're going to do the right thing - it's our mission," said Eric Love, program director for the Trust for Public Lands. "It's our hope that the U.S. Forest Service and the state of Montana get the best pieces for the best prices. And Plum Creek no longer owns any land in the Swan Valley."



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