

February 7, 2007

Timber in transition: Blackfoot Challenge a lasting model for conservation

By PERRY BACKUS of the Missoulian



Hank Goetz, lands director of the Blackfoot Challenge, sits at the entrance of the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area, a 5,600-acre piece of former Plum Creek land near the foot of Ovando Mountain.

KURT WILSON/Missoulian

OVANDO - Thirty years ago, a few folks sat down one day in the tiny town of Lincoln and started talking about the future of the Blackfoot Valley.

There's no way they could have known what those first few visits over a cup of coffee would set in motion.

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"I don't think anyone back then had any idea it would have gone this far," said Land Lindbergh, a longtime Blackfoot Valley resident.

Three decades later, the Blackfoot Challenge is held up as a model of what can be accomplished when local residents, government, private foundations and industry are willing to work together to preserve rural lifestyles and landscapes.

The group's consensus-driven approach has helped unite 660 different partners around the basic premise that cooperation results in more effective conservation.

The results have been impressive.

To date, about 91,000 acres of private land have been protected from development through conservation easements,

thousands of acres of wetlands have been rehabilitated and portions of more than 40 Blackfoot River tributaries restored. All of that has occurred while helping traditional ranch families stay on the land.

Over the past few years, The Nature Conservancy teamed with the Blackfoot Challenge to put together a deal with Plum Creek Timber Co. that could preserve up to 88,000 acres in the upper Blackfoot Valley for about \$69 million.

So far, the conservancy has purchased 70,000 acres and the final option on the remaining 18,000 acres is due in November. So far, the conservancy has sold about 26,000 acres, mostly to the U.S. Forest Service. The rest will either be sold to the government or to adjoining landowners.

As Plum Creek continues to divest some of its prime acreage in the state for real estate development, many wonder if the Blackfoot Challenge couldn't be a model for preserving more of those industrial timberlands.

The Blackfoot Valley has a jump-start on most places around the state. Decades ago, people there put away their boxing gloves and started looking for common ground. Conservationists sat down with ranchers, and talked. They invited some government folks to crowd around the kitchen table, and talked some more.

Starting with small projects that everyone agreed needed to be done - like pulling weeds or putting a fence in a better spot - they started to trust each other.

It's not something that happens overnight.

"It's really unique when you look at what's happened here 30 years later," said Hank Goetz, lands director of the Blackfoot Challenge. "We were fortunate that when the opportunity arose, there were people here willing to work together. That history would be the hardest part of transplanting what's been accomplished here in the Blackfoot to other places in the state."

"You can't just add water, shake, put it in a microwave and it's done," he said. "It takes some time. You have to develop some credibility."

The Nature Conservancy built its credibility over the course of decades; it helped a Blackfoot Valley landowner put together the first conservation easement in Montana in the mid-1970s. Other conservation-minded landowners in the valley soon followed suit.

That work led to an opportunity to help preserve almost 12,000 acres of Plum Creek land in the Blackfoot Valley through a trade with the Bureau of Land Management in the mid-1990s. The Nature Conservancy purchased the land from Plum Creek and held onto it while the BLM sold off scattered parcels around the state to raise money it needed to eventually buy the ground.

"It was the foundation set by those early landowners with a vision that helped get this started," said Bee Hall, the

conservancy's director of conservation programs. "After that occurred, a lot of things just seemed to come together to bring us to where we are today."

Hall said the conservancy built a relationship with Plum Creek through that first project.

"It was a big factor in allowing us to move forward with Plum Creek and the Blackfoot Challenge on this latest project," he said.

Relationships, trust, credibility - all of that takes time and effort. And it doesn't hurt to have a willingness to look outside the box for solutions. In the Blackfoot Valley, sometimes that out-of-the-box solution came wearing a government hat.

Back in the 1990s, Jim Stone, a rancher who now serves as the Blackfoot Challenge chairman, invited Greg Neudecker over for a visit. Neudecker works for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's private lands program called Partners for Fish and Wildlife.

"Back in the early 1990s, we clearly were not on the same page," Neudecker said.

The two began talking about how they could meet their responsibilities to both wildlife and the community, and they began to find some common ground. They started to come up with ways to help each other. Each success led to another.

"It's about people. That's the way this whole thing started out and it continues to be about people," Stone said. "What we've discovered here is the individual can affect the larger outcome if they're willing to work to build on community. This story is about people coming together and building that trust."

It's also a story about government taking a chance. All too often, federal agencies put together a plan, hold a few meetings and then say this is the way it's going to work. In the Blackfoot Valley, the idea started in a coffee shop and slowly percolated its way up to the top.

"People recognized early that there wasn't any way we could get this done without public agency folks like Greg who were willing to park the agency's agenda at the door and be willing to look for new ways to move things forward," Goetz said. "For that to happen, those field people have to be supported by the intermediate bureaucracy. They have to be willing to turn their people loose and allow them to get things done."

"Managers at that intermediate level can be one hell of a stumbling block," Goetz said. "After people at the ground level knock their heads against the wall enough times, they either have to quit or just get numb."

"To make something like this work, everyone at the table has to be creative and be willing to make some mistakes along the way," Neudecker said. "Too often, conservation groups or government agencies don't allow that to happen and nothing is accomplished in the long run."

"There's a fine line between success and failure."

The Blackfoot Valley isn't the only place where people have worked together to find ways to preserve Plum Creek lands for future generations.

In the Swan Valley, loggers, environmentalists and others started talking with each other in the early 1990s.

Back then, longtime Swan Valley resident Tom Parker remembers the community was polarized over a variety of social and environmental issues. They began looking for common ground, but it wasn't easy.

"There were tremendous misunderstandings on both sides," Parker said. "There was fear. Over time, people set aside those differences and began to forge ahead and find solutions. At times, it seemed like we'd take two steps forward and then slide backward a step. Progress was slow and steady."

One of those pieces of common ground appeared after Plum Creek identified lands in the Swan Valley as having a "higher and better use" than growing trees. The writing was on the wall. The company meant to sell those properties for development.

Swan Valley residents began working with a variety of groups to find ways to protect Plum Creek lands from development.

Since 1999, The Trust for Public Lands has acquired about 8,650 acres of Plum Creek land and worked with the company to place conservation easements on another 7,200 acres in the Swan Valley. Groups like the Montana Land Reliance, The Nature Conservancy and Vital Ground Foundation have protected another 5,000 acres through conservation easements.

It's not something that happens overnight. People have to be willing to work and look for compromise.

"It's really up to the public to demand something different. To do that requires a paradigm shift," Parker said. "It takes dedication and lots of time to get something like this accomplished. It's not something you can do with a stolen moment here and there. You have to live, eat and breathe it to make a difference."

Jim Clawson of Missoula knows what it's like to make a difference.

A few years back, Clawson noticed a lot of new flagging in one of his favorite hunting spots along the edge of the Bob Marshall Wilderness. He'd been hunting the same area for 40 years and knew it was an important elk corridor. He'd seen plenty of grizzly bear tracks there, too.

"I knew this was an important piece of ground for wildlife," Clawson said. "When I saw the flagging and marks on the trees, I knew that Plum Creek was planning to harvest it."

So Clawson got in touch with a Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks biologist, who in turn called a Plum Creek biologist. The

trio took a trip to the area and Clawson convinced the company to hold off on its plan to harvest the spot. Following a letter-writing campaign, the Forest Service and Plum Creek agreed to include the section in a trade they were working on.

“I found out that one guy can make a difference if the timing is right,” Clawson said.

Finding the kind of money needed to preserve large portions of Plum Creek lands for future generations isn't getting any easier.

In the Blackfoot Valley, the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund has provided a good deal of the money the Forest Service has used to buy former Plum Creek land from The Nature Conservancy. With changes in federal priorities, that pot has been shrinking in recent years and is expected to be even smaller next year.

While it will continue to be a challenge to find the kind of funding needed to preserve big tracts of Plum Creek land, most of those in the forefront of the effort believe that where there's a will, there's a way.

“So often we hear people say that if we just had the money, we'd be able to solve all these problems,” Neudecker said. “A big part of that premise just really isn't true. If you have an intact landscape and people willing to support saving it, you can find the money. So often, you just don't have public support or that intact landscape.”

“I think it's all about attitude,” Lindbergh said. “It took quite a while to get the right attitude. The people who became involved were incredibly forward thinking. They had to stick their necks way out there to get some of this stuff done.”

“The Blackfoot Valley is definitely a unique place. I think there are other unique places where something like this could work. I think the ingredients are there, but just in different mixes,” he said. “It's all going to depend on just how bad people want it to happen.”

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