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Vital Ground protects key wildlife habitat, brings new funding to Swan Valley

MISSOULA, MT - Three conservation easements completed during 2007 have permanently protected nearly 600 acres of habitat and working forestlands in western Montana's Swan Valley. Two of the three Swan Valley projects were funded in part by Missoula County's Open Space Bond Fund, a measure approved by a voter margin of 70% to 30% in November 2006.

"The work of Vital Ground is tailor-made for helping Missoula County achieve its goals of assisting rural land owners who wish to remain on their working lands and of protecting internationally recognized natural resources," said Missoula County Rural Initiatives Director, Pat O'Herren.

The three easements, which were partially donated by each of the landowners, protect portions of Cooney, McKay, and Condon creeks--tributaries to the Swan River and important year-round wildlife movement corridors.

"The more we learned about our property's resources, the more apparent it became that our site was an integral part of a major migration route and winter habitat for grizzly bears, elk, and deer moving to and from the Bob Marshall Wilderness," said Gene Tingle, one of the owners who donated an easement to Vital Ground. "Although the use of our property is as 'light handed' as

possible, it is comforting to know that our conservation easement ensures that subsequent owners will also maintain the property in essentially its current natural condition."

The Beck family decided to protect their property through a conservation easement out of respect for wildlife and in honor of the family history in the Swan Valley. "We wanted to keep our land wild for the many animals that have always made their home along side our home," George Beck stated.

Grizzlies, moose, elk and many other species frequent the Beck property, which contains significant riparian resources associated with Condon Creek, and is located just outside a federally-designated grizzly bear linkage zone.

Vital Ground's efforts in the Swan Valley are part of a landscape scale effort lead by The Trust For Public Land to protect private wildlands threatened with subdivision or other development. While TPL is focused on acquiring lands being divested by the Plum Creek Timber Company, Vital Ground places special emphasis on assisting smaller private parcel owners to protect land that provides connectivity for grizzly bears and other wildlife.

"Vital Ground understands the importance that even relatively small acreages in critical locations have for the long term survival of wildlife species like the grizzly bear," says Tom Parker, a 25-year Swan Valley resident and Director of Wildlife Research and Monitoring of the valley-based nonprofit Northwest Connections.

Melanie Parker, co-founder of Northwest Connections and its Executive Director adds, "Vital Ground is a great partner in the Swan Valley. In addition to working one-on-one with private land owners, they work cooperatively with other land trusts and conservation groups and they're helping us leverage more conservation from limited dollars."

Vital Ground has helped to expand the overall public and private funding base for conservation work in the Swan Valley in the last few years. During 2006, the organization co-sponsored the successful movement led by Montanans for Land, Water and Wildlife to get Missoula County's \$10 million Open Space Bond initiative into the public eye and approved.

Vital Ground has also attracted new private funding to the Swan Valley from several national foundations including the Chicago-based Oberweiler Foundation, the William H. Donner Foundation and the Steele-Reese Foundation, both of New York. Other significant donors include the Qureshi Family Foundation, Cinnabar Foundation, First Interstate BancSystem Foundation, and Montana Coffee Traders.

Evidence is mounting that the importance of private land is not just a function of its relative abundance or of its productive soils and access to water. It also is vitally important in sustaining the nation's wildlife and natural resources. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service states that loss of habitat on private lands is the primary danger to grizzly bears and other threatened species.

"Everyone talks about hope for the future for our wild communities and preserving the special qualities of life in these grand Western landscapes like the

Swan Valley," says Doug Chadwick of Whitefish, a founding board member of Vital Ground. "As far as that goes, my thanks go to the property owners we work with who are making that hope real, acre by acre. I know our children and grandchildren will thank them for their vision and open-heartedness even more."

Since its founding in 1990, Vital Ground has helped to protect and enhance over 417,000 acres of habitat crucial for grizzly and other wildlife in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Alaska, and British Columbia. Vital Ground is headquartered in Missoula in the Heritage Hall building at historic Fort Missoula. For more information or to make a donation, visit www.vitalground.org or call 406-549-8650.