

Missoulian

Interior Secretary Salazar touts conservation partnerships in Ovando

By KEILA SZPALLER of the Missoulian | Posted: Saturday, July 16, 2011 11:30 pm

OVANDO - As the country looks to emerge from the worst financial crisis since the Great Depression, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ken Salazar said people must understand that land preservation for agriculture and recreation is a powerful economic driver.

In front of the Stray Bullet Café on Saturday, the 50th Secretary of the Interior said outdoor recreation accounts for some 7.5 million jobs across the country. He told more than 100 people who gathered outside the eatery that their very own Blackfoot Challenge - an effective conservation coalition with partners of all stripes - is the model for similar efforts nationwide.

"I do believe it is the birthplace of the conservation concept for the 21st century, so I'm very, very proud of you," Salazar said shortly before noon Saturday after visiting areas of the Blackfoot Valley.

Salazar made the stop as part of a tour to tout conservation through public and private partnerships and to witness the economic outcomes firsthand. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dan Ashe joined in the visit, which takes place as funds for land and water preservation take a beating in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Salazar, who said his conservation values were forged growing up on his family's ranch in Colorado, showered praise on Montana's Blackfoot Valley in his talk. He said it must be the envy of all who visit and should be kept pristine for centuries to come.

"You live in one of the most beautiful, beautiful places I am sure on our planet," Salazar said.

The compliments bounced right back to him. Susan Reneau, an author of books about big game, described Salazar as a "wonderful spokesman for wildlife" and a skilled speaker.

"He doesn't use a teleprompter like the president. And he looks darned good in a white hat," Reneau said.

The crowd that gathered to listen applauded the words of the secretary. Salazar said that in the past, preservation meant buying up a bunch of land. But the Blackfoot Challenge was demonstrating ways to conserve through easements, so landowners could still actively ranch and also protect wildlife.

"This template here has now been borrowed," he said.

The model is being used in the Flint Hills in Kansas for 1.1 million acres of grasslands, he said. It's also in play in South Dakota and the Florida Everglades.

In Montana, the Blackfoot Challenge successfully reintroduced trumpeter swans into the Blackfoot watershed, and on Saturday a coalition of partners presented Salazar and Ashe mounted photos of a nesting pair of trumpeter swans as a symbol of "community-led conservation efforts."

The gift came from Northwest Connections, the Rocky Mountain Front Advisory Group and the Blackfoot Challenge, among others, according to a news release: "It takes a community to raise a swan, and a public-private partnership to protect its future," said Jim Stone of the Blackfoot Challenge. "We hope that the secretary will continue to champion community-led conservation efforts and ensure the federal government remains an effective partner."

Secretary Salazar, though, blasted legislation coming out of the U.S. House of Representatives, saying it would "annihilate the Land and Water Conservation Fund." That pool of money is funded by oil and gas revenues and offers matching grants to state and local governments for recreational areas and facilities.

According to the office of the secretary, President Barack Obama's budget includes some \$900 million of land and water monies for all federal agencies. But the fund faces an estimated 80 percent cut in the U.S. House.

In this fiscal year, some \$5.3 million from the fund is going directly to conservation efforts along the Rocky Mountain Front, according to the Department of the Interior. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Ashe said the \$5.3 million represents 10 percent of the Land and Water Conservation Fund money that goes to his department, some \$52 million. By comparison, he said the president's budget would fund the item to the tune of \$120 million; a bill coming out of the U.S. House would slash that amount to \$11 million.

Some members of the crowd pulled into Ovando towing fishing boats and campers, and Ashe told them the money represents great value for the taxpayer. It helps preserve the ranching and outdoor economies.

"We can conserve wildlife, and we can conserve a way of life if we work together," said Ashe, who praised the "rural community spirit" in the Blackfoot.

Reporter Keila Szpaller can be reached at @KeilaSzpaller, 523-5262, keila.szpaller@missoulian.com or on MissoulaRedTape.com.