

## **USFS Acquires 9,200 Acres in the Horseshoe Hills**

**By Jay Kolbe**

In 2003, Plum Creek Timber Company began discussions with the Blackfoot Community regarding the future ownership of many of its lands in the upper Blackfoot, including the Clearwater drainage. Plum Creek wished to divest of these timberlands and agreed that a community driven disposition would best fulfill the Company's conservation vision and protect the traditional uses and biological values of these important lands.

And so was born the Blackfoot Community Project; a landmark conservation initiative involving the Blackfoot Challenge, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), and Plum Creek Timber Company. This community driven and collaborative effort is a rare opportunity for local residents to guide the future ownership and management of nearly 88,000 acres of large, intact landscapes with critical community, agricultural and natural values. TNC has purchased 68,000 acres of timberland from Plum Creek so far and they hope to purchase the remaining 20,000 acres in the north Garnets this fall.

TNC works closely with the Blackfoot community, agencies, and private landowners to identify the most appropriate ultimate owner of Project lands. To date, this has meant donation or sale of lands to public land management agencies; private (usually adjacent) landowners after conservation easements have been put in place; or in the case of the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area north of Ovando, to the community as a whole.

The Seeley Lake community has benefited tremendously from the Blackfoot Community Project. To date, nearly 15,000 acres of former Plum Creek land in the Seeley Lake area has been transferred into public ownership. This is nearly half of the total acreage the Project has resold to date.

Beginning in 2004, the local Blackfoot Clearwater Chapter of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation raised funds for RMEF to purchase 3800 acres of former Plum Creek land within the Game Range. The hard work and resources of RMEF volunteers allowed FWP time to secure funds to then purchase the land from the Foundation, protecting it for wildlife and sportsmen in perpetuity.

### **Horseshoe Hills USFS Acquisition**

Tim Love, USFS Seeley Lake District Ranger has been involved with the Blackfoot Community Project from the beginning. "When the Blackfoot Challenge approached me asking which Project lands I would most like to see go into USFS ownership, I immediately identified the Horseshoe Hills", he said. Tim worked hard to secure federal Land and Water Conservation Fund monies allowing the USFS to complete the purchase of 9200 acres of the Horseshoe Hills this month. "Moving these lands to USFS ownership will protect their tremendous wildlife value, maintain habitat connectivity between USFS lands and the Game Range, and allow us to continue our forest stewardship activities there. It's a wonderful thing for the community."

In 2003 I attended a meeting in Seeley Lake at which the Blackfoot Challenge asked the Seeley Lake community for their opinions about the most appropriate disposition of Project lands here. I remember Jack Rich, whose family has outfitted in the Clearwater for 50 years, specifically noted the unique biological and cultural value of the Horseshoe Hills.

When I spoke with Jack recently he said “development of the Horseshoe Hills would have been devastating for aesthetic reasons, the loss of big game habitat, and diminished recreational opportunity. This is scenic, low-lying hilly terrain. It’s acquisition adds balance to Forest Service ownership. Everybody teamed together see this tremendous conservation and stewardship opportunity through. The Seeley Lake community will reap immeasurable benefits for generations to come.”

I couldn’t agree more.

In the coming year, the Forest Service will be conducting a detailed analysis of the Horseshoe Hills lands and seeking public input regarding their future management. We hope you can join the Forest Service, the Blackfoot Challenge, CRC, Plum Creek Timber Co., and the Blackfoot community for a field trip and BBQ celebrating this historic acquisition on Sept. 8, 2007 in Seeley Lake.

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