

## **Landscape Level Ownership Changes Ongoing**

By Scott Tomson, CRC Board member and USFS employee

As 2009 draws to a close and I contemplate the year's highlights, I can't help but think about the incredible land conservation efforts that continue to occur in the Clearwater drainage and beyond. For the Seeley Lake area, the Blackfoot Community Project facilitated the transfer of nearly 15,000 acres of Plum Creek land into Forest Service ownership in 2006-08. Add to this approximately 7,000 acres that went to Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (MTFWP) in the Blackfoot/Clearwater. For the mathematically challenged like me, this equates to about 34.5 square miles of "new" public land.

In total, the Blackfoot Community Project encompassed approximately 88,000 acres of former Plum Creek Land in the Blackfoot/Clearwater drainages. A land transfer of this scale was astronomical when compared to past projects which were typically at the scale of a section or two. Enter the Montana Legacy Project. When all the dust settles, this project will move over 300,000 acres of Plum Creek land in western Montana into state or federal ownership – with the possibility of some limited private ownership in a few places.

The Seeley Lake Ranger District will be getting about 7,600 acres under phase 2 of this project, primarily on the East side of highway 83 in the Rice/Richmond area. The anticipated closing date for these parcels is April 2010.

Phase 3 of the Legacy Project includes a large contiguous Plum Creek area of approximately 24,300 acres on the west side of the highway known as the Marshall Block. At this time the disposition plan for the Marshall Block lands is still being developed. MTFWP is actively working to secure Habitat Conservation Program dollars from US Fish and Wildlife Service which could be used for fee title acquisition of some of this area. Concurrently, the Forest Service is requesting Land and Water Conservation Fund money which would allow for some of the lands to go into Forest Service ownership. Although the end results of these efforts are uncertain, it appears that the 24,000 acre Marshall Block may be a combination of state and federal ownership.

When completed, the Blackfoot Community Project and Montana Legacy Project will have facilitated the transfer of more than 54,000 acres of Plum Creek lands in the Blackfoot/Clearwater to the Forest Service and Montana fish, Wildlife and Parks. This translates to roughly 340 square miles of land to be managed for the public good in perpetuity.

So what does all of this mean for residents of Seeley Lake and nearby communities? In part it means we will continue to have access to these lands for a variety of outdoor activities including hunting, hiking, horseback riding and snowmobiling. In addition, these lands will continue to produce sustainable forest products and help to generate jobs and revenue for our communities while at the same time providing fish and wildlife habitat, clean water and adding aesthetic beauty to our watershed.

The past couple of years have been difficult and it is pretty easy to come up with ways to be negative. However, at this time of the year in particular, I think we all need to focus on the positives and be

thankful for where we live and what we have. These 2 projects and all the people who have dedicated their time and energy to them are certainly on my list of things to be thankful for. Along with this is an appreciation for the growing national recognition of the “Southern Crown of the Continent” as a special place in terms of ecological value, resilient communities and strong collaborative efforts. It is my hope for 2011 that we continue to move these efforts forward and serve as a national model for collaborative resource management and conservation.

To learn more about the Montana Legacy Project or to view maps please go to <http://www.themontanalegacyproject.org/>

For information on Land and Water Conservation Funds please see <http://www.fs.fed.us/land/staff/LWCF/>

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land\\_and\\_Water\\_Conservation\\_Fund](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Land_and_Water_Conservation_Fund)

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