

Land Conservation in the Clearwater Valley

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A primary feature of the Clearwater Valley making it such a special place for us to live is the wild and publicly accessible land that surrounds us. This land provides the diverse recreational opportunities most of us enjoy (hunting, hiking, backpacking, horseback riding, snowmobiling, skiing, ATVing, mountain biking, berry picking, wildlife viewing, etc.) as well as the quality environment and incredible wildlife populations that make this corner of the Crown of the Continent unique. The National Forest land around us provides these and other benefits, as do the state lands managed by Montana Department of Natural Resource Conservation (MT DNRC) and Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MT FW&P). We should not forget the large amount of land owned by Plum Creek Timber Company that also provides many of these benefits thanks to the company policy of allowing public use. Plum Creek has managed its lands for timber output while allowing public access for hunting, hiking, berry picking, and other recreational activities. From an economic and recreational standpoint, having these lands remain as working forests and providing continued public use would be desirable. However this is unlikely to happen. Plum Creek has changed their corporate structure by becoming a REIT (Real Estate Investment Trust) to take advantage of current tax codes, and has already harvested most of the timber from its lands in the Clearwater Valley. A REIT is unlikely to continue to own land that will receive a low financial return in the future, and a common practice of a REIT is actively selling land to maximize financial returns under this tax structure.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC), Trust for Public Lands (TPL), and others recognized this change in business direction for Plum Creek roughly a decade ago. The Nature Conservancy, working with the Blackfoot Challenge completed the Blackfoot Community Project by purchasing some 89,000 acres of Plum Creek Land in the Blackfoot Valley including lands south of Seeley Lake and east of MT 83 within the Clearwater Valley. These transactions helped maintain the integrity of the Blackfoot/Clearwater Game Range and public access to lands including Horseshoe Hills. Following this, TNC teamed with TPL for the Montana Legacy Project to maintain the wild and accessible status of over 300,000 acres of former Plum Creek land in western Montana. For this, we owe thanks to both these organizations as well as many others involved in these efforts. Through this project, approximately 32,000 acres of former Plum Creek land in the Clearwater Valley are now either in USFS ownership or are part of the new Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area of MT FW&P. Recently, MT FW&P acquired Plum Creek's Section 24 at the lower end of Deer Creek as an addition to the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area, again ensuring these lands continue to provide fish and wildlife habitat and recreational benefits to our community. Unfortunately, more actions like these are needed to acquire some additional Plum Creek lands. In particular, the southern portion of the area known as the Big Block or Marshall Lake Block still remains in Plum Creek ownership as well as the lands in checkerboard ownership to the west of Placid Lake. Both of these areas have very high conservation and recreational values.

Plum Creek recently listed section 23 (T17N, R16W) for sale. This section is located west of section 24 recently acquired by MT FW&P and is adjacent to the Marshall Creek Wildlife Management Area created through the Montana Legacy Project. Why is the sale of this section or any other Plum Creek section in the Big Block or checkerboard area a concern? Changing ownership of these lands from working forests to private landholdings may result in several undesirable changes. First, private owners typically post their lands to public use. Our community makes substantial use of Plum Creek lands in the above areas, especially during the fall hunting seasons. Second, sale of these lands may impact the public use of access roads. While the primary access roads, such as the road to Lake Elsiná that runs through section 23, will remain open through existing road use agreements, a new owner might decide to plow the road in the winter to gain access. This could negatively impact the current snowmobile trail system as well as other uses such as skiing or dogsledding. Third, these lands are outside of the designated wildland urban interface where efforts have been underway to conduct fuel mitigation treatments in a coordinated manner to protect human property and lives. Building houses or structures outside of this area could put additional stress on fire-fighting agencies and increase risks to property and human lives. Fourth, private ownership may reduce the value of these lands to some of our desirable fish and wildlife populations. With another 14 sections of remaining Plum Creek lands in the Big Block and a similar amount in the checkerboard lands west of Placid Lake, the potential changes to wildlife habitat and public access as well as concerns for wildfire safety could be very significant.

Expecting these lands to transfer to another industrial forest landowner is not a realistic option, as the remaining timber on these lands and potential for growing trees in the near future does not make them an attractive purchase for this purpose. So what can be done? Various possible solutions exist. What makes the most sense is to have these lands purchased for public ownership by MT FW&P, MT DNRC, the USFS, or some combination of these agencies. A transaction similar to the MT Legacy project but at a much smaller scale may be the best alternative. Clearly this would require significant financial support from such sources as the Land and Water Conservation Fund, Forest Legacy funding, or others. Community support is needed for this to happen. The Clearwater Resource Council is committed to doing whatever it can to assist in facilitating such transfers of land to keep the wild and accessible status of lands that are so important to our community. We are looking for partners and volunteers in this effort. Please let us know if you are interested.