

Timber in Transition: When Plum Creek Land Changes Hands, Public is Often Locked Out

By Perry Backus of the *Missoulian*

Published 2/6/2007

Pelah Hoyt with Missoula Hellgate Hunters and Anglers is concerned about access issues with the sell-off of Plum Creek land for development. "Hunters and anglers need to wake up," says Hoyt. "This conversion of working timberlands to real estate is one of the biggest threats to the lifestyle we all enjoy here in western Montana."

CONDON - For years, Joe Raible and his family used a road across Plum Creek Timber Co. land to access their home in the Swan Valley. Set about a mile from the nearest county road, the family depended on Plum Creek's generosity to access their homestead. And the company gladly obliged. Not only did Plum Creek allow the Raibles to drive across its property, it even provided a utility easement for the family's telephone line. Then, in about 1990, the timber company sold the property to a Florida man. Not long after that, a locked gate appeared across the road to keep the public out. "At first he gave us a key to the gate, but then someone tore the gate down," Raible said. "He blamed us and dug a tank trap across the road right at our property line. He dumped the pile of dirt on our land and sowed the pile with logs so we couldn't just push it back in the hole." Raible thought about suing, but changed his mind after a very direct discussion with his attorney. "He told me that I could either put my kid through college or his kid," Raible said. "I had a friend who'd had an access issue and spent a lot of money on it. He lost." And so Raible gave up. When they come back to visit the homestead from their present home in Oregon, the Raibles take a longer and rougher route into their property. "I just decided we couldn't afford to do this," he said.

The Raibles' story of access lost could become a familiar one to people used to venturing into the backcountry. Montanans are finding themselves locked out of some of their favorite hunting grounds and backcountry haunts as Plum Creek - the state's largest timber company - begins selling off prime acreage for real estate development. Generations of Montanans have become accustomed to Plum Creek and their predecessors' generosity when it came to accessing millions of acres of industrial timberlands. Without so much as a second thought, Montanans hunt, hike, bike, gather wood and picnic on these private timberlands - fully expecting they'll be here this year and the next. But with Plum Creek's creation of a real-estate subsidiary, the Plum Creek Land Co., and plans afoot to develop big chunks of its 1.3 million acres in western Montana, a good bit of access soon could be lost. "Plum Creek has been a marvelous neighbor in terms of providing access to their lands," said Tim Aldridge, a longtime outdoorsman in Missoula. "A lot of people would have a difficult time differentiating between public lands and those owned by Plum Creek. "Most likely if you've hunted much in this county, at one time or another you were on Plum Creek lands. Whether you knew it or not, you were a visitor."

When those corporate timberlands change owners, quite a few folks will find fresh orange paint on fence posts and no trespassing signs hanging from nearby trees at some of their favorite getaways. And it's not only access to Plum Creek lands that's at stake, said Mack Long, Montana Fish, Wildlife and

Park's Region 2 supervisor. Much of Plum Creek's holdings either border or are scattered in a checkerboard fashion among public lands. "The subdivisions people are most interested in block access to large blocks of public land," Long said. "Developers must drool over those properties. If there isn't a public road that comes out on the other side, the public is effectively blocked out of those lands." "We have this one chance in time to do something," Long said. "Once it's subdivided, it's gone forever. Anyone who's wondering what Montana will be like 25, 50 or 100 years from now should be thinking about how to go forward with this issue of industrial timberlands." A few years back, hunters in western Montana learned firsthand just how vast Plum Creek's holding are after the company decided to close down most of the side roads in places like Gold Creek near Missoula during the general hunting season. People could still walk or ride horseback, but they had to leave their vehicles at the locked gate. "It was a huge deal - a real eye opener for a lot of people," said Mike Thompson, FWP's Region 2 wildlife manager. "We had a lot of people calling in to complain and all we could tell them is there was nothing we could do." "It was one of those moments where the lights went on for a lot of people," he said. "I think a lot of them were thinking, 'Holy cow, this could all go away.'" Pelah Hoyt hears people talking about the issue often as she chairs meetings of Missoula's Hellgate Hunters and Anglers Association. "It comes up a lot at our meetings," Hoyt said. "People are pretty much overwhelmed by the whole idea. It's so huge. There's just not enough money in Montana to address it." About 25 percent of Missoula County is owned by Plum Creek. Much of it is intermingled with federal and state public lands. A lot of people don't even realize the company has begun selling its corporate timberlands for real estate development, Hoyt said. "Hunters and anglers need to wake up," she said. "Right now, too many people don't even realize those aren't public lands. They don't even realize what's at risk. This conversion of working timberlands to real estate is one of the biggest threats to the lifestyle we all enjoy here in western Montana." Over the past few years, Hoyt has had a change of heart about the timber company. She remembers growing up frustrated with Plum Creek's logging practices. "But I'd gladly take that over this threat of development," she said. "It would be just great if they'd just keep doing things that they have been. Plum Creek has been a good neighbor. They've been great about allowing access for all these years." "It's going to be sad if that all changes," Hoyt said. Reporter Perry Backus can be reached at 523-5259 or at pbackus@missoulian.com