

## Timber in Transition: If Land is for Sale, Schweitzer Wants a Call

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HELENA - Gov. Brian Schweitzer is paying close attention to the business and real-estate dealings of Plum Creek Timber Co., and says he hopes the company will call when it has big blocks of Montana land for sale. This is one of the few "seminal moments in history that come along," Schweitzer said, a chance to acquire land important for timber, open space, natural resources, wildlife and the future of the state. He also said he is meeting with state officials, environmental and conservation groups and others to be ready as Plum Creek land becomes available. "Plum Creek has not told me that they are selling," he said. "I've had many meetings with them where that question has been asked. They've said to me that their priority is to produce timber." But, he said, "I've met with them periodically and said, 'What about now? Are you getting ready to do something? If you do, call us first. We are putting together resources and we are your neighbors.'"

"What I've learned about land deals," he continued, "is that they always go to hell if you've got loose lips. You start bragging about a deal that you are going to do, and it usually blows up. ... The tighter the lips, the closer they are to a closing." Other private companies, such as Smurfit-Stone Container Corp., have a stake in the future of Plum Creek lands, too, the governor said. They need timber, pulp and wood-product waste for their own businesses. "I like the timber industry," Schweitzer said. "It is not the basis of the economy in western Montana, but it is one of the legs on the table. It's a good leg. "If we don't have sawmills in western Montana, Stone Container doesn't exist anymore. They need that pulp, they need that waste material. "I want to keep some sawmills open in western Montana. Somebody comes in and liquidates (the land), and it's all for development property and they put a big gate around it and say, 'Stay the hell out because I'm from Philadelphia,' we are probably not going to harvest that timber. "From my standpoint, whether you hate me or love me, almost everybody agrees: He's an activist governor. He seems to poke his nose into everything that has to do with state government.

During the next couple of years you hired me to do this job, if Plum Creek announces that they are selling ... we need to be prepared to do swaps, trades or buy (the land) outright." Montana has millions of acres of state land, much of it timbered and much bumping up against, or in the neighborhood of, Plum Creek land. The state actively manages its land, and proceeds benefit schools and other parts of government, Schweitzer said. "There might be an opportunity to add some more land to our portfolio of state lands," he said. "The disposition of that land will affect us," he said. "We are always looking for trades and swaps and blocking off land that makes good sense for natural resources. That's a primary interest: Let's make sure we have the opportunity. "Bottom line is that I have told the potential seller that we would be a potential buyer. Call us. They know that." "The reason we care," Schweitzer said, "is because it is so much of some real special land in western, and especially northwestern, Montana."