



Secure, manage Swan's forestlands Thursday, Dec. 18, 2008

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By *NEIL MEYER*

I've been a logger all my life. My wife and I have managed the timber on our land for more than 50 years, and we still have trees for the future. As longtime residents of the Swan Valley, we have a deep concern for the area. The valley's economy has been rural and forest-based with woods jobs in logging, outfitting and small ranches. We want to perpetuate the history and rural lifestyle of the Swan. We support the Montana working forests initiative, which would add lands to the state and go a long way toward keeping those traditional jobs in the woods.

The Swan Valley is probably the best tree-growing area in Montana. The wildlife and fish habitat is rich and diverse, and is the finest in the state for bull trout and other endangered species, including grizzly bears. We have a diversity of plant species, and the scenic and recreation opportunities are superb.

Anyone familiar with the map of the valley knows that every other section on the valley floor has been in Plum Creek Timber Co. ownership. The balance is in national forest and to a lesser extent state lands. The Plum Creek timberlands, originally some 84,000 acres, have historically been managed for timber and open for public access.

Recently, Plum Creek has been divesting its holdings, with some timberlands intended as additions to the Flathead National Forest and some potentially going to the state. In the Swan Valley, this would mean acquiring about 25 square miles of checker-boarded Plum Creek lands, intermixed with the Swan River state forest, to add to Montana's land base.

An acquisition for the state would bolster our forest economy, guarantee public access for recreation, and contribute to Montana's school trust fund. Blocked management would make it easier for the Swan River state forest to provide a steady flow of forest products. This would mean employment for local people and more dependable raw wood material to local mills.

The Swan Valley has been saddled with a checker-boarded landscape since lands were set aside in the late 1800s for the railroads. By acquiring the adjacent Plum Creek timberlands, the Swan River state forest will at last be able to manage a block of connected lands rather than piecemeal in separated parcels. Wide-ranging wildlife species and our tributaries to the Swan River are not constrained by political boundaries. Block management would lead to better wildlife connectivity and more effective water quality protection.

Land in the north Swan Valley is highly productive. Trees grow tall and fast in the moist climate. The forests are resilient. The Mission Mountains are low enough on the western horizon that clouds from prevailing westerlies can course over and release rain and snow on the valley floor. The annual timber growth rate on the Swan River state forest is one of the highest in the state. We would be remiss to lose these valuable timberlands to development for non-forest uses. If Plum Creek lands go to private buyers who purchase large tracts, then fences and no trespassing signs will go up and our historical public access for hunting, fishing and berry picking will be lost.

We hear honest concern on both sides of the too-little or too-much management argument. Some people fear the Plum Creek lands scheduled for acquisition by Montana might be constrained to such an extent little timber would ever be cut, while others are afraid the land will be over-harvested.

The advantage of public ownership is that the debate can continue. Montanans will always have the right to work out their differences and have a say regarding land management n as long as the land is public. This is not the case if they are privately developed for second homes. Let's add to Montana's working forests and protect these timberlands while we have this remarkable opportunity afforded by the Montana Legacy Project. When the lands are secure, then we can continue the discussion on how best to manage them in the tradition of a democratic society.

Neil Meyer is chairman of the Swan Ecosystem Center and writes from Condon.

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