

Missoulian

Montana Legacy Project complete with last transfer of Plum Creek land

By **ROB CHANEY** of the Missoulian | Posted: Wednesday, December 1, 2010 8:18 pm

The third and final part of the Montana Legacy Project closed on Wednesday with a transfer of 69,000 acres from Plum Creek Timber Co. to two conservation groups.

The Nature Conservancy and The Trust for Public Lands paid \$89 million for the former logging lands. The groups plan to pass most or all of it over to public ownership.

"People are glad to have this phase closed and the paperwork done," TNC spokeswoman Bebe Crouse said Wednesday. "We still have some money to raise and pay it off, but I think everybody's ready to take a breath and celebrate."

The deal includes 24,208 acres in the Clearwater River area, 24,506 acres in Mill Creek between Missoula and Frenchtown, and 20,809 acres in the Upper Swan River drainage near Condon. Much of the property is in checkerboard ownership, mixed with state or federal lands.

"The Montana Legacy Project not only preserves habitat for wildlife," said Kat Imhoff, state director of the Montana Chapter of The Nature Conservancy. "It ensures that people are still able to use this land for recreation, as a source of clean water and as a place to make a living through activities such as ranching and sustainable forestry."

Wednesday's deal also included transfers of two parcels to the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. FWP bought 13,821 acres known as the Marshall Block in the Clearwater area for \$10.6 million, and took a conservation easement on 9,348 acres in the Swan drainage for \$14.8 million.

"We were pleased to partner with the Nature Conservancy and Trust for Public Lands on the project, and to help conserve this land we know is special to people in Montana," Plum Creek spokeswoman Kathy Budinick said on Wednesday. Plum Creek continues to operate on about 900,000 acres in Montana, the most land the company owns in any state. The company owns about 7 million acres in 19 states.

The entire Montana Legacy Project encompassed 310,000 acres spread throughout western Montana. Large chunks have already been turned over to the U.S. Forest Service or the state, such as a new wildlife management area and state park in the Fish Creek drainage south of Alberton.

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