

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC) and Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) each purchased 320 acres of contiguous land from Plum Creek Timber Company in September 2006 using mitigation funds from the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA). The mitigation property is situated at the confluence of Elk Creek and the Swan River in the Upper Swan Valley. It is near the Condon, Montana area, less than a mile from Highway 83.

Elk Creek is a vital corridor for many wildlife species. It has consistently been ranked the highest and best in every category biologists catalog and has core habitat for bull trout production. Bull trout are native species listed as “threatened” on the federal Threatened and Endangered Species list. The cottonwood and willow streamside areas and the many wetlands also offer important low-elevation habitat for grizzly bears, winter range for deer and elk, and important rare plant habitat. The Elk Creek Conservation Area helps prevent development along the stream and uplands, conserving forestlands, habitat for fish and wildlife, and community access.

The mission of Elk Creek Conservation Area management is to:

Allow dynamic processes to create and sustain habitat for all bull trout life stages. Protect and promote habitat for all native plant and animal species in a naturally functioning forest. Recognize that this forest is part of a larger landscape that supports humans. Considering that not all natural processes (such as wildfire) can be allowed to proceed, we will follow a well-

defined process for decision making to identify management interventions that simulate a naturally functioning forest.

The Elk Creek Management Group was formed late in 2006, and included Swan Valley residents, CSKT planners, foresters, biologists, and other relevant professionals. It was charged to create a cooperative management plan that encompasses both the SEC and CSKT portions of the Elk Creek Conservation Area. This plan is a result of those efforts.

The Management Group collected existing data and performed field work to inventory the property’s biological and physical characteristics. The Elk Creek Conservation Area lies within the Upper Swan Valley’s Valley Bottom Ecosystem.¹ The management plan analyzes the following characteristics: soils; ponds; streams and riparian habitats; wildlife; threatened and sensitive plant and animal species; forest stands; and disturbances.

For planning purposes, the Elk Creek Conservation Area was divided into 13 vegetation units, based on vegetative composition and topography. Two of the units are riparian and are bounded roughly by the Elk Creek and Swan River floodplains. The pattern of previous logging has also delineated the boundaries between vegetative units. Quantitative and descriptive assessments of each unit were completed in the summer of 2007.

An analysis of the area’s cultural heritage was also completed, focusing on historic uses of the Elk Creek drainage, Native American sites and uses, and recent access

¹ Swan Ecosystem Center, 2004. *Upper Swan Valley Landscape Assessment.*

to and use of the Elk Creek Conservation Area.

This inventory and analysis of biological, physical, and cultural factors led to the following broad goals and more specific objectives for management.

Goal 1. Perpetuate native species and their habitats by allowing natural processes to occur.

Objective 1. Monitor habitat conditions for all bull trout life stages by a combination of quantitative and non-quantitative methods. Bull Trout have been selected as the primary stewardship priority for the following reasons: 1) this land was purchased with funds earmarked for native species protection; 2) bull trout are an excellent surrogate representative for other native fish; 3) Elk Creek is the most important spawning tributary for the Swan Lake bull trout population; and 4) they receive federal, state and tribal protection.

Objective 2. Protect all native plant and animal species by recognizing their presence and vulnerability as all management actions are planned and performed. Follow the decision-making protocol (defined below) to evaluate and document all management activities.

Objective 3. Minimize the presence of non-native plant species, especially noxious weeds, focusing on road verges, landing areas, disturbed riparian areas, and other disturbed sites.

Goal 2. When natural processes cannot be allowed to occur, identify appropriate management interventions by means of a structured decision-making process.

Objective 1. Promote a biologically diverse forest that, over time, maintains areas of forage, thermal cover, hiding cover, etc.

Objective 2. Meet as a management committee on a set schedule, or in response to specific management proposals, to implement the decision-making protocol.

Objective 3. Document and archive all management decisions made for the property.

Goal 3. Integrate human use consistent with the mission statement.

Objective 1. Control public access to balance resource protection with recreational opportunity.

Objective 2. Protect relevant historic and cultural artifacts and sites.

Objective 3. Inform the community about the value and role of the Elk Creek Conservation Area.

Objective 4. Develop monitoring programs, utilizing professionals, students and/or residents. Collect baseline and trend data to determine management effectiveness over time.

Objective 5. Encourage appropriate recreational uses, including hiking, bird-watching, and other passive recreation appropriate to the mission. Identify and restrict recreation activities detrimental to the mission.

Goal 4: Respect our neighbors by recognizing that our actions have implications beyond the property's boundaries.

Objective 1. Understand and respect local traditions. Encourage meaningful participation by community members.

Objective 2. Coordinate management activities, to the extent feasible and appropriate, with neighboring landowners.

Future management of the Elk Creek Conservation Area will be guided by a decision-making process based on the following concepts:

- Desirable management activities are those that create conditions that will sustain natural processes.
- Passive management approaches which can solve a problem or condition within a time frame that does not place the ecosystem at unacceptable risk are preferred.
- Active management approaches will only be used when passive approaches will likely not be effective within an acceptable timeframe and where the active approach will create conditions that will sustain natural processes.
- In cases of uncertainty, default decisions will be made in the direction that favors native trout.

A protocol for using these principles in decision-making was developed. A five-member Management Committee will oversee management of the Elk Creek Conservation Area and will apply the decision-making protocol to all management proposals. Two appointments to the committee will be made by the SEC Board of Directors and two by the CSKT Natural Resources Department. These appointments will be made by January 1, 2008. One at-large person will be appointed to the committee by these four individuals. The

committee will meet in January 2008 and make its first report to SEC and CSKT by March 1, 2008.

On a project-by-project basis, the five-person Management Committee is mandated to consult with qualified experts from relevant agencies or universities outside SEC and CSKT in order to obtain unbiased technical opinions on which to base decisions.

The management committee will review the management plan at regular yearly intervals in light of information from the Elk Creek Conservation Area monitoring program. In keeping with the principles of adaptive management, observing and measuring results for each management decision (action or no action) will provide data that should be used to improve subsequent practices and enhance our knowledge of Elk Creek ecosystems. All decisions should be documented and archived for this purpose.

Several key issues will likely need to be dealt with by the management committee in the future. For some issues, further studies should be conducted. The main issues identified and discussed in the management plan are: weed control; coordination with neighbors and the public; fire; insects and disease; stream habitat and fish studies; harvests; public access; monitoring ecological processes; wildlife; and historic and cultural artifacts and sites.