

Partnership Leads to Large Land Donation from Conservation Partners

The Crown of the Continent is one of the largest intact mountain ecosystems in North America, encompassing an 18-million acre area including Glacier National Park, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex and Waterton Lakes National Park in Canada. Not only is it important for wildlife, the Crown is an important water source that includes the headwaters of the Missouri, Columbia and South Saskatchewan Rivers.



The Nature Conservancy's Montana Legacy Project recognizes the significance of this area and recently purchased more than 300,000 acres of land formerly used for commercial timber production. Following that purchase, and under provisions of the 2008 Farm Bill, more than 110,000 acres within the Flathead and Lolo National Forests were donated to the Forest Service.

However, once land is donated to the Forest Service, the process of exchanging ownership isn't as simple as changing the color of the land area on a map. To bring these lands into Federal ownership requires a significant effort from a number of people.

For the land management teams at the Flathead and Lolo National Forests along with the Northern Region Headquarters, it meant ensuring the acquisition process was completed properly. Efforts included title review, verification of legal descriptions, field inspections, and hazardous materials site assessments. Extra diligence required that these lands were properly acquired to conserve open space, protect clean water and abundant fish and wildlife habitat, provide continued public access and provide sustainable working forests.

In less than 16 months, the on-the-ground inspection and verification of 111,740 acres and all of the associated title work was complete. The timeframe was demanding, but accomplishing the deadlines allowed for the donation to be finalized by the target date of April 2010.

It was a team effort with the lands teams supporting each other and an outstanding effort by each individual to complete the due diligence in a safe and professional manner, in an extremely short timeframe.

The work continues for these lands staffs as they strive to incorporate the property in the National Forest System and work acquire additional lands available through The Nature Conservancy's efforts.

Victoria Christiansen, acting Regional Forester for the U.S. Forest Service Northern Region, has recognized these efforts by recently awarding one of the Regional Forester's Honor Awards for

Collaboration and Partnership to the members of the acquisition team on the Lolo National Forest, Flathead National Forest and Northern Region Headquarters. Len Newton, Linda Smith, Marc Burkhart, Dave Ondov, Andrew Johnson, Jennifer Watson, Teresa Burke, Pat Corts, Karen Linford, Judy Reese, Rusty Wilder, Ron Schlader, Guy Adams, Ron Erickson and Robin Edwards received awards in addition to the recognition of the efforts of the partnership as a whole.



These awards would not have been possible without the generous donation from The Nature Conservancy.

Following the completion of the team's work a recent announcement by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack offered an additional \$2 million to go toward acquiring additional land in these areas. The Montana Legacy Project will continue to enhance resource management within and adjacent to the Crown of the Continent by protecting healthy watersheds, diverse habitats for threatened and endangered species, and open space on a landscape-scale and while offering public access to high quality recreation opportunities.

"In keeping with the Obama Administration's America's Great Outdoors conservation initiative, USDA is committed to conserving and restoring our forests and bringing jobs to rural America," said Vilsack in the recent announcement. "Through our partnerships with states, communities, tribes and others, it is vital that we step up our efforts to safeguard our country's natural resources."

The parcels that were donated contain reaches of the Swan River and its tributaries, which hold some on Montana's highest water quality designations and provide a sustainable, functional watershed that is one of the very few places in the United States that supports healthy, stable populations of the federally threatened bull trout.

Partners and cooperators include: The Nature Conservancy, The Trust for Public Land, Missoula and Lake County Commissioners, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and Natural Resources & Conservation, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, Montana Trout Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Swan Ecosystem Center, Clearwater Resource Council, Friends of the Wild Swan and the Montana Wilderness Association.

The Honor Award for Stewardship of National Forests and Grasslands was among five awards recently given by Christiansen. The Northern Region has established a series of special awards to recognize exceptional performance or outstanding contributions and accomplishments to improve the quality and efficiency of Forest Service administrative and resource programs.