

## ***National Fire Plan***

### ***Swan Valley***

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The Swan Valley is segmented into a square mile checkerboard pattern, Plum Creek Timber Company and the Flathead National Forest together manages about 80 percent of the land. The remainder is managed by the State of Montana and by residential landowners. The complexity of the ownership demands cooperation among all parties. Following is a brief history of how that collaboration and cooperation has evolved over the last 23 years.

In the 1980's, a lot of polarization unfolded between the community members of Swan Valley, Montana. In addition, the Flathead National Forest and Plum Creek Timber Company accelerated harvest on public and private lands during the 1980s, alarming the environmentalists. They were concerned that the ecosystem could not sustain the harvest levels. Timber workers feared that environmentalists would cause job losses; this fear was exacerbated by technological improvements in logging and milling equipment that were reducing timber jobs everywhere.



Several public meetings were held with outspoken people dominating the discussions. Some people were afraid to speak out; therefore little progress was made in the public meetings. In 1990, citizens formed the Swan Citizen's Ad Hoc Committee and a professional facilitator volunteered his services to help the community work effectively in this committee. The Ad Hoc Committee became more and more successful in bringing people together with a variety of understanding and feelings about the Swan Valley Watershed.

In 1995, the Ad Hoc Committee started working with Forest Service silviculturists, biologists and others to develop the Ponderosa Pine Site Demonstration Area located adjacent to the U.S. Forest Service Condon Work Center. The project was underway when Chuck Harris, District Ranger on Swan Lake Ranger District, informed the Swan Valley citizens that due to funding issues, he was closing the Condon Work Center.

People wanted a Forest Service presence in the Swan Valley. The community formed the non-profit organization called the Swan Valley Ecosystem Management and Learning Center or Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC) for short. SEC is a cross section of individuals who collectively bring many views and understandings to the table. The mission of the SEC is:

- Maintain a strong vital community in the Upper Swan Valley, Montana, one involved in setting its own destiny through partnerships that encourage sustainable use and care of public and private lands;
- Create a learning center that promotes understanding of the land, and relationships between the people and the land.
- Integrate science and the knowledge of local people experienced with the land;
- Emphasize interrelationships of economic and social considerations in ecosystem issues and processes, and emphasize the necessity of addressing these inherent relationships at all levels.

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### ***Swan Valley (cont.)***

SEC was able to obtain grant funding to support the continued management of the Condon Work Center and two backcountry rangers for the Mission Mountains Wilderness and the Swan Range. In 1997, SEC started a collaborative landscape assessment in the Upper Swan Valley Watershed. This project brought together technical experts from state and federal agencies and the citizen's local knowledge of the valley's ecosystem. This assessment covered federal and private lands within the watershed.

Montana's 2000 wildfire season caught the attention of Swan Valley citizens. SEC started discussions about how they could help the community understand fire's role in the Swan Valley's ecosystem. Through grants from the National Fire Plan, SEC developed *Firewise Forest and Ready for Fire* programs. They conducted Firewise workshops for community leaders, firefighters, and private citizens. SEC worked with the Forest Service to develop a Firewise Demonstration project at the Condon Work Center so people could experience and understand what is meant by Firewise landscaping. Community members came in and helped design the firewise landscaping plan and marked trees to be cut for defensible space around the work center. A stewardship contract was issued to SEC to log the area around the Condon Work Center. SEC developed displays and educational material on Firewise practices.



In conjunction with Montana Department of Natural Resources, Northwest Land Office and National Fire Plan grant monies, SEC completed a Fire Risk Assessment. This assessment mapped most of the homes in the Swan Valley area and completed defensible space assessments on many of the homes. The information from the assessment is displayed in a GIS database used by several land management agencies. This assessment has led to several fuel reduction proposals around the Lindbergh Lake area of Swan Valley.

A private landowner of the Lindbergh Lake area permitted SEC to manage section 24 for Firewise fuel reduction projects. Merchantable and non-merchantable trees were logged.

Several other landowners in the same area have also worked with SEC to log their property to reduce the fuels. These areas have become a demonstration area of Firewise Defensible Space and Threat Zone management and treatments that effectively reduce the risk of loss from wildland fire occurrence.



### **So, what can we learn from the community of Swan Valley, Montana?**

First, building and maintaining relationships through collaborative partnerships is one of the strongest tools a community can have to sustain and grow.

Second, in order to live in a fire-adapted ecosystem, it is important to understand and manage the ecosystem and homes within its boundaries. A fuel treatment strategy needs to be based on treating all 3 zones; defense, threat, and general forest. If any of these components is not fully implemented, the effectiveness of the overall strategy is compromised.