

Plum Creek Land Divestment Update by Melanie Parker

The future of the Swan Valley continues to hang in the balance as our large industrial land owner, Plum Creek, transitions its national corporate emphasis from timber production to real estate development. Plum Creek could single handedly change the economy and culture of the Swan Valley from a land and community dominated by forestry and wildlife interests, to a land and community dominated by development, recreation and service industries.

To date, through the commitment of many valley residents, public agencies and conservation partners, 13,000 acres of Plum Creek land have been protected. Of Plum Creek's original 84,000 acres in the Swan Valley watershed 7,200 acres have been purchased and transferred to the Flathead National Forest. These acres are around Lindbergh Lake, Van Lake, and in parcels scattered along the Swan River within grizzly bear linkage zones or in other critical wildlife crossing areas. An additional 6,100 acres intermixed with the Swan River State Forest was protected this year when Plum Creek sold its development rights to the state of Montana (see map). In this case, Plum Creek retains the underlying ownership of the land, but permanently relinquishes the rights to develop the land as real estate. This agreement comes in the form of a conservation easement.

Of the 10,000 acres Plum Creek originally slated for sale on the open real estate market - acres that primarily surround the existing community of Condon - about 4,000 have been sold. The Antler Ridge subdivision along Rumble Creek, the Glacier Ridge subdivision up Kraft Creek Rd. and the developments along Cooney Creek were all lands sold originally by Plum Creek. Several other parcels have been sold along Remick Rd. and Guest Ranch Rd., Holland Creek, Elk Creek Rd. and near Salmon Prairie.

So, are we half way to the eventual 'build out' of Condon, Montana? The company originally planned to sell 10,000 acres to the public, and roughly 10,000 acres to private individuals. What will become of the remaining 60,000+ acres of Plum Creek land in the Swan Valley? Currently, the company refers to these lands as 'core timber lands,' but will this still be the case in 5-10 years, or will market forces convince the company to convert these highly productive forests to real estate and/or resort development?

One important conservation strategy that is gaining speed this year is the purchase of land using a combination of public and private funds for the explicit retention as a community asset. The proposed Elk Creek Conservation Area is made up of the three sections (just under 2000 acres) of Plum Creek land through which Elk Creek flows on its journey from the Mission Mountains down to join the Swan River. Folks will remember that the upper sections were traded out of Plum Creek ownership in the mid 1990's to protect bull trout spawning areas in the headwaters. This current project can be seen as 'Phase 2' of the original desire to protect the fishery and associated wildlife in the Elk Creek area. These three sections were to be sold for real estate under Plum Creek's Higher and Better Use strategy. If successful, the Elk Creek Conservation Area will permanently provide public access and economic benefit to the community while protecting key wildlife habitat.

This is the time for engaged civil dialogue and solution-oriented thinking in our community. It is time to work hard on behalf of the land, the wildlife and the people of this most amazing valley to find the appropriate level of development. Northwest Connections will continue to provide site specific information to help guide decision making in this process.

Acres-at-a-Glance

7,200 – Transferred to Forest Service
6,100 – Conservation Easement w/State
4,100 – Sold for Real Estate
65,000⁺⁻ Unknown