

March 13, 2009

BLACKFOOT COMMUNITY PROJECT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Blackfoot Challenge, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, is in the final phase of the Blackfoot Community Project. The Blackfoot Community Project is a community-based and locally developed effort to guide the future ownership and management of key lands formerly owned by Plum Creek Timber. In September 2003, The Nature Conservancy and Plum Creek reached an agreement on the sale of over 89,000 acres in the upper Blackfoot Valley. This transaction has since been completed and the lands acquired by The Nature Conservancy are being re-sold into public and private ownership based on this community driven plan.

As of January 12, 2009, about 36,000 acres have been sold to public buyers and about 11,000 acres have been sold to private buyers. Of this acreage, the BLM has acquired 6,120 acres using LWCF funding. It is anticipated that BLM will acquire approximately 6,035 additional acres through LWCF and an assembled land exchange.

ISSUES:

The Blackfoot Challenge, comprised of local landowners, federal and state land managers, local government officials and corporate landowners, has been working in the Blackfoot Valley for 15 years to coordinate conservation efforts in the watershed. An important consideration in the Blackfoot's diversity and rural character is that large landholdings in the watershed remain intact. Sixty percent is now in public ownership and the remaining 40 percent is made up of primarily large working ranches or large timberland holdings. Fragmentation of private lands by subdivision and development is a threat to wildlife habitat and the traditional agricultural and rural lifestyle of the watershed. Maintaining the rural way of life and protecting the natural resources of the Blackfoot are top priorities for the Blackfoot Challenge.

Community meetings were held in each participating community in the valley. All private landowners adjacent to the project lands were contacted, as some have expressed an interest in acquiring additional acreage. Ranchers with grazing leases on Plum Creek lands were also contacted, and they have indicated a critical need to continue to graze these lands. There was a strongly voiced desire to see these leases remain as grazing areas and to go to public ownership, if necessary, in order to continue traditional grazing usage. The desire to maintain intact working ranches is clear.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

At public meetings, Blackfoot Valley citizens and landowners expressed strong support for substantial public ownership of these lands to maintain historic public access, traditional grazing leases, and high natural resource values. They also encouraged ownership consolidation by adjacent public landowners to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of management activities such as grazing administration, forest management, noxious weed control, and public recreation management.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The BLM is only one of several public agencies acquiring some of Plum Creek's acreage. Other agencies include the U.S. Forest Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. All agencies are active partners in the Blackfoot Challenge and are committed to collaboration and community involvement.

CONTACT:

Nancy Anderson, Missoula Field Manager, (406) 329-3914