

A photograph of a grizzly bear standing in a forest, looking upwards. The bear is the central focus, with its head tilted back and eyes looking towards the top right. The forest is lush with green foliage, including evergreen trees and smaller shrubs. The lighting is natural, suggesting a bright day. The bear's fur is a mix of brown and grey tones.

# Keeping Forests **FORESTED**

How a little-known federal program is protecting rural jobs, wildlife habitat, water quality, and recreational access in western Montana. **By Allen Morris Jones**

**GREEN LIVING** Grizzly bears are among the dozens of western Montana wildlife species benefiting from forest habitat protected by the Forest Legacy Program.



**E**ach fall Whitefish resident Steve Thompson hunts deer in the foothills of the Whitefish Range, on a piece of ground known as Haskill Basin. Over the years, he's killed half a dozen whitetails in the scenic forested basin, spotted grizzly tracks, listened to wolves howl, and marveled at moments of complete stillness and quiet. It's a wild and beautiful place. And it's just two miles from the Whitefish city limits.

A longtime hunter and conservationist, Thompson co-founded the local Whitefish Legacy Partners conservation group and worked for both the Montana Wilderness Association and the Forest Stewardship Council. He's a big fan of the Haskill Basin. "I use that area in all four seasons," he says. "I go there to pick huckleberries. I go cross-country skiing. That place is bread and butter for me."

But that special place—3,000 acres of privately owned timber—might well have been altered forever, going the way of the Gallatin, Bitterroot, and Paradise Valleys. Subdivisions were metastasizing all around Haskill Basin. There was really no good reason to think it wouldn't make that now-familiar transition from forest to exposed trusses and Tyvek house wrap, multiple aluminum mailboxes, and long asphalt driveways.

For Whitefish residents, the possibility of subdivisions threatened more than their access to recreation. Haskill Basin supplies roughly 80 percent of the city's municipal water supply. Every time Thompson takes a shower or fills his coffeepot, the water comes from this watershed.

The heart of Haskill Basin has been owned for more than a century by F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber, Montana's oldest family-owned wood products company. For

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decades the municipal water supply agreement between Stoltze and Whitefish had been informal, a handshake accord of the sort you don't see much of anymore. Stoltze has long been a gracious and conscientious corporate neighbor, a major local employer that allows public use on most of its lands.

But every year it made less and less financial sense for Stoltze to maintain the status quo. Single-family homes close to Haskill Basin were selling for \$3 million and more—prices that would make even the most conservation-minded board member step back



**CLEAN WATER** A stream on F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber property that feeds the water supply of Whitefish. The watershed is now protected with a new conservation easement.

and reconsider. And if the company sold Haskill Basin? The loss to the community would be incalculable. Whitefish land prices being so exorbitant, how could the city ever afford to buy the property from Stoltze? On the other hand, given the value of the property, how could Stoltze afford not to sell?

#### Response to forest loss

When hitting on all cylinders, land and water conservation is usually a win-win for everyone involved. The brightest moments in conservation history are when disparate interests come together over a shared goal and find common ground to the advantage of all parties.

That's the concept behind the Forest Legacy Program, a little-known conservation workhorse administered by the U.S. Forest Service. Forest Legacy was created in 1990 in response to widespread development turning the nation's privately owned forests into "nonforest uses"—housing estates, golf courses, and other commercial sites. The conversion of timberland hurt logging and sawmill businesses, cut off recreational access, fragmented critical wildlife habitat, and degraded streams with sedimentation and leaching septic systems.

One solution was a new federal program that makes grants to states to "keep working forests working," as Tom Tidwell, U.S. Forest Service chief, told reporters last year at an event in Washington, D.C. celebrating Forest Legacy's 25th anniversary. The program maintains intact forests mainly by helping states purchase conservation easements—land agreements through which willing private landowners sell development rights but retain ownership and the right to harvest timber.

Forest Legacy works like this: In each state the governor appoints a state agency to work with conservation groups, local forest landowners, and others to submit applications to the Forest Service for review. A panel of state and federal officials from across the country then ranks the projects. The panel gives priority to forested lands with "nationally significant resources" that would provide the most public benefit and, at the same time, are most threatened by development. Federal funding, always limited, goes to the highest-ranking projects to help the states either buy



#### WHICH FUTURE FOR FORESTS?

Top: As forests across the United States were converted into housing and retail properties, Congress enacted the Forest Legacy Program in 1990 to "keep working forests working." Beneficiaries include rural sawmills; hunting, fishing, and other recreation (above and right); and habitat for elk and other wildlife (left).

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: RANDY BEACHAM; SHUTTERSTOCK; STEVEN GNAM; TONY BRUNIA; STEVEN GNAM





**GREAT GAINS** From left to right: FWP wildlife habitat biologist Alan Wood, Stoltze vice president and general manager Chuck Roady, and Whitefish mayor John Muhlfeld discuss the Haskill Basin and Trumbull Creek conservation easements that protect forest in the city's watershed. In addition to helping the Whitefish water supply stay clean, the easements protect spawning habitat for westslope cutthroat trout (left) and preserve vast scenic vistas (below).



a conservation easement or, in some cases, purchase the property.

The federal money comes mainly from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, a program that uses royalties from federal offshore gas and oil drilling leases to support a wide range of recreation and conservation projects nationwide. Forest Legacy requires that matching funds come from various state programs, such as FWP's Habitat Montana, and donations from landowners and conservation groups.

If all this talk of projects and funding seems a bit dry and dull, consider what Forest Legacy benefits. The program helps ensure that private lands with public value are appropriately and permanently protected from development. That keeps mills running, maintains access to hunting and other recreation, allows mountain streams to continue running clean and clear, and sustains intact landscapes that support important fish and wildlife populations.

Remember that "win-win" concept mentioned earlier? Forest Legacy is win-win multiplied several times over.

**Number one, twice**

Because Montana's forest fish and wildlife populations—including lynx, wolverine, grizzly bears, and bull trout—are recognized worldwide, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks is the state's point agency working with the Forest Service on the program. According to Alan Wood, an FWP wildlife habitat biologist who works extensively on Forest Legacy proposals from his office in Kalispell, roughly 90 applications are submitted to the Forest Service each year from 49 states and six U.S. territories. Each one makes a strong case as to why *this* project is so important.

The combination of Montana's significant forest resources and the enormous effort from dedicated landowners, other partners, and FWP staff has resulted in Forest Legacy contributing more than \$52 million to the state's forest conservation since 2000. The money has helped secure 23 different projects and 210,000 acres of prime forest land. To top it off, Montana currently has two projects with nationwide rankings of number one (in 2014 and 2015, respectively)—Haskill Basin and nearby Trumbull Creek.

"Keep in mind that Montana got started

with Forest Legacy only in 2000, about 10 years after the program started," says Wood. "We've been very competitive and successful since then, and are now number two in total funding—behind only Maine—and number three in total acres, behind Maine and New Hampshire."

On the Haskill Basin project, Wood says the Trust for Public Land (TPL) was a key partner with FWP and other groups. "Their



F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Company, Columbia Falls

“There’s no question we could have generated a lot more money if we’d wanted to. But the other options wouldn’t have allowed us to keep growing trees to supply our sawmill and keep our employees working.”



project manager, Alex Diekmann, was tireless in working closely with Stoltze and the city of Whitefish to figure out how to make this deal work," he says. Diekmann and others at TPL also helped obtain millions of dollars in federal funds and assisted in polling city residents to see what funding mechanism they'd be most willing to accept to raise necessary funding. "Unfortunately,

Alex died just as the Haskill Basin project was completed, and he'll be sorely missed by all of us who worked with him," says Wood.

An appraisal put the worth of a conservation easement on Haskill Basin at approximately \$20 million. The Trust for Public Land helped secure \$9 million from the federal Endangered Species Grant Program; the city of Whitefish, by levying a voter-approved 1 percent resort tax increase, will contribute \$7.7 million; and Stoltze agreed to sell the easement for \$3.3 million below appraised value. "There's no question we could have generated a lot more money if we'd wanted to," says Chuck Roady, Stoltze vice president and general manager. "But the other options wouldn't have allowed us to keep growing trees to supply our sawmill and keep our employees working."

Forest Legacy conservation easements in Montana are held by FWP, which monitors the land and enforces the agreements. Private landowners still own the deeds and continue working their properties under the terms of the easements. Haskill Basin and Trumbull Creek combined supply around 10 percent of Stoltze's lumber needs, says Roady. "The easement keeps these working forests in private ownership, where we still pay taxes and get to maintain our strong commitment to the land and the resources we manage," he adds. Wood notes that Stoltze has a long history of sustainable forest management and is certified by the American Tree Farm System and Sustainable Forestry Initiative, both widely recognized as industry standards of quality.

Whitefish mayor John Muhlfeld, who has a background in water resources and hydrology, has been working on the deal for the last four years with the support of city residents. "When we went to the voters with a special election to increase the resort tax, it was overwhelmingly approved by 84 percent of Whitefish voters," he says.

**Pockets of greenery**

Montana's other top-ranking Forest Legacy project, Trumbull Creek, sits next to Haskill Basin and is also owned by Stoltze Lumber. At 7,150 acres, Trumbull Creek provides a sizable complement to Haskill. The two projects conserve a portion of this Crown of the Continent ecoregion, maintain stunning

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JEREMIE HOLLMAN; F.H. STOLTZE LAND & LUMBER CO.; CRAIG MOORE; KEN ARCHER



views, and protect habitat for Canada lynx and grizzly bears. Both properties are readily visible from most of the Flathead Valley, particularly U.S. Highway 93 on the drive north toward Whitefish.

According to Wood, as many as 2,400 new homes have been built within a five-mile radius of the Trumbull Creek property in the last decade. Without too much imagination, it's easy to imagine a time when Trumbull Creek and Haskill Basin will be conspicuous pockets of greenery, quiet asylums of clean streams and woodpeckers, thumping ruffed

grouse and bugling elk, within the surrounding roof lines and gables.

Both the Haskill Basin and Trumbull Creek projects have been funded by the Forest Service in the agency's 2016 budget. "Trumbull Creek is still short on some matching funds, but it appears on track for completion," says Wood.

Congress recently approved the Land and Water Conservation Fund for another three years and included a budget for the Forest Legacy Program. That's welcome news for forest conservationists in western

Montana. "LWCF has been instrumental in funding Forest Legacy and other conservation and recreation programs, so we're real pleased it was approved and that Montana's entire congressional delegation supported its reauthorization," says Wood.

That gives the FWP biologist at least another three years to submit additional Forest Legacy project applications. Then he'll see if Montana can again be ranked among the states with the top-scoring—and most likely to be funded—forest conservation proposals. 🐻

## Other Forest Legacy Lands



Western Montana is home to 23 Forest Legacy Program projects totaling more than 200,000 acres. They range from the 80 acres of the two Windfall Creek conservation easements—an ecologically rich forest laced with pothole lakes and mountain streams next to the Flathead National Forest—to the massive 142,000-acre Thompson/Fisher conservation easement near Thompson Falls, a forested mountain-valley landscape that provides vital winter range for many wildlife species and both hunting and fishing recreation for thousands of visitors each year.

Project/Tract Name	Location	Completed	Acres
<b>CONSERVATION EASEMENTS</b>			
Manley Ranch	Blackfoot Valley	2001	7,900
Dalton Mountain	Blackfoot Valley	2008	4,891
Thompson/Fisher	Lincoln, Sanders & Flathead Counties	2003	142,015
Stimson Forestlands Conservation Project	Lincoln County	2012	27,992
Schiemann	Bitterroot Valley	2004	302
Swan Valley State Forest	Swan Valley	2006	7,204
Coyote Forest	Swan Valley	2006	80
Creek Tract I	Swan Valley	2007	318
Condon Creek	Swan Valley	2007	160
Cooney Creek II	Swan Valley	2007	110
Salmon Prairie	Swan Valley	2007	294
Pierce Lake	Swan Valley	2007	444
Glacier Creek	Swan Valley	2009	641
Abbott Creek	Swan Valley	2009	113
Wolf Creek I	Swan Valley	2009	92
Wolf Creek II	Swan Valley	2009	93
Birch Creek Tract I	Flathead Valley	2006	160
Cedar Creek	Flathead Valley	2010	157
Windfall Creek 20	Flathead Valley	2010	20
Windfall Creek 60	Flathead Valley	2010	60
<b>Total CE acres</b>			<b>193,046</b>
<b>FEE TITLE</b>			
Blackfoot-Clearwater	Blackfoot Valley	2005	4,124
Clearwater WMA	Clearwater Valley	2011	10,236
North Swan Valley	Swan Valley	2006-09	2,212
<b>Total fee acres</b>			<b>16,572</b>

SOURCE: MONTANA FWP



Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA

LEFT TO RIGHT: PAUL N. QUENEAU; RANDY BEACHAM



**DRINK UP** Working forests saved from overdevelopment by the Forest Legacy Program can continue producing water, wildlife, and jobs far into the future. Shown here: a pristine Haskill Basin creek on Stoltze property near Whitefish.