

*Stephen H. Ellis*

30 March, 2007

My name is Steve Ellis. I live in the Swan Valley about 9 miles north of the community of Condon. We bought our property in 1974, and we built our home and moved to the Valley full time in 2000.

My wife, Betsey, and I both grew up in East Tennessee. At that time (the 1940s and 50s), we found Tennessee to be a beautiful place, with many farms and much open country. I never figured to leave that state. But when I entered the Air Force after college, our first assignment was to Malmstrom AFB in 1962. My first reaction as we approached Great Falls was, "Where are all the trees?" And my second reaction was "What in the world did we do wrong to end up here?" However, by the time our assignment to Malmstrom was drawing to a close we had decided that Montana was now our home. Over the course of my 24 years in the Air Force, we returned to Malmstrom for two more tours and my wife had a teaching career in the Great Falls public school system.

We also returned to Tennessee from time to time, but each time we returned we found the state less appealing. The most appalling thing we noticed was that the open lands, farms, and forests were rapidly being replaced by sprawl, congestion, and pollution. And every time we left our old home state to return to Montana we were more eager to get back here.

Montana is still beautiful. Although the state has grown noticeably in the 44+ years since we first came here, there is still much beauty to be found throughout the entire state. Now that we are both retired, we travel widely throughout the United States. But as we approach Montana's border the feeling is still, "It's great to be back home!" However, our way of life isn't self sustaining. As more and more of the rest of the country becomes crowded, fragmented, and polluted, people look for relief and renewal, and Montana offers just that. More and more people are coming here every year. Just look at Bozeman, Missoula, Kalispell, and many other communities. These places themselves are undergoing tremendous population growth and ever increasing sprawl. Places which used to be open lands are being developed at an alarming rate. Although the Swan Valley is still quite rural, it, too, has undergone much development since we first drove through the valley in 1963. As Plum Creek transforms itself

from a timber company into a land development and real estate company, the pressures for increased development in the Swan Valley will increase dramatically.

Ranching, farming, and logging have long been an integral part of Montana life, and when done responsibly sustain and enrich our quality of life. Montana's scenery, waters, and wildlife attract visitors from around the world. I believe that Montana needs a mechanism to help preserve our rural and open lands permanently, both as working ranch, farm, and timber lands, and as open lands dedicated to the preservation of wildlife, woodlands, recreation, and scenery. After all, these are the qualities which I believe continue to set Montana apart as the Last Best Place for each of us.

Senate Bill 452 is such a mechanism. If passed, it would be the first ever state funding source to provide grants and loans to purchase lands or acquire conservation easements so that these lands can be permanently protected and conserved. The bill has broad based support by numerous individuals, organizations, and political entities. I believe that it is extremely important to pass this bill. We must do everything we can to protect and conserve what belongs to each of us citizens of Montana while it is still available to us. I ask your help and your vote to enable SB 452 into law.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Steve Ellis", written in a cursive style.

Steve Ellis