



## State ownership can sustain rural lands Monday, April 6, 2009

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By GARY BURNETT and 24 CO-SIGNERS

Many thanks for the bipartisan efforts of Reps. Bill Nooney, R-Missoula, Chas Vincent, R-Libby and Jill Cohenour, D-East Helena, to deliver the House's nearly unanimous support for a proposal to allow the state to purchase nearly 26,000 acres in the Potomac Valley. Now it's up to the Senate to close the deal.

House Bill 674 in a new version of what started out as HB14 in would help keep part of Montana working for Montanans by placing the land under Department of Natural Resources and Conservation ownership and management.

Some of us grew up in the Potomac Valley. Some of us are raising kids here. Some of us came to retire. Regardless of when or how we got here, we call it home and we depend on keeping this land working, in one piece and accessible, whether that means cattle grazing, timber management, hunting or the rural landscape we enjoy.

The ownership of this land has changed a number of times in from Anaconda to U.S. Plywood to Champion to Plum Creek. Over the years, we've seen more and more of it broken up by individual owners in mostly for building homes.

This kind of change certainly isn't all bad. It brings with it new neighbors and friends, and new energy into the community. But for our rural economies, this kind of development presents a number of challenges. For grazing and timber, the land needs to stay as whole unit. Losing part of the unit makes it more difficult to manage between remaining parcels. Homes scattered throughout overstocked forests are susceptible to fire, and create increasingly expensive and dangerous situations for both homeowners and firefighters.

With the goal of conserving the ecological and economic viability of these lands, The Nature Conservancy and The Trust for Public Land partnered to buy more than 300,000 acres from Plum Creek Timber Co. These organizations have been working with our community to outline what works best for long-term ownership of the land; both for those of us who now call this valley home, and for the generations who'll follow.

This land is more than just our backyard in it's a tremendous resource for the state in and has been for a long time. State ownership of these lands means that they will remain part of the forest products industry long into the future. These lands are also a critical resource for the ranches in the Potomac Valley. We've helped the neighbors bring in cattle and plenty of fat calves from these lands, and these lands are critical to keep the deer, elk and other wildlife abundant. The hills around us are an important watershed for the farms and ranches on the valley floor. It provides enough water for us to irrigate and support a healthy fish population.

To us, state ownership seems to be the only way we are going to accomplish the community-driven goal of sustaining our rural lands, economy and culture in this time of rapid change.

The House just passed the truly bipartisan HB674 with an overwhelming 98-2 vote on the third reading. We urge the Senate to finish the job and keep this part of Montana working for Montanans.

This opinion was signed by Gary Burnett and 24 members of the Potomac Working Group of the Blackfoot Challenge. They are: Paul Barger and Karen Rising, Wanda Burnett, Robert and Crystal Cheff, Phil Copp, Jim and Cheryl Johnson, Rick and Sue Knudsen, Eugene Miller, Scott Frost and Valerie West, Doug and Jeanne Hall, Denny and Charlotte Iverson, Alicia Vanderheiden, Heather Wills, and Sidney and Jody Wills.

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Dear members of the Montana Legislature,

My name is Dwight Gappert. I am a land owner in Missoula and Powell counties.

I ask you to support HD 674.

This bill is an opportunity for all Montana to benefit from the work and foresight of not only a group of people but individuals as well.

The people of Montana have an opportunity to acquire lands that will benefit us all for years to come. When have most of us ever seen the chance for the state to buy a large chunk of land in one area at a reasonable price, mostly do to the work of others. Here is a chance to leave a lasting legacy for us all. Please do not let this opportunity pass by. I urge all members to vote YES on this bill. Thank You.

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April 6, 2009

To the Montana State Legislature:

Please accept this letter of support for the passage of Bill HB674. As members of the Potomac Valley community, we are committed to preserving the integrity of our surrounding lands and believe that this bill is supportive of these goals. As members of the Blackfoot Challenge, we endorse this bill and ask you to give it your full support.

Thank you for your hard work, your cooperation, and for representing the voice of our community in the State Legislature. Our phone numbers are listed above and we are available if there are any questions.

Thank you,



Bernadette A. Bannister  
and  
Patrick A. Bannister

Heather Wills  
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Senate Natural Resources Committee  
State of Montana  
House Bill 674  
April 6, 2009

Chairman Gebhardt, and members of the Natural Resources Committee:

My name is Heather Wills. I am a fourth generation livestock producer from Potomac, Montana. I'm here today representing the Bonita-Clinton-Potomac Grazing Association, and my family ranch. HB674 is in support of the Working Forests Project, and today I would like to talk with you about another aspect of those working forests—Agriculture.

The grounds within the Working Forests Project are vital for my family's cattle operation, as well as for the other members of the BCP Grazing Association, for summer and early fall grazing. The timber industry and the livestock producers have worked together in the Potomac valley for well over 100 years. The ranch families provided meat, vegetables, milk, and horses for logging camps scattered through these timberlands at the turn of the century. In return the timber company allowed the livestock to graze their lands. This "working together" venture continues today.

The BCP officially started in 1938 and included ranches from both the Clinton/Bonita and the Potomac areas. At this time, Anaconda Company, BLM, and Burlington Northern owned the lands. Looking at the map of the area you will see many State allotments dispersed through the Association Grazing Boundaries as well. Some of

the state leases have been held by BCP since 1938, and many have been held by individual operations prior to the formal organization of the Grazing Association.

As the landowners of the timber ground have changed from Anaconda Company, to US Plywood, to Champion International, and until recently Plum Creek, the Association has worked together with these organizations to maintain the integrity of the lands. We, the BCP and landowners, have completed water projects, executed spring developments, and used salting techniques to continue wise use of the resources for livestock as well as wildlife. These grounds currently aid three ranches in sustaining their economic units. It is important for the grounds to remain a whole unit. Any loss of part of the unit is a loss of the whole. For the grazing and the Association to work as well as it has for the past 70+ years and for the continued operations of the ranches involved, maintaining a large block of land is key.

HB674 can support the Working Forests Project. Growing up on these lands, I have seen the working landscapes in action, from cattle utilizing the grass, to loggers managing the trees, to hunters chasing game, to recreationalists enjoying the beauty and peace of the area. My family has truly enjoyed these lands as well. We picnic when taking the salt out, we admire the wildlife we see as we walk the cows home in the fall, and take photographs of the mountain ranges we can see from the tops of the ridges when looking for those cows. The continued historic use of these lands is necessary for Potomac's future in agriculture and timber management.

Thank you and I encourage you to give positive support to HB674.

Robert Cheff  
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April 5, 2009

Dear Sir or Madam:

In writing this letter I have had a lot of thoughts and concerns about what may happen to these lands. Plum Creek, being the largest landowner in the valley, brought great concerns with them now being a real estate company. It was just a matter of time before all of their land in the Potomac Valley was sold off to the highest bidder.

My family has lived in the Potomac Valley for three generations and I am now raising my own family here. We are lucky enough to have our home on a piece of the original ranch that my grandfather owned. My family has made a living off of the land, whether it was from farming or ranching to working in the woods logging.

I do not think there is a hill or stream in the valley that I haven't climbed or crossed in the 40 years that I have lived here. That might have been when I was a youngster helping my granddad push cattle out of the Gold Creek drainage in the fall or maybe when I was sawing timber for a living. Or perhaps it was during my favorite hobbies, hunting season and enjoying the great outdoors.

So in writing this, I would like to say thanks to everybody involved in HB 674. I think that it is the best thing that can happen to keep the land intact.

Sincerely,

Robert Cheff and family  
Potomac Valley Resident

**To State of Montana legislators:**

**We are Potomac residents and would like to urge Senate support for HB 674, proposing State purchase and stewardship of Potomac Valley acreage.**

**Both of us grew up here in Montana. Throughout our lives we and our families have spent our free time in the outdoors. We hike, ride horses and bicycles, hunt, cross-country ski, and snowmobile across the lands on which the timber companies have allowed access. This year-round nearby access to recreation lands is the primary reason we choose to live and work here now.**

**It is easy to look at the statistic of the acreage of public lands in Montana and proffer the opinion that Montanans don't need more public land up the Blackfoot. That is, we feel, a deceptive outlook. We lived for a number of years in Portland, OR where we watched the urban growth spread to encompass all the nearby open lands until it was necessary to drive more than an hour to the closest recreation lands.**

**We would hate to see that happen around Missoula. Our communities currently are able to offer the unique opportunity of access to a variety of public lands within ½ hour of 'the city'. As the population grows, this lifestyle will become even more valuable.**

**We have a wonderful opportunity now to preserve these blocks of lands. Timing is critical; waiting would only result in development that can't be undone, such as the loss in the 1980s of the Milwaukee Railroad right-of-way lands.**

**Please put your support behind HB 674.**

**--Karen and Paul Barger  
28778 Camp Run Rd  
Potomac, MT  
244-5883**

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**April 2, 2009**

**Save Garnet Range for timber and wildlife.**

**This letter is written to strongly urge you to vote for House Bill 674. This bill provides the \$21 million in bonding authority for 26,000 acres in the Garnet Range in Missoula County, and has the endorsement of local officials. Bill 764 and companion bill 669 would help to ensure a timber supply for mills, a vital industry here in Western Montana. These are some of the most productive lands in Montana.**

**I've grown up and have lived in this area for over 60 years. My father was a logger for ACM (Anaconda Copper Mining Co.) in the 1940's. And since then these timber lands have supplied timber and jobs for saw mills and for their workers. These timber lands are vital for people in this district, to help preserve the timber and recreational aspects of the land. These lands could otherwise be sold for subdivisions or trophy properties for the rich who could lock up the land for their exclusive use. They will be sold and the state will greatly benefit by owning these lands for years to come, from the income of the timber and the hunters and other sports people.**

**A. Eugene Miller  
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4/2/2009