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## FWP OKs Swan Valley easement purchases

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Montana's Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission approved the acquisition of two conservation easements on 9,350 acres in the Swan Valley for \$14.8 million on Tuesday.

The deal still needs the approval of the state Land Board, which meets next Monday.

The parcels sit within the Swan River State Forest and are owned by Plum Creek Timber Co., which has a contract to sell the land to The Nature Conservancy. While the property was appraised at \$21.8 million without conservation easements, the easement value was \$18.2 million. After negotiations, The Nature Conservancy agreed to sell the conservation easements to FWP for \$14.8 million.

Money for the purchase is expected to come from the Bonneville Power Administration Fisheries Mitigation Program and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Habitat Conservation Plan.

The easements will restrict future subdivision and development, but can allow the landowner to continue activities like logging, recreational outfitting and other compatible uses. FWP officials said they hope the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation will purchase the actual land, and the two state agencies can work in conjunction to manage it for the benefit of the landscape, the wildlife that inhabits it and the school trust fund.

Hugh Zackheim, the FWP land program supervisor, said the parcels are surrounded by DNRC land, which makes it easier for that state agency to manage the property. He said that in similar situations, the purchase price for the land is lowered from the appraised value by the amount paid for the conservation easement.

"Typically, the price we pay for an easement is subtracted from the price a party would pay for residential land value," Zackheim said.

Since DNRC is looking to purchase additional property in the Swan Valley from The Nature Conservancy, Zackheim isn't sure what the final purchase price might be.

"It's up to them to work out the transactional details, and then that would also come before the Land Board," he said.

Only one person at the meeting spoke against the easement purchase, saying there wasn't any documented need for the easements. During the public comment period in October, eight people opposed the purchase.

However, out of 29 comments, 17 people supported purchasing the easement, while three parties said the state should just buy the land outright because it offered the most protection for fish and wildlife resources.

The parcel includes streams for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, and supports deer, elk, moose and bears.

FWP commissioners liked the arrangement, which they said should make the lands easier to manage in the future.

"I consider it a good deal when two agencies can work together to achieve a common goal," said Commissioner Bob Ream.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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