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## Swan Valley land deal moves ahead

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JIM MANN/Daily Inter Lake |

A conservation project covering 9,500 acres of former Plum Creek Timber Co. lands in the west Swan Valley has been advanced by the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission.

The West Swan Valley Conservation Project was approved by the commission in Helena Thursday, clearing the way for the acreage west of Montana 83 to be protected by a conservation easement purchase for \$14.8 million, most of it coming from the Bonneville Power Administration's fisheries mitigation program.

That wouldn't be the final cost for the land.

The Department of Natural Resources and Conservation intends to eventually purchase the acreage and manage it as part of the Swan River State Forest.

In the meantime, it will be held by The Nature Conservancy, with the easement allowing it to be managed as a "working forest," said Joel Tohtz, regional fisheries mitigation coordinator for Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

The terms of the easement are "somewhat more conservative, but compatible with the DNRC to meet its statutory obligations to the school trusts" in terms of timber harvest revenue, Tohtz said.

The project must get final approval from the State Land Board at its Oct. 18 or Nov. 15 meetings.

The project has been in the works for the last two years with "many moving parts" and people involved in negotiations, Tohtz said.

There were ongoing appraisals, uncertain funding availability and other complicating factors, such as a desire to see some of the checkerboard lands purchased outright to consolidate them with state forest lands.

"It's a very complex project. It's very challenging on a number of levels," Tohtz said.

The appraised conservation easement value of the 9,500 acres was \$18.6 million. The Nature Conservancy agreed to sell the easement at 19 percent

below market value at \$14.8 million.

That price tag represents about 68 percent of the full appraised fee purchase value of \$21.8 million.

The project environmental assessment was released on Aug. 6 for public comment and the decision notice came out last week.

The assessment and notice are available under “public notices” at the Fish, Wildlife and Parks website at <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

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