

# Missoulian

## Vital Ground adopts conservation easement in Swan Valley grizzly habitat

By TRISTAN SCOTT of the Missoulian | Posted: Wednesday, January 5, 2011 9:30 pm

A Missoula-based charitable organization has adopted two conservation easements totaling 80 acres in prime grizzly bear habitat along Windfall Creek in the Swan Valley.

Both wilderness tracts were donated by private landowners "who are dedicated to a conservation vision for the Valley," said Ryan Lutey, director of lands for the Vital Ground Foundation, which negotiated the transactions.

The properties fall within the Northern Continental Divide Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone and help expand grizzly bear "linkage zones," or corridors that provide safe travel for bears and other wildlife that rove between seasonal habitats - in this case the Mission Mountains and Bob Marshall wilderness areas.

"Because they are relatively small, these easements don't accomplish linkage by themselves but contribute to linkage across the Swan Valley floor," Lutey said. "Bears utilize that floor in the spring, summer and fall months, and more people and development in the valley hinders their travel."

Lutey said the two new conservation easements build on four others that Vital Ground previously secured in the Swan Valley, which sees some of the heaviest conflict between humans and bears in the region.

"The Swan Valley is a major focal point for us, and we definitely have an ongoing initiative dedicated to its conservation," Lutey said. "We will continue to reach out to private landowners here."

A conservation easement is a legal agreement voluntarily negotiated between a private landowner and a land trust. The agreements generally restrict development while allowing many traditional land uses to continue in accordance with the purposes of the conservation easement.

The recently donated properties adjoin other permanently protected private lands and the Flathead National Forest.

"These easements will help conserve crucial wildlife habitat for wide-ranging big-game animals, grizzly bears, lynx and numerous other wildlife species," said Gary Wolfe, executive director of Vital Ground, which works toward the recovery and long-term survival of grizzly bears and other native species that share their range and habitat.

The U.S. Congress recently renewed the enhanced tax incentive for conservation easement donations, making the incentive effective through Dec. 31, 2011, and retroactive to Jan. 1, 2010.

In addition to the donations by landowners, the Helena-based Cinnabar Foundation and Montana Coffee Traders provided funding for transactional costs and long-term stewardship endowments for the easements.

The landowners also worked with Vital Ground to obtain matching funds through ongoing Swan Valley Forest Legacy Program projects.

"Landowner-land trust partnerships like this are important for maintaining healthy wildlife populations and improving habitat connectivity across the landscape," Wolfe said.

Reporter Tristan Scott can be reached at (406) 260-4197 or at [tscott@missoulian.com](mailto:tscott@missoulian.com).