

# Proposed Conservation Easement Program

## Swan Valley Conservation Area



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Swan River

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to protect one of the last undeveloped, low-elevation, coniferous forest ecosystems in western Montana—Swan Valley. The proposed project area would protect 11,000 acres of land between the Bob Marshall Wilderness and the Mission Mountain Wilderness, primarily through the purchase of conservation easements on private lands.

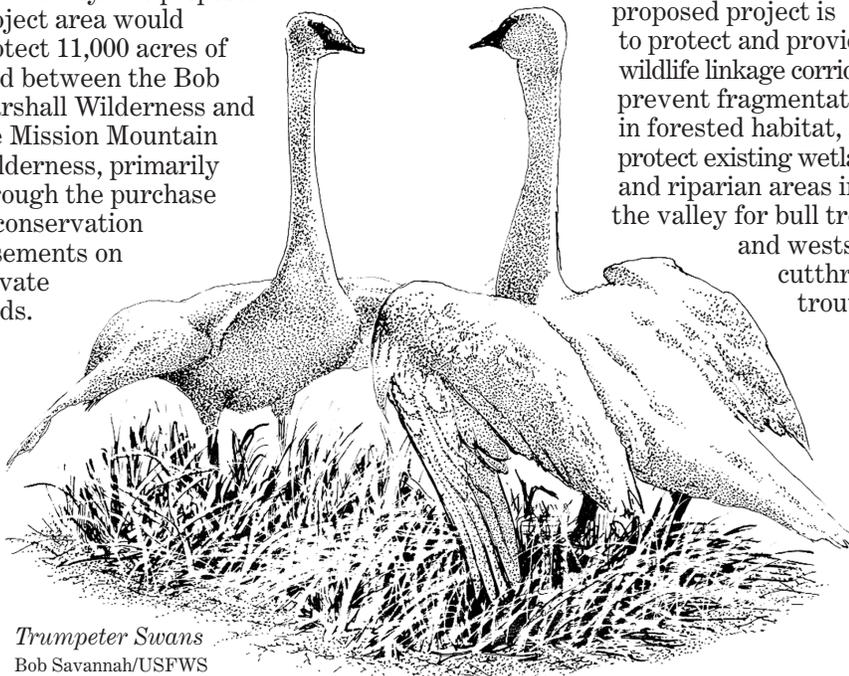
The Service would buy in fee title up to 1,000 acres adjacent to the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge.

The purpose of the proposed project is to protect and provide wildlife linkage corridors, prevent fragmentation in forested habitat, and protect existing wetlands and riparian areas in the valley for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout.

### How would the conservation easement program work?

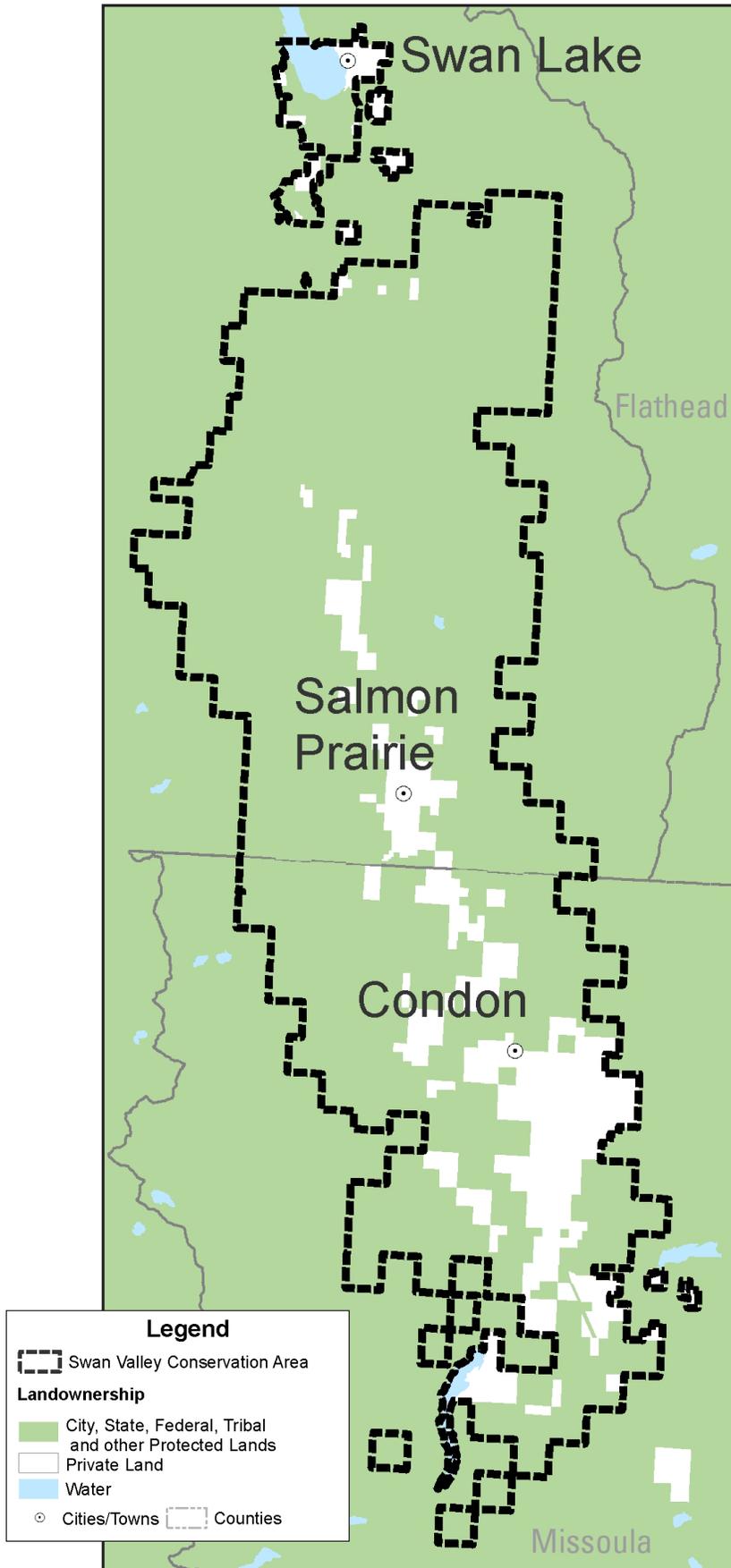
The proposed conservation area encompasses an 187,400-acre landscape on the valley floor of the 469,000-acre Swan River watershed and includes portions of Lake and Missoula counties.

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements between landowners and government agencies or qualified conservation organizations. These easements limit the type and amount of development that may take place on a property in the future. Service easements are perpetual and typically prohibit subdivision and commercial development activities but allow for continued agricultural uses such as livestock grazing and haying. Conservation easements not only protect important wildlife habitat but also help maintain the working ranches and agricultural lifestyle of the area.



Trumpeter Swans  
Bob Savannah/USFWS

## Swan Valley Conservation Area, Montana



Under conservation easements, the land ownership and property rights including control of public access would remain with the participating landowner. In addition, participating properties remain on local tax rolls. Easement values are determined by appraisal and typically are about one-third of the property's full-market value. Under fee-title acquisition, property would be owned and managed by the Service as part of the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge.

### What resources would benefit from the conservation easement program?

Swan Valley's moist, low-elevation forest ecosystem supports a diversity of fish and wildlife species. Federal trust species that would benefit include wolverine, American marten, and Canada lynx. Native salmonids such as the westslope cutthroat trout and bull trout would benefit.

The valley's wetland complexes provide important breeding habitat for 20 species of waterfowl including mallard, Canada goose, northern shoveler, and harlequin duck. The Swan Valley is one of the only watersheds in the western continental United States that supports breeding common loons; currently, there are six breeding pairs.

Other migratory birds that would benefit from protection in the conservation area include black tern, peregrine falcon, and greater sandhill crane.



Harlequin Duck

We will use your input when developing a draft environmental assessment and land protection plan for the proposed conservation easement program in the Swan Valley. These documents will highlight the resource values; present alternatives that address issues that the Service, our conservation partners, and the public identified; and evaluate the effects that may occur if the proposal is determined to be a viable tool for conserving habitat. The draft environmental assessment and land protection plan will be distributed to those who would like to review and comment on the documents. The Service will consider all comments, and then prepare the final land protection plan.

### Does the Service have other land conservation efforts in the area?

The Service has successfully used its conservation easement program to work cooperatively with private landowners to conserve more than 100,000 acres along the Rocky Mountain Front and in the Blackfoot and Centennial valleys of western Montana. This approach enjoys broad support from the conservation community, landowners, and Montana’s congressional delegation.

The Service is looking for opportunities to strategically link areas for preservation of wildlife corridors and significant fish and wildlife habitat. In addition to the Swan Valley, the Service has identified other areas for landscape conservation planning within this region of Montana including the Blackfoot Valley and the Rocky Mountain Front.

These areas share exceptional diversity of habitat types including riparian areas, glacial prairie, potholes, lakes, bogs, fens, swamps, and boreal peat lands. Transitional zones between valley floors and mountains are extremely important

to fish and wildlife. Large expanses of fescue grasslands phase into alpine meadows or sagebrush steppe, which transitions into forests of white pine, Douglas-fir, and ponderosa pine.

The proposed projects would be carried out mainly through conservation easements to preserve essential wildlife habitat.

### What is the next step in the process?

We want to hear from you, and to do that we will hold a meeting about the Swan Valley proposal on May 18 (see meeting schedule below). At the meeting, you will be able to meet with Service personnel, learn about the proposal, and provide input. We also encourage you to comment through letters, emails, and phone calls to the local or regional contact listed below.

*This meeting is one of three public meetings during May 2010 that will be forums for sharing ideas and issues about the proposed land conservation efforts. Each meeting will focus on one of the conservation proposals.*



American Marten



Tim McCabe/USFWS

*Mallards*

## How do I get involved?

The Service welcomes your questions and comments! Whether you are an individual or a group representative, please do not hesitate to call, write, or request information concerning the proposed conservation easement program in the Swan Valley or any of the other land conservation proposals.



May 2010



## For more information, contact:

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## Meeting Schedule

Proposed Expansion of the Conservation  
Easement Program in the Rocky  
Mountain Front

May 17, 2010; 4–7 p.m.  
Choteau, Montana  
Stage Stop Inn, 1005 N. Main Avenue

Proposed Conservation Easement  
Program in the Swan Valley

May 18, 2010; 4–6 p.m.  
Condon, Montana  
Swan Valley Community Center,  
6799 Highway 83

Proposed Expansion of the Conservation  
Easement Program in the Blackfoot  
Valley

May 19, 2010; 7–9 p.m.  
Ovando, Montana  
Ovando School, 108 Birch Street