

2016 CONSERVATION PLAN SUMMARY

PROTECTING NORTHWEST MONTANA'S SPECTACULAR LAND
AND WATER LEGACY THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED CONSERVATION



WHY CONSERVATION MATTERS

What will the Flathead Valley look like in 2050? Flathead County is one of the fastest growing counties in the state, increasing its population at an estimated 1.5% a year. An estimated 23,000 more residents are expected to live in the County by 2050. That is the equivalent of adding another city the size of Kalispell to the County over the next 35 years. And that doesn't include the growth in seasonal visitors we are experiencing each year. As we look to the future, we will continue to need more residential housing, commercial development, and infrastructure in order to accommodate this increasing growth.

Yet, what makes living and visiting here so special is our abundance of beautiful open space lands, outstanding fish and wildlife habitat, exceptionally clean water, and unsurpassed recreational opportunities.

Population growth in this beautiful corner of Montana is inevitable and contributes to our economic prosperity, but it also comes with some loss of the land and water legacy we cherish in the Flathead. This is why we must work together as a community to ensure that we conserve the most important open space lands for maintaining our rural agricultural heritage, abundant fish and wildlife, and clean water. While much of the surrounding landscape enjoys federal protection, the low-elevation private lands have a critical role in ensuring high water quality, as well as providing secure habitat for wildlife and rich farmland.

A RECORD OF SUCCESS ★

Flathead Land Trust is a local non-profit founded in 1985 by forward thinking community members who wanted an organization dedicated to preserving the qualities that make the Flathead so special and a treasure for future generations.

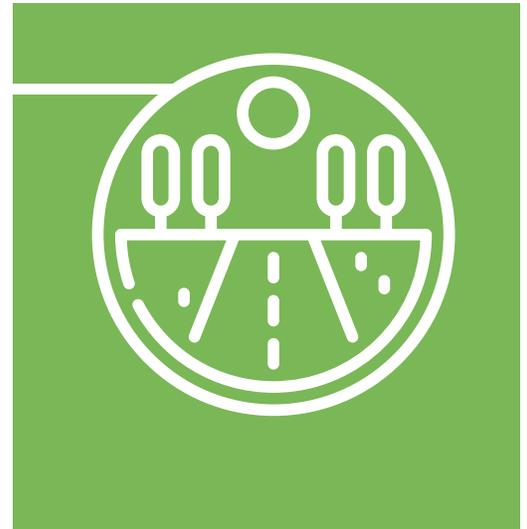
Thirty years of conservation work has resulted in Flathead Land Trust protecting nearly 10,700 acres of private land with 53 perpetual, voluntary legal agreements with private landowners called conservation easements, and partnering with other organizations and agencies to protect another 3,000 acres. Important land has been conserved along the Flathead and Stillwater Rivers, wetlands and lakeshores, forestland, family farmlands, fishing access sites, public accessible parks, wildlife management areas, and areas of tremendous scenic beauty visible to the public.

A GUIDE TO THE FUTURE

This Conservation Plan will provide focus for future conservation efforts, laying a road map for accomplishing the most important and needed conservation for the Flathead region.

In addition to continuing the successful Flathead River to Lake Initiative that has focused conservation efforts along the main stem of the Flathead River, our Conservation Plan identifies three additional focus areas in which to direct our conservation efforts:

- Important Agricultural Soil (especially with shallow groundwater)
- Migratory Bird Habitat & Wetlands
- Community Projects



FLATHEAD RIVER TO LAKE INITIATIVE 🐟

The waters, wetlands, and riparian systems of the Flathead River to Lake Initiative area are the most threatened in the Flathead watershed's unique landscape, and the most vital for maintaining clean water and providing habitat for an amazing diversity of native fish and wildlife species.

The Flathead River to Lake Initiative is a highly collaborative partnership of agencies and organizations with a landscape-scale focus encompassing the 100-year floodplain of the Flathead River from its confluence with the South Fork Flathead River to Flathead Lake and the north shore of Flathead Lake.

Since 2002, the Flathead River to Lake Initiative has protected over 5,000 acres of key lands in its focus area adding to a conservation network totaling over 11,000 acres of private and public lands. This acreage has protected, among other important accomplishments, 51% of the wetlands and 41% of the 100-year floodplain within the Initiative focus area. By working together, this successful partnership seeks to continue to conserve what is special about the Flathead Valley.



IMPORTANT FARMLAND CONSERVATION

The Flathead Valley has some of the best soils in the state and the nation for agriculture. Just over one hundred thousand acres in Flathead Valley are designated by U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resource Conservation Service as having prime agricultural soils (some of the land containing these soils has been developed). In 2012, the Flathead Valley generated nearly \$35 million in agricultural products. The Flathead Valley has been defined by productive farming since it was settled and is an important part of the economy, culture, local food movement, and our heritage.

Yet, the Valley's best agricultural lands are under threat from encroaching development. Farmland, because it is usually flat, open and relatively close to existing communities, is the most easily developable land and therefore the most threatened. When farmland is developed, however, we not only lose the economic contribution of agriculture to our Valley and the opportunity to grow the food we consume locally, but we also lose much of the rural character, open space, and strong agricultural communities that make our Valley so special. We also lose important wildlife habitat that expanses of open farmland provide, as well as threaten the quality of our shallow groundwater.

By utilizing existing partnerships, sources, and professional expertise in private land conservation, Flathead Land Trust will expand existing agricultural conservation efforts and preserve some of the best soils in the nation for food production, thus ensuring that agriculture in the Flathead will always be here.



MIGRATORY BIRD HABITAT & WETLAND CONSERVATION

Wetland habitat and neighboring agricultural lands are important for migratory birds throughout the Flathead Valley. These wetlands and adjoining uplands in the Flathead Valley support a high number and wide diversity of resident, migratory, and wintering birds.

Flathead Land Trust recently began to implement a Migratory Bird Habitat Protection Program. This has expanded our focus area to wetlands and nearby agricultural lands throughout the Flathead Valley, with an initial emphasis on wetlands in the Smith and West valleys.

Protecting migratory bird habitat and wetlands also helps to achieve additional conservation goals. By conserving property along the Whitefish and Stillwater Rivers, Ashley Creek, and important spring creeks, we help protect water quality, fish habitat, and the wildlife habitat and travel corridors provided along the banks of these rivers, streams, and spring creeks. By conserving wetlands for migratory waterfowl, we also help to protect amphibians and other species dependent on the wetlands.



COMMUNITY PROJECTS

Community projects include efforts that enhance public access to or use of open space land, provide outdoor recreation opportunities, and/or are strongly associated with a particular location-based community.

One of the most prominent community projects in the region is the effort by F.H. Stoltze Land & Lumber Company and The Trust for Public Land, together with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the City of Whitefish, and Whitefish Legacy Partners, to permanently conserve over 10,000 acres of Stoltze's timber land containing the headwaters of the City of Whitefish's water supply in Haskill Basin and the headwaters of Trumbull Creek. Protecting the water supply for the City of Whitefish and the wildlife habitat and recreational trails on Stoltze's land has long been a top priority for the community and will be a significant and widely supported achievement.

Flathead Land Trust is supporting and expanding upon that effort by conserving private land adjacent to the Stoltze timber lands that are generally north of the BNSF railroad tracks, thus creating a larger block of conserved open space.

In our region there have also been successful community led efforts to create and protect a network of public trails. Such efforts include the Whitefish Legacy Trail program, Foy's to Blacktail Trails, and the Gateway to Glacier Trail program, among others. Foy's to Blacktail Trails, for example, is a broadly supported community effort to establish a permanently protected public access trail network and community forest from Herron Park, outside of Kalispell, south to Blacktail Mountain. The effort, with some assistance already from Flathead Land Trust, has protected 320 acres of land with heavily used trails that have now been incorporated into Herron Park. Flathead Land Trust will continue to work with these groups, and others, to identify ways in which we can help expand the community's access to high quality recreational trails.

In addition, Flathead Land Trust will seek opportunities to increase public access to area lakes and rivers such as public access sites along Flathead Lake and other bodies of water. Efforts will also focus on community conservation that provides benefits to a local community that is strongly associated with "a sense of place", providing value to the people within that community.



IMPLEMENTATION & CONCLUSION

There are many opportunities for private land conservation in the Flathead. This plan focuses Flathead Land Trust's work on four important areas as previously outlined. Implementation of this Conservation Plan in these four focus areas will ensure that future efforts prioritize the most important and advantageous opportunities.

Conservation of private land, however, isn't possible without landowners willing to conserve their property in perpetuity. Our work is dependent on the generous foresight of landowners who voluntarily choose to leave a legacy of conserved open space for their descendants, the larger community, and the wildlife that depends on it. Many landowners have chosen to leave such a legacy, and many more no doubt will, but it often requires reaching out to and speaking with hundreds of landowners over years to build the relationships that result in a strong network of conserved land. The analysis resulting from the plan helps us to identify which landowners to approach for the future success of conservation.

Moving forward, we will also explore with our partners the possibility of concentrating our collaborative efforts on a new geographic focus area that includes multiple, significant resource conservation values. Such an effort, modeled on and in addition to the Flathead River to Lake Initiative, would strengthen the Land Trust's ability to achieve conservation goals in priority areas identified by this plan and possibly some new areas.

In order to implement new conservation as guided by this plan, Flathead Land Trust and its partners will need support from the community, and all of those who love the Flathead. By working together, even amidst our continuing growth, we can ensure that the future of the Flathead will continue to include an abundance of beautiful open space, robust local agriculture, outstanding fish and wildlife habitat, clean water, and unsurpassed recreational opportunities!



Find out more and get involved at www.flatheadlandtrust.org or give us a call at 406-752-8293. Contact us if you would like to receive a copy of the full conservation plan.