

BLM buys more land near Blackfoot River

Eve Brown | November 22, 2019

The Bureau of Land Management closed on a \$5.6 million [property purchase](#) Thursday that adds 7,268 acres to public lands just north of the Blackfoot River.

The purchase is from The Nature Conservancy and uses [Land and Water Conservation Fund](#) dollars, which is a federal program whose money comes from offshore oil and gas development. This brings the total of BLM-owned property in the drainage about 25 miles northeast of Missoula to about 27,000 acres, with the eventual goal of expanding the federal agency's land holdings in the area to 60,000 acres.

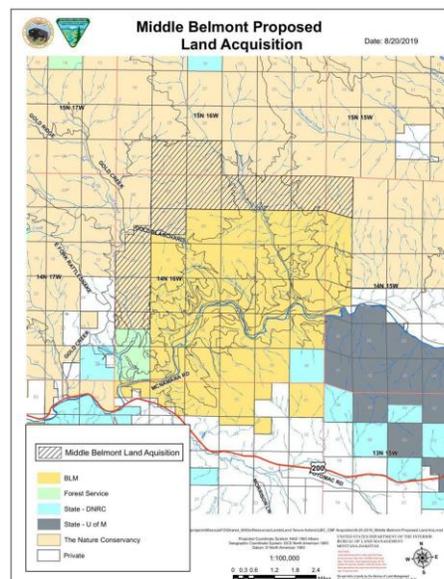
The purchase amounts to about \$775 per acre.

Joe Ashor, the BLM's Missoula field manager, said the plan has been in the making for a couple of years. The nonprofit Nature Conservancy bought about 117,000 acres from Plum Creek in 2014 in the greater Blackfoot area to preserve the intact landscape and keep it from being subdivided into ranchettes. When The Nature Conservancy purchased the property, the nonprofit group said it didn't intend to retain ownership, but wanted to pass it on to the state and federal public agencies.

Ashor anticipates they'll use \$4.5 million in LWCF next year to purchase another 5,760 acres, then make additional purchases in 2021 and 2022.

"Back in 1986, the BLM managed a whopping 40 acres in that area," Ashor told the Missoulian on Thursday. "Fast forward four or five years, and that 40 might be upward of 60,000 acres."

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The purchase comes at a time when federal land managers under the Trump Administration are being accused of wanting to sell off public property, and Ashor said he hopes this will calm some of those fears. In a news release, William Perry Pendley, the BLM deputy director for Programs and Policy, confirmed the support. [Pendley previously supported the sale](#) of public lands, but after he was appointed to head the BLM he said he disavowed his past views.

“The BLM, under Secretary (David) Bernhardt’s leadership, is working on multiple fronts to expand access to public lands for all Americans and to increase opportunities for hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation on the more than 245 million acres we manage,” Pendley said in the news release. “This important acquisition embodies our commitment, and we’re proud to work with local landowners and sportsmen’s groups to continue to enhance public holdings in the Blackfoot River watershed.”

The purchase stitches together the former patchwork of interspersed public and private land. Ashor notes that it’s not actually expanding public access, since people already were able to use the property, but will ensure that use can continue in the future.

“Today is a big day for us,” Ashor said. “We’re not expanding, but maintaining public access, because this is where people already were hunting and fishing. The Department of Interior folks are real supportive of this purchase.”

Amanda Tripp Johansson of Missoula said her family hunted on this land for generations, and she fully supports the purchase.

“All of the meat that my family eats comes from this land, so it has become kind of sacred to us,” Johansson said. “There is nothing more valuable than having the security that my family will continue to have this land for more generations to come.”

Denny Iverson of Potomac, a rancher and semi-retired logger, said the deal was successful because the partners engaged with the local community.

“This sale comes after a deliberate process to get community input, which secured the support of local folks,” he said. “It means the area will remain intact while still serving as a working landscape.”

Chris Bryant, The Nature Conservancy’s western Montana forests director, said the purchase couldn’t have been done without the LWCF dollars. Montana’s entire congressional delegation has repeatedly voiced support for fully funding and permanently reauthorizing the LWCF, and on Tuesday, the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources [passed a bill out of committee](#) that would require Congress to fully fund the LWCF every year, which is \$900 million.

“We are encouraged that legislation to permanently fund LWCF is moving forward and hope that we will see a vote on the legislation by the full senate as soon as possible,” Bryant said.