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Deal is struck in Montana to Preserve Forest Areas
By Kirk Johnson

DENVER — A huge patchwork of privately owned forest in northwest Montana — much of it abutting wilderness, and together almost a third the size of Rhode Island — will be permanently protected from development under an agreement announced Monday by two private conservation groups, the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land.

The groups will pay $510 million for about 500 square miles of forest now owned by Plum Creek Timber, a lumber and real estate firm based in Seattle. It is one of the biggest sales of forest land for preservation purposes in United States history, conservation experts said.

About half the amount will come from private donations, the conservation buyers said, and about half from the federal government under a new tax-credit bond mechanism that was included in the giant farm bill recently passed by Congress over President Bush's veto.

The bond mechanism was devised by Senator Max Baucus, Democrat of Montana. Mr. Baucus, his spokesman said, was approached about a year ago by representatives of the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land, who argued that development pressures were growing so intense that new tools had to be created to buy the Plum Creek properties if they were to be protected.

"The ordinary tool kit was not industrial-strength enough for us to make an offer," said William Ginn, the director of conservation markets and investments for the Nature Conservancy, and one of the lead negotiators of the deal.

Mr. Baucus's spokesman, Barrett Kaiser, said that while Montana might be the pilot for the conservation bonds, Mr. Baucus believed there would be applications for preserving lands all over the country. Mr. Kaiser said there had been "no deal on the table" to buy the Plum Creek properties when the bond measure was passed.

The lands in this case were considered especially valuable, and vulnerable to the effects of development, because most were in fragments — 640-acre squares interspersed in a checkerboard with public lands mostly owned by the Forest Service. Checkerboard ownership is a legacy of the railroad-building of the late 1800s and early 1900s, when the government offered millions of acres of the West as an incentive to companies laying track through Montana and other Rocky Mountain states.

The purchases, which are to be completed in phases over the next two years, with most of the land then conveyed to the Forest Service or other government agencies over the next decade, will essentially fill in the checkerboard, Mr. Ginn said. An outline of the project is on the Nature Conservancy's Web site, www.nature.org.

Grizzly bears and other animals that now face transit through public-private checkerboard lands in the Swan Valley, northeast of Missoula, will have a straight path, for example, between the Bob Marshall Wilderness and the Mission Mountains Wilderness.

"That has huge implications, positive ones, from a biodiversity standpoint," Mr. Ginn said. Creating a more continuous fabric of lands in public ownership also helps the Forest Service in its firefighting duties, since a filled-in checkerboard reduces access issues in reaching interior areas of the forest.

Mr. Ginn said that while long-term protection is the goal, the deal also includes provisions for some continued timber cutting on the lands, with logs sold at market rates to Plum Creek lumber mills in Montana over the next 15 years. He said that third-party-certified sustainable forestry standards would be used in choosing how much to cut and where, and that overall timber cutting would decline.

Mr. Ginn also said that new thinking about how to maintain undeveloped lands in the West was increasingly dependent on maintaining their economical value, and that keeping forestry jobs in places like Montana would bolster overall forest values as another tool to keep them from being developed.

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