



GRAZING INTO THE FUTURE

SEVENMILE'S GRASS MANAGEMENT PROGRAM TRIES SOMETHING NEW

The Sevenmile Creek restoration project consumed countless hours of PPLT staff and volunteer time, and cost upwards of \$1 million borne by public and private contributors. A storybook-like ending was unfolding with improved water quality, bird and wildlife habitat, erosion control and educational opportunities. But then...

Last year on a particularly windy September day, a fire charred most of the site's 360 acres. As devastating as the fire was, it would have been far worse had it continued east across Head Lane.

The vulnerability to fire in the area piqued concerns of the land trust's folks and their Sevenmile neighbors. According to PPLT's Blake Sexton, while pre-fire efforts had initially focused on stream bed and wetlands restoration, a more holistic land management effort was evolving. "Our main goal is to promote restoration of the site and sound land-management practices," including addressing potential fire concerns of their agriculture neighbors, he said.

Blake visited with Terry Dunlap who manages the ag land south of Sevenmile. Terry expressed an interest to Prickly Pear in haying the property to reduce the fire loads. Blake soon enlisted the expertise of PPLT board member Tyrell Hibbard, whose family has been practicing progressive land management on their Sieben Livestock Co. holdings for years.

That fire "was a real eye-opener for neighbors," Tyrell recalls. But simply haying the land was not a long-term solution. While the land had a long history of ag-use, the range was bare and the soils thin. "To hay it wouldn't improve range health," he explained. Instead, it required,

"converting biomass into something that will help the soil." Enter in an innovative cattle grazing program. "We worked with Blake to design a grazing program based on high-intensity, rotational grazing to support a regenerative approach," Tyrell explained.

The plan involved setting up three, eight-acre paddocks hemmed by temporary solar-powered electric fencing, all within a 60-acre plot. The neighboring landowner provided 30 cow-calf pairs and the cows spent three to five days in the paddocks. The cattle's fertilization powers – yes, that would be excrement – added nutrients that helped activate the soil. "We were able to get all the benefits of cattle by redirecting their natural tendencies to over-graze or revisit a site," Blake explained.

Managed grazing was achieved "by keeping fresh feed in front of the cattle

and applying even grazing pressure to all plants in the paddock," Tyrell said. The cattle consumed both desirable and less-desirable (plant) species and also

provided good distribution of hoof impact, which helped open up the soil, essentially helping "plant the seeds from grasses. By rotating the cattle out of the paddocks, "the plants get to rest and recover. It's really beneficial to the range."

Range-management efforts give PPLT an opportunity to showcase to the community disparate areas of conservation and education in one project.

The even grazing pressure more resembles how buffalo grazed across the plains years ago. "Buffalo will graze and move along," explained Blake. "We have to force cattle to act like buffalo." Funds for the project came from the Montana Watershed Coordination Council, which saw opportunities to protect the new stream channel. The Council's grant covered costs of the electrical fencing, which included riparian protection along the creek, and obtaining infrastructure including tanks, pumps and pipeline to irrigate the parcel.

"It's a good example of partnerships with nonprofits," said Ethan Kunard, the group's executive director. "It's important to have pilot projects to help inform the surrounding land owners." While the grazing program is a "trial run," Tyrell described a "new

relationship with our neighbors. And a new relationship with the cattle." It was a first step according to Blake, "it worked well and we learned a lot of things." He envisions other proactive management opportunities among the portfolio of PPLT open lands.

The range-management efforts contribute to what PPLT staffer Nate Kopp, who has overseen the entire Sevenmile project, sees as an amalgam of assets and community benefits. It's given PPLT an "opportunity to showcase to the community disparate areas of conservation and education in one project." He describes a "unicorn of a project" that encompasses wildlife, grassland and stream restoration, education, recreation, an active agriculture program, view shed and land protection that all co-exist in one spot.

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BOND, OPEN SPACE BOND

REGIONAL PARK DISTRICT COULD SHAKE UP MORE CONSERVATION AND NOT STIR UP MORE MANAGEMENT

IN 2008, Lewis and Clark County voters approved a \$10 million open space bond. Proceeds have afforded a diversity of outdoor access and conservation projects throughout the county, “cherished by the community,” says Mary Hollow, executive director of the Prickly Pear Land Trust.

Among them: the Tenmile Creek Park and Sevenmile Creek Restoration, the Lincoln Community River Park on the Blackfoot River, Falls Creek Trailhead near the Dearborn River, additions to Mount Helena and Mount Ascension, the Potter and Gehring working ranch easements and the Upper Prickly Pear Creek fishing access site on York Road. “Projects like this show how much the open space bond has given back to the taxpayers who have been so instrumental in supporting these measures,” says Mary.

But funds in that bond are winding down and the public appetite for open space and outdoor recreation, among long-time residents and newcomers alike, is increasing. “We have to be looking toward the future. What needs to be protected and where will people recreate,” she says. Open space funding and the variety of projects they

support have been embraced by Montana voters outside of Helena too. In 2018, Gallatin County approved a \$20 million measure, through a mill levy – the third to pass in that community. That same year, Missoula County passed – for a third time also – a \$15 million bond which included funds for maintenance. Both received 62 percent of the vote.

But the popularity of open lands and trails isn’t limited to individuals. “From a business and economic perspective, those amenities are a part of success,” Mary says. “Community access to public land is how businesses attract and retain workforce here, especially in the competitive environment we’re in.” Continued support of the business community – greatly valued by the PPLT organization – would be essential in ballot measures succeeding.

Prickly Pear is adept at building strong partnerships with state and federal government agencies, which can help achieve win-win outcomes for stakeholders and the community. For example, the Department of Defense (Fort Harrison) has played an enormous role in securing Tenmile Creek Park and two recent Mount Helena additions. Such relationships, however, require a local financial match or landowner donation, she says. The availability of local bond funds is key as they provide those matching dollar requirements.

But while PPLT has an impressive legacy of championing conservation and recreation on the properties it does hold, its most strategic

role centers on properties it does not. Managing land is very costly for a local, member-supported non-profit and can limit the ability to take on new projects. Instead, facilitating land transfers to public agencies and acting in the role of project partner on those lands, frees PPLT up to make a broader impact. But beyond the City of Helena, there isn’t an open space department within Lewis and Clark County to partner with.

A new open space bond would help protect and secure important local landscapes, but what about future maintenance and recreational improvements on our open spaces? What’s needed, Mary and the board say, is creation of a cross-jurisdictional regional park district. A park district would require the support of Lewis and Clark and Jefferson county commissioners and voter approval. Potentially, they could be included on the same ballot.

“The current modus operandi that our conservation and recreation resources are managed are unsustainable,” Mary says. The county does not have an open lands or recreation department. Prickly Pear’s traditional role “was the facilitator, the fund-raiser, but not the long-term public land manager.”

She envisions great efficiency in a multi-county district in which management and maintenance

efforts would not overlap. Several projects – the South Hills complex and the expansive Greenway project south of East Helena, cover both Lewis and Clark and northern Jefferson counties.

If created, a district “would increase the ability to manage and maintain open space, trails, county parkland, donations, projects like Tenmile Creek

Park, Scratchgravels Hills, the Spokane and McMaster Hills, the Greenway all more uniformly, strategically, and in the most cost-effective way for taxpayers.” Without a park district, demand will continue to go up as will costs to the

taxpayers siloed in a project-by-project approach or even eventually the formation of a duplicate open space program at the county.

Earning public support for the regional park district and a bond issue is a formidable task but not one Prickly Pear would try to tackle alone. The land trust has begun reaching out to land trust and conservation partners locally and nationally, some who have been responsible for multi-million efforts in Minnesota, the Alabama gulf and Colorado.

“As with anything Prickly Pear Land Trust does, we are reaching out to partners and starting the process of seeking input and understanding what the community would like and will support.”

Projects like this show how much the open space bond has given back to the taxpayers who have been so instrumental in supporting these measures.



John Smith

BOND GIVING BACK:
SOUTH HILLS TRAILS



Eliza Wiley

BOND GIVING BACK:
TENMILE CREEK PARK



Kevin League

BOND GIVING BACK:
POTTER RANCH EASEMENT

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE:
A regional park district would increase the ability to manage and maintain projects like Tenmile Creek Park, Scratchgravels Hills, the Spokane and McMaster Hills, and the EAST HELENA GREENWAY.

Eliza Wiley

GROWING THE NEXT GENERATION

TEACHERS OF STUDENTS at Helena’s Project for Alternative Learning (PAL) need creative ways to engage their students. Kids in this program are looking for different ways to learn, “We try to do things, to get them out of the building. To be in the field,” explains Ryan Cooney, a PAL teacher. “PPLT has provided those opportunities.”

At the end of the last school year Ryan contacted PPLT’s Blake Sexton, who’d been working with the PAL kids for a couple of years. PAL teachers had some ideas for a curriculum based on outdoor learning that they bounced off Blake. “We gave him a general idea,” recalls Ryan. Then, “he took it on himself to create a curriculum. It was fantastic!”

Not only did Blake design the course of study, but he made it happen, contacting guest speakers, arranging site access and designing course content. He pretty much “established himself as a PAL teacher,” Ryan says with no small measure of admiration and appreciation. “It was a blast.”

The four weeks of learning, which ultimately included 2,000 hours spread among the entire PAL student body,

“Now the students know that [PPLT] is enhancing the outdoor opportunities in their community.”

—Ryan Cooney, PAL teacher

included everything from learning about renewable energy systems, indigenous culture, climate science, pollinators, soil health, watershed perspectives, and the wildlife and plants of Montana. They visited Montana Wild to learn about raptors, to the Sevenmile restoration project for lessons on aquatic invasive species and grazing and soil health and

to Toston Dam for a first-hand look at hydroelectric generation. Amanda and Charles Walking Child, volunteers involved with Helena Indian Alliance, offered their time to share background information about indigenous culture and provide perspective on the rich, modern and historic culture of the many tribes in the area. Joseph Pichardo, Indian Education for All tutor with Capital High School, led a lesson on the cultural significance of the traditional Chippewa game, Doubleball, a precursor to lacrosse. To end the four-week program, students joined together to help weed and reseed the pollinator habitat at Tenmile Creek Park. “They really enjoyed it,” says Blake, of their weed-pulling efforts. The goal of this was to culminate the curriculum by



PAL students get a lesson on the cultural significance of the traditional Chippewa game Doubleball, a precursor to lacrosse.

engaging the students with “solutions for those challenges” they’d been introduced to during the lessons, i.e actively helping to prep a grassland restoration site.

The field trips tied nicely to the PAL classroom instruction, be it government studies, science or even English, according to Ryan. Acquainting the students with PPLT is invaluable, Ryan says. “Now they know that this is a local organization that they can go to” and that it’s enhancing the outdoor opportunities in their community.

“We’re excited to see where this takes us.” His PAL students were so impressed by PPLT that he suspects there are future PPLT volunteers and perhaps even staffers among them. Ryan can’t say enough about the PPLT staff and culture.

“Their hearts, minds and souls are vested in fostering the next generation of public lands awareness.” And how did Blake fair with the youngsters? The last day, as the bus pulled away, recalls Ryan, the kids were screaming their good-byes to him.

CIRCLE OF TRUST

THERE ARE SOME NEW, smiling faces on the Prickly Pear Land Trust’s staff. And behind those smiles there’s thoughtfulness, expertise and passion that’s very much in keeping with the staff veterans. “For the first time since the pandemic hit we are fully staffed,” says Executive Director Mary Hollow, her voice reflecting a sense of relief. Conversations with the three recent hires suggest her team building is right on track.

AshLy Tubbs,
Outreach Manager

Yes, that’s an uppercase “L.” “My mom loved the name Ashley but it’s popular so she wanted to make my name a little different,” the new outreach manager says. And “a little different” is how she’s embracing her new job.

AshLy comes from a background in social work, the discipline in which she earned her degree from the University of Montana. For five years she held several positions in the administration of Gov. Steve Bullock, most recently managing The Equal Pay for Equal Work Task Force.

How do these credentials apply to her contribution to the land trust’s communication, public relations, and events? “It’s about relationship building,” she says. “Where you advocate for people who don’t have a voice as far as land and open space, there’s a lot of social justice that goes into that. Part of the movement in the outdoors world is to shed a light on diversity and inclusion.”

AshLy and her husband Riley, who is an owner of Ten Mile Creek Brewery, have two young children. As a fifth-generation Montanan, she feels “a duty that I inherited this place [Montana] and it is my responsibility to be a steward.” She intends for her children to be similar beneficiaries. “My world revolves around them. In a way, I’m taking care of them by taking care of the environment.”

Becca Dudek,
Associate Development Director

Becca’s parents are originally from Montana and she holds fond memories of visiting her grandparents who still live here in Helena. Becca, and her husband Ben, couldn’t wait to flee the East Coast where she’d grown up and was educated.

“Coming out here I was humbled by the trail system,” she recalls. It didn’t take long for the couple to pursue new opportunities and they looked no further than Helena where she took at job fundraising for Shodair Children’s Hospital foundation. Ben is a middle school science teacher and coaches the Helena High girls’ basketball team. They have a four-year-old daughter.

Her introduction to Prickly Pear came as a volunteer for the annual Don’t Fence Me In events and the block parties. “[Prickly Pear] seemed like such a wonderful culture, a wonderful mission. So when I saw the opportunity, I jumped at it.” Becca will focus on all fundraising, specifically growing the grant program, corporate partnerships and membership. Community reception to her initial efforts has been heartening.

“Everyone seems so happy and thankful that an organization like Prickly Pear is in Helena. It made those calls really easy. It’s been a testament to Mary (Hollow) and the whole team. Everyone before me has laid the groundwork ... I’m very grateful to be on this team, to be part of this organization!”

Kevin League,
Land Projects Manager

Opportunities in the world of conservation easements and land acquisitions have kept PPLT staffers Andrea Silverman and Travis Vincent hopping, to say the least. It was time to strengthen the team. Enter Kevin League who joins Prickly



Kevin League

Left to right: Kevin, AshLy, and Becca at Tenmile Creek Park

Pear as a part-time lands project manager. He’s no novice in the field. For the past 7.5 years Kevin managed the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Conservation Easement Stewardship program, which has one of the largest conservation easement portfolios in the country. Before that, he worked for eight years for land trusts in Colorado.

Kevin describes himself as being among the many Americans who reconsidered their working lives during the pandemic. His passion for landscape photography has been a growing hobby that turned into a business. That business, he happily reports, is booming.

And his contributions to Prickly Pear will combine his long-time career as a conservation professional with his “hobby turned business.” Specifically, he’ll focus on continuing the land trust’s invaluable work with the Army Compatible Use Buffer program which has made possible the land acquisitions of Sevenmile and Tenmile creeks property as well as additions to the Mount Helena Complex. He’ll also be assisting Mary Hollow and Nate Kopp in efforts to successfully pass a Lewis and County open space bond issue.

TRAIL MIX

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

David Allen & Jessie Wiles
Kirk Astroth
Joyce Bateman
Brad Borst & Jill Forseth
Carlo & Marietta Canty
Ben Carreon
Patti Marshall
Emily & Evan Parker
Sue Ann & Jim Roberts
Rebecca Rohrer
Bruce Whittenberg
Tom Woolf

SAVE THESE DATES!

Giving Tuesday

Tuesday, November 30, 2021

Don't Fence Me In

Saturday, May 7, 2022

Walking Mall Block Party

Thursday,
July 21, 2022

COMING SOON: HOLIDAY MERCHANDISE SHOP

Apparel for all ages
Gear for 4-legged friends
Trail maps & more



TRAIL UPDATES

It's been a productive year for improvements and expansion of the Helena area's vaunted and beloved trail system. Trail use continues to grow and PPLT is responding to that demand. Here's a summary:

LeGrande Trails

When the Prickly Pear Land Trust acquired the 90-acre parcel on the northwest side of Mount Helena above LeGrande Cannon in 2019 with it came a mish-mash of trails. After acquiring the parcel, PPLT subsequently donated it to the city of Helena. As part of PPLT's 2021 trails contract with the city, the land trust's staff was directed to develop a designated trail system plan for the property. After mapping social trails, studying aerial photos and physically walking every existing trail, PPLT's assessment produced three parts: recommended closures and re-routes, new proposed trails, and trail signs and names.

The existing trails, about four miles of them, are primarily historic jeep, motorcycle and game trails, some which connect to trails within the Helena open lands system. None were intentionally designed and some cross private property boundaries.

Nate Kopp, PPLT's trails director, sees tremendous opportunities. The new trails proposal, which must be approved by the city, includes options that will be more accessible and more family-friendly than many existing South Hills routes. It will include some single-track bike trails of a novice level. The barrier to entry will be minimal and "more folks would be comfortable," he says. PPLT's "portfolio of offerings will target those underserved" within the existing trail network, he says.



VOLUNTEERS ROCK!

The past year has been another one in which devotees of the Prickly Pear Land Trust have put their best feet forward, as well as their hands, backs and hearts. Some 450 volunteers contributed 1,260 hours of work on Forest Service, City of Helena and PPLT lands.

Eddy McClure East

PPLT recently signed an easement with the new landowners of the private property hosting the popular Eddy McClure East access. "It's exciting to secure permanent access," says PPLT trails director Nate Kopp. "Now, the entirety of the trail is secured."

Access on the Montana City end of the trail had been secured with a handshake deal. When the property was sold, the new owner closed access for liability concerns. The new easement resolves those issues and access has been restored. The easement required re-routing of the initial section of the trail. The work was completed by the Montana Conservation Corps and Phat Trak Trail Co. "The easements are in perpetuity," says Nate.

LOOSE ENDS

Progress on trail development in the **Greenway** project 80-acre parcel north of East Helena is awaiting completion of soil remediation. Then comes bird habitat restoration work by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Hopefully, trail work can begin in the spring, says PPLT's Andrea Silverman.

Both the **T.R.** and **Pay Dirt** trails benefitted from major re-routing work this summer that included contributions from the Montana Conservation Corps.

Notice some snappy **trail etiquette signs** during your summer biking or hiking treks? Courtesy of PPLT, they're reminiscent of the old Burma Shave highway signs of years gone by. Always helpful to have trail etiquette reminders.

connecting land
and people

PRICKLY PEAR LAND TRUST

40 W. Lawrence, Suite A
PO Box 892, Helena MT 59624
406-442-0490

STAFF

Mary Hollow
Executive Director

Rachel Rountree
Associate Director

Nate Kopp
Program & Trails Director

Andrea Silverman
Conservation Manager

Kevin League
Lands Project Manager

Travis Vincent
Lands Project Coordinator

Sue McNicol
Office Manager

Blake Sexton
Community Conservation Coordinator

Tim Lawrence
Trails Coordinator

AshLy Tubbs
Outreach Manager

Becca Dudek
Associate Development Director

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

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Pam Bucy
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PRICKLY PEAR
LAND TRUST

40 W. Lawrence, Suite A
PO Box 892
Helena MT 59624

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PRICKLY PEAR
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FALL 2021

SEVENMILE
GRAZING
MANAGEMENT

REGIONAL
PARK DISTRICT
ENVISIONED

GROWING
THE NEXT
GENERATION

Kevin League

