

# **Land Buyer Vows to Preserve ‘Generational Asset’**

**As prized chunk of Northwest Montana timberland changes hands for second time in less than a year, Green Diamond Resource Co. commits to conservation and access**

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Views of the proposed Lost Trail Conservation Project. Courtesy FWP

Late last year, when the Georgia-based investment firm Southern Pine Plantations (SPP) paid \$145 million in exchange for 630,000 acres of Northwest Montana timberland, the exchange raised plenty of eyebrows as the new owners openly discussed the possibility of future sales to private investors.

But SPP also pledged to maintain longstanding access agreements allowing the public to use the lands for hunting, fishing and recreation and to continue negotiating permanent protections — a promise the sporting community took to heart.

That pledge remains in place despite the Nov. 2 announcement that SPP was indeed selling nearly half of its newly acquired acreage to Green Diamond Resource Company, which owns working forest lands in Washington, Oregon, California, and now — following its purchase of 291,000 acres west of Kalispell — Montana.

Like its predecessors at SPP, and before that at Weyerhaeuser Co., officials at Green Diamond said access and conservation would remain top priorities as they engage management agencies and partner with stakeholders.

“We see this as a generational asset,” Green Diamond Resource Company President Douglas Reed stated in a press release, which did not include the monetary terms of the deal. “It is our intent to manage these lands as working forests going forward.”

According to Reed, Green Diamond has a long history of managing forests to maintain and improve productivity while protecting shared values including recreation, clean water, wildlife and carbon.

In an effort to preserve access, Green Diamond will continue enrollment in the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) Block Management program, “to maintain public access for hunting, fishing and other recreational activities.”

Green Diamond will also assume the terms of the Thompson-Fisher River Conservation Easement, much of which is now part of the Green Diamond footprint, and will work with the Trust for Public Land (TPL) toward completion of the ongoing Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Project and the Lost Trail Conservation Area.

“These projects would ensure access to key recreation areas for area residents and visitors while maintaining working forests,” Reed stated.

Finally, Reed said Green Diamond would assume the terms of the Native Fish Habitat Conservation Plan, which provides habitat protection for native fish including bull trout, cutthroat and other species. The company operates under similar conservation agreements on other holdings.

“Agreements such as the Native Fish Habitat Conservation Plan provide for long-term stability to manage forests in concert with protection of habitat for sensitive species,” Reed said.

Southern Pine Plantations President Pat Patton said the sale was contingent on the new owners maintaining the long-term viability of the land as a resource for Montana’s hunters and anglers.

“We are proud to achieve a positive outcome for the people of Montana on such a significant portion of our Montana lands,” Patton said. “We believe Green Diamond will be an excellent long-term steward. We will continue working with The Trust for Public Land with the hope that a majority of our Montana lands might remain working and open to the public forever.”

There are currently two major land deals underway to place more than 230,000 acres of prime hunting and timberland into conservation easements.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is spearheading efforts to place 100,000 acres west of Kalispell into conservation easements, protecting parcels in Flathead and

Lincoln counties from private development in perpetuity while ensuring public access, as well as allowing the property to be sustainably managed for timber production.

Meanwhile, TPL is working to protect an additional 130,000 acres of adjacent land, providing one of the largest conservation opportunities the region has seen in years.

“Green Diamond has been a great partner in conservation through several projects across the U.S., and we look forward to working with the company in northwestern Montana. The conservation component of these lands is critical to ensuring they stay in working forest and remain open to the public,” Dick Dolan, northern Rockies director of TPL, said.

Jim Williams, FWP’s regional supervisor, said the land deal’s inclusion of existing easements and programs, as well as Green Diamond’s pledge to continue working to expand protections through new easements and acquisitions, is welcome news to hunters and anglers.

“We’re excited to welcome Green Diamond Resource Company to Montana,” Williams said. “We look forward to working together and maintaining a strong cooperative relationship with corporate landowners like Green Diamond that are interested in FWP’s Block Management Program and providing public hunting access. We are also encouraged by Green Diamond’s past commitments to natural resource management and conservation.”

Ben Long, a local hunter and conservationist, cheered the owner’s support for ongoing conservation negotiations and access agreements, but said the rapid succession of land sales should serve as a reminder that Montana’s outdoor heritage remains vulnerable.

“The deal shows how much of our traditional freedoms and outdoor access exist at the whim of boardrooms far from Montana,” Long said. “I’m happy to see the language from Green Diamond voicing support for easement negotiations and access programs. Locals need to speak together in support of these agreements and make sure the promises aren’t empty.”

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