

SWAN CONSERVATION FOREST STUDY (swanforestinitiative.org)

The Lake County Conservation District (LCCD) is one of 58 districts in Montana. Montana's 1937 legislature established the law required to allow districts to organize as a subdivision of State government. Districts are overseen by a locally elected (5) and sometimes appointed (2) Board of Supervisors to help address natural resource concerns in the district. Conservation District's main responsibility is focused on conserving Montana's soil and water resources and encouraging landowners to use wise practices when managing all of Montana's natural resources. The LCCD began studying the feasibility of establishing a Conservation Forest with the boundaries of the district and in the Swan valley about 4 years ago.

The LCCD study process has been transparent and inclusive. Four workshops were held in 2014 to explain the study's focus and to allow LCCD district residents to express their views. A web site was established in early 2014 enabling LCCD to post the results of each step of the study. Additionally, the following stakeholders receive periodic updates on the study's results and progress: United States Forest Service (USFS), Montana's Department of Natural Resources (DNRC), Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), local State legislators, Governor's office, Congressional staffers, Lake County Commissioners, local city councils and residents of the Swan valley living in the district.

The Conservation Forest model being studied includes the following key points:

- An approximately 60,000 acre forest will be established on the Flathead National Forest. All lands would be within the LCCD boundaries and Lake County.
- The Conservation Forest will be managed in trust by Montana's Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). The beneficiary of the trust is the LCCD.
- The laws, rules and regulations governing the management of Montana's State forest will be used by DNRC to manage the Conservation Forest.
- All lands included in the Conservation Forest will continue to be owned by the United States Government. The people of the United States will continue to have the right to all lawful uses of these forest lands.

- The Conservation Forest will revert to United States management 100 years after Congress approves establishment of the Conservation Forest.
- All net revenues generated from proactively managing the Conservation Forest will be invested in conservation work in Lake County. The conservation work can occur on federal lands, State of Montana lands, private lands and on tribal lands. Most net revenues will most likely be invested in the Swan valley for a few decades.

As of November, 2016 the following steps have been completed in the Study (All results are posted on the web page).

- Idea Vetting - (discussion with Flathead National Forest about conservation concerns, then a 12 month period of reflection, which resulted in converting a conservation concern into a conservation opportunity).
- Information Gathering – LCCD District residents concerns and opinions - (described previously).
- Development of a Forest Information Tool – to aid in understanding of forest dynamics – (5 videos developed by a Forest Ecologist).
- Analyzing Economic Feasibility – (Mason, Bruce & Girard).
- Legal analysis – Don McIntyre and Maresa Jenson

NEXT STEP:

Politics – This stage of the study will prove to be the most difficult. Over the next three to six months, LCCD residents, especially those with property in the Swan Valley, will be asked their opinion. LCCD wants to know if Montana’s congressional delegation should be asked to begin working on federal legislation that would create a Conservation Forest in the Swan Valley. LCCD wants to know if Montana’s governor and legislature should begin working on State legislation that would support the establishment of a Conservation Forest. Conversely, LCCD wants to know if the study should be suspended and the idea of a Conservation Forest put to bed.