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Travelers for Open Land Announces Grants To Conservation Ag Lands and Wildlife Habitat

Travelers for Open Land, a statewide private land conservation partnership in Montana created in 2009, is awarding three grants totaling \$15,000 to land trusts to help protect important agricultural lands and wildlife habitat in the Bitterroot Valley, along the Flathead River and in the Swan Valley.

Travelers for Open Land, a partnership among the Montana Lodging and Hospitality Association, Montana Association of Land Trusts, the Montana Community Foundation, other tourist-related businesses and the traveling public, is the only statewide program of its type in the country. The program seeks donations from travelers in Montana, which are collected by businesses participating in the program and used to fund competitive grants among land trusts for land conservation projects. In 2010, Travelers for Open Land raised \$15,000 and on Feb. 3, 2011 awarded three \$5,000 grants to The Vital Ground Foundation in Missoula, Flathead Land Trust in Kalispell and the Bitter Root Land Trust in Hamilton.

“We’re pleased that Travelers for Open Land can help fund three excellent examples of projects that demonstrate the benefits of Montana land conservation,” said Mike Scholz, a leader of Travelers for Open Land, owner of Buck’s T-4 Lodge in Big Sky and a Montana Lodging and Hospitality Association board member. “These projects and grant awards will help protect valuable and productive ranchland in the Bitter Root Valley, conserve important grizzly bear habitat in the Swan Valley and preserve prime farmland and migratory bird habitat along the banks of the Flathead River.”

“The tourism and hospitality industry is a major contributor to Montana’s economy and Travelers for Open Land is a real benefit to our industry,” said Stuart Doggett, executive director of the Montana Lodging and Hospitality Association. “Survey after survey of residents and nonresidents alike consistently emphasize that protecting open land is good business. Travelers for Open Land is a real asset to our economy and our landscape.”

Three grants, each for \$5,000, will help fund permanent conservation easements and are being awarded to:

Flathead Land Trust in Kalispell, to protect 192 acres of prime agricultural lands on a family farm along the banks of the Flathead River north of Flathead Lake. The project will help protect water quality in the Flathead River system and Flathead Lake, conserve critical habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife, and keep prime farmland in production. The project is part of the River to Lake Initiative ongoing in the Flathead and project partners include the American Bird Conservancy, Montana FWP and the Flathead Lakers.

The Vital Ground Foundation in Missoula, for the Windfall Creek II Conservation Easement, located in the Swan Valley southwest of Condon. Two adjoining parcels totaling 80 acres will be permanently conserved, protecting prime grizzly bear habitat within the Northern Continental Divide grizzly bear recovery ecosystem. In addition to grizzly bear habitat and open lands the conservation easement will protect wetlands and riparian areas on the property.

Bitter Root Land Trust in Hamilton, to help conserve 353 acres of historic ranchland known as Severson's Flying E Ranch, located in the Burnt Fork drainage of the Bitterroot Valley. The Flying E Ranch has been in the Severson family for more than a century and is in one of the Bitterroot's most important agricultural areas. The Burnt Fork drainage was the site of Montana's first permanently settled agricultural community, which makes the area historically significant as well. The area has retained its rural and agricultural character, and the project enjoys broad support within the area.

"These are exactly the kind of open land projects we had in mind when we created Travelers for Open Land in 2009," said Lucy Weeder, manager of Best Western Grant Creek Inn in Missoula and president of Montana Lodging and Hospitality Association board of directors. "We created the program because we thought it was important to give people a chance to protect what they value...Montana's open lands. The response from participating businesses, travelers and land trusts has been encouraging."

When visitors stay or shop at a business property participating in Travelers for Open Land, they're asked to make a small donation in support of the program. Over 100 properties participate in the program, which includes hotels, dude ranches, bed and breakfasts, outfitters with lodging, fly fishing shops, rafting companies and other tourism-related properties and businesses. The funds are collected and sent to the Montana Community Foundation, the fiscal officer for the program. The funds are then awarded as grants to land trusts through a competitive grant program.

During 2009 the Travelers for Open Land program awarded \$10,000 in grants. Travelers for Open Land is off to a great start in 2011, thanks in large part to a \$20,000 contribution from The Blake, Kymberly and Charles Rapier Charitable Trust in early February.

In addition, Travelers for Open Land is working on an April 9-10 event named Skiers for Open Land at Big Sky. Skiers for Open Land will feature a coupon for reduced lift tickets, and for each coupon used during the event Big Sky Resort will make a \$5 donation to Travelers for Open Land.

Over 100 business properties in Montana are participating in the Travelers for Open Land program. For more information about Travelers for Open Land, visit the program's website at <http://www.travelersforopenland.org/>.

A FUND TO CONSERVE MONTANA'S NATURAL HORIZONS