

OUTDOORS

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Deal expands Smith Lake Wildlife Area

By JIM MANN
The Daily Inter Lake

The Flathead Land Trust's latest conservation project may be one of its most unusual — a serendipitous acquisition of a property in the Kila area that once was destined to be a luxury residential development with a private airstrip.

The 305-acre parcel adjacent to the Smith Lake Waterfowl Production Area was slated to be developed, but the economic downturn put the subdivision on hold and the property ended up with Provident Bank.

"This project was brought to us by a neighboring landowner. He knew of a piece of property by Kila that was in

bank repossession. He was concerned about what would happen to it," said Marilyn Wood, executive director of Flathead Land Trust.

The landowner, Pete Wade, was interested in expanding his farming operation and proposed doing a combination conservation/agriculture project.

"We didn't have enough money to buy the whole thing outright and Mr. Wade didn't have enough to do the whole thing outright," Wood said, adding that negotiations were successful, with the bank also working hard to make the acquisition happen.

The parcel includes 189 acres of wetlands that will be transferred in October to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as

an addition to the Smith Lake Wildlife Production Area.

A 100-acre portion of the property that has been in agricultural use will continue to be farmed by Wade.

The wetlands, farm fields and riparian habitat along Truman Creek are considered vital to the ecological integrity of Ashley Creek, Smith Lake and the greater Flathead watershed. An additional benefit is the protection of scenic views in the Kila and Smith Lake area.

"This project really benefits the local community in so many ways," Wood said.

"It significantly increases the wetlands habitat of the Smith Lake Wildlife Production Area, helps protect water quality all

the way down to the Flathead River, keeps another parcel of agricultural land in local food production and traditional use, and preserves the beautiful scenic views we all enjoy. It's just an amazing project."

It is the land trust's 50th conservation project since the organization was founded in 1985.

To mark the milestone, the trust will hold a celebration Sept. 26 at the Creston Picnic Pavilion near the Creston Fish Hatchery from 4:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. The public is invited to enjoy hay rides, a bonfire, snacks and raffle prizes.

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