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Travelers for Open Land Awards Over \$88,000 in Grant Funds To Land Trusts in Missoula, Helena, Bozeman, Kalispell and Hamilton

Travelers for Open Land, a collaborative program that allows Montana visitors and residents to make voluntary contributions to conserve open land, enjoyed its best year ever in 2012 and recently awarded \$88,365 to fund six Montana private land conservation projects.

Travelers for Open Land was launched in 2009 and since then has awarded \$148,365 to help fund 20 land conservation projects throughout Montana. TFOL is a cooperative program and among the program supporters are the Montana Lodging and Hospitality Association, Montana Association of Land Trusts, Montana Community Foundation, the Montana Office of Tourism, other tourist-related and outdoor recreation businesses and the traveling public.

“We had a very impressive group of grant applications this year, and were pleased to fully fund all six applications,” said Mike Scholz, founder of Travelers for Open Land, owner of Buck’s T-4 Lodge and a hospitality industry leader. “The projects we helped fund showcase excellent examples of Montana land conservation efforts and included wetlands protection, enhanced recreational access opportunities, conservation of historic and traditional working ranches, lakeshore protection at Flathead Lake, wildlife habitat protection and more.”

Here is a brief summary of the six projects approved for funding by the Travelers for Open Land Advisory Committee:

The Nature Conservancy of Helena received \$20,000 to help fund a 580-acre conservation easement project in the Big Hole Valley. The project conserves a working ranch that includes a stream corridor containing arctic grayling.

Prickly Pear Land Trust received \$18,365 to help fund a conservation easement and additional recreational access as part of the 266-acre Aspen Trails proposal in the North Helena Valley. The project enjoys significant local support, protects a wetland area and has several partners cooperating on the project.

Five Valleys Land Trust in Missoula will receive \$15,000 to help fund a 2,278-acre conservation easement in the Mission Valley on the Flathead Indian Reservation. The project conserves an important wildlife corridor, valuable soils and a traditional working ranch.

Gallatin Valley Land Trust in Bozeman will receive \$15,000 to help fund a hiking trail and conservation easement project near Big Sky. The project features a large number of private and public partners and would expand outdoor recreational opportunities in Big Sky.

The Bitter Root Land Trust in Hamilton will receive \$10,000 to help fund a conservation easement on a historic 1,080-acre ranch in the Bitterroot Valley. The project protects existing recreational access, enjoys local support and has a connection to noted Montana artist Charlie Russell.

Flathead Land Trust in Kalispell will receive a \$10,000 grant to help fund a 190-acre conservation easement on the North Shore of Flathead Lake. The project features protection of wetlands and waterfowl habitat and is part of the Flathead's River to Lake Initiative.

“Travelers for Open Land has come a long way since we launched the program in 2009,” said Stuart Doggett of the Montana Lodging and Hospitality Association. “The Montana tourism industry had a very good year in 2012 and one of the key goals of the TFOL program is to recognize the value of open lands to the Montana tourism industry and also recognize the value of the tourism industry to Montana’s economy.”

“Open land is an economic asset to Montana, and Travelers for Open Land is starting to make some meaningful contributions to our landscape, our economy and quality of life,” said Glenn Marx of the Montana Association of Land Trusts.

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 30 business properties collected more than \$100,000 and contributed those as donations in 2012. These funds came from hotels, dude ranches, bed and breakfasts, outfitters with lodging, fly fishing shops, rafting companies and other tourism-related properties and businesses as well as a generous donation from the Rapier Family Foundation of Big Sky. The funds are awarded as grants to land trusts through a competitive grant program.

For more information about Travelers for Open Land, visit the program’s website at <http://www.travelersforopenland.org/>.