



May 18, 2017

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Pelah Hoyt, Lands Director, 406-549-0755
pelah@fvlt.org

Farm Bill Conservation Program Awards to Benefit Agriculture in Missoula County

Efforts to protect agriculture throughout Missoula County could take a giant leap forward this year thanks to two Farm Bill conservation program awards. On behalf of two local families, Five Valleys Land Trust applied for and received \$734,000 of funding to permanently protect 692 acres of important agricultural soils. The funding will help the families acquire land to improve the sustainability of their agricultural businesses while ensuring that the land remains available for agricultural uses. The properties are located in lower Miller Creek near the Bitterroot River, and in Potomac. Both agricultural properties adjoin other protected areas that are significant for agriculture, wildlife, or riparian area conservation.

Five Valleys will seek support from The City of Missoula's and Missoula County's open space bond funds to complement the awarded Farm Bill funds.

"The opportunity for us to preserve agricultural land right next to Missoula, which will in turn provide local food for the community, is only possible due to these funding sources," said Wendy Morris of Oxbow Cattle Company. "This program will allow us to expand and solidify our ranching operation, preserve this land from development, and provide open space for the deer, elk and all other wildlife in perpetuity. We feel very honored to have this opportunity and do not take it lightly."

Wendy and her husband, Bart Morris, sell their beef in local grocery stores and have been expanding their ranch and cattle business in recent years. The ranch is located in lower Miller Creek, within the Missoula urban area where development pressure is increasingly threatening agricultural soils. The City and County have jointly invested in conservation projects on the edge of the City of Missoula in recent years, especially where important soils exist. The Department of Agriculture's Natural

Resources Conservation Services (NRCS) recognizes Oxbow Cattle Company's 168 acre operation as having 155 acres of important farm soils, or those worthy of public investment through the Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) program in the 2014 Farm Bill.

The 2014 Farm Bill is set to expire in 2018, and the City of Missoula's portion of the 2006 open space bond is almost entirely spent.

The awarded ALE program funding will assist with protecting an additional 569 acre property in the Potomac area, which will include 537 acres of formally designated important soils.

According to Elizabeth Erickson, The City of Missoula's Open Space Acquisitions Attorney, "The City's 2006 Open Space Plan stated 'while Missoula's recent growth has benefitted the community in many ways, the rapid rate of growth has also prompted much discussion and concern among City and County residents about the loss of open space.' The concerns still exist today, and particularly with regard to the loss of agricultural land and soils. The Farm Bill conservation program awards directly address this need in Missoula."

"Missoula County remains committed to voluntary agricultural land conservation close to our urban areas and in our rural communities and we believe in leveraging our effort and money toward that end," said Missoula County Commissioner Jean Curtiss. "The Farm Bill's ALE program has proven to be a great way to do that in the past and we're excited to see momentum on this effort continue."

Five Valleys will begin its formal application process for open space bond funds from the City and County later this summer. If successful, the total funds from the bond programs will contribute about 30% the overall project cost. Farm Bill funding and landowner donations will provide 70% of costs.

"Farmers, ranchers, and the community at large all appreciate that agriculture remains a fundamental part of our economy and our way of life in western Montana," said Five Valleys Land Trust Executive Director, Grant Kier. "Farm Bill programs like ALE are a perfect fit for a community like ours where working on these issues locally and collaboratively makes a positive impact for our whole country."

###