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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT GLENN MARX 406-490-1659

New Program Announces Grants to Protect Open Lands

Directors of a new program created in 2009 awarded four Montana land trusts a total of \$10,000 on Jan. 13 to help protect open lands, improve wildlife habitat, provide recreational access and protect riparian areas in places like Valley County, on the Flathead River, along Rock Creek east of Missoula and on ranchland near the lower slopes of the Bridger Mountains.

Travelers for Open Land, launched in April 2009, is a partnership among the Montana Innkeepers Association, Montana Association of Land Trusts, the Montana Community Foundation, Montana Office of Tourism and other tourist-related businesses. 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 2009, Travelers for Open Land raised \$10,000, and four \$2,500 grants were awarded through the program.

“We had outstanding grant applications that truly demonstrate the quality and diversity of land trust conservation projects across the state,” said Mike Scholz, owner of Buck’s T-4 Lodge and founder of the Travelers program. “Funds donated by Montana travelers and others are protecting the reasons we live here and why most people travel to Montana – to experience the open lands, view wildlife and recreate on private and public lands.”

“These grant awards are impressive accomplishments, considering we’re talking about a new program that was created in a down economy and depends on small donations,” said Stuart Doggett, executive director of the Montana Innkeepers Association. “Travelers has a ways to go to reach its potential, but the grants are proof the program’s off to a great start.”

The four grant awards, each for \$2,500, are received by:

* Gallatin Valley Land Trust in Bozeman, for the 400-acre Half Circle Ranch project. The Half Circle Ranch conservation easement will protect a historical ranch that neighbors the Gallatin National Forest and will create a permanent trail across private land into the national forest. The Half Circle Ranch project has been approved for Gallatin County Open Land program funds, and is supported by a wide variety of conservation groups, state and federal agencies and others.

* The Nature Conservancy of Montana, for the 12,192-acre Cornwell Ranch project in northeastern Montana’s Valley County. The Cornwell conservation easement will help protect habitat for a variety of grassland birds in Montana, many of which have been designated highly imperiled or species of concern. The ranch currently provides recreational access through the Block Management Program and the project protects agriculture lands identified as Priority One for habitat protection by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

* Five Valleys Land Trust of Missoula, for the 157-acre Madsen-Rock Creek project. The Madsen-Rock Creek conservation easement will help protect a biologically rich Blue Ribbon trout stream less than one mile upstream from Rock Creek’s confluence with the Clark Fork River. The 157-acre parcel is the land

trust's highest priority for conservation on the lower Rock Creek and key partners in the project include Trout Unlimited, the Upper Clark Fork Restoration Program and the Missoula County Open Lands program.

* Flathead Land Trust in Kalispell, for the 837-acre Loudon Family Farm/Church Slough project. The Loudon Family Farm/Church Slough project is part of the Flathead River to Lake Initiative, a comprehensive effort to protect critical lands along the main stem of the Flathead River and the north shore of Flathead Lake. The Loudon Family Farm/Church Slough project will help protect water quality, preserve critical habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife, protect a productive family farm and enhance an already popular fishing, birding and recreational area.

“The grants demonstrate the potential importance of the Travelers program, and also highlight the need for increased donations through the program,” said Kris Hauck, owner of the El Western Cabins & Lodges in Ennis. “People come to Montana and come to Ennis to enjoy the open lands, and it’s the open lands that will keep bringing people back. Travelers for Open Land is good for the landscape and it’s also good for business.”

“The great thing about Travelers for Open Land is that it gives people an opportunity to help protect what makes Montana such a great place to live in and visit,” said Scholz. “It’s the only statewide program of its type in the nation, it’s completely voluntary and the donations can add up to have a tremendously positive impact.”

When visitors stay at a property participating in Travelers for Open Land, they are asked to make a small \$1 or \$2 donation in support of the program. Member properties for the voluntary program include 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 received a \$2,000 contribution from the MacKenzie River Pizza Company as part of MacKenzie River’s High Plains promotion, which sought to promote tourism opportunities in eastern Montana.

Over 120 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/>.