



The Falls Creek Project



Proposal Questions

Mission/History Of Organization

The Vital Ground Foundation advances grizzly bear recovery and provides lasting large landscape conservation by permanently protecting and connecting the most important habitat in the Northern Rocky Mountains. Through conservation easements, land acquisitions and partnerships with local communities, Vital Ground connects the region's wild strongholds and provides

JEDI Efforts and Impact

Vital Ground works to address justice, equity, diversity and inclusion (JEDI) by working to restore Indigenous rights and access to land in the Northern Rockies. We participate in the Heart of the Rockies' Equity Collective, have directly returned land to the Blackfeet Nation, financially supported efforts to restore bison, pursued cultural use agreements with the Salish and Kootenai tribes, and

the social habitat that promotes wildlife movement across the landscape. To date, Vital Ground has helped to protect and enhance more than 1 million acres, including the organization's direct purchase of 29 conservation easements and 33 properties on more than 10,000 acres. Our work helps restore one of the richest wildlife communities in North America and last remaining grizzly bear habitat in the Lower 48 states.

collaborated with the Kalispel Tribe and Kootenai Tribe of Idaho on restoration. Our conservation easements include protection of culturally sensitive areas and artifacts. Furthermore, we work with tribal members to ensure that easement terms provide the opportunity to host cultural and spiritual ceremonies and practice traditional land uses.

Internally, our organizational philosophy, practices and procedures embrace JEDI and we have strong diversity on our staff and Board.

Final Success

The Falls Creek Project permanently protects 160 acres of grizzly bear habitat on the edge of the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness, supporting regional landscape connectivity and ensuring public access to biking and cross-country ski trails by transferring private property ownership to the U.S. Forest Service.

Location Details

The Northern Rockies region of Montana, Idaho and Wyoming contains one of the richest wildlife communities in North America, including the last strongholds of grizzly bears in the Lower 48 states. The region includes the iconic Glacier and Yellowstone national parks and several million acres of designated wilderness and roadless areas. Wide-ranging wildlife like grizzly bears and wolves need to be able to move between secure areas to persist and adapt to climate and demographic changes. Wildlife corridors across private lands are essential for the habitat connectivity these species require.

The Falls Creek property, currently privately owned, is located in the Bull River Valley of northwestern Montana. The valley, with its highway and residential development, creates a barrier between the Cabinet and West Cabinet Mountains within the Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Area. The Falls Creek property is located adjacent to the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness on one side and Savage Lake on the other. The acquisition of this parcel will create a buffer to the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness, preventing incompatible development adjacent to the wilderness boundary and preserving the integrity of the land. Its protection will help facilitate wildlife movement across the valley and between the two mountain ranges. Grizzly bears are frequently documented on and near the property. More than 60 wildlife biologists participating in Vital Ground's Conservation Assessment identified the project area as a connectivity priority for the struggling Cabinet-Yaak grizzly population.

Beyond grizzlies, the Falls Creek property provides habitat for other rare and federally-listed species such as Westslope cutthroat trout, wolves, wolverine, the Townsend's Big Eared Bat, and the Western Toad. In addition to protecting high-quality wildlife habitat, the project also protects the area's rural and scenic character and water quality and provides climate resilience and public recreational opportunities.

Biodiversity in Project Area

Vital Ground is partnering with the U.S. Forest Service to purchase the Falls Creek property because of its regional importance for landscape connectivity, biodiversity and climate resilience.

The Falls Creek property is located in Montana's Bull River Valley. The valley is comprised of rich grizzly bear habitat within the Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Area. The property is frequented in the spring and fall by grizzly bears. Biologists support this project because it will permanently protect private land on the valley floor from development, which will improve habitat connectivity within the Cabinet-Yaak recovery area and between the major ecosystems in the Northern Rockies. The purchase prohibits future subdivision and residential development and thus eliminates a major source of bear-human conflicts. Grizzly bear populations in the Cabinet-Yaak recovery area contain roughly 60 bears, far lower than other recovery areas such as the Northern Continental Divide and Greater Yellowstone ecosystems, each with around 1,000 bears.

Grizzly bears serve as a conservation umbrella species. Protecting their habitat conserves biodiversity by protecting land for other species to thrive. In addition to grizzly bears, the Falls Creek property provides habitat for many other rare species. Protecting stream banks and keeping riparian zones connected to uplands will allow western toads to have unimpeded access to spawning and rearing zones. The highly productive plant communities and resiliency offered by riparian areas are utilized by numerous avian species, including bald eagles, and provide valuable nutrient-rich vegetation for big game species, such as deer, elk, and moose. Other large carnivores such as gray wolves, wolverines, and bobcats also frequent the property.

Geographic areas with strong habitat connectivity provide climate resilience, allowing wildlife to adapt to landscape changes and move to higher elevations or more northern habitats. Headwater streams are especially vulnerable to climate change and shifting land management practices. Forest Service ownership would protect and enhance

Expected Economic & Recreational Impact

The property includes the lower portion of Falls Creek Falls, the highest waterfall in the Cabinet Mountains and the highest on private property in Montana. The U.S. Forest Service hopes to secure public access through a Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) purchase in partnership with Vital Ground.

The Falls Creek property provides new opportunities for outdoor recreational access and trail use. The property has a well-established trail system, developed by the private landowners at their own cost, and is easily accessed by the nearby community of Troy. The lower falls and a portion of the upper falls are scenic destinations located on the property, which also features the third-largest grand fir tree in the state. The property will provide 160 acres of public access to recreational non-motorized activities including fishing, birding, horseback riding, mountain biking, hiking and camping along with winter activities including cross-country skiing and snowshoeing.

The project accomplishes goals in the Troy Area "Mountain to Town" Outdoor Recreation Plan, which creates a roadmap for how to integrate outdoor recreation into Troy's community and economic vitality, quality of life, and health and wellness. The plan identifies the outdoor recreation experiences that will position Troy as a desirable place to live, work, and play. The Falls Creek property, when acquired, will provide front- country recreational assets available to people of all ages and abilities and contribute to the vision in Troy's recreation plan by expanding cross country skiing and biking opportunities, contributing to a plan to connect three waterfalls in one loop trail, and providing access to the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness. The project helps Troy transition from a community based on resource extraction to a recreation destination.

The parcel creates new non-motorized access into the wilderness area. Spanning 94,272 acres, the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness provides visitors with self-challenge, spiritual renewal, solitude, alpine scenery, and the opportunity to view unique wildlife - grizzly bears, mountain goats, wolverines, Canadian lynx, and peregrine falcons to name a few - as well as native trout fishing and abundant summer huckleberry picking and wildflower viewing.

processes such as maintaining critical base flow, providing groundwater recharge, protecting riparian-dependent organisms, and maintaining stream shade to regulate stream temperature. The forested and grassy meadow areas of the property will provide carbon sequestration, while climate-resilient springs at lower elevations will also be protected.

**Strategy & Timeline
For Final Success**

Vital Ground is partnering with the U.S. Forest Service to purchase the Falls Creek property using the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). Vital Ground staff have worked with the owners of the property for more than four years. As conversations evolved, the U.S. Forest Service was brought into the conversation following the passage of the Great American Outdoors Act. The partners determined that adding the parcel to Forest Service holdings would be the best way to prevent residential development, protect wildlife habitat, and facilitate public access to the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness and developed network of biking and ski trails. Vital Ground is working with the landowner to establish project boundaries, conduct appraisals and environmental analyses and assess the property for the LWCF program.

The Forest Service's Northern Region submitted the project for LWCF funding as their first priority project. The project was selected for funding at the national level and included in the President's 2025 budget. Vital Ground continues to build political support for the project and raise funding for project costs. We will conduct final appraisals and due diligence in the coming months. We plan to purchase the property by December 31, 2025 and will immediately sell the property to the Forest Service. The U.S. Forest Service has maintained their commitment for purchasing the project through the LWCF program despite political and budget challenges.

Elevate Voices

The Falls Creek project area is located in a Justice40 community, a census area that is low-income and experiences environmental, economic, or health burdens. The Justice40 designation helped attract federal money to purchase the property.

The project has also received town and county support due to its contributions to the Troy Area "Mountain to Town" Recreation Plan, which the city of Troy developed to position Troy as a hub for regional recreation tourism. The plan guides the future use, management and enhancement of motorized and non-motorized recreational facilities in the greater Troy area. The Falls Creek

Key Decision Makers

Because of its benefits to both people and wildlife, the Falls Creek project has already garnered a wide range of state and local support. Montana Senator Steve Daines and former Senator Jon Tester have both endorsed the conservation effort along with the Lincoln County Commission, city council and mayor's office of Troy, the Kootenai Forest Stakeholders Coalition and a broad majority of residents in the Savage Lake area, more than 20 of whom have written letters of support.

Since the successful completion of this project relies on LWCF funding, business community support of passage of a federal budget with strong LWCF funding levels would greatly help our efforts.

Measurable On-Ground Outcomes

In the next year, Vital Ground anticipates the following outcomes:

1. Ownership of the 160-acre Falls Creek property by the U.S. Forest Service.
2. Protection of grizzly bear and wildlife habitat from subdivision and development.
3. Public access to the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness, Falls Creek Falls, and trail system opened and managed by the U.S. Forest Service.
4. Increased regional recreation tourism revenue to the community of Troy



property is located within the "Troy Sub-Area" and when acquired will provide front country recreational assets available to people of all ages and abilities.

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TCA Funding Plan

The property will be purchased using federal LWCF funding. In addition to the purchase price, the project budget includes appraisals, environmental analyses, transaction costs, staff time and travel. There is a current \$78,000 funding need to complete the project. Vital Ground has identified a private funder for a small grant. A \$50,000 grant from The Conservation Alliance will complete the project and facilitate the LWCF purchase by the Forest Service. A \$50,000 grant would have a \$1.6 million federal match, protect grizzly bear habitat, and provide public recreational access to a Wilderness area, waterfall, and well-developed trail system.

How long it took to complete application

12 hrs.

Confidential Items

N/A

Other Relevant Application Details

