

American Prairie Foundation to open office

To manage south PC property

The American Prairie Foundation (APF) which recently purchased a large ranch in Phillips County represents its first land acquisition in Montana and in the US on the way to fulfilling its mission of restoring a native northern prairie ecosystem.

Scott Laird, who spent 14 years working for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, has been hired as field director.

Laird was in Malta Tuesday looking for potential office space.

Laird said Phillips County is one of the few areas left in America where open areas of grass prairie are fundamentally still intact.

It is those same prairies which attracted the Nature Conservancy to purchase the Matador Ranch in Phillips County a few years back.

Laird said that the two organizations are similar in that they are conservation based, but added that APF hopes to have more of an economic influence on the area as it assembles a resource that will be open to the public as a hunting resource and some potential employment.

He said the organization hope to let a fencing contract this summer locally.

Laird said the land will likely be entered into the block management program for hunting purposes and added that hunting access won't be "fee based" but won't be a "free for all."

Laird said the foundation's intent is to maintain ownership of the lands it acquires from willing sellers rather than donating them to federal or state agencies.

Foundation president Sean Gerrity, who works out of Bozeman, said the former owners of the land have a lease and continue to run 260 head of Charolais cattle "and probably will for some time."

The foundation might do some "grass banking" also at some point.

But Gerrity said the ultimate focus of the foundation is wildlife. Eventually the primary grazing animal on the property will be bison.

Gerrity, who grew up in Great Falls, said it used to be easy to get on the land but it is becoming more and more difficult.

“So much of Montana is being bought up and people are being locked out,” he said. “Our whole goal is to keep lands open for the public for a lot of different uses.”

“Our goal is to create access for folks on both our private land and adjacent public land,” he added. “We think for now the best tool we can figure out to use is block management.”

Gerrity said the foundation has plans to meet with local Fish, Wildlife, and Parks agent Mark Sullivan to work out how to get the property into block management.

Laird said the foundation will pay property taxes just like anyone else. A large portion of the foundation’s property in southern Phillips County consists of federal leases which the foundation will maintain.

Gerrity said the foundation paid cash for the property it acquired and does a majority of its banking at a local bank.

“We always have to raise money to pay for any property we might buy now or in the future,” he added.

“When we raise money we ask people to support and endowment,” he added.

The long term goal is for the endowment to support the on-going operation of the properties.

“We don’t have to do things like fee hunting or charge people to visit or enjoy the land, but we still have to work very hard to make money to keep the place operating.”

“Our donors are very interested in historical preservation,” added Gerrity.

He said the foundation hopes to meet with members of the Phillips County Historical Society about plans to restore the Prairie Union School which sits on private ground just north of the area the it acquired.