

We manage our lands to preserve Montana values

Montana is home to abundant and diverse wildlife, clean water with lots of fish, and a slower pace of life that has disappeared from much of America.

Many call it the “Montana lifestyle.”

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks staff work hard to maintain the conditions that allow for this high quality of life. One way is through land management practices that preserve natural areas and “working landscapes”—land actively used for productive agriculture—while also maintaining abundant opportunities for hunters and others who enjoy the outdoors.

To make sure FWP is staying true to its mission, Governor Steve Bullock has asked us to explain what we do with the land we manage and why those properties are under FWP authority. Specifically, he requested that we assess our land holdings and then evaluate the operation and maintenance of FWP properties, management priorities, and good neighbor policies. A summary of what we’re looking at:

FWP holdings comprise 448,000 acres in conservation easements; 18,178 acres in fishing access sites; 365,271 acres in wildlife management areas; and 38,901 acres set aside in state parks.

That total of about 870,000 acres managed by FWP may sound like a lot, but it’s only a small fraction of Montana’s land base—less than 1 percent of 94.1 million acres. Under state law FWP pays taxes equal to the amount that a private landowner would pay. In 2012 the department paid more than \$767,000 in property taxes to Montana counties.

The land under FWP jurisdiction falls into two main categories: owned (fee title) and conservation easements. In both, agreements are struck only with willing sellers, and every property’s value is appraised by licensed land appraisers. We don’t “grab” land from anyone, as some have claimed, and we pay no more than what the property is worth—and often far less, thanks to the generosity and conservation ethics of many sellers.

Fee title land comes in several forms. Some are fishing access sites and some are state parks, but most of the acreage is in wildlife management areas (WMAs). WMAs primarily serve as big game wintering areas, lands on which mule deer, elk, and other species can survive the cold months unbothered by human activities. Another benefit of WMAs is that they reduce the problem of big game competing with livestock for forage on neighboring ranches.

Conservation easements are a totally different way FWP oversees land. Just like fee title sales, conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements made with landowners who wish to sell to

us. In purchasing an easement, FWP typically pays 40 to 45 percent of the property’s value. In return, the landowner agrees to keep the land in traditional agricultural use, employ agricultural practices such as rotational grazing that benefit wildlife, and forego certain development opportunities such as subdividing. In addition, most easements provide public access for hunting.

Landowners still own the property, which in most cases continues to stay in agricultural production. And owners can sell or pass the land on to heirs. But the title carries the agreed-upon terms of the easement, which are negotiated to remain with the land forever.

Why purchase conservation easements rather than use the money to buy wildlife lands that FWP would own? The 1987 Montana Legislature passed a law creating what is today known as Habitat Montana. The legislation directed FWP to protect important habitat that is threatened, primarily by working with private landowners using conservation easements.

Money to fund Habitat Montana comes from hunting license fees—none comes from the state’s “checkbook” (general fund)—

Governor Steve Bullock has asked us to explain what we do with the land we manage and why those properties are under FWP authority.



and amounts to about \$4 million annually. Over the past 35 years Habitat Montana has protected and enhanced several hundred thousand acres of wildlife habitat across the state.

Conservation easements serve purposes as varied as keeping sagebrush communities intact for sage-grouse and connecting wildlife corridors for big game migration. They also provide more wildlife habitat bang for the buck, because they cost less than buying land.

Whether through fee title ownership or conservation easements, land tied to FWP is managed carefully to take into account wildlife stewardship, neighboring landowner concerns, and the public’s desire to hunt and fish. That’s a tall order, but FWP is definitely up to the task.

Preserving Montana’s famous quality of life is far too important for us to do otherwise.

—M. Jeff Hagener, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Director