

# ***FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** October 10, 2013

**Agenda Item:** West Fork Addition to Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Preliminary Approval

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

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## **Background**

FWP proposes to acquire a 320-acre undeveloped, private in-holding within the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area, west of Missoula. The purchase is critical to maintain the integrity of the Fish Creek WMA and to protect the high fish, wildlife, and public access values from imminent subdivision development on two highly developable, un-zoned parcels. The proposed project would permanently protect a significant reach of the West Fork of Fish Creek, facilitate future enhancement activities, and fill a crucial gap in public ownership at a broader landscape level. Once acquired, the parcels would be incorporated into the Fish Creek WMA and managed for the benefit of fish and wildlife.

In 2010, FWP acquired 40,807 acres from The Nature Conservancy to form the Fish Creek WMA (34,573 acres) and Fish Creek State Park (6,235 acres). The West Fork of Fish Creek property is a private in-holding almost completely surrounded by public lands, including FWP's Fish Creek WMA, Department of Natural Resources and Conservation land to the east, and the U.S. Forest Service to the southwest and northwest. The property is west of the Forks Fishing Access Site and the proposed Forks land acquisition parcels (the F&W Commission gave preliminary approval in August 2012 to negotiate the "Forks" purchases, see map image). The property includes an ecologically critical 1.3 miles of the West Fork of Fish Creek, as well as 0.62 miles of Bear Creek, 0.36 miles of Trail Creek, and 0.24 miles of Winkler Gulch. It includes some of the highest white-tailed deer densities in the Fish Creek drainage.

Fish Creek is the most intact tributary watershed in the middle Clark Fork region and supports its largest fluvial bull trout population; Fish Creek typically contains more redds than the rest of the tributaries in this region combined. An intact migratory corridor and rearing area in the main stem is vital to this bull trout population. The proposed parcels contain about 1.3 miles of the West Fork of Fish Creek on a portion of the key migratory corridor and sub-adult rearing area for fluvial bull trout. The fish community along this reach is comprised almost entirely of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, both Tier I species.

## **Public Involvement and Process Results**

Upon Commission endorsement, FWP would proceed with negotiations and seek public involvement in developing a proposal for acquisition.

## **Alternatives and Analysis**

No action is the only practical alternative to this proposal, given the landowner's interest in selling the property. No action would potentially open the riparian complex to developments detrimental to fish and wildlife.

## **Agency Recommendation and Rationale**

FWP asks to explore the potential for acquiring fee title to the West Fork property. This could fulfill the landowner's interest in selling the property and provide a critical connection of fish and wildlife habitat within Fish Creek WMA .

## **Proposed Motion**

I move that the Commission endorse FWP's proposal to negotiate for the purchase of the West Fork Addition to Fish Creek WMA.