

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 10, 2013

Agenda Item: Stellar Creek Conservation Easement Proposal Endorsement

Division: Fish and Wildlife

Action Needed: Preliminary Approval

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

FWP has been approached by a private conservation organization looking into the possible development of a Conservation Easement partnership with FWP on 59,779 deeded acres of private land in Rosebud County. The property is currently for sale. The private entity has an interest in purchasing the property, and attaching an FWP conservation easement to the property. FWP at this point in time seeks Commission endorsement to initiate that process.

The vast majority (>95%) of the property is still in native range. Property consists of 50% sagebrush grassland, 20% salt flats/greasewood flats, 20% grassland, 5% plains riparian and >5% converted to crested wheatgrass. Conserving this property would help preserve several Tier 1 habitats, also located in the middle of Yellowstone Watershed Sage-Grouse Core Area. There are documented 6 “active” and 16 “unconfirmed active” sage-grouse leks located on or within 2 miles of the property. Sage-grouse require large blocks of native sagebrush grassland, as provided by this property, in order to survive and thrive. The easement would establish land and access management requirements to conserve this property in perpetuity.

Public Involvement Process & Results

To date there has been no public involvement. Should a conservation easement come to fruition through this process public involvement would be consistent with other lands projects FWP has completed.

Alternatives and Analysis

- 1) Pursue the possibility of a perpetual conservation easement on 59,779 acres of important sagebrush grassland (sage-grouse) habitat. Placing a conservation easement on such a large, (112 square miles) contiguous block of native sagebrush grassland presents a unique, perhaps once in a lifetime, opportunity to meaningfully conserve important, intact and relatively pristine sage-grouse habitat in eastern Montana.
- 2) Not pursue a conservation easement. FWP would lose an opportunity to conserve a contiguous block of important core sage-grouse habitat with the possibility of these habitats being converted to other uses.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends that the Commission endorse the initiation of a process to pursue the possible development a conservation easement.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission give preliminary approval to the Stellar Creek project, allowing the Department to conduct further negotiations, public review, and analysis.