

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: November 14, 2013

Agenda Item: Proposed Sinclair Creek CE

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorse Course of Action

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background

A private landowner who owns approximately 220 acres of ranch and forest land in Sinclair Creek drainage, a tributary to the Tobacco River east of Eureka, would like to sell a conservation easement to FWP or both FWP and Vital Ground. It adjoins a 700-acre conservation easement held by Montana Land Reliance. The property is a natural wildlife/grizzly bear travel corridor and the property provides both spring and fall habitats for grizzly and black bears. It provides important winter/spring habitat for an important population of mule deer and elk as well as excellent habitat for moose and white-tailed deer. The land is sloping with excellent views of the valley and highly vulnerable to development due to significant influx of Canadians buying up and developing recreational land in this area. Development of low elevation grassland, foothill, and riparian habitats increases human-wildlife conflicts particularly for grizzly bears and would reduce habitat values for mule deer, elk, moose, and other wildlife. The project would primarily be funded through a grant from the USFWS Section 6 Endangered Species Program and private funding from/through Vital Ground and potential donation from the landowner. The property is currently at risk of being foreclosed upon by a mortgage lender. The funding from this conservation easement is essential to remove the risk of imminent foreclosure, protect the land by keeping it as a single parcel, and ensure continued sustainable land management. It would also protect habitat along a portion of Sinclair Creek, a bull trout spawning stream. The landowner is willing to provide public access for wildlife viewing, hunting, and/or educational purposes.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP is working closely with the landowner, Vital Ground, and Montana's USFWS Section 6 Coordinator to forestall foreclosure and allow FWP and Vital Ground the opportunity to apply for Section 6 funding in 2014. FWP anticipates support from the community because of the property's unique and important wildlife habitat values and the potential opportunity for public access to a largely inaccessible area.

Alternatives and Analysis

FWP could decide not to pursue this conservation opportunity. The federal funding sources proposed for this project can only be granted to FWP. Neither a donated conservation easement nor 100 percent private conservation easement funding are viable alternatives. If a conservation easement alternative is not pursued, the property will be foreclosed upon and likely auctioned off and developed.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

Because of the importance of conserving this land and the high resource values and public recreational opportunities, FWP recommends that the Commission endorse this proposed project so FWP may work with Vital Ground and others to fully develop this opportunity.

Proposed Motion

I move that the Commission endorse FWP's proposal to negotiate for the purchase of the Sinclair Creek conservation easement.