

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: November 14, 2013

Agenda Item: Olson Farms Conservation Easement

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Preliminary Approval

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

Olson Farms includes 298 acres along the Missouri River just south of Ulm. Approximately 23 acres (7.7 percent) is native riparian habitat including mature cottonwood and green ash stands, having a native shrub grassland understory mostly comprised of snowberry, willow and chokecherry. Seventeen acres (5.7 percent) are classified as seasonal freshwater emergent wetlands. The property adjoins the 163-acre FWP Ulm Fishing Access Site which incorporates two miles of Missouri River and Smith River frontage. The two properties would maintain 461 acres of intact riparian, wetland and associated upland habitats along the Missouri River and mouth of the Smith River into perpetuity. A change in ownership would likely result in the loss of FWP's ability to positively impact habitats on this property. Management components include a conservation easement with covenants, grazing management (if applicable), habitat enhancements such as retiring and converting select dry land crop acres to dense nesting cover and/or native shrub grassland and precluding conversion of riparian vegetation to agriculture. The land would continue to provide public hunting access in perpetuity. FWP looks to use FWP habitat program funds in combination with an array of other partners to complete this project.

Public Involvement Process & Results

Future involvement to complete the proposed conservation easement will include an environmental assessment process together with typical press releases and website notification, a public hearing, and presentations for approval to the F&W Commission and Board of State Land Commissioners.

Alternatives and Analysis

The preferred alternative is to purchase a conservation easement with funding and habitat partnerships as mentioned above. FWP would hold and monitor the conservation easement. The subject property is not offered for sale to FWP, therefore fee purchase of the property is not an option. If FWP took no action, the land would most likely become subdivided or sold in the future, as development pressures increase in the Missouri River valley between Helena and Great Falls.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends approval by the Commission to proceed with landowner negotiations as this project will conserve and protect important riparian/wetland habitats along the Missouri and Smith Rivers, while providing public hunting access.

Proposed Motion

I move that FWP proceed with negotiations along with associated assessment and public review to complete the purchase of this conservation easement from the Olson family.