

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: January 14, 2015

Agenda Item: Rehbein Addition to Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area (R2)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

Background

FWP proposes to purchase a 320-acre addition to the Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area from the Rehbein family. The property is a private inholding within the 34,573-acre Fish Creek WMA and is also bordered by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, U.S. Forest Service, and a small private parcel. FWP proposes to purchase this property for the appraised value of \$1.4 million using federal Pittman Robertson Act and Habitat Montana funds. The Fish & Wildlife Commission first endorsed this project in 2014.

The property has unique ecological importance to the Fish Creek watershed as valuable habitat and as a corridor to wildlife movement and dispersal. The property includes approximately 1.3 miles of the West Fork of Fish Creek and its associated riparian corridor, as well as lower sections and confluence areas of Bear Creek (~0.6 miles), Trail Creek (~0.35 miles), and Winkler Gulch (~0.24 miles). In total, the property contains 72 acres of stream corridor, riparian areas, and associated wetlands. There are also 148 acres of adjacent upland habitat significant as winter range for elk and other wildlife species. The area is recognized as an important forest carnivore linkage zone, supports elk, mule deer, moose, and high densities of white-tailed deer, and represents some of the best remaining habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout in the Middle Clark Fork. Acquiring this inholding would benefit the integrity of the WMA and other adjacent public lands while providing additional opportunity for public access.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP released a draft environmental assessment for public review on Oct. 8 and accepted public comment through Nov. 6. A public hearing was held in Alberton on Oct. 20 at the Community Center. FWP received a total of 32 emailed, written, or oral comments, representing 25 people, six organizations and one agency. Commenters were from Missoula, Alberton, Superior, Trout Creek, Tarkio, Helena, Huson, Bozeman, Emigrant, Hamilton, Stevensville, and Dillon. Twenty-eight commenters supported the acquisition, three opposed it, and one did not indicate a preference. A summary of comments can be found in the project Decision Notice.

Alternatives and Analysis

The proposed alternative is to acquire the property. The only other viable alternative to this proposal would be to forego this acquisition. The parcel is developable and a nearby parcel was sold recently, has buildings on it, and is posted against public access.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends that the Commission approve the purchase of this addition to the Fish Creek WMA. The property has high fish/wildlife habitat and recreation values and is strategic to other lands where FWP retains interest.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission approve FWP's purchase of this addition to Fish Creek WMA.