

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: March 12, 2015

Agenda Item: Assignment of Public Hunting Access Rights on the Lazy J Cross Ranch

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

FWP proposes to accept assignment of the rights of fall public hunting access on the 1,080-acre Lazy J Cross Ranch from the Bitter Root Land Trust (BRLT) under its conservation easement on the ranch. FWP would provide \$105,000 from the *Access Public Lands* program as partial funding towards the BRLT's purchase of the conservation easement. Matching funding for the easement comes from the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service, pursuant to the Federal Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (\$400,000), and from the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond (\$350,000). Lazy J Cross Ranch is also generously agreeing to voluntarily gift part of the value of the conservation easement.

The ranch is located in the Sula Basin in Ravalli County. The proposal would protect in perpetuity public hunting access on and through the Ranch to over 40,000 acres of adjacent Forest Service and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation School Trust lands. BRLT would hold the conservation easement and enforce the public's right to use the property in the fall, while FWP would manage the specific access considerations.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP released a draft environmental assessment on Jan. 8 and accepted public comment through Feb. 6. FWP received 20 mailed or e-mailed comments in support, including from the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association and the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation, and five others which didn't express support or opposition. A public hearing was held Jan. 20 at the Sula Club House. Sixteen people attended and seven people offered testimony in support and two people expressed concern about parking and safety. One concern about acreage removed from the easement for three building sites was addressed by BRLT. No comments were received in opposition.

Alternatives and Analysis

Under the No Action Alternative, FWP wouldn't accept assignment of the rights for fall public hunting access on the Lazy J Cross Ranch and would not provide partial funding toward the conservation easement's acquisition. The negotiated total purchase price of the easement wouldn't be met and would likely result in losing the opportunity to secure perpetual public access.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends approval, which would conserve native fish and wildlife habitat, secure fall hunting access, and support traditional land use. FWP has worked closely with The Bitter Root Land Trust and local landowners to develop this project to meet local, state and federal objectives for this conservation area.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish & Wildlife Commission approve FWP's acceptance of the rights of public hunting access on the Lazy J Cross Ranch and its expenditure of \$105,000 toward the conservation easement held by the Bitter Root Land Trust.