

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: March 10, 2016

Agenda Item: Raths Conservation Easement (R5)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 Min

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Background:

The Raths property comprises approximately 11,500 acres of private land in Golden Valley County, deer/elk HD 530, in Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Region 5. The property, which is six miles north of Lavina, consists of approximately 9,800 acres of native sagebrush grassland, 300 acres ponderosa pine savanna ridges, and 600 acres herbaceous marsh along Currant and Merrills Spring Creeks. Merrills Spring Creek is a warm spring creek that remains open all year. The property also adjoins 1,920 acres of DNRC land of which 640 acres are not publicly accessible.

Native habitats on the ranch are key to maintaining sage-grouse, mule deer, white-tailed deer, antelope, Merriam's turkey, sharp-tailed grouse, pheasants, furbearer and native species populations, including several "species of concern." This property includes high quality big game winter range and core sage-grouse habitat, including a lek with the highest male attendance in Region 5. An FWP research project in the vicinity has confirmed extensive sage-grouse use of this property

The property is managed as a working cattle ranch. The landowner and his family want to provide quality wildlife habitat, while maintaining their livelihood under the terms of an FWP conservation easement. A conservation easement on this property would conserve a variety of valuable wildlife habitat types, prevent fragmentation from conversion or other land use changes, and provide public recreational access, all in perpetuity.

Public Involvement Process & Results:

FWP has not sought any public comment at this time. Upon endorsement from the Commission, FWP would conduct appropriate analyses, public review processes and negotiations.

Alternatives and Analysis:

The conservation easement alternative allows the property to remain in private ownership while conserving and enhancing habitat and providing recreational access. Given current trends in the area surrounding the Raths property, it is possible that if sold in the future this parcel could be converted from sagebrush grassland to other agricultural land uses. Opportunities to conserve and enhance wildlife habitat and maintain public access could be lost.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale:

Because of the importance of conserving this land, including the high resource values and public recreational opportunities, FWP recommends that the Commission endorse this proposal, allowing FWP to proceed further with landowner negotiations and to conduct necessary analyses and public review processes.

Proposed Motion:

I move the Commission endorse this conservation easement project, allowing FWP to proceed with further work on this project.