

# **FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** June 9, 2016

**Agenda Item:** Pintail Flat Conservation Easement

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 Min

---

## **Background**

FWP has been negotiating a conservation easement with Wetlands America Trust, a division of Ducks Unlimited, on approximately 1,760 acres in Phillips County. The Pintail Flat project received Commission endorsement in August 2013.

The primary purpose of this proposed conservation easement is to enhance and conserve a productive complex of grassland and wetland habitats as well as their traditional agricultural uses, to include livestock grazing. This interspersed of grasslands and wetlands is valuable for waterfowl production and breeding and migrating shorebird and grassland birds. In addition, these habitats support sage-grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, mule deer, antelope, black-tailed prairie dogs, and a wide variety of other native species. This property is strategically located adjacent to BLM and USFWS Waterfowl Production Area lands that support similar habitats, providing a sizeable block of conserved habitat. This conservation easement would also assure free public access for hunting and wildlife viewing in perpetuity.

The appraised value of the easement is \$505,000. However, Wetlands America Trust is donating \$100,000 of value through a bargain sale, making the final cost of the conservation easement to the department of \$405,000. An additional \$50,285 would be provided by FWP toward cost-share of grazing improvements. The funding source is the Migratory Bird Wetland Program and Habitat Montana. Wetlands America Trust intends on selling the property as ranchland after a conservation easement is completed.

## **Public Involvement Process & Results**

FWP released a Draft Environmental Assessment for public comment from January 22 to February 26, 2016 and included a public hearing in Malta on February 16th. The Draft EA was made available to neighboring landowners and interested parties, and the EA was posted on the FWP webpage. FWP received 25 written public comments from individuals and organizations. Nineteen of the comments supported, one was neutral and five opposed the project. The five opposing comments identified questions, issues or concerns in five different categories that are addressed in the Decision Notice and reflected in the Final EA.

## **Alternatives and Analysis**

Two alternatives were analyzed and considered in the EA: 1) Proposed Action—purchase the Pintail Flat conservation easement and 2) No Action—do not complete the proposed conservation easement. Under the Proposed Action, the property would: Continue to be sustainably managed for livestock grazing; conserve important fish and wildlife habitat; and maintain public recreational opportunity. Under the No Action Alternative, no immediate changes would be likely since the conservation easement was designed to maintain current sustainable management practices and public access. However, there would be no certainty that future land management actions would maintain the property as functional grassland and wetland habitat. There is a high potential for grasslands to be converted to cropland, which would substantially reduce the habitat values on this and adjacent properties.

## **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends the Commission approve the purchase of the Pintail Flat conservation easement in order to protect, enhance and preserve high value wildlife habitats, traditional agricultural uses, and public access.

## **Proposed Motion**

I move the Commission give final approval for the purchase of the Pintail Flat conservation easement from Wetlands America Trust.