

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

**Meeting Date:** October 13, 2016

**Agenda Item:** Coal Creek Conservation Easement

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Endorsement

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

---

### **Background**

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks proposes to pursue a conservation easement on 10,080 acres of deeded land in Prairie and Custer Counties. The ranch also comprises 4,480 acres of BLM and 960 acres DNRC lands. The Coal Creek Conservation Easement (CE) would provide protection, enhancement, and public access to a unique combination of Eastern Montana habitats. The Coal Creek riparian zone consists of a large, uninterrupted silver sagebrush bottom that traverses the property for roughly 5.5 linear miles. Numerous seeps and springs dot the landscape in the hills and draws leading into Coal Creek. These natural water features support permanent wetlands and large mesic drainages dominated by green ash, cottonwood, and juniper overstories, providing exceptional biological diversity in otherwise xeric eastern Montana. The property also contains sagebrush grasslands, juniper hills, and rough breaks. Hunting opportunities include deer, antelope, elk, and upland game birds. The property is within core bighorn sheep range, sage grouse general range, and provides year round and important winter range for mule deer. The Coal Creek CE is as scenic as it is diverse, and would lend itself to a variety of outdoor recreational activities.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

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

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

This is a unique, probably one-time opportunity to secure an interest in this property. A change in ownership would result in the loss of FWP's ability to positively impact the habitat on this property and a loss of much needed access for sportspersons and recreationists. Purchase of this conservation easement would result in a large 'footprint' of conservation and public access. The property is adjacent to the 13,851-acre Fluss Ranch Conservation Easement and a 12,960 acre block of public lands to the south (see map). In total, 23,931 acres would be under conservation easement and 54,400 acres would be open to public access, all in one large block.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends endorsement by the Fish & Wildlife Commission, allowing FWP to proceed with further development of this conservation opportunity.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission endorse the pursuit of the Coal Creek Conservation Easement.