

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 12, 2017

Agenda Item: Fargo Coulee Conservation Easement (R4)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 Min

Background: Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) seeks final Commission approval to purchase a Conservation Easement (CE) to protect wildlife habitat, ensure agricultural production, and provide public access to the Machler Property (hereafter, Fargo Coulee CE). The CE would encompass approximately 2,700 acres of unbroken sagebrush-grassland habitat north of Roy in Fergus County. The area is completely within Greater Sage-Grouse Core Area, and has nine active sage-grouse leks within four miles. The Fargo Coulee CE is part of a larger landscape key to maintaining viable populations of sage-grouse, as well as providing important sharp-tailed grouse, mule deer, pronghorn, and native non-game species habitat. The property also adjoins 1,920 acres of DNRC lands, currently inaccessible to the public. Limited hunting access exists in this area and the proposed CE would assure 4,620 acres remain open for public recreation and hunting.

The current landowner, Mark Machler, seeks to sell his property but wishes to ensure that it is conserved in perpetuity. Therefore, he approached FWP about placing a CE on the ranch prior to selling to an interested neighbor. Both Mr. Machler and the interested buyer have worked with the Department to develop this CE and accompanying management plan. The USDA NRCS has agreed to contributing toward the purchase of this CE through the Agricultural Lands Easement (ALE) program as part of their Sage-Grouse Initiative. The CE would be purchased for the appraised value of \$897,000 including \$455,625 from ALE and the balance (\$441,375) from Habitat MT.

Public Involvement Process & Results: A final EA and Decision Notice have been completed and published, following requisite public involvement. Strong public support has been voiced for this effort via formal comments received.

Alternatives and Analysis:

Proposed Action: This CE would conserve agriculture and wildlife habitat, and provide public access to the property's lands and adjacent public lands. Wildlife habitat would be protected by no subdivision or development of the property, as well as no sodbusting or removal of native vegetation. Public recreation access would be available for hunting, hiking, and other purposes year-round. A grazing management plan would be implemented to improve the quality and quantity of vegetation for cattle and wildlife, and the land's traditional ag uses would remain in perpetuity.

No Action: The No Action alternative for this project is described as FWP not purchasing the Fargo Coulee CE. The neighbor currently interested in buying the property may not be able to afford it unencumbered by a CE. Future land management status and configuration may change if the property were to sell on the open market, affecting habitat and public access.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends Commission approval to acquire the CE. The CE would ensure continued ranching and conservation of wildlife habitat and public recreation opportunities.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the purchase of Fargo Coulee Conservation Easement as proposed by the Department.