

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 12, 2017

Agenda Item: Tenderfoot Creek Conservation Easement (R4)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

Background

The proposed Tenderfoot Creek Conservation Easement is the culmination of a 10-year collaborative effort to permanently conserve more than 9,300 acres of private land within the Lewis and Clark National Forest's Tenderfoot drainage. Between 2007 and 2016, multiple partners helped purchase 8,220 acres of private land from the Bair Ranch and transfer them to the Forest Service. The Tenderfoot Creek property consists of three separate units totaling 1,092 acres and is the last remaining unprotected private land in the Little Belt Mountain's lower Tenderfoot watershed.

The proposed conservation easement contains a mix of rare mesic montane native grasslands and meadows interspersed within extensive aspen parks and upland forest. Two tributary streams run through the property and the subject parcels include or are adjacent to Tenderfoot Creek, South Fork Tenderfoot Creek, Daisy Creek, and Mongar Creek. Tenderfoot Creek is one of the Smith River's primary tributaries and provides thermal refuge as well as critical spawning and nursery habitat for mountain whitefish, cutthroat trout, rainbow trout, brown trout, and other species. The Zehntner family has historically allowed free public access to the property; the proposed conservation easement would ensure that this tradition continues. The Zehntner's, DNRC and USFS have agreed to implement an FWP-approved coordinated rotational grazing system. The conservation easement would include all three private parcels which could not be split or sold individually in the future.

Public Involvement Process & Results

The larger Tenderfoot Legacy Project has the formal support of more than 30 conservation and sporting organizations. Upon endorsement, an EA with public comment and outreach would be completed.

Alternatives and Analysis

The property is at imminent risk of sale and development if a conservation easement is not completed. The purchase of a conservation easement by FWP would allow the Zehntner family to continue ranching in the Smith River Valley as they have for the last 135 years. Development of the property would significantly compromise the watershed's fish and wildlife resources as well as the public's ability to access adjacent USFS lands.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

Placing a conservation easement on the remaining private parcels in the lower Tenderfoot would prevent fragmentation of important fish and wildlife habitat and ensure the public's continued access to and through it.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve proceeding with further analysis and conducting an environmental assessment of the Tenderfoot Creek Conservation Easement.