

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: November 7, 2017

Agenda Item: West Valley Viewing Area Conservation Easement

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

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Background:

FWP is proposing to accept a ¼-acre public access easement that would be donated to create a public wildlife viewing area overlooking a 45-acre pothole wetland. The proposed West Valley Donated Public Access Easement and Wildlife Viewing Area is part of a Flathead Land Trust (FLT) project to conserve 328 acres of important habitat northwest of Kalispell. Public access is a requirement for part of the funding that FLT is using to purchase their conservation easement. By accepting the donated public access easement, FWP would help support this conservation project while providing an outstanding opportunity for the public to view this pothole wetland and the surrounding agricultural land that are heavily used by migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and sandhill cranes. The sandhill cranes use a 4-square-mile staging area, including this project area, during their fall migration. Over 400 sandhill cranes have been seen at one time, making this the largest staging area in northwest Montana. The complex of wetlands in the agricultural fields of West Valley support some of the highest numbers and diversity of wetland birds in the Flathead Valley. There have been 129 species of birds documented using the pothole wetland area including tens of thousands of waterfowl, hundreds of sandhill cranes, and several species shorebirds and raptors.

Public Involvement Process & Results:

FWP has not engaged in public outreach at this time. However, the Flathead Land Trust has many partners that have committed funding including Montana's Outdoor Legacy Fund, Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Flathead Audubon, Ducks Unlimited, Flathead Pheasants Forever, one private foundation, and 55 members of the community. Upon endorsement, an environment assessment (EA) with public comment and associated outreach would be conducted.

Alternatives and Analysis:

No action is the only viable alternative to this proposal. Without FWP's participation, the 328-acre Flathead Land Trust conservation easement (CE) cannot be completed. This would result both in a lost opportunity for conserving a high value wetland complex and a lost opportunity to develop a popular public wildlife viewing opportunity.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends commission endorsement, which would support conservation and public wildlife viewing outcomes. The wildlife viewing area would expand FWP's information and education outreach opportunities in northwest Montana, potentially providing outdoor education for local schools, conservation groups, and individuals.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission endorse the West Valley Viewing Area Access Easement proposal, allowing FWP to conduct additional analysis and associated public review.