

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

**Meeting Date:** April 19, 2018

**Agenda Item:** West Valley Donated Public Access Easement and Proposed Wildlife Viewing Area (R1)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

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

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## **Background**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks(FWP) proposes to accept a ¼-acre public access easement to serve as a wildlife viewing area. The West Valley Public Access Easement which overlooks a 45-acre pothole wetland, 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 and obtain a suitable site to develop into a wildlife viewing area. This pothole wetland and the surrounding agricultural lands are heavily used by migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors, and sandhill cranes. Over 400 sandhill cranes have been seen at one time, making this the largest staging area in northwest Montana. A developed viewing area would provide a designated location for wildlife watching, photography, and outdoor education for local schools. The easement would be donated by Grosswiler Dairy Inc. Development of a wildlife viewing area on the easement would be funded with partner contributions from FLT, Montana's Outdoor Legacy Fund, Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, FWP, Flathead Audubon, Ducks Unlimited, Flathead Pheasants Forever, one private foundation, and 55 members of the community.

## **Public Involvement Process & Results**

The West Valley Donated Public Access Easement and Proposed Wildlife Viewing Area draft Environmental Assessment (EA) was released for a 14-day public comment period on February 27, 2018. FWP posted a public notice on its webpage and the Region One Facebook page. A news release was distributed to a standard list of media outlets. The draft EA was available at the Region 1 office and Helena Headquarters. Public notices were published in the *Daily Inter Lake* and the *Flathead Beacon* and notices of the EA were distributed to neighboring landowners. FWP received 15 responses to the draft EA that were positive in nature and supported the proposed action. Many of the responses acknowledged the level of community involvement and assistance in reaching fundraising goals. One suggestion to mitigate wildlife disturbance and another comment with concerns over the potential increase in traffic and impacts to adjacent neighbors and residents beyond the access easement were addressed in the decision notice.

## **Alternatives and Analysis**

FWP analyzed 1) the Proposed Action and 2) No Action – not accepting the donated public access easement and not creating a wildlife viewing area. Under the No Action, this opportunity to provide a safe wildlife viewing area would be lost and the Flathead Land Trust's 328-acre conservation easement may not be completed.

## **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends the Commission approve FWP's acceptance of the West Valley Donated Public Access Easement. Completion of this project would provide wildlife viewing opportunities and allow FWP to foster interest in the resources we manage while conserving agricultural values.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve FWP's acceptance of the West Valley Donated Public Access Easement from Grosswiler Dairy Inc. as proposed by the Department.