

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: June 14, 2018

Agenda Item: Kootenai Forestlands Conservation Project (R1)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background:

FWP is working with the Trust for Public Land (TPL) to negotiate a conservation outcome on approximately 22,275 acres of commercial timberland owned by Stimson Lumber Co. checkerboarded around the community of Libby. The project would involve FWP obtaining a conservation easement on these lands, which would allow Stimson to continue forest management while precluding development, protecting incredible wildlife habitat and key landscape connectivity, and providing permanent public access to extraordinary recreation lands. An extensive network of public roads provides easy access to the parcels, making the property highly developable and at increased risk of being converted to non-forest uses, especially given that these are some of the last undeveloped lands in the area. The property provides habitat and supports hunting opportunities for deer, elk, moose, bear, lion, wolf, and forest grouse, as well as providing important habitat for 43 species of greatest conservation need. Though the property is not contiguous, it functions as a much larger block of land given that the majority of parcels are surrounded by U.S. Forest Service (USFS) land. The project would be funded primarily through federal grants from the USFS and potentially the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service with matching funds provided by a below market sale by Stimson. These timberlands have a long history of public access that would be permanently secured through this project.

Public Involvement Process & Results:

FWP, Stimson, and TPL met with the Lincoln County Commissioners on November 8, 2017, to apprise them of this potential project, and we received their unanimous support. A public open house was held at the same time to inform the community of Libby about the preliminary details of the potential conservation easement with all in attendance supportive of the project.

Alternatives and Analysis:

If FWP does not pursue acquiring a conservation easement on these lands, Stimson would retain ownership in the near term and the possibility remains that some or all of the parcels could be sold for development or other uses incompatible with fish and wildlife values. It is also possible that the public would lose access to these lands under different ownership.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale:

FWP recommends the Commission endorse this proposed project to allow the department to continue to work with TPL and Stimson on this proposal to conserve valuable fish and wildlife habitat and public recreational opportunities.

Proposed Motion:

I move the Commission endorse FWP's proposal to negotiate the Kootenai Forestlands Conservation Easement and complete associated due diligence and analysis.