

WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL – vers. 1/2018

Instructions: FORMAT: Please follow this template to help streamline scoring. Italicized notes are intended to clarify the intent of each section and may be removed for the actual proposal. Proposals selected for Fish and Wildlife Commission endorsement will be included with the commission packet and will also be available for public review – please develop a professional proposal. Saving this file in an Adobe (pdf) format will reduce file size for emailing purposes. **SUBMISSION:** Submit as an electronic file both to the Habitat Bureau Chief and the Wildlife Division Office Manager. If the file is too large for email, please submit through the Montana File Transfer Service.

1. Applicant Name: *Mark Sullivan*
2. Date: 12/11/17
3. Project Name: Ash Coulee Type of Acquisition: (*Easement*)
4. Size: 3,400 acres
5. Location: (*5 Miles Southeast of Hinsdale, Valley County, and FWP Region 6*)
6. Map(s):

Additional Project Background

This conservation easement has been previously proposed, but at the time it included additional land that was directly adjacent to the Milk River. Due to an inability to fully resolve some access issues to a portion of these river parcels, it was decided to eliminate them from the easement proposal.

Region 6 feels that the uplands portion of this ranch, seen in this revised proposal, fully meets the criteria for protecting conservation values, while also continuing to build a larger footprint of conservation and access using smaller, high value projects; a model based upon the Milk River Initiative.

Because of these circumstances, work related to this proposal has already been completed. Some of this work includes:

- GIS mapping of public access routes and points
- Mapping and surveying of future infrastructure needs including fences and water
- Public Scoping
- Lands staff have been involved with title research, GIS exercises, and numerous landowner communications related to negotiating easement terms
- Acquisition of additional funding
 - o National Wild Turkey Federation- \$5,000
 - o Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust- \$107,000

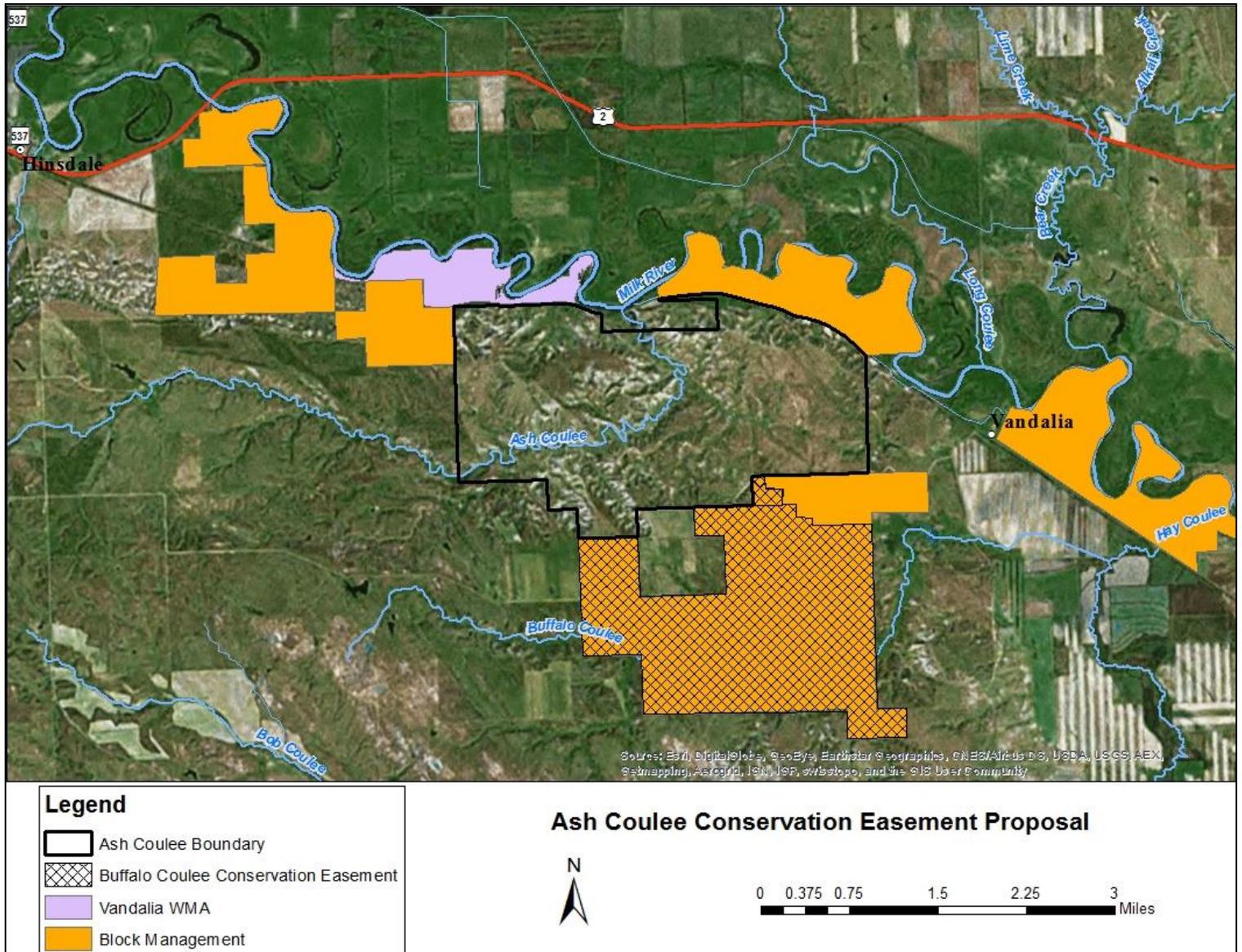


Figure 1. Aerial map of the proposed Ash Coulee Conservation Easement with neighboring public access properties

- Project Need (Application Overview – limit to 1,500 characters) – **10 pts.**
(provide a brief narrative of why the project is needed: Why this habitat? Why this geographical location? What species impacted and how? Public access considerations? This is an opportunity to summarize in narrative form why this project should be funded.)

The Ash Coulee property is composed of approximately 3,400 deeded acres and includes approximately 160 acres of US Bureau of Reclamation property. The property lies adjacent to the FWP Vandalia Wildlife Management Area, publicly accessible DNRC land, the Buffalo Coulee Conservation Easement and two properties enrolled in Block Management (figure 1).

The property consists of approximately 3,400 acres of native grasslands, bisected by Ash Coulee. This ranch provides very productive native shrub and plains grasslands which have been identified as state priority habitats. These uplands include important year-round habitat for sharp-tailed grouse, partridge, mule deer and antelope, and many other resident wildlife species. Ash Coulee, found in the core of the uplands, provides critical winter range for antelope and mule deer, and is part of the sage grouse connectivity core area between their silver sagebrush to the north and the big sagebrush to the south.

A change in ownership would likely result in the loss of FWP ability to positively impact the habitat on this property. Numerous properties along the Milk River and associated uplands in Valley County have undergone both habitat and landownership changes. Only a small percentage of native habitats are left within the Milk River Valley including Cottonwoods and associated uplands and hardwood brushy cover.

8. Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria - **10 pts.** (*List Tier I Community Types (SWAP 2015) that make up a significant portion of the property. Please provide an approximate percentage makeup of each Tier I Community Type relative to the entire property. Riparian and stream courses may be listed as a distance or by acreage.*) Scoring follows:

- Tier I Community types involving Intermountain Grassland, Riparian/Wetland, or Shrub Grassland receive up to 4 points each
- Tier I Community Types outside of these broad habitats receive up to 2 points each.
- Cropland (*each 10% increment reduces the score by 2 pts, for example 30% of property in cropland would reduce the score by $2 \times 30 / 10 = 6$ pts; acres of cropland that are intended to be restored to permanent cover do not reduce the overall score*).

-Tier 1 Aquatic Communities; prairie rivers and streams, riparian/wetland-
4.6 Miles- 4 Pts

-Tier 1 Lowland and Prairie Grassland **42%- 2 Pts**

-Tier 1 Sagebrush Steppe and Sagebrush Dominated Shrubland (both with many associated SGCN)- **58%- 4 Pts**

9. **Project Level Criteria** (submit short paragraph or bullet points for each bolded heading and provide associated figure(s) as appropriate)

a) **Habitat Values - 10 pts.** (What makes the habitat on this property high value? For example: Are there valuable biological/ecological characteristics such as strategic seasonal habitat for game species or species of greatest conservation need (SWAP 2015)? Is there a unique plant community that exists as a remnant of its original distribution? Does the property comprise a mix of priority habitats or a unique intact expanse of habitat? Etc.)

The Ash Coulee property has approximately 3,400 acres of native uplands located in the Milk River Breaks and adjoining the Vandalia WMA. The uplands provide a unique mix of plateau grassland benches leading to steep sloped green ash draws with rocky outcroppings and silver sage bottom-lands. The property provides habitat for a variety of native species of migratory birds, songbirds, and small mammals. Surveys conducted near this ranch found 35 songbird and 6 shorebird species, and 10 small mammal species. American kestrels, northern harriers, red-tailed hawks, golden eagles and common nighthawks are common in the area. Bald eagles winter in the area and are expanding their breeding range along the Hi-Line. Species-of-concern include long-billed curlews, Sprague's pipits, chestnut-collared longspurs, ferruginous hawks, Swainson's hawks. The uplands include important year-round habitat for sharp-tailed grouse, partridge, mule deer and antelope, and many other resident wildlife species. Ash Coulee, found in the core of the uplands, provides critical winter range for antelope and mule deer. The property lies within the Core Connectivity Area for migrating sage grouse.

Other species:

- Invertebrate and Amphibian SGCN: Great Plains Toad, Northern Leopard Frog
- Birds: Chestnut-collared Longspur, Greater sage-grouse, sharp-tailed grouse
- Fish: Blue Sucker, Pearl Dace
- Reptiles: Milksnake, Western Hog-nosed Snake
- Species of Inventory Need: Short-eared Owl

- b) **Threat Status: PICK ONE** (and provide brief explanation)
- **PROBABLE - 5 pts:** *strong trends in the vicinity of project have been toward conversion of the habitat (e.g., subdivision; sodbusting), but no specific threat is underway.*

While the land has not been proposed for major habitat changes in the next five years, strong trends in the vicinity of project have been toward conversion of the habitat (e.g., subdivision; sodbusting), but no specific threat is underway. The ranch is currently managed as a livestock enterprise. The ranch has been showcased on outdoor hunting TV channels, and has been purchased by out-of-state buyers. However, the owners have recently offered this ranch for sale. Presently, the owners lease the ranch for year-round, grazing/feeding operations. This level of grazing/feeding is moderately impacting nesting and hiding cover. With continued levels or heavier or longer-term grazing, the quality of the remaining native vegetation will continue to deteriorate. Portions of the ranch will likely change ownership in the future, and most likely result in negative land uses, and continued elimination of public use.

The trend along the Milk River is toward more intensive farming and grazing to maximize production and income. Shrub grassland habitats that existed along the Milk River have been greatly reduced through conversion to grain and domestic hay production. Grassland and shrub grassland habitats are still being cleared and broken for intensive farming. In the future, it is probable that hay fields could also be expanded into existing riparian habitats, eliminating those habitat values.

The property is also located in an area where natural gas exploration has occurred, and several gas wells have existed for quite some time. While no new exploration has occurred for many years, the possibility should still be considered. Conservation easement terms that outline best management practices related to energy or mineral exploration could help offset any major impacts to the existing habitat.

- c) **Focal Priority - 10 pts.** *(Describe as follows: Does the project occur within a 2015 SWAP Regional Focus Area? (4 pts) Is this project part of an ongoing multi-partner initiative? (3 pts) Does the property comprise substantial grasslands within an FWP Grassland Initiative priority county? (3 pts) Is this project area identified as a priority in a species conservation plan? (3 pts))*

The project occurs within the Milk River aquatic and terrestrial Focal Area, as well as the terrestrial Sagebrush and Grassland Focal Area. – **4 Pts**

While this project is not part of an ongoing multi-partner initiative, it does follow the groundwork of the former Milk River Initiative, and falls within this focal area. – **3 Pts**

The project comprises substantial grasslands within Valley county, which is a Grassland Initiative priority county. – **3 Pts.**

The project area provides critical winter range for mule deer and antelope. The project area is utilized during winter antelope migrations. The project area is also lies within the area identified as a Core Connectivity Area for migrating sage grouse. – **3 Pts**

- d) **Geographic Effectiveness - 10 pts.** *(For example: Is the land in multiple smaller parcels or a large single parcel? One parcel is better than many isolated parcels. Is the land configured in a manner that supports the conservation values? Is the land adjacent to other protected lands or intermingled with public lands, leveraging a larger block of conservation? Is this a “postage stamp” or of sufficient size to stand alone?)*

This property is in one large contiguous parcel, and is configured in a manner that, if protected by an easement, can support conservation values. The land is adjacent to the Vandalia WMA, US Bureau of Reclamation Land, DNRC Land, the Buffalo Coulee Conservation Easement, and two Block Management properties, which when combined totals 8,914 contiguous acres of habitat and access conservation efforts.

This property is also nearby other protected areas:

Page-Whitham Ranch Conservation Easement (Tampico Unit) – 4,000 acres – 3 miles southeast

Hinsdale WMA – 266 acres – 5.0 miles northwest

Bernie Hart Conservation Easement – 404 acres – 5.5 miles northwest

Cottonwood Bend Conservation Easement- 164 acres- 5.5 miles northwest

Lower Beaver Creek Conservation Easement- 463 acres – 5.5 miles northwest

Olsen Ranch – 612 acres – 11 miles southeast.

e) **Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – 10 pts.** *(Provide a layout of hunting and fishing opportunities and anticipated access arrangement. Is there well established legal access? Easier access and areas that accommodate more days of recreation support a higher score. What other forms of recreation would occur on the property? Given location, what is the likelihood of substantial public use? Lands that have a history of providing public access should receive a higher score.)*

Ash Coulee has provided public access, in the form of Block Management, for the last three years and in 2017 provided a minimum of 275 hunter days. Legal access is well established in the form of county roads. Proposed hunting access roads and parking areas are shown on the map in Figure 2. Access outside of the proposed designated roads will be proposed as Walk-in-Only. Trapping, wildlife viewing, and hiking would also be activities that would create public use of the property.

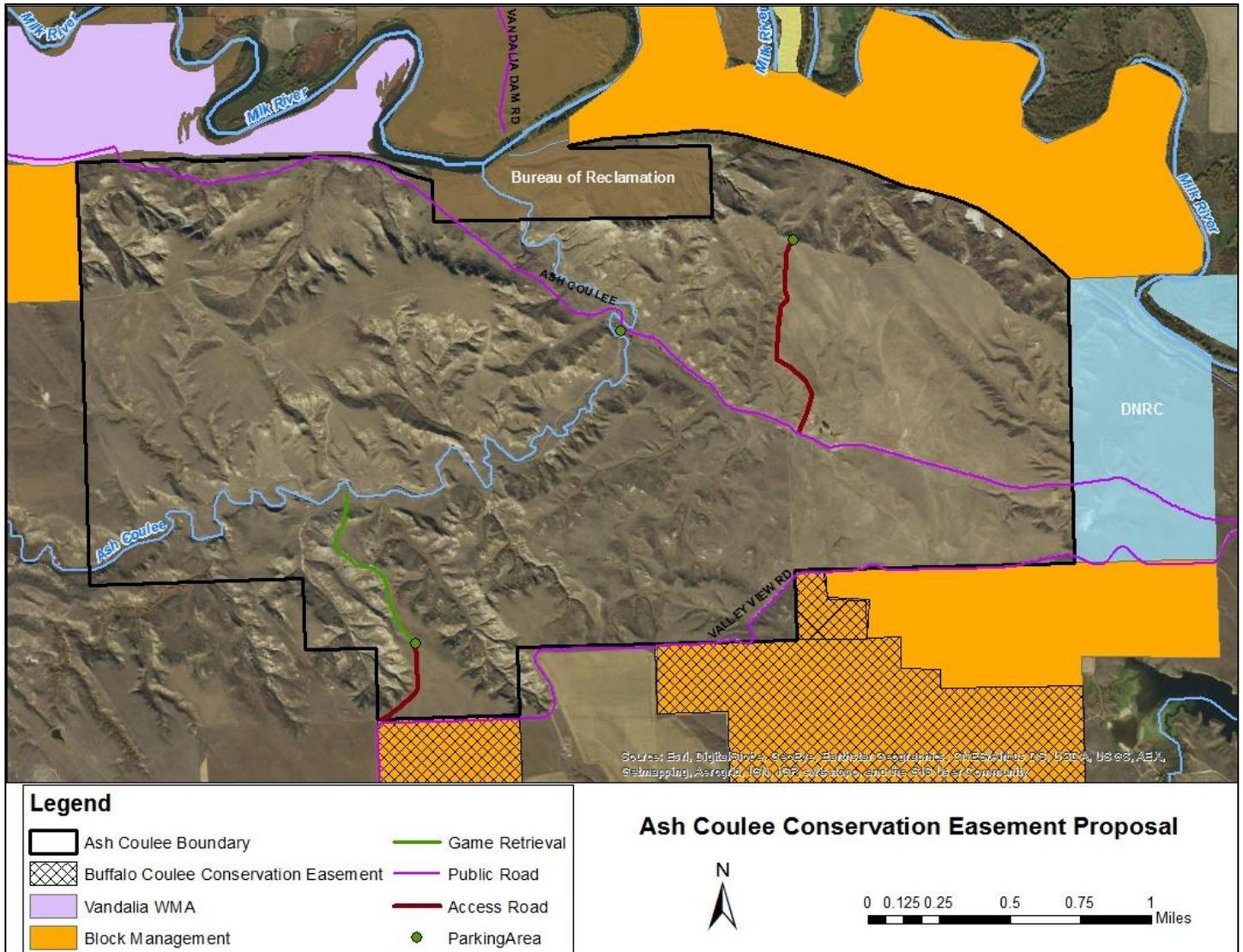


Figure 2. The draft access management map of the Ash Coulee Conservation Easement

- f) **Management Considerations – 10 pts.** *(What are the initial and ongoing obligations and liabilities associated with this project? Less is better. For example – substantial monitoring needs? Tax and fee obligations, such as irrigation water fees? Infrastructure improvements for grazing management or other needs? Additional staffing and equipment needs? Juxtaposition to other Wildlife Division and FWP land interests? Weed issues?)*

As is shown in Figure 1, the property lies in direct juxtaposition to another FWP conservation easement property enrolled in Block Management, a FWP Wildlife Management Area, as well as two other parcels of land enrolled in the Block Management Program.

Through the title work that has already been conducted by the FWP Lands staff, several title exceptions are included with this property. These title exceptions are related to utilities, gas and minerals may pose habitat risks in the future.

Fencing (figure 3) and water (figure 4) infrastructure improvements for a grazing system will be needed. Professional survey work for a water system has already been conducted and a draft pasture plan with fence needs has been created.

FWP monitoring of the conservation easement terms is not predicted to be of a greater need than is typical for an easement of this type.

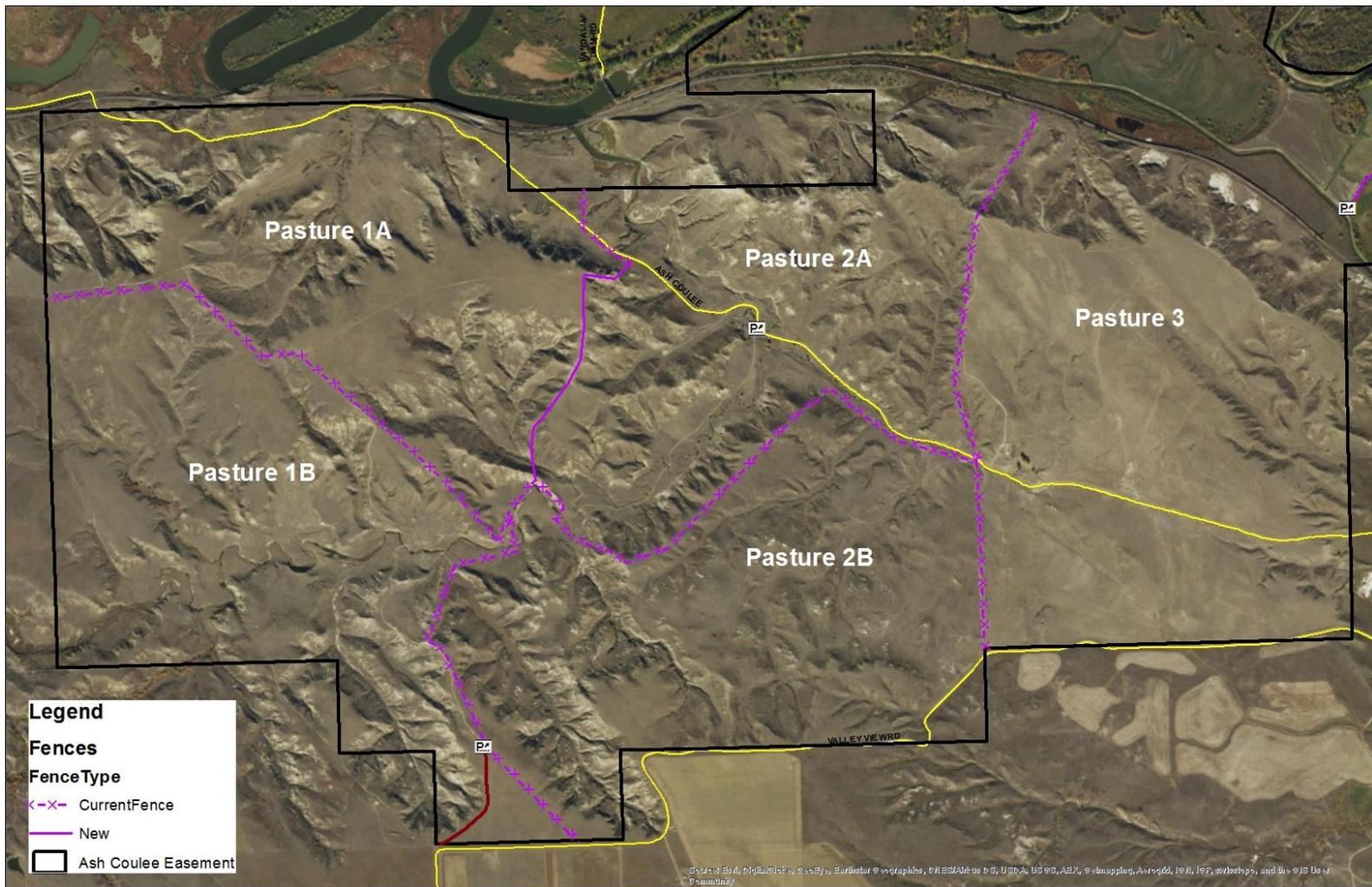


Figure 3. A draft map of the proposed pastures for a 3-pasture rest-rotation grazing system; while much of the fence is existing, a large majority of it will need to be replaced and/or updated.

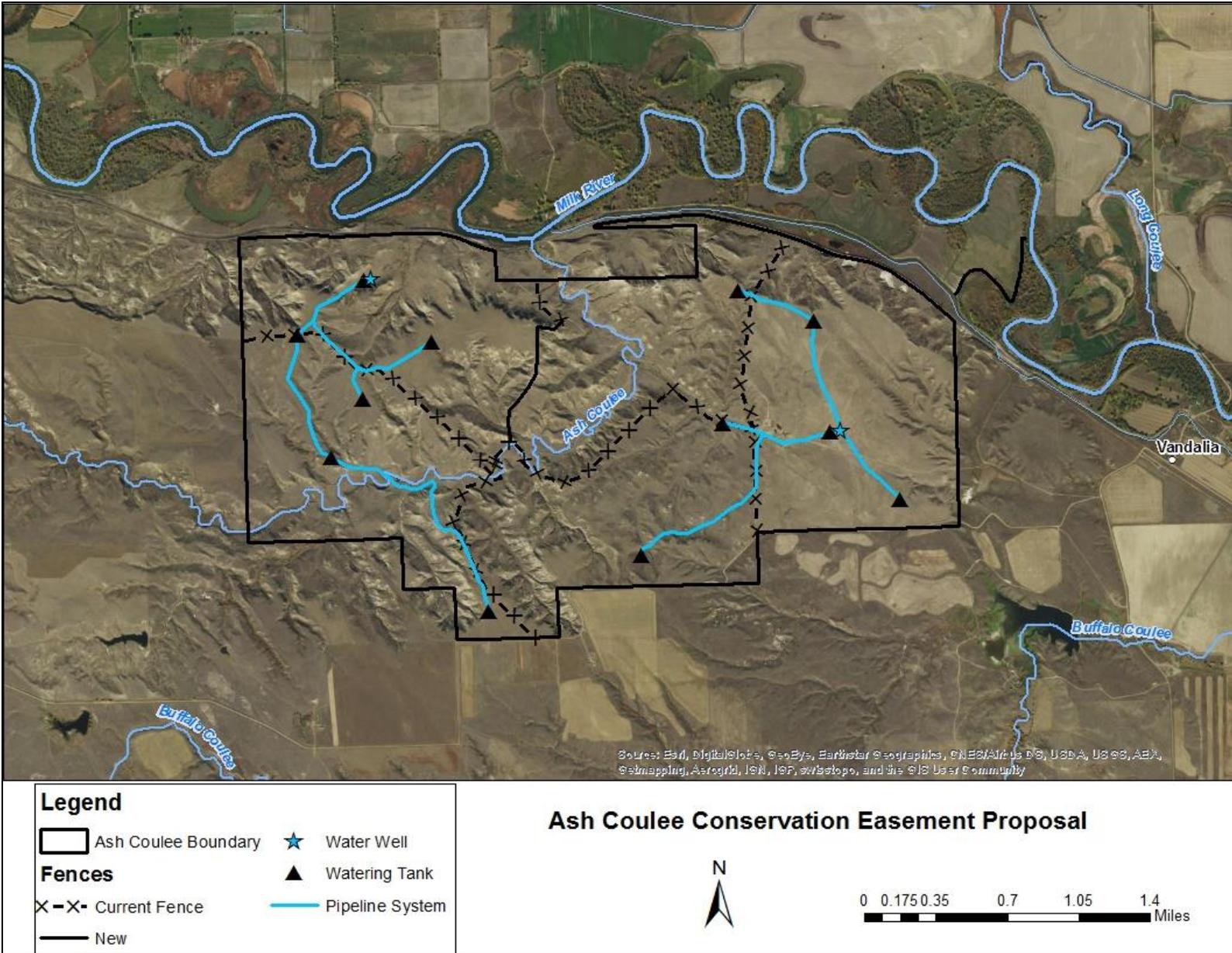


Figure 4. A map of the needed water infrastructure improvements to allow for a rest-rotation grazing system.



Figure 5. Photos showing the Ash Coulee uplands.