

WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL – vers. 1/2018

1. Applicant Name: Brad Schmitz
2. Date: 02/23/2018
3. Project Name: W-Bar Conservation Easement (Note: this name was chosen because this ranch was the historic headquarters of the Pierre Wibaux W-Bar Ranch).
4. Type of Acquisition: Easement
5. Size: Total: 6,880 acres (6,760 acres deeded + 120 acres BLM lease). The property is also contiguous with 1,280 acres of accessible State lands for a total access footprint of 8,160 acres.
6. Location: Roughly 10 miles NE of Wibaux, MT, Wibaux County, FWP Region 7
7. Map(s):

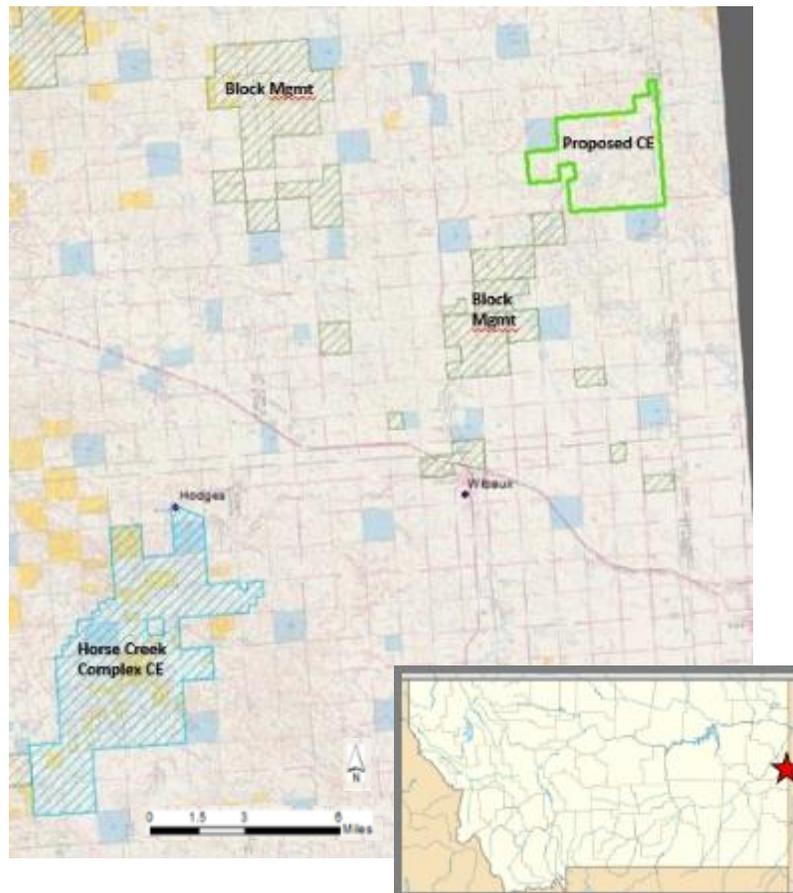


Figure 1. The Proposed W-Bar CE (green outline) is located 10 miles NE of Wibaux, MT in close proximity to a number of Block Management Areas (green crosshatch), and roughly 15 Miles NE of the Horse Creek Complex CE (blue crosshatch).

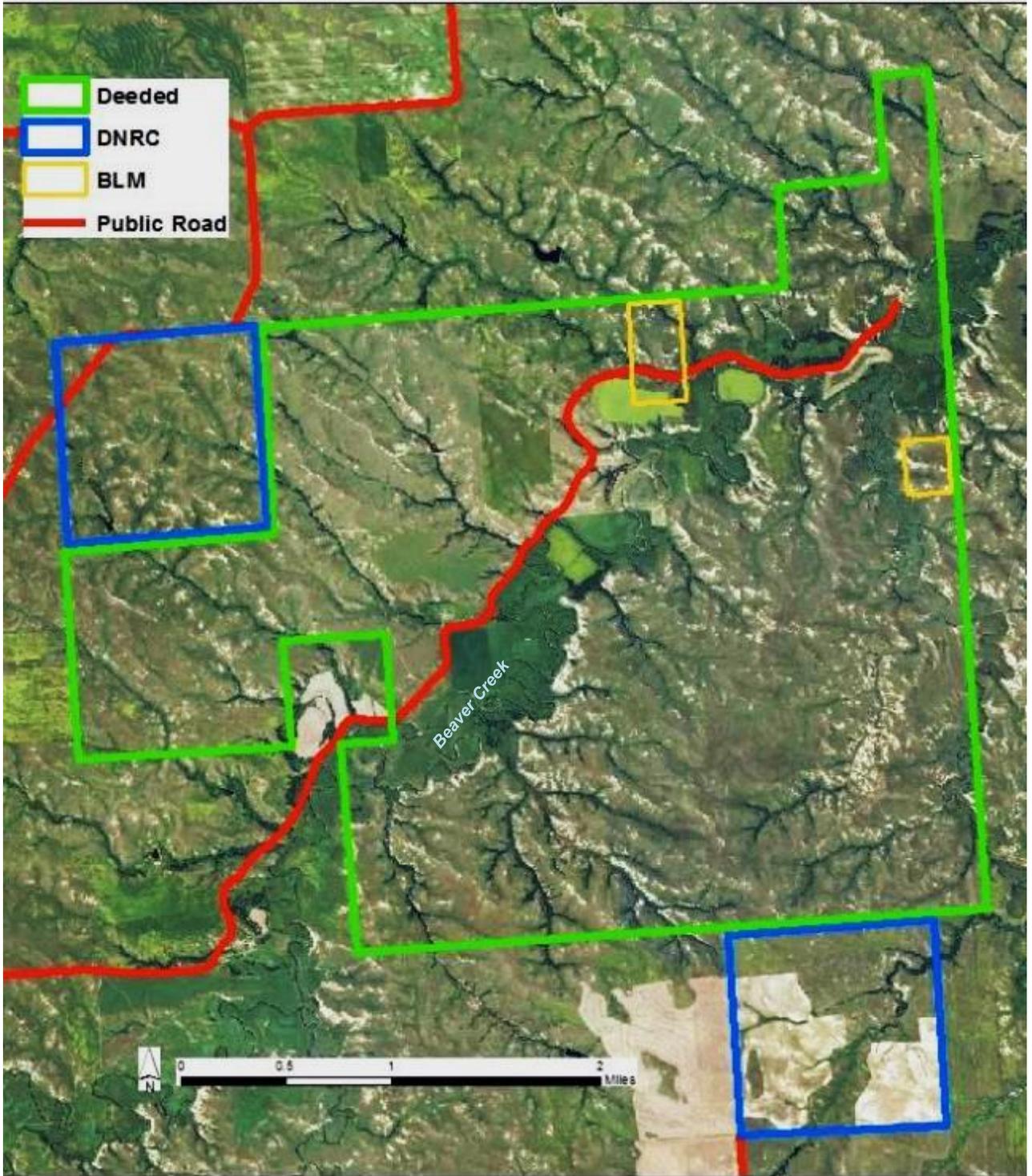


Figure 2. *The Proposed W-Bar CE is bisected by a county road, providing easy public access to Beaver Creek bottoms, numerous woody draws that traverse the property, and associated shrublands and native grasslands.*

8. Project Need (Application Overview – limit to 1,500 characters) – **up to 10 pts.**

This property comprises the largest intact parcel of Beaver Creek riparian habitat from its headwaters to the North Dakota line. It would encompass over 11 miles of Beaver Creek and over 10 miles of Dry Creek and other tributaries. The woody draws on the property are as impressive as they are numerous, offering critical winter cover for mule deer and whitetails (100% of the property is winter range for one or both species), as well as upland game birds and other wildlife. The woody draws give way to shrubby hillsides and extensive native prairie uplands, making it some of the best sharp-tail grouse country that Region 7 has to offer. Bird hunters will also find abundant pheasants, partridge, and turkeys to pursue. The abundance of security habitat, wildlife densities, and easy access off of W-Bar Road will provide substantial public hunting access, with 400-600 hunter days anticipated annually. The diversity and quality of habitat are valuable for a wide variety of nongame species. The property could support over 40% of SWAP Species of Greatest Conservation Need. Beaver creek supports native and introduced game fish species year-round, and acts as source of forage production and rearing for the Little Missouri drainage. The landowner would allow fishing access, a sought-after opportunity for anglers to pursue catfish, northern pike, and walleye that will benefit the local community for generations to come. The ranch is the historic headquarters of the Wibaux W-Bar Ranch, and the remains of an elaborate stone barn adds historic value for visitors. This is probably a one-time opportunity to place a conservation easement on this valuable property for wildlife and sportsmen. The size and quality of habitat make the property a high priority for conservation.

9. Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria – **up to 10 pts.**

- 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; cropland areas that are intended to be restored to permanent cover do not reduce the overall score*).

Approximately 90% of the property is comprised of Tier I community types (Figure 3). The property is approximately 15% Tier I riparian habitat along Beaver Creek, Dry Creek and associated woody draws. This easement would serve to conserve over 11 miles of Beaver Creek and over 10 miles of Dry Creek and other tributaries, and allow the highly biodiverse aquatic community to persist and thrive. Approximately 75% of the property is Tier I prairie grassland. The remaining 10% is prior-converted land along Beaver Creek (shown in yellow in Figure 3). These areas are currently in grass cover and will remain in permanent cover in the future.

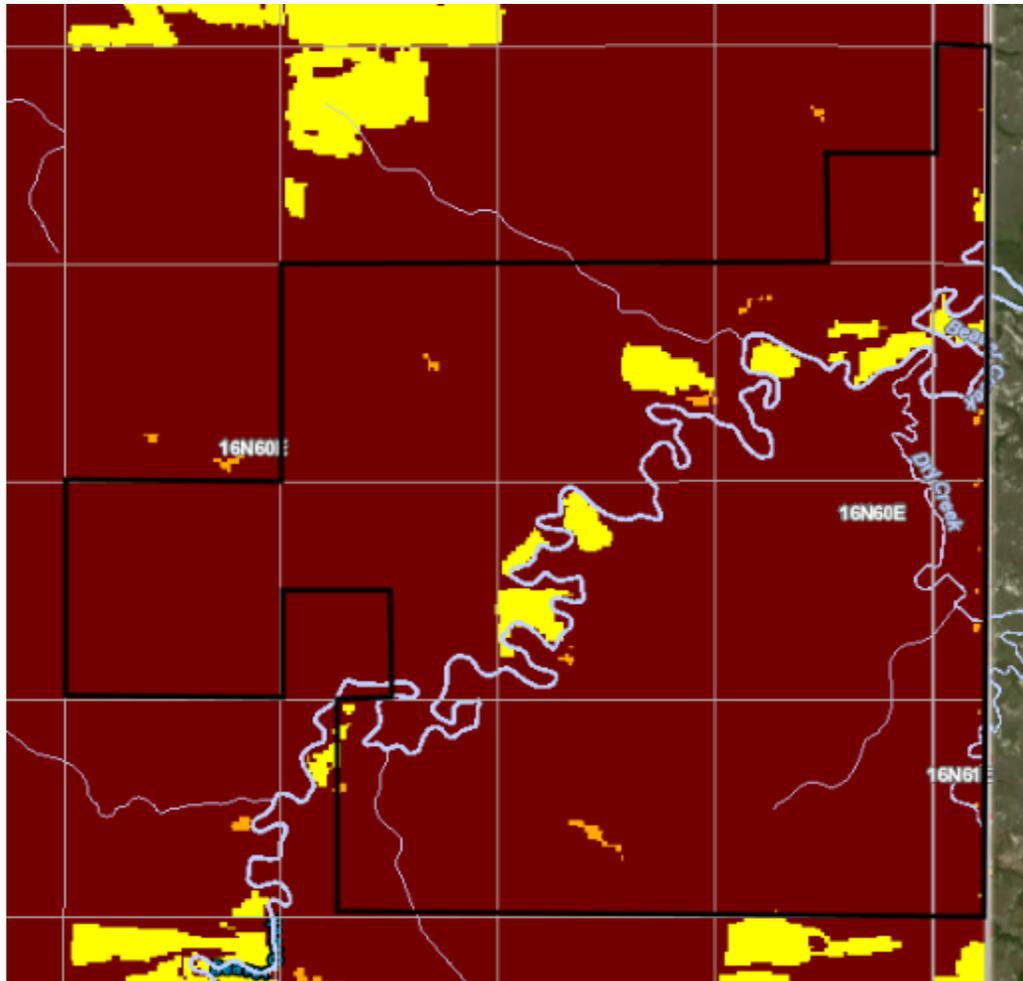


Figure 3. The proposed W-Bar CE (black outline) is comprised over 90% Tier I communities (brown), very little Tier II (orange), and less than 10% Tier III (yellow).

10. Project Level Criteria

a) Habitat Values – up to 10 pts.

Beaver Creek is highly productive for wildlife. The Beaver Creek riparian zone becomes well-developed north of Wibaux, MT as Yates, Hay, and Little Beaver Creeks join Beaver Creek (Figure 4), each adding volume to the creek and with it more productive riparian habitat. The reach of Beaver Creek between Little Beaver and the North Dakota state line is the most well-developed reach from a riparian habitat standpoint, and the proposed CE is also the largest contiguous parcel of property along Beaver Creek from its headwaters to the North Dakota line (Figure 4). The size and quality of habitat on this parcel make it a priority for conservation.

Uplands on the property are comprised of substantial native grasslands, transitioning into shrubby hillsides, woody draws, and finally the Beaver Creek Riparian Zone. From a

wildlife standpoint, all the “pieces” are present: native prairie offers cover for fawns, nests, and broods. Shrubs offer hiding and thermal cover, and soft mast in the fall. The woody draws on the property are as impressive as they are numerous (Figure 2; photos in Appendix A). They offer year-round and critical winter cover for mule deer, white-tail deer, sharp-tailed grouse, pheasants, Hungarian partridge, and wild turkey. Implementing a grazing system to provide sufficient rest and allow recruitment of woody species will allow the draws to maintain and improve condition through time.

Roughly 75% of the property is mule deer winter range and 100% of the property is whitetail winter range. This is some of the best sharp-tail grouse country that Region 7 has to offer. There is 1 known sharp-tail grouse lek on the property (likely more; it hasn't been exhaustively surveyed), and 8 known leks within 2 miles of the property. Antelope utilize the uplands, and elk occasionally occur on the property.

The Beaver Creek riparian zone offers wildlife watchers unique opportunities to view species such as bank swallows, which nest in the cliffs and swoop over the water catching insects. Ferruginous hawks can commonly be viewed in this area. The Beaver Creek riparian zone provides excellent habitat for bats, although surveys to identify species have not been conducted. Just as the diversity of habitat types on the property support a variety of game species, they also support a variety of nongame species ranging from grassland, to shrubland, to forest species.



Figure 4. The proposed W-Bar CE (yellow circle) represents the single largest contiguous parcel of land on Beaver Creek in Montana from its headwaters to the North Dakota line. Landownership is outlined in orange; the southernmost extent of Beaver Creek is not pictured.

The property is within the range of an impressive array of SWAP Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), including:

- Half (3 of 6) Amphibian SGCN: Great Plains Toad, Plains Spadefoot, Northern Leopard Frog
- A third (21 of 63) Bird SGCN: American Bittern, Great Blue Heron, Ferruginous Hawk, Golden Eagle, Peregrine Falcon, Sage Grouse (historic range), Sharp-tailed Grouse, Long-Billed Curlew, Black Tern, Black-Billed Cuckoo, Burrowing Owl, Red-headed Woodpecker, Pinyon Jay, Veery, Sage Thrasher, Sprague's Pipit, Loggerhead Shrike, Brewer's Sparrow, McCown's Longspur, Chestnut-collared Longspur, Bobolink
- Over a third (8 of 23) Mammal SGCN: Preble's Shrew, Dwarf Shrew, Merriam's Shrew, Fringed Myotis, Hoary Bat, Townsend's Big-eared Bat, Black-tailed Prairie Dog, Swift Fox
- More than half (5 of 8) Reptile SGCN: Snapping Turtle, Spiny Softshell, Greater Short-horned Lizard, Western Hog-nosed Snake, Milksnake

Beaver Creek hosts a large assemblage of both native and introduced fish species. Multiple surveys have captured Iowa Darters, and Sauger are likely occasionally present in the system; both species are Montana Species of Concern. The creek and its tributaries provide valuable native prairie stream fish rearing and production habitat for the Little Missouri basin. Additionally, Beaver Creek contains a unique and rare opportunity in the area for anglers to catch game species including Northern Pike, Channel Catfish, and particularly the highly sought-after Walleye.

b) Threat Status: PICK ONE (and provide brief explanation)

- **PROBABLE - 5 pts:**

There is a significant threat of tillage on the property if it is sold. The Beaver Creek riparian zone and other flats on the property would likely be returned to tillage agriculture. New areas may be tilled.

Riparian areas are at risk from improper grazing practices. Hardwood draws are disappearing throughout eastern Montana, in part due to grazing regimes that don't provide sufficient rest and attendant recruitment. The proposed easement contains extensive hardwood draws, with some recruitment occurring. Implementation of a three-pasture summer rest-rotation grazing system with winter pastures rested every other year will improve recruitment and allow hardwood draw habitats on the property to maintain and improve condition.

Public access to outdoor recreation in the area is at risk by commercial interests on private lands or private landowners unwilling to deal with the public. The easement represents an opportunity to conserve a large area of diverse habitat and provide extensive outdoor recreation for generations to come.

Prairie streams across the Great Plains have been characterized as fragile systems that are in danger of collapse due to land use disturbances (Source: Dodds, W.K., K. Gido, M.R. Whiles, K.M. Fritz and W.J. Matthews. 2004. Life on the Edge: The Ecoogy of Great Plains Prairie Streams. Bioscience Volume 54, Issue 3. Pages 205-216). Beaver creek is no exception, and is especially important because it provides year-round residency of native species and introduced game species, and acts as source of forage production and rearing for the Little Missouri drainage.

c) Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.

Does the project occur within a 2015 SWAP Regional Focus Area? (4 pts)

Yes, Beaver Creek is a Tier II Aquatic Focal Area and a Tier II Terrestrial Focal area identified in the 2015 SWAP.

Is this project part of an ongoing multi-partner initiative? (3 pts)

Area Mule Deer Foundation chapters have expressed their support for and interest in partnering on projects on FWP Conservation Easements. The property is prime turkey habitat, and NWTf is another potential partner that may have an interest in the property.

Does the property comprise substantial grasslands within an FWP Grassland Initiative priority county? (3 pts)

Yes, the property does comprise substantial grasslands within Wibaux County, a Grassland Initiative priority county.

Is this project area identified as a priority in a species or multi-species conservation plan? (3 pts)

Wibaux County is recognized as a priority county for upland game birds in the FWP UGBEP Strategic Plan, and the property is located in some of the best sharp-tail grouse habitat that Region 7 has to offer.

d) Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.

The land is in a single parcel, and represents a key piece for conservation because it is the largest parcel of private land along Beaver Creek in Montana (Figure 4). It contributes to landscape-scale conservation because it is roughly 15 miles as the crow flies from the Horse Creek Complex Conservation Easement, 20 miles south of the Buxbaum Conservation easement, and contributes to public access because it is located in close proximity to a number of existing block management areas and publicly accessible state sections (Figure 1).

e) Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.

The proposed W-Bar CE is a gem for sportsmen. The Block Management along Beaver Creek south of the proposed CE (Figure 1) is comprised of 3 separate Block Management Areas (BMAs), each providing an average of 200-300 hunter days annually. These are some of the most sought-after BMAs in my biologist district, and hunters typically report very high satisfaction with these BMAs. The proposed CE could be expected to provide 400-600 hunter days annually, a high number considering its size. The number of woody draws and layout of the property would accommodate a higher hunter density than more open grasslands or properties with less security cover. The high-quality habitat lends itself well to higher densities of wildlife, hence higher hunter numbers, as well as a diversity of opportunities ranging from spring turkey, upland game bird, archery whitetail and mule deer, rifle deer, and so on.

The property will be offered for enrollment in Block Management, and hunter access would be managed similar to other BMAs. The property is bisected by W-Bar Road, providing easy access to some of the best hunting on the property along Beaver Creek (Figure 2).

While no formal estimates of angler use exist for Beaver Creek, anecdotal reports from a local angling club and residents suggest that anglers utilize the creek as both an open-water and ice fishing destination. Understanding the need to provide angling opportunity in an otherwise sparse region of the state, MT FWP annually stocks the creek with approximately 2000 walleye. Public land access to the creek is limited to non-existent, and anglers mainly utilize road crossings and right-of-ways to gain access onto the creek. There are two gravel road crossings that receive frequent use and provide decent fishing depending on water flows, and the Hwy 7 bridge provides good fishing but a lower-quality outdoor experience due to highway traffic and noise. Securing this easement would not only provide additional fishing access options, but it would spread out angler effort from what could otherwise be crowded road access sites.

The landowner is willing to allow public access for wildlife watching, and the property also is home to the historic Pierre Wibaux W-Bar Ranch headquarters. An elaborate stone barn still stands on the property, providing added value to members of the public that would access the ranch (pictures in Appendix A).

f) Management Considerations – 10 pts.

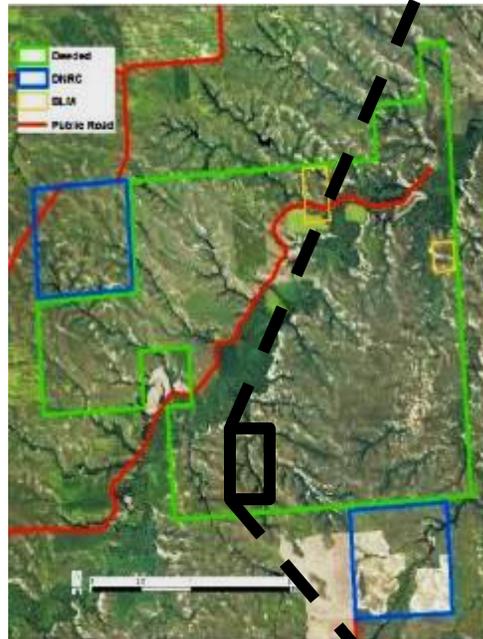
The initial and ongoing obligations associated with this project are minimal. Monitoring needs will be standard for conservation easements. There are no tax obligations or irrigation water fees. No additional staffing or equipment needs exist. There may be minor infrastructure needs necessary to implement the grazing system. The landowner

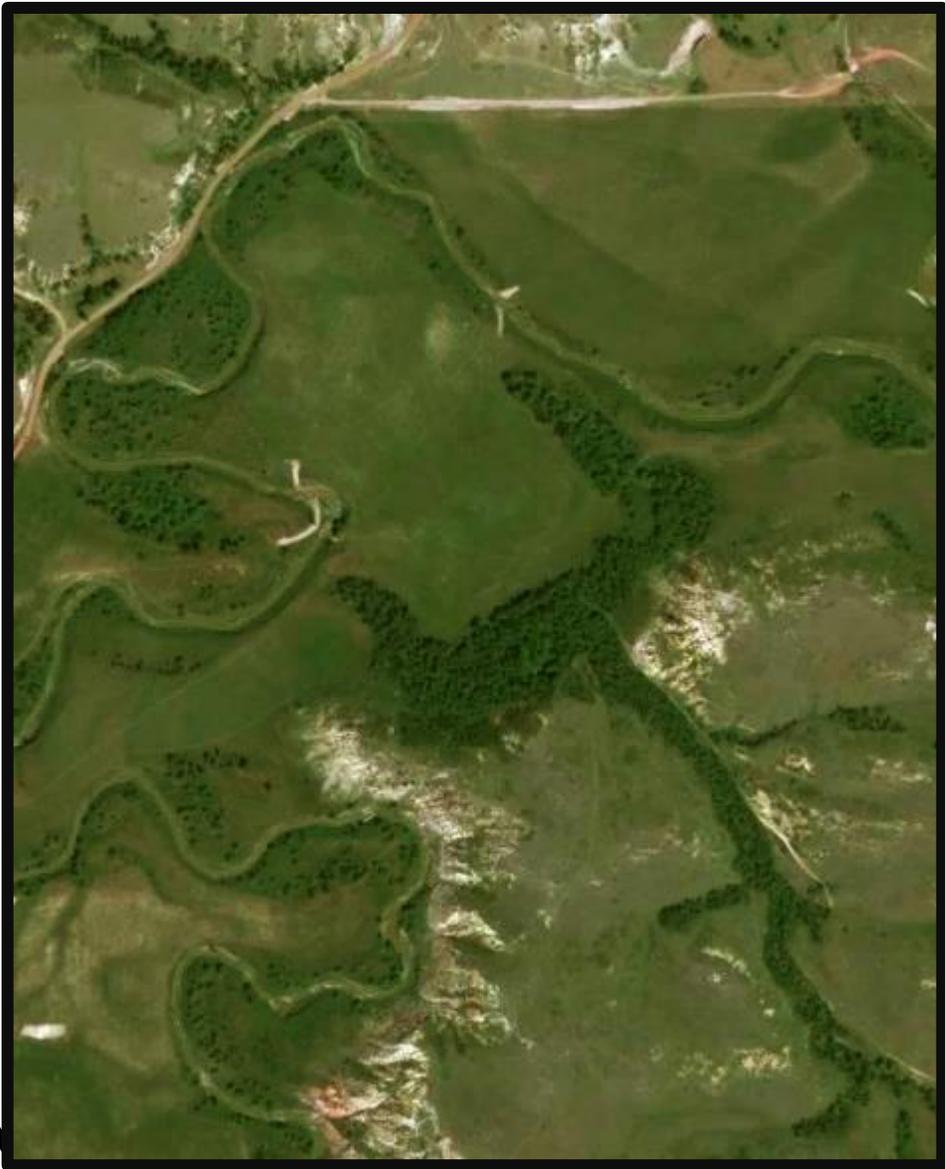
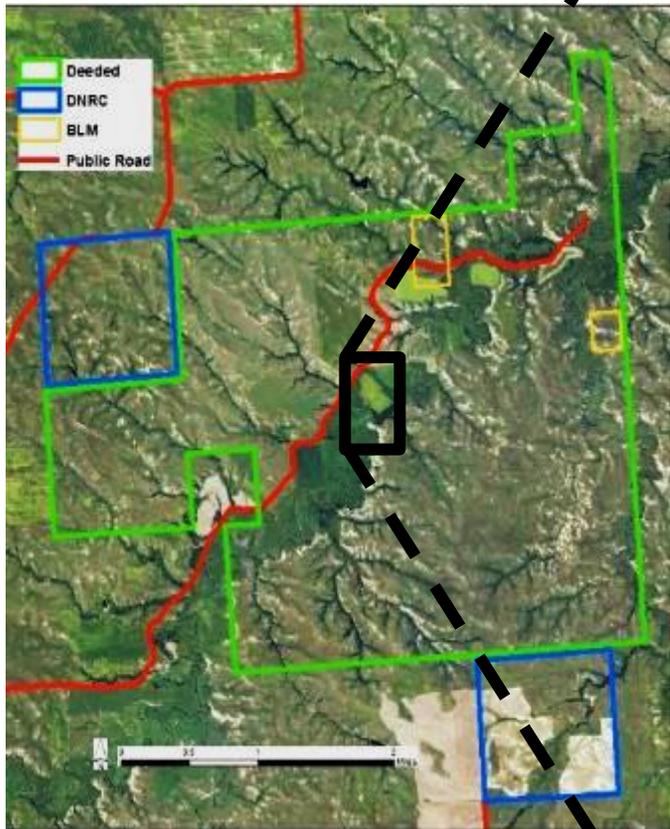
has expressed great flexibility in terms of grazing and willingness to follow the FWP Minimum Standards for Grazing Livestock. The proposed easement is located north of Wibaux off of I-94, in close proximity to the Horse Creek Complex Conservation Easement and a number of BMAs (Figure 1). It is within easy reach of the area biologist and conveniently located for other Regional and Helena staff.

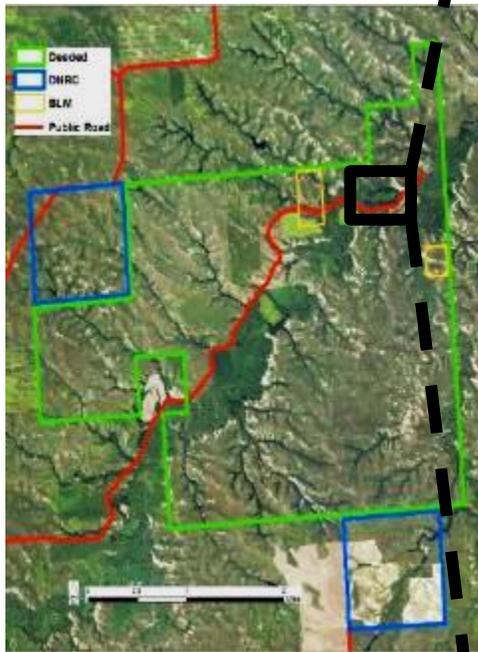
Appendix A: Photographs

A Woody Wonderland:

A closer look at a few of the numerous woody draws that traverse the property:







A Winter (Cover) Wonderland:

Woody riparian areas as far as the eye can see





Horizontal Juniper, Sagebrush and Buffaloberry Hilltops Transition into Green Ash Draws











Sagebrush benches along Beaver Creek







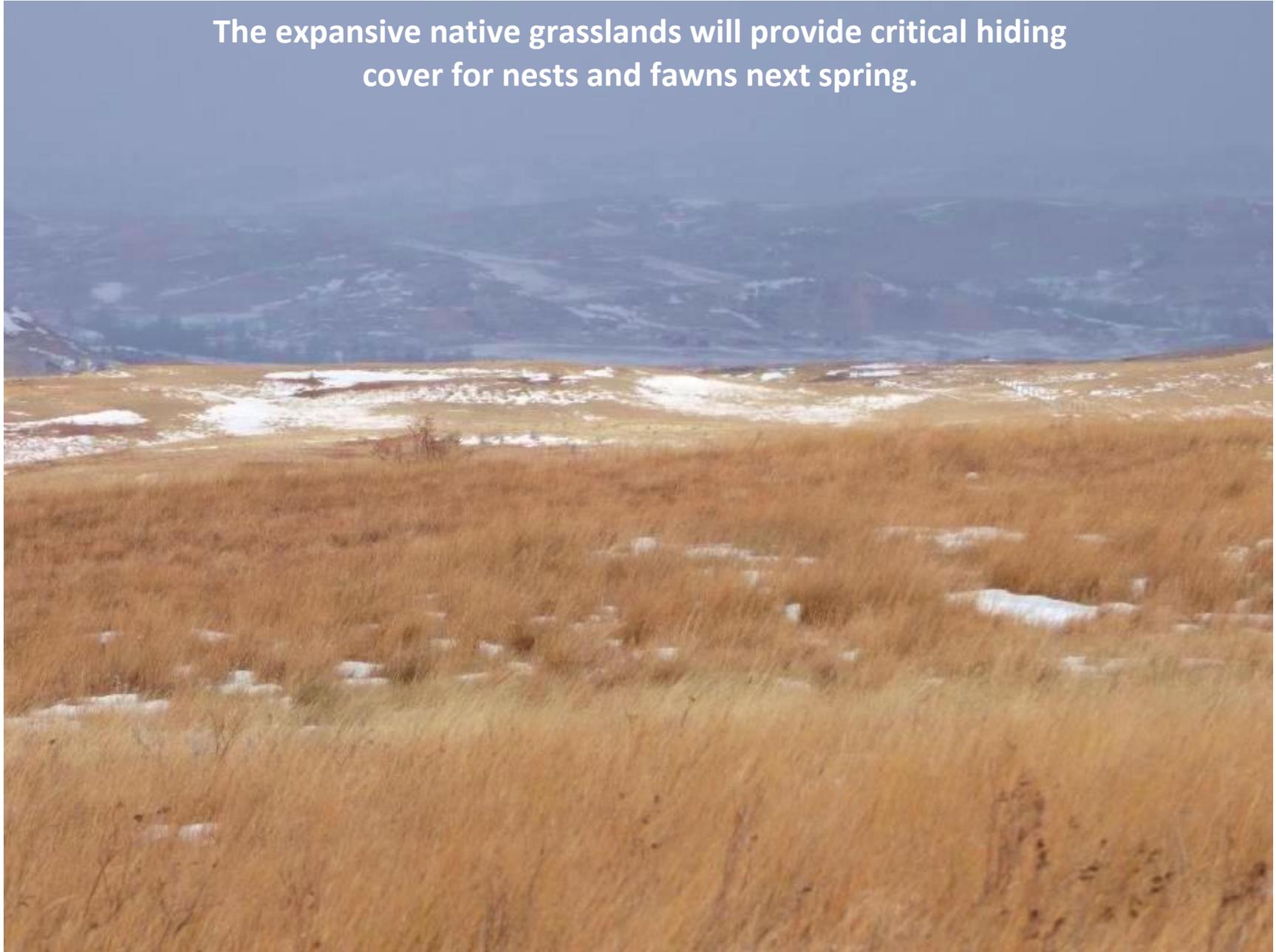
Native Prairie Uplands



The value of this landscape for wildlife is especially apparent on a cold winter day. The combination of Beaver Creek riparian, woody draws, shrub-grasslands, and native prairie uplands provide critical year-round habitat for both mule and white-tailed deer, upland game birds, and a variety of nongame wildlife.



The expansive native grasslands will provide critical hiding cover for nests and fawns next spring.

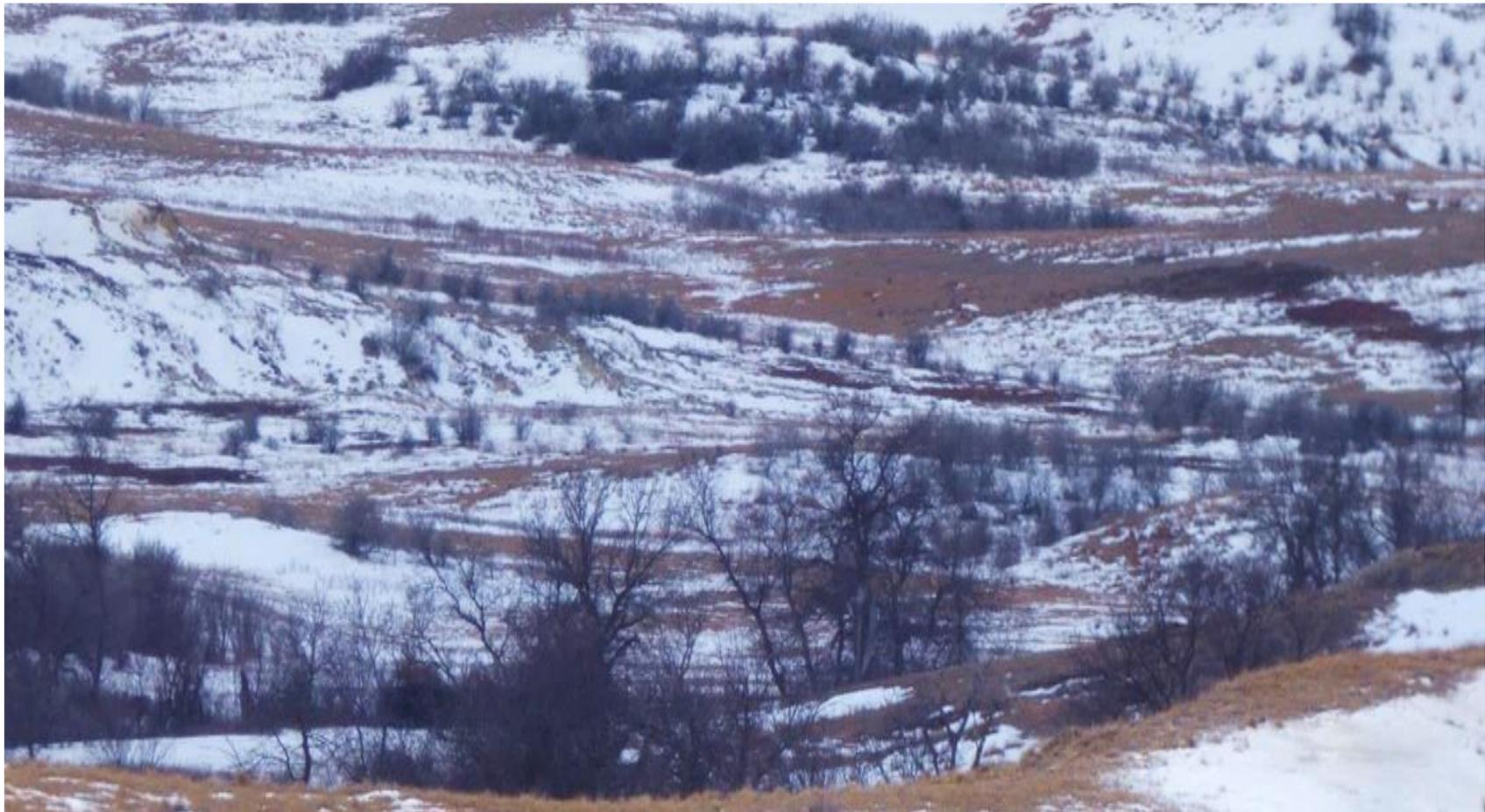




**This is the stuff that bird dogs dream about come September 1:
Big Grasslands, Little Bluestem, and Buffaloberries**







Winter photos highlight the value of the property for winter cover, but just imagine if they had been taken when the landscape is green.





The proposed CE received approval from one of the region's foremost experts in upland game bird habitat.



**And there's excellent
turkey hunting, to boot.**



The Fishin' Hole: It doesn't look like much in the winter following a drought (locals will tell you they've never seen Beaver Creek this dry), but this is a great fishing hole. Beaver Creek is characterized by intermittent deep pools such as this one that hold catfish, northern pike, and walleye. The landowners are willing to provide public fishing access.



Historic Pierre Wibaux Barn

Pierre Wibaux was a prominent cattleman and the namesake for both the Town of Wibaux and Wibaux County. The property is the site of his famous W-Bar Ranch Headquarters and an elaborate stone barn remains on the property.



