

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 17, 2018

Agenda Item: North Sunday Creek Conservation Easement (Endorsed as Ponessa Ranch CE)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 Minutes

Background

FWP proposes to purchase a conservation easement on approximately 14,301 acres of land in Custer and Rosebud counties, Montana. The North Sunday Creek Conservation Easement (Easement) is comprised of over 90% native prairie grassland that supports mule deer, antelope, sharp-tailed grouse, sage-grouse and other grassland-associated wildlife species. The Easement would preclude the conversion of native ground to other cover types, limit development, institute grazing standards and offer public access opportunities. Based upon the terms of the Easement, an independent appraisal service valued the Easement at approximately \$3,432,000. The purchase of the Easement would not exceed the appraised value. Funding acquired through the federal Agricultural Land Easements (ALE) program would cover approximately 44% of the total cost and Habitat Montana funds would cover the remainder.

Public Involvement Process & Results

Public scoping was conducted in February and March 2018, during which the public was asked to identify issues and concerns related to this Easement. Two comments supporting the Easement were received during the scoping process. The draft EA was released to the public and a public hearing was held in Miles City in August 2018. Ten comments were received through the public comment period. Six comments supported, two opposed, and two comments neither supported nor opposed but offered recommendations. Responses to the comments were addressed in the subsequent Decision Notice that was released in September 2018.

Alternatives and Analysis

Proposed Action: To purchase a conservation easement to maintain and improve conservation values and provide public recreational access in perpetuity on approximately 14,301 acres of grassland habitat while keeping the land in private ownership and in agricultural production.

No Action Alternative: FWP would forgo the opportunity to conserve and enhance valuable wildlife habitats with a willing private land partner. There would be no guarantee of public access to the property.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

To conserve and enhance the high conservation values and public recreation opportunities on this land, FWP recommends approval of this proposal by the Fish & Wildlife Commission.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish & Wildlife Commission approve the North Sunday Creek Conservation Easement as presented.