

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 17, 2018

Agenda Item: G/T Ranch Acquisition (R3)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 min

Background:

FWP is seeking endorsement from the commission for purchasing a portion of the G/T Ranch to establish a new wildlife management area north of Confederate Creek along the foothills of the Big Belt Mountains, Broadwater County. The proposed acquisition involves approximately 4,818 acres of private land. The area also includes about 642 acres of BLM inholdings. This proposal involves high-value winter range/yearlong habitat for approximately 300+ elk and 150+ mule deer (numbers vary annually and seasonally) that is adjacent to Helena-Lewis & Clark National Forest, BLM and DNRC lands (see map). The current landowner is interested in selling the land in fee title and has no interest in a conservation easement. The unique big game winter range values associated with this property are considerable and worthy of investigation as an acquisition. The land is predominantly mountain foothill sagebrush grasslands and conifer forest/woodlands interspersed with deciduous draws. Some of the lower elevation includes former and actively farmed croplands that make up about 11% of the proposed acquisition. The property has operated as an amenity ranch and has not supported public hunting, acting instead as an elk refuge during the general hunting season. In addition to conserving and restoring habitats dedicated to wildlife, this acquisition would support significant public hunting and other wildlife-related recreation opportunities.

Public Involvement Process & Results:

Neighboring/local landowners and local sportsmen's groups/hunters were contacted and asked for their informal comments about the potential acquisition. Comments received were across the board. Some individuals were opposed to the project (opposition to a government agency purchasing private land, impacts to county property tax values, weed management, and impacts to elk distribution during and after the hunting season were among the concerns), some individuals were fully supportive of, or at least ok with, the project, and some individuals were on the fence, so to speak, i.e. had some concerns but weren't totally opposed to the idea. The Broadwater County Commission was also asked for their input, and they were supportive of the potential acquisition.

Alternatives and Analysis:

If the property were purchased, it would become a new Wildlife Management Area. As such, the property would require some new boundary fence and would require all the normal activities/costs associated with the establishment and maintenance of a WMA, i.e., FWP staff and time, fence maintenance, noxious weed control, and habitat management. Having the property in public ownership would significantly improve public hunting opportunity, particularly for elk, in that area. The alternative would be to not purchase the property. The property would then likely be purchased as an amenity ranch (which it is currently) for its hunting value and could be subject to subdivision and housing development.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale:

FWP recommends the commission endorse the proposal, allowing the department to further investigate this opportunity and to conduct a necessary due diligence, environmental analysis, and public review.

Proposed Motion:

I move the commission endorse the proposal to acquire a portion of the G/T Ranch, allowing FWP to conduct further work on this possible acquisition.