WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(version 4/2019)

A view into Dog Creek, taken from the proposed Whiskey Ridge Conservation Easement (May 2018)

1. **Region**: 4 **Regional Supervisor**: Gary Bertellotti

   Name of Applicant(s): Sonja Andersen

2. **Date**: 06/11/2019

3. **Project Name**: Whiskey Ridge CE **Type of Project**: Conservation Easement

4. **Size**: 4424 acres (deeded), 7844 acres (leased; 5100 BLM and 2744 DNRC)

5. **Location**: ~9 miles north of Winifred, Fergus County, Region 4, HDs 417 & 426

6. **Map(s)**: See Figures 1 through 4 below proposal text

7. **Project Need**:

   This proposed conservation easement (CE) ties well into the mission, goals, benefits, and application of Habitat Montana as stated in ARM Rule 12.9.508 through 511. It consists of approximately 4,400 deeded acres of primarily sagebrush-grassland at the threshold of the Missouri River Breaks in Fergus County, with an additional 7,844 acres of associated leased public lands (BLM and DNRC). The project area is located about 8.5 miles north-northeast of Winifred, split between Hunting Districts (HDs) 417 and 426 (Figure 1). The property straddles two SWAP Terrestrial Focal Areas, the Greater Sage-Grouse Core Area and the Judith River Focal Area (Figure 2). It comprises a portion of the larger landscape key to maintaining viable populations of bighorn sheep, elk, mule deer, pronghorn, Merriam's wild turkey, sage grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, mountain lion, and a host of native non-game species in central Montana. This property also facilitates improved recreational access to ~15,400 acres of DNRC and BLM lands (including the

above-mentioned leased acres and the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument; UMRBNM; Figure 3).

Most notably, this property and associated breaks provide important habitat and access to the Southern Missouri River Breaks (HD 482) bighorn sheep herd which constitutes an important ecological and recreational resource to Montana. The Missouri Breaks sheep herd comprises of a portion of the state's largest metapopulation of bighorn sheep (>1,000 individuals estimated between HDs 482 and 680).

The landowner currently runs a successful cattle operation on the property, however has sought to diversify his operation by grazing domestic sheep. The landowner has approached FWP about the risks of domestic/wild sheep interactions and the implications to this world-renowned wild sheep herd. As an alternative to running domestic sheep as a means to supplement ranch income, the landowner enrolled in FWP's Block Management Program in 2018, and is now expanding upon his relationship with the Department and shifting to long term ranch protections by pursuing a CE.

Funding for the easement would come from Habitat Montana and the Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF), with possible additional partnerships with the Mule Deer Foundation, Safari Club International, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, among others. The CE would include typical terms as other FWP CEs, but also prohibit domestic sheep/goats on the deeded parcels, ensuring conservation and hunting access to these lands in perpetuity.

8. Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria:

- Breakdown of landcover types by acreages and percent (**Bold** indicates Tier I Community Type; Figure 4):
  - **Wetland/Riparian** (3%)
    - **Open Water** (<1%)
    - Emergent Marsh (<1%)
    - **Great Plains Closed Depressional Wetland** (<1%)
    - **Great Plains Saline Depression Wetland** (<1%)
    - **Great Plains Riparian** (2%)
  - **Shrub Grassland** (53%)
    - **Big Sagebrush Steppe** (38%)
    - **Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairie** (11%)
    - **Great Plains Sand Prairie** (<1%)
    - Intro. Upland Veg – Annual & Biennial Forbland (3%)
  - Pasture/Hay (24%)
  - Cultivated Crops (0%) – landowner recently seeded all cultivated crops back to grass/alfalfa or straight sainfoin alfalfa
  - **Conifer-dominated Forest & Woodland** (18%)
    - Great Plains Ponderosa Pine Woodland & Savanna (8%)
    - Great Plains Wooded Draw & Ravine (<1%)
    - Rocky Mtn Foothill Woodland-Steppe Transition (10%)
  - Breaks/Badlands (2%)
    - Great Plains Badlands (2%)

9. Project Level Criteria

a) **Site-Specific Habitat Values**:
The majority of sagebrush-grassland habitat in Montana is privately-owned, and the single greatest threat to this habitat is cultivation, which has increased substantially in central and eastern Montana over the past 30 years. Therefore, it is imperative to conserve as much native sagebrush-grassland as possible. Additionally, the primary land use in this area is cattle grazing. Poor grazing management can negatively impact sagebrush-grassland systems, thus responsible grazing is a key management strategy important to maintaining the health of this landscape. A CE management plan would implement a rest-rotation grazing system to ensure healthy long-term range conditions. With the leased lands tied to this CE, the footprint for FWP's Minimum Standards for Grazing could expand to over 11,000 acres managed for habitat conservation, livestock and wildlife forage, and cover.

This area provides important year-round habitat for bighorn sheep and mule deer, as well as seasonal habitat for elk. Additionally, the CE would provide potential habitat for the following species of greatest conservation need: Black-tailed prairie dog, dwarf shrew, Merriam's shrew, Preble's shrew, Townsend's big-eared bat, spotted bat, hoary bat, little brown myotis, fringed myotis, swift fox, American bittern, Baird's sparrow, black tern, black-billed cuckoo, bobolink, Brewer's sparrow, burrowing owl, Cassin's finch, chestnut-collared longspur, Clark's nutcracker, common tern, ferruginous hawk, Forster's tern, golden eagle, Great Blue Heron, Greater sage-grouse, green-tailed towhee, horned grebe, loggerhead shrike, long-billed curlew, McCown's longspur, mountain plover, northern goshawk, peregrine falcon, pinyon jay, red-headed woodpecker, sharptailed grouse, Sprague's pipit, veery, white-faced ibis, Great Plains toad, Northern leopard frog, plains spadefoot, greater short-horned lizard, milksnake, spiny softshell, and western hog-nosed snake.

b) **Threat Status**: IMMINENT
The landowner is not currently interested in fee title sale, only a CE. However, he has expressed interest in diversifying his ranching business by adding domestic sheep—which could result in disease transmission to wild bighorns, causing irreversible negative impacts to this world-class bighorn sheep population via potential all-age die-off and suppressed recruitment for decades following. A CE on this property would designate allowable livestock classes, excluding domestic sheep/goats to limit disease transmission concerns, while ensuring further habitat conservation efforts and free public recreational access in perpetuity. While this threat status does not pertain directly to habitat, it does concern an important recreational/wildlife resource for the state of Montana, warranting mention here.

c) **Focal Priority**:
The proposed CE straddles the Region 4 Sage Grouse Core Area Focal Area and the Judith River Focal Area, which are Tier I and Tier II Terrestrial Focal Areas, respectively, as identified by the 2015 State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP). The property also contains three Tier I terrestrial community types of greatest

conservation need (as described above in Section 8): Wetland/Riparian, Shrub/Grassland, and Conifer-dominated Forest and Woodland.

Additionally, the project falls within Priority Area D (which includes Fergus County) of Montana's State Action Plan to protect big game migration routes and winter ranges (particularly for pronghorn, mule deer, and elk) in response to Secretarial Order (SO) 3362.

Finally, the project originated from local FWP staff working with the landowner, as well as a partnership with the Montana Wild Sheep Foundation (WSF), who are committed to providing funding towards this CE, to help conserve and protect the Missouri Breaks bighorn sheep population.

d) **Geographic Effectiveness**:
The proposed C is comprised of five (one large, four smaller) separate parcels, connected via adjoining BLM and DNRC lands (Figure 3). Since Dave Bergum leases the majority of adjacent public lands, conservation activities through this CE will be realized on a much larger scale with the cooperation and partnerships of other land management agencies. Even without neighboring public lands, the 4400-acres of deeded lands associated with this CE provide a significant conservation and partnership opportunity in this area.

e) **Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation**:
The Bergum Ranch has historically allowed free public hunting; in 2018, the ranch enrolled in FWP's Block Management Program (Taffy Creek BMA #195), providing 430 hunter days of access. Adjacent BLM and DNRC lands receive relatively high use from a mixture of deer, elk, bighorn sheep, turkey, and upland game bird hunters, as well as hikers and Missouri River Breaks enthusiasts. Several avenues for legal access exist to these deeded parcels via county roads Stafford Ferry and Whiskey Ridge or via public land. While most of the surrounding public land is already accessible, a CE on this property better facilitates public access to these public lands.

f) **Management Considerations**:
The Bergum Ranch is generally well-maintained with few issues. However, the implementation of a new rest-rotation grazing system to meet FWP's Minimum Standards for Grazing may require the construction of water infrastructure or fences. While additional costs would be associated with adding additional rangeland infrastructure, the construction of new fences would allow the landowner to conform to wildlife-friendly fencing design, and better allow the department to implement recommendations and direction associated with SO 3362 to conserve big game winter range and movements.

Figure 1. Proposed Whiskey Ridge Conservation Easement (CE) in relation to the town of Winifred, the Missouri River, and hunting districts (HDs) 417 and 426.

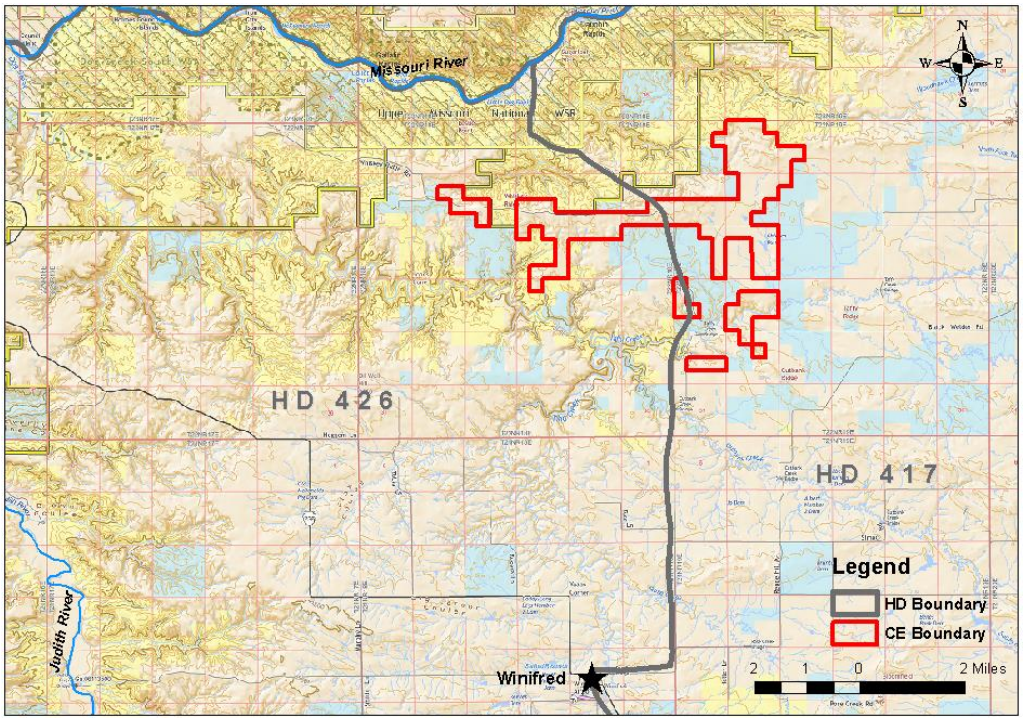


Figure 2. Proposed Whiskey Ridge CE in relation to the Tier I Sage Grouse Core Area Focal Area and Tier II Judith River Focal Area.

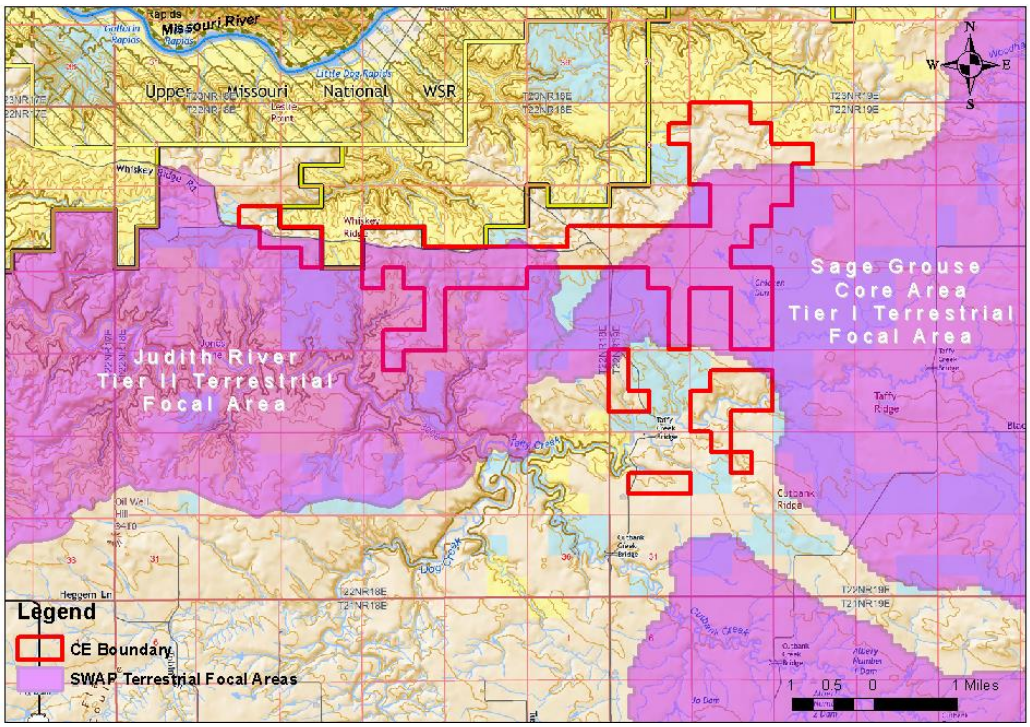


Figure 3. Leased federal (BLM) and state (DNRC) acreages associated with the proposed Whiskey Ridge CE.

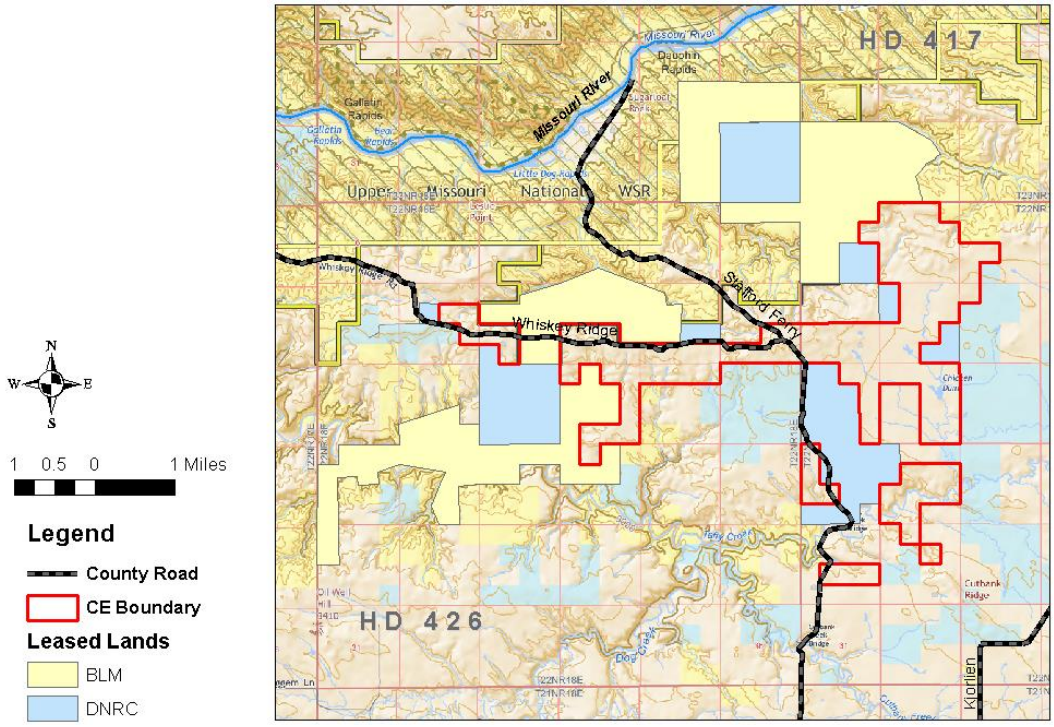
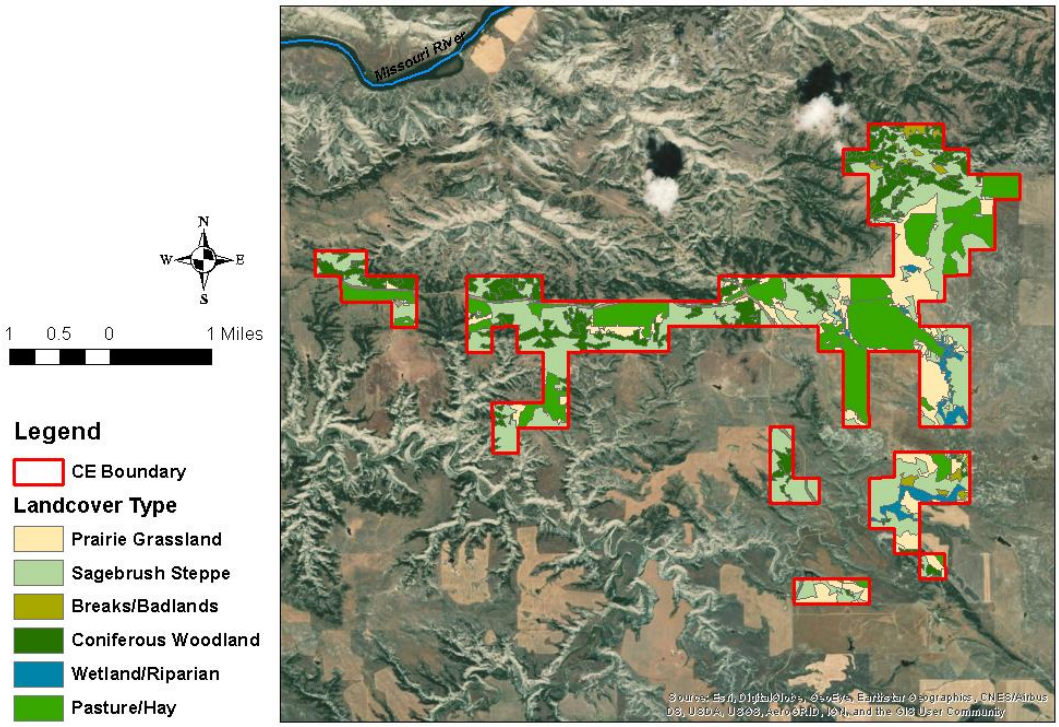


Figure 4. Landcover types on the proposed Whiskey Ridge CE.



The proposed Whiskey Ridge CE facilitates improved access to the Missouri River Breaks National Monument.

View from Whiskey Ridge Road, overlooking sainfoin alfalfa fields on the proposed Whiskey Ridge CE.

Sagebrush-grassland is intermixed with ponderosa pine-timbered breaks on portions of the proposed Whiskey Ridge CE.

Dave Bergum’s property and surrounding public lands provide excellent habitat for a variety of big game species, including bighorn sheep, elk, and mule deer.

Looking south from Dave Bergum’s driveway along Stafford Ferry Road towards Winifred.