

## ***FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET***

**Meeting Date:** August 18, 2011

**Agenda Item:** Proposed Stimson Forestlands Conservation Easement

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Tentative Approval

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

### **Background**

Stimson Lumber Company has offered to sell a conservation easement on 28,000 acres of their land in northwest Montana near Troy. This transaction is being facilitated by The Trust for Public Land. The property includes over 20 miles of perennial stream, 14 miles of which support spawning and rearing habitat for bull trout, interior redband trout, and pure-strain westslope cutthroat trout. The lands also provide key wildlife corridors linking public lands in the Cabinet, West Cabinet and Purcell mountains, benefitting wide-ranging species like elk, bear, wolf, lynx, fisher and wolverine. The land is home to priority conservation species such as Coeur d'Alene salamander, western toad, harlequin duck, bald eagle, flammulated owl, and Townsend's big-eared bat. This area provides some of the highest hunter densities for big game, and the highest density upland bird hunting, in the state. Stimson currently allows public hunting access through the Block Management Program. The proposed conservation easement would secure continued public recreational access into the future. Funding for the \$16 million project would come from federal grants to FWP and a commitment for a below-market sale price by Stimson Lumber.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

FWP and TPL have conducted preliminary public outreach and have received strong support by numerous local conservation groups including the local rod and gun clubs and local community groups. FWP has received letters of support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Kootenai National Forest, Kootenai Tribe of Idaho, and the Selkirk/Cabinet-Yaak Subcommittee of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee. The Lincoln County Commissioner from Troy has offered preliminary support but is concerned with maintaining motorized public access on the Stimson property in the Ruby Creek watershed.

### **Alternatives and Analysis:**

- 1) No action. This would miss an opportunity to conserve important fish and wildlife habitats across a large landscape. Stimson is liquidating their land holdings near Missoula and could consider selling these lands near Troy for future development if the conservation easement is not purchased.
- 2) FWP could propose to purchase a conservation easement on only some of the lands, but that option may miss out on the opportunity to conserve some key parcels. Sale or development of the remaining Stimson lands could result in significant fragmentation of the forest and riparian ecosystems.
- 3) FWP could propose to purchase fee-ownership of only some parcels should Stimson choose to sell some or all these lands but the overall cost would be significantly higher and the benefits of scale and ecosystem integrity would not be realized.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends that the commission grant permission to negotiate the terms and purchase of this conservation easement with TPL and Stimson Lumber Company to fully develop this proposed project and address public issues or concerns.

### **Proposed Motion**

I move that the commission grant FWP preliminary approval to negotiate a conservation easement on 28,000 acres of Stimson Lumber Company land.

