

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: August 18, 2011

Agenda Item: Browning Ranch Conservation Easement

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorse Course of Action

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

FWP proposes to purchase a conservation easement on 2,847 acres owned by Tom Browning located about 12 miles north of Mosby. The property consists of a mixture of plains forest, sagebrush grassland and plains river riparian including 3.5 miles of Musselshell River frontage and associated cottonwood bottoms. The easement purchase, and development and management of this site in partnership with the Browning Family, gives FWP the opportunity to work with a successful ranching operation: (1) cooperatively enhance and manage native habitats for the benefit of wildlife, domestic livestock, the landowner and recreationists. (2) develop long term riparian and upland wildlife best management practices on the property, (3) increase public recreational opportunity, (4) protect healthy blocks of riparian and sagebrush habitats, and (5) support activities that encourage sustainable land management practices such as rest rotation grazing. The property provides the public with a number of recreational opportunities including: hunting, fishing and wildlife watching. Management activities would include development and implementation of a rest rotation grazing system and the evaluation of irrigated cropland to determine management strategies to benefit livestock and wildlife to include riparian restoration, dense nesting cover, brood cover and winter food plots.

Public Involvement Process & Results

Upon approval to proceed from FWP Commission, terms, covenants and a management plan will be developed. Once these are formulated and are mutually agreed upon an Environmental Assessment will be completed, with a public-comment period and additional public involvement.

Alternatives and Analysis

Proposed Action: Purchase a conservation easement on 2,847 acres along and adjacent to the Musselshell River owned by Tom Browning. FWP would secure permanent public access to this land and develop a rest-rotation grazing system and riparian management opportunities to benefit the land, wildlife, domestic livestock, landowners and the people of the State of Montana. This project would conserve animal and plant species biodiversity and important wildlife habitat.

No Action alternative: FWP would forgo the opportunity to develop, manage and enhance the property with a willing private land partner. There would be no guarantee of public access to the property for recreation and land access would not be secured for the public.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends approval by the FWP Commission to proceed with the purchase of the conservation easement from the Tom Browning Ranch. The project will conserve and protect important riparian/cropland, rangeland habitats along the Musselshell River and provide permanent public recreational access.

Proposed Motion

private:stream

I move that the commission grant FWP preliminary approval to negotiate a conservation easement on 2,847 acres from the Tom Browning Ranch.