Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

2300 Lake Elmo Drive
Billings MT 59105

August 6, 2012

TO: Environmental Quality Council
Director's Office, Dept. of Environmental Quality
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP)*

Director's Office	Lands Section
Parks Division	Design & Construction
Fisheries Division	Legal Unit
Wildlife Division	Regional Supervisors

Sarah Elliott, Press Agent, Governor's Office*
Maureen Theisen, Governor's Office*
Montana Historical Society, State Preservation Office
Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council
Montana Wildlife Federation
Montana State Library
George Ochenski
Montana Environmental Information Center
Wayne Hirst, Montana State Parks Foundation
FWP Commissioner Shane Colton*
Montana Parks Association/Our Montana (land acquisition projects)
Richard Moore, DNRC Area Manager, Southern Land Office
Stillwater County Commissioners
Adjacent Landowners
Other Local Interested People or Groups
* (Sent electronically)

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The enclosed draft Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared to collect public input on FWP's proposal to acquire 1,105 acres as an addition to the existing Big Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA), located near Molt, MT. The draft EA is available in hardcopy, electronic file, or on the FWP website (fwp.mt.gov). A public meeting to discuss this proposal will be held at the FWP Region 5 Headquarters in Billings at 2300 Lake Elmo Drive on Thursday, August 16, 2012 from 7:00-9:00 PM.

If you have questions or need additional copies of the draft EA, please contact FWP at 247-2940. Please send any written comments postmarked no later than August 31, 2012 to the following address:

Ray Mule'
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
2300 Lake Elmo Drive
Billings, MT 59105 or
rmule'@mt.gov

Thank you for your interest,

Gary Hammond
Region 5 Supervisor

Enclosure

DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

BIG LAKE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA EASTSIDE ADDITION LAND ACQUISITION

August 2012

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

REGION 5 MIGRATORY BIRD HABITAT PROPOSED LAND PROJECT

I. INTRODUCTION AND PROPOSED ACTION:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes the purchase approximately 1,105 acres of important wildlife habitat along the eastern shore of Big Lake. The property is located along the east boundary of Big Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) approximately 23 miles northwest of Billings and 6 miles west of Molt, Montana (Figure 1). The property is currently operated as part of a private ranch; the primary land use is cattle grazing. The property is not currently listed for sale. However, the current owners have indicated their willingness to sell to FWP. FWP has completed an appraisal on one of the three parcels considered for purchase in this EA. This appraisal coupled with the understanding that the proposed purchase provides perpetual benefits for the management of the entire WMA was used as the basis for a purchase offer.

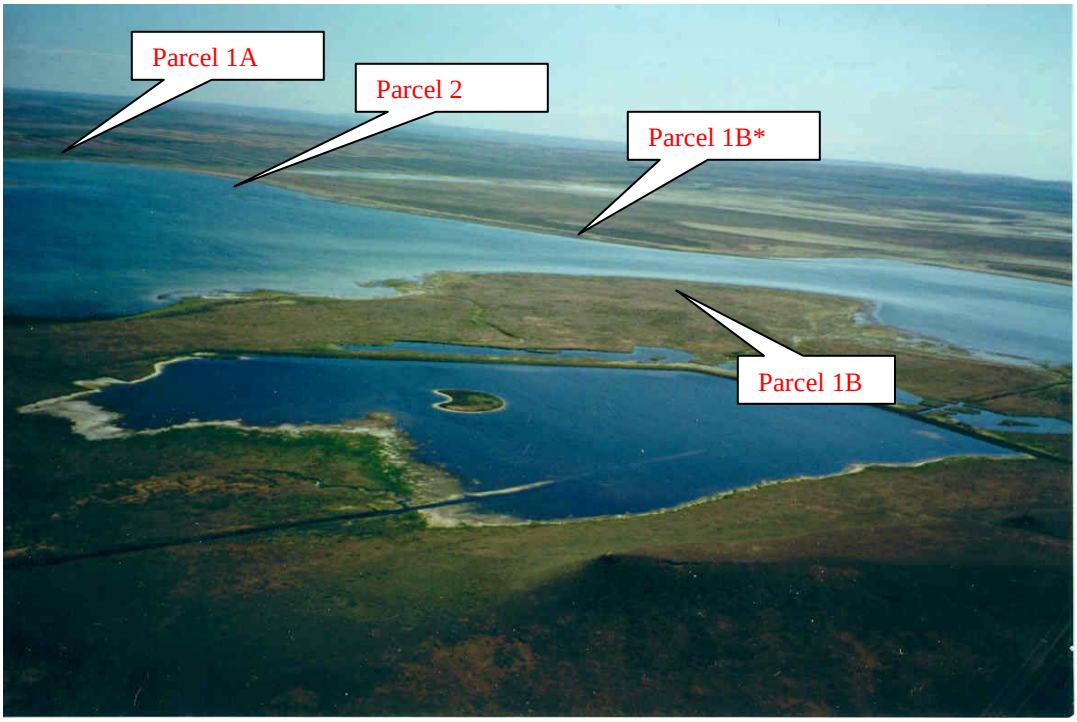
The property would be purchased using Migratory Bird Habitat Program funding. These parcels would be added to the existing WMA and managed under the existing WMA Management Plan (Big Lake WMA, Management Plan Draft, October 2009). This acquisition would allow FWP to own and manage nearly the entire shoreline of Big Lake. The purchase would provide public recreation opportunities and habitat benefits for these parcels, as well as significantly improve the overall habitat management effectiveness of the WMA. The property consists primarily of plains grassland habitat bordering the Big Lake Basin, in addition to the lake basin itself. Grasses dominate upland habitats, while the lakebed is primarily alkaline flats during low water periods. Large expanses of greasewood are present along the shoreline.

Big Lake WMA lies in the Hailstone Basin and is the terminal lake in a series of lakes which include Hailstone and Halfbreed National Wildlife Refuges. The WMA includes approximately 2,118 acres of public lands, all of which have been purchased or leased since 1981. The primary purpose for acquiring the WMA was to provide quality waterfowl nesting and staging habitat to help mitigate waterfowl losses due to power line collisions with a 500 KV power line near Lake Broadview. The land was purchased with Lake Broadview mitigation funds that were administered through FWP and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC). Portions of the WMA are also leased from the DNRC. The WMA provides recreation opportunities for waterfowl, upland bird, and big game hunting, bird watching, wildlife viewing, hiking, and photography.

The scope of this Environmental Assessment (EA) is the acquisition of the property. No facilities or site development are planned for the proposed parcels other than fence improvements and maintenance as described below.

In proposing to acquire the three land parcels, FWP seeks to meet the following needs:

- To protect and enhance riparian and upland habitats.
- To improve habitat management effectiveness on the WMA through the ability to exclude livestock from sensitive riparian habitats.
- To secure the future wildlife and recreation benefits of the WMA~~,~~ by ensuring no development occurs along the shoreline and habitat quality is improved.
- To provide public recreational access to over 3,223 acres of contiguous habitat.



Aerial photo of Big Lake WMA during a wet period (circa 1997) looking northeast showing approximate locations of parcels 1a, 1b and 2. *Note the strip of Greasewood nesting cover (dark green area) present along the east shore of Big Lake in Parcel 2, denoted by the text tag. The 60-acre subimpoundment in the foreground was constructed in 1986 to provide more reliable brood-rearing water. The lake filled with water again in 2011, and remains nearly full, as shown in the photo, during the early spring of 2012.

Riparian and wetland communities support the highest concentration of plants and animals in Montana (Ellis 2008). The proposed acquisition secures the entire shoreline of Big Lake. During years with average to above average precipitation the WMA provides high quality breeding, brood rearing and migration habitat for many species of waterfowl, water birds, and shorebirds. Mudflats along the shoreline of section 30 (Parcel 1a + 2, Figure 2) provide a valuable foraging area for nesting and migrating shorebirds, such as black-necked stilts (Species of Concern, NHP 2012). During periods of low to moderate precipitation the lake basin may not fill sufficiently to produce significant waterfowl habitat, however the upland habitat component still provides important nesting habitat. The expanse of greasewood in Parcel 1b (Figure 2) provides nesting cover for waterfowl such as mallards, gadwalls, teal, and pintails, as well as various songbird species.

Successful completion of this proposal will benefit the conservation and management of a rare habitat type in south central Montana. The acquisition of these parcels is listed as high priority in the 2009 Draft Big Lake WMA Management Plan. Nesting and migrating waterfowl, shorebirds, upland birds, and big game will benefit through the conservation and enhancement of newly purchased lands. The purchase will ensure a high quality hunting and wildlife viewing experience at the WMA, and eliminate the possibility of development along the shoreline that would greatly reduce habitat value and recreation opportunities on the existing WMA. The proposed purchase has far reaching positive impacts not only for three parcels but for the entire WMA. Waterfowl and upland bird habitat will be improved on the existing WMA by enabling

FWP to manage these lands in the absence of trespass livestock grazing. The location of the current WMA boundary, in conjunction with fluctuating water levels, makes it unfeasible to fence out neighboring livestock from the east. As such, FWP is currently unable to control the timing or intensity of livestock grazing on the WMA. This purchase will allow FWP to effectively fence the east boundary of the expanded WMA to exclude livestock from sensitive riparian habitats and waterfowl nesting habitat within the WMA.

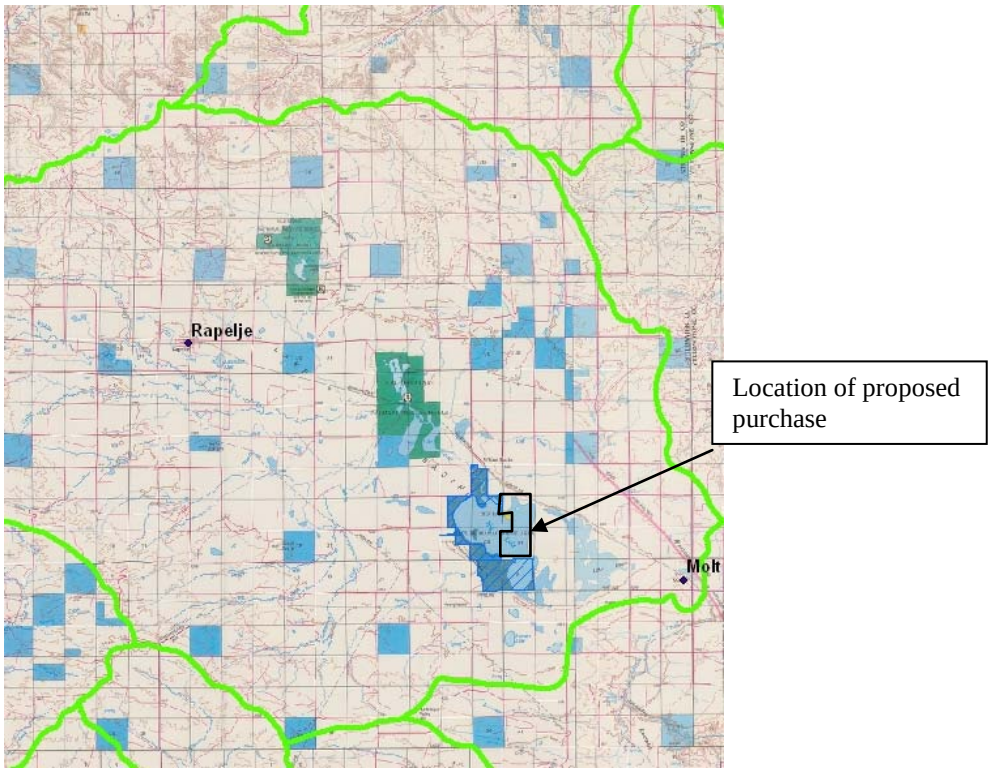


Figure 1: The location of the proposed parcels. Big Lake WMA is denoted by blue hatch marks. National Wildlife Refuges are indicated in dark green. Fifth-level HUCs are delineated in light green.

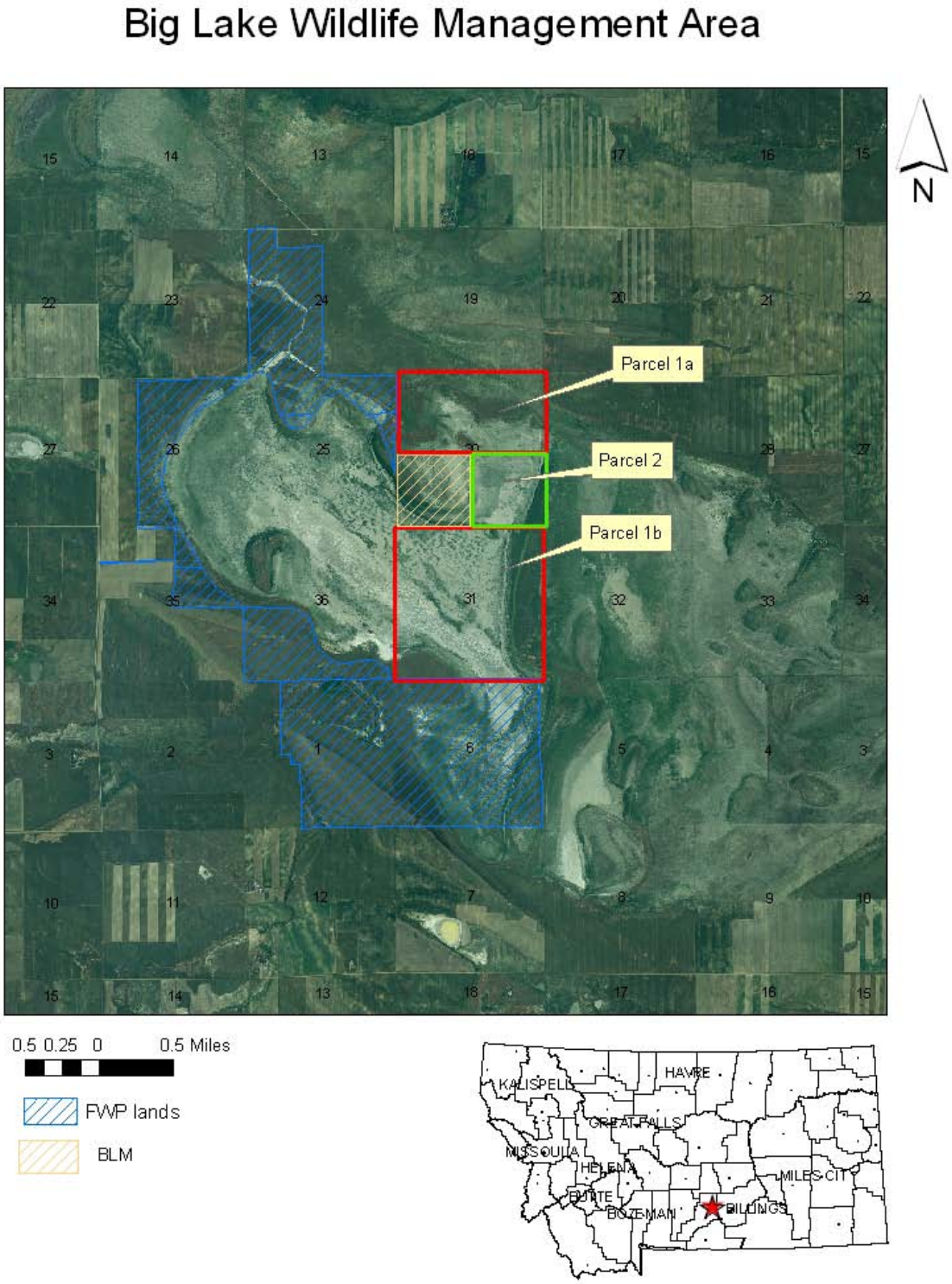


Figure 2. Aerial view of proposed purchase in relation to current Big Lake WMA.

II. PROPOSED LAND PROJECT

Date: June 1, 2012
Property Name: Big Lake WMA Eastside Addition
Location: FWP Region 5 - Deer and Elk Hunting District 500 - Stillwater County. The parcels are located about 23 miles northwest of Billings, Montana, adjacent to Big Lake WMA.
Landownership: These properties consist of 1,105 acres (deeded) in three parcels along the eastern boundary of Big Lake WMA. These parcels comprise the remainder of the shoreline of Big Lake adjacent to the WMA, but not currently conserved within the WMA. The northern and southern parcels are owned by the same landowner and total 945 acres. The remaining 160 acre parcel is held by a second landowner and located between the first two parcels. These three parcels are contiguous and encompass the eastern shore of Big Lake. Private lands surround these parcels to the north and east. Their western boundary adjoins Big Lake WMA.
Legal Description: Deeded-parcel 1a: N1/2 30 T2N R22E (312 acres); parcel 1b: S31 T2N R22E (633 acres). Parcel 2 SE S30 T2N R22E (160 acres).
Public Review Period: Comments will be accepted from August 6, 2012 through August 31, 2012 at 5:00 PM.
Public Hearing: A public hearing is scheduled at the Fish, Wildlife and Parks office, 2300 Lake Elmo Drive, Billings, MT, from 7:00-9:00 PM on August 16, 2012.
Contact Person: FWP Region 5 Wildlife Manager Ray Mule', (406) 247-2960 or rmule'@mt.gov

III. EXISTING ENVIRONMENT

1. Habitat:

a) Identified Habitats: The property consists primarily of plains grassland habitat bordering the Big Lake Basin, as well as the lake basin itself. Grasses dominate upland habitats, while the lakebed is primarily alkaline flats during low water periods. Large expanses of greasewood are present along the shoreline. Specifically, Parcel 1a (Figure 2) consists of approximately 197.25 acres of upland habitat, 114.75 acres of wetland/lakebed, as well as a 5.25-acre island dominated by grassland cover. Parcel 1b consists of a 30-acre patch of upland habitat in the southwest corner, approximately 496 acres of wetland/lakebed, and 77 acres of dense greasewood habitat bordering the lake along the eastern edge of the section. The greasewood patch is approximately 0.88 miles long and 0.16 miles wide at its widest point. This long strip of cover provides some of the best dense nesting cover for waterfowl along the shore of Big Lake. This habitat can be improved by incorporation into the existing WMA through improved grazing management. Parcel 2 consists of approximately 140 ac of wetland/lakebed, an additional 15 ac of greasewood, and 5 ac of shortgrass prairie/upland habitat.

Priority habitats contained within the WMA and proposed acquisition of Parcels 1 and 2 include **Wetland** during wet years, as well as associated **Sagebrush and Salt Flats,** with some **Mixed Shrub/Grass Associations**, as described in Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CFWCS, FWP 2005). Plains Grassland and Riparian are also two of the six habitat types that have been designated "important habitat types that are seriously threatened" in the FWP Statewide Habitat Plan. These habitat types are uncommon in this part of the state, and a series of such basins connected by a common drainage is unique.

2. Land Criteria:

a) Resource Values: Riparian and wetland communities support the highest concentration of plants and animals in Montana (Ellis 2008). The proposed acquisition secures the entire shoreline of Big Lake. During years with average to above average precipitation the WMA provides high quality breeding, brood rearing and migration habitat for many species of waterfowl, waterbirds, and shorebirds. Mudflats along the shoreline of section 30 (Parcel 1a + 2, Figure 2) provide a valuable foraging area for nesting and migrating shorebirds, such as black-necked stilts (Species of Concern, NHP 2012). During periods of low to moderate precipitation the lake basin may not fill sufficiently to produce significant waterfowl habitat, however the upland habitat component still provides important nesting habitat. The expanse of greasewood in Parcel 1b provides nesting cover for waterfowl, especially mallards and gadwall, and songbirds such as lark bunting.

Parcel 1a contains a 58-acre black-tailed prairie dog colony that provides habitat for nesting burrowing owls, and prey for ferruginous hawks that likely nest nearby. This is part of a much larger black-tailed prairie dog colony (~1000 contiguous acres) that continues east and south of the parcels proposed for purchase. All three of these species are Species of Concern (NHP 2012), and black-tailed prairie dogs and burrowing owls are Tier 1 species of Greatest Conservation Need (FWP 2005). Prairie dogs may also provide additional habitat for mountain plover (Tier 1). In fact, more than 30 vertebrate species are considered dependent on the prairie dog ecosystem for food or shelter. Their important ecosystem role combined with declines in their habitat over the last century has prompted the heightened status of prairie dogs.

Upland birds including sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian (gray) partridge rely on the WMA for nesting, brood rearing, and winter habitat. Antelope and mule deer are also common on the WMA and both species use the area throughout the year. The grasslands also provide habitat for many songbirds, including chestnut-collared longspur (Species of Concern, NHP 2012), lark bunting and Vesper sparrow.

There are over 300 terrestrial vertebrate species that are found within the grasslands community type. The CFWCS (FWP 2005) lists the following Tier I Species of Greatest Conservation Need that may be found in mixed shrub and grassland communities: northern leopard frog, western hog-nosed snake, milksnake, greater sage-grouse, mountain plover, long-billed curlew, burrowing owl, Townsend's big-eared bat, black-tailed prairie dog, and meadow jumping mouse.

Photo taken in the June 2011, looking northeast over the brood pond. Proposed purchase is along the far shoreline near the top of the photo.

Historically this habitat type is rare in south-central Montana. Many smaller wetland basins have been converted to farmland while many large basins are not being managed in a manner that is favorable for waterfowl and wildlife production. When the Big Lake basin has water the productivity of this area increases dramatically. Characteristics of this area include a productive wetland ecosystem in association with a prairie grassland ecosystem. It provides native wildlife with year-round habitat and also provides important breeding and migration areas for migratory birds.

b) Threat Status: When the basin fills with water the threat status is rated as "probable" for these parcels. Housing developments are expanding west of Billings and land values for recreational purposes could also increase substantially when Big Lake holds water. The property owners are considering all options for the future of the property, and it is possible this land could see some form of development or agricultural practice that could reduce habitat quality and recreation opportunity on the WMA.

c) Degree of Protection: FWP currently owns approximately ¾ of the land that borders the high water mark of the Big Lake Basin. Securing management authority around the entire perimeter will insure that this area continues to provide maximum benefits for waterfowl, upland birds, big game, and other native species. Public recreation opportunities will also be enhanced in an area with Montana's largest urban population where public access is becoming increasingly limited.

d) Geographic Location: This land is located approximately five miles west of Molt, MT, and approximately 23 miles northwest of Billings, MT. Big Lake is the terminal end of the Yellowstone-Lake Basin watershed in south central Montana. Big Lake Basin drainage area is 253,801 ac in size and includes a series of natural basins including Hailstone National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Halfbreed Lake NWR. In addition to these larger complexes there are several other smaller basins scattered throughout the system, mostly located on private land. Private land use is dominated by dry-land grain farming and grazing where the emphasis is on commercial production rather than wildlife habitat. Wildlife values and habitat in the Big Lake WMA are generally of higher quality than the rest of the Yellowstone-Lake Basin watershed.

e) Conserve and Enhance Land, Water and Wildlife: At the present time the WMA consists of 2,118 acres of deeded property. The Big Lake Basin covers approximately 2,800 acres at full pool. The purchase of another 1,105 acres on the east side of the basin would help to protect in perpetuity one of the very few large wetland habitats in south central Montana. The primary goal is to maintain and improve native cover to increase productivity for waterfowl, upland birds and other native species. A wide range of waterfowl and shorebirds use the wetland areas while antelope, mule deer, sharp-tailed grouse and numerous other species make use of the adjacent prairie habitat.

f) Contribute to Hunting and Fishing Opportunity: Big Lake WMA provides hunting and other recreation opportunities in close proximity to Billings, the largest population center in the state. Vehicle travel is restricted to existing roads; some seasonal road closures have been implemented to protect the resource and ensure nesting security and quality hunting opportunities for the public. Hunter days vary depending on whether or not the basin has water. The annual hunter days are estimated to be approximately 300 when there is no water and about 500 when there is water. When the lake has water, on the opening day of waterfowl season there are generally about 25 hunters on the lake, with waterfowl hunting continuing until the lake freezes over. Hunters also pursue antelope, mule deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge on the existing WMA.

The proposed acquisition will be publically accessible through the existing WMA and provide opportunities for waterfowl hunting along the east and northeast shores of the lake. Mallards,

northern pintails, American widgeon, redheads, canvasbacks, teal, and tundra swans compromise the majority of waterfowl species hunters will likely encounter.

No sport fishing opportunities exist on the WMA or the proposed purchase.

g) Provide Incentives for Habitat Conservation on Private Land: Grazing is not currently used as a management tool on the WMA, although some grazing does occur by trespass livestock because of fencing problems on the east side of the area. Consultation with the FWP range specialist indicates the native vegetation on the WMA is responding well to grazing rest, allowing for improvements in native plant condition and abundance. No grazing is planned to occur on the proposed parcels in the immediate future. At some point it may be beneficial to trade grazing opportunity on this property for grazing management and public access on adjacent private lands.

h) Contribute to Non-hunting Recreation: The WMA is designated as a wildlife viewing area and listed in the Montana Wildlife Viewing Guide. Wildlife viewing and bird watching has always been a popular activity in this area. Bird watchers, most notably members of the local Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society, account for most of the wildlife viewing days on the WMA. Neighboring farmers, ranchers and their families also have an interest in the area's wildlife. Of particular interest in this area are prairie dogs, burrowing owls and ferruginous hawks.

g) Protect Open Space and Scenic Areas: This project would add to the open space and scenic areas available for public use within close proximity to a large population center. It would ensure the preservation of a very unique ecosystem in this part of the state. The property will be protected from subdivision and other such development in perpetuity.

i) Maintain Local Tax Base: FWP annually pays county governments an in-lieu-of-tax payment equivalent to the property tax that would be assessed on a private landowner. This payment will ensure that Stillwater County property-tax proceeds are not diminished by FWP ownership of these properties.

3. Current Condition of Habitat: Grasses dominate upland habitats, while the lakebed is primarily alkaline flats during low water periods. Large expanses of greasewood are present along the shoreline. Specifically, Parcel 1a consists of approximately 197.25 acres of upland habitat, 114.75 acres of wetland/lakebed, as well as a 5.25-acre island dominated by grassland cover. Parcel 1b consists of a 30-acre patch of upland habitat in the southwest corner, approximately 496 acres of wetland/lakebed, and 77 acres of dense greasewood habitat bordering the lake along the eastern edge of the section. The greasewood patch is approximately 0.88 miles long and 0.16 miles wide at its widest point. Current habitat on the proposed project is generally in fair condition. Most of the land proposed for acquisition has been consistently grazed for many years. Under FWP ownership, the land will be rested from grazing resulting in increased wildlife habitat value and recreation opportunities.

4. Current and Potential Recreation Opportunities: This area provides hunting and other recreation opportunities in close proximity to Billings, the largest population center in the state.

The annual hunter days are estimated to be approximately 300 when there is no water in Big Lake and about 500 when there is water. Hunters also pursue antelope, mule deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge. The proposed acquisition will be publically accessible through the existing WMA and provide opportunities for waterfowl hunting along the east and northeast shores of the lake. Mallards, northern pintails, American widgeon, redheads, canvasbacks, teal, and tundra swans compromise the majority of waterfowl species hunters will likely encounter.

The Big Lake WMA is designated as a wildlife viewing area and listed in the Montana Wildlife Viewing Guide. Wildlife viewing and bird watching has always been a popular activity in this area. Bird watchers account for most of the wildlife viewing days on the WMA; of particular interest in this area are prairie dogs, burrowing owls and ferruginous hawks.

Recreational use will be managed by regulating level and type of access, level and type of facility provided and through implementing the standard FWP recreational use regulations (A.R.M 12.8.101 – 12.8.213), the FWP Commercial Use Rule (ARM 12.14.101- 12.14.170) and any special regulations developed for this property.

5. Other Management Considerations: Game damage has not been a major issue in this area due to the relatively low densities of big game species and the dry-land farming methods employed by area landowners. The purchase of these parcels is not expected to create any new game damage issues in the area.

The acquired parcels will be managed under the current Big Lake WMA Management Plan. Currently the fence along the eastern boundary of the parcels is in poor condition. In some places the fence does not follow the property line due to fluctuating water levels and unstable soil for fence construction. The proposed project would require repairing existing fence and/or constructing new fence along a two mile span to keep cattle from the adjacent property from wandering onto the WMA. Any new fence construction would follow FWP Wildlife Friendly Fence design standards. In addition to the two miles of fence along the eastern boundary of the

parcels, some fence reconstruction may be needed to tie the new parcels fence back into the existing fence at the south east corner of the WMA (along the eastern boundary of Section 6). No significant increase in manpower need is projected once the purchase and fence work is completed. Maintaining high quality waterfowl nesting habitat as well as brood rearing and staging habitat will remain the top priority. As a secondary goal, upland habitat projects may be undertaken to maintain or improve the quality of cover for upland birds. Non-game species as well as mule deer and antelope will benefit from habitat enhancement.

Noxious weeds will be monitored and chemically controlled where appropriate in accordance with the Big Lake WMA Management Plan. No noxious weed infestations are currently known to occur on the proposed site. FWP will conduct a site visit with the Stillwater County Weed District to check the proposed parcels for weed occurrence and to develop a weed management protocol that meets the needs of Stillwater County and FWP.

Fisheries: No sport fisheries opportunities currently exist on Big Lake WMA or the parcels proposed for acquisition.

6. Relation to the Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Conservation Strategy:

Priority habitats contained within the WMA and proposed acquisition of Parcels 1 and 2 include Wetland and Sagebrush and Salt Flats as described in Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CFWCS, FWP 2005). Tier 1 species that are known to be present in the proposed acquisition include black-tailed prairie dogs, burrowing owl, and long-billed curlew. Other Tier 1 species that may be found in the area include western hognose snake, milksnake, northern leopard frog, bald eagle, and Greater sage grouse. This acquisition would serve to protect these habitats and species, as per the CFWCS.

The habitat types represented by Parcel 1 and 2 are reflective of high priority habitats in CFWCS, and their acquisition and conservation would fulfill the objectives within the CFWCS.

The table below lists the proportion of the property that fall within the various CFWCS Tier 1 Community Types:

Class	Percent with Lake Included	Percent with Lake Removed
Not Tier 1	56	37
Grassland	13	16
Mixed Shrub-Grassland	16	23
Sagebrush and Salt Flats	7	12
Riparian and Wetland	5	9
Mixed Broadleaf Forest	2	4

IV. ALTERNATIVES:

1. Alternative A – Acquisition of Big Lake WMA Eastside Addition Parcels (Proposed Action):

FWP proposes to purchase 1,105 acres of important wildlife habitat along the eastern shore of Big Lake as described in this Environmental Assessment (EA). Through the Proposed Action, FWP would enhance waterfowl and upland habitat on these parcels. A second critically important benefit would be a resulting improvement to habitat quality and management effectiveness on the existing Big Lake WMA. This project would conserve animal and plant species biodiversity and important wildlife habitat that exists on these lands, including riparian, sagebrush-greasewood, and mixed shrub grasslands.

2. Alternative B – No Action:

Under the No Action alternative, FWP would forgo the opportunity to purchase the Eastside Addition parcels. Waterfowl and upland bird nesting habitat would continue to be compromised on Big Lake WMA due to the inability to adequately manage trespass livestock on the WMA from adjacent private lands. It is possible that under the No Action alternative a portion of this property could be developed for rural home sites, with significant adverse impacts to natural habitats and recreation opportunities on the adjacent Big Lake WMA.

3. Alternatives Eliminated from Further Study

An alternative to purchasing the parcels would be to purchase a conservation easement on the property, rather than acquiring fee-title ownership. However, at this time, the property owners are not interested in selling a conservation easement, but rather fee-title to the properties. FWP cannot project the intent of future owners. Therefore, the alternative of purchasing a conservation easement was excluded from further study.

V. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND POTENTIAL IMPACTS

1. Physical and Biological Environment

a) Land Resources

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, land resources within the property would be protected and managed for wildlife habitat values and recreational use. There is substantial value in conserving property of this size with this level of biodiversity; those values will be maintained or improved with fee-title acquisition.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, it is possible that this property could be developed or maintained solely for private recreation. The No Action will not address a growing problem of decreasing public access to wildlife and recreation. Development of the property could result

in the loss or disturbance of important wildlife resources, including riparian and native shrub-grassland habitats.

b) Air Quality

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, air quality would be maintained or improved by managing vegetation for wildlife habitat. No prescribed burning for the benefit of wildlife is planned for these parcels. No new roads will be constructed. Access roads to these parcels are initially proposed to be for administrative use only, primarily for the purposes of boundary fence construction and repair. No increase in dust due to roads is anticipated.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no change in air quality for this location assuming current management continues.

c) Water Resources

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, water resources on or adjacent to these parcels will be enhanced by protecting riparian areas on the WMA. There are no proposed changes that would result in increased runoff, changes in drainage patterns, changes in the quality or quantity of groundwater, and/or changes in water rights or other water uses.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, water resources on this land will continue to be impacted by grazing of riparian habitats.

d) Vegetation

Proposed Action: The Proposed Action would result in an improvement to the diversity, quantity and quality of native vegetation on the land parcels. Habitat quality and management effectiveness would also be improved on Big Lake WMA because trespass livestock could be fenced out of the WMA. The current Big Lake Management Plan (which would be used to manage these new parcels) calls for no livestock grazing. No grazing is planned to occur on the proposed parcels in the immediate future. At some point in the future it may be beneficial to trade grazing opportunity on this property for grazing management and public access on adjacent private lands. No Plant Species of Concern are known to occupy these land parcels.

No known weed infestations occur on the parcels proposed for purchase. However, infrequent occurrences of thistle occur on the WMA and are managed annually according to the Big Lake WMA Management Plan. Weed management on the parcels will be done in accordance with the Big Lake WMA Management Plan. Native vegetation will be managed and enhanced for its wildlife value.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, cattle will continue to cross the lake bed during periods of low water and move onto Big Lake WMA. Due to fluctuating water levels there is no effective way to fence cattle from the neighboring ranch out of the existing Big Lake WMA. Native vegetation as well as dense nesting cover plots will continue to be impacted by unmanaged cattle use of the WMA. Although the risk of development on the parcels is minimal,

development would likely result in negative impacts to the native plant communities, including an increase in noxious weeds due to building and road construction and disruption of soils.

e) Fish & Wildlife Resources:

Proposed Action: Long-term impacts, under the Proposed Action, should be positive for wildlife resources due to the protection and enhancement of habitat for all native species. When Big Lake is inundated with water, estimates of duck numbers in early October have generally been around 20,000, consisting primarily of several species of dabbling ducks, including mallard, gadwall, northern pintail, American widgeon, northern shoveler, and blue-winged teal. Diving ducks may also use the area, including redheads, lesser scaup, and canvasbacks. Many of the dabbling ducks, as well as lesser scaup and Canada geese, also nest on the Big Lake WMA. As many as 500 Canada geese, 600 tundra swans, and occasionally several hundred snow geese stop at Big Lake during their fall migration (James Hansen, FWP, pers. com. 2011). Up to 50 antelope and 30 mule deer have been seen on the area. Upland birds, including Hungarian partridge and sharp-tailed grouse, utilize the WMA and the proposed parcels for nesting, brood rearing and winter habitat.

A number of nongame birds also use the area. Up to 30,000 shorebirds of various species have been estimated on the lake during spring and fall migration. Several species also nest in the area including American avocets (up to 150 nests), and on occasion Black-necked stilts. Common songbirds observed in the uplands include western meadowlark, lark bunting, chestnut-collared longspur, and vesper sparrow.

No Action: Due to the possibility of development or negative changes in agricultural practices the wildlife resources may not be protected under the No Action Alternative.

2. Human Environment:

a) Noise and Electrical Effects:

Proposed Action: The proposed project may result in more people visiting the area, but should have no significant impact on noise levels, or create electrostatic effects that could be detrimental to human health, or interfere with radio or television reception.

No Action: No Action could result in development of the property, which could increase noise and electrical effects in the area. No development by other owners would result in no changes to noise and electricity in the area.

b) Land Use:

Proposed Action: Currently, the parcels are utilized for seasonal cattle grazing and private recreational property. Under the Proposed Action, the area will be managed as a natural area with increased public access. The property would be managed for wildlife habitat in perpetuity, which should have no impact to surrounding land uses or residences.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative this property may be maintained as a commercial agricultural operation and a private recreational property. The natural areas could be degraded by development or changes in agricultural practices. The potential for residential subdivision development on these parcels is minimal.

c) Risk and Health Hazards:

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, pesticides may be used to reduce or eradicate noxious weeds on the property, as per the current Big Lake WMA Management Plan. Chemical spraying is part of FWP's integrated management program to manage noxious weeds. Trained, licensed professionals would conduct any weed treatment and storage/use of chemicals in accordance with Standard Operating Procedures and label instructions. The Proposed Action would not result in the creation of any human health hazards.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, current risks or health hazards could change in the future as the property changes ownership.

d) Community Impact, Aesthetics & Recreation:

Proposed Action: The Proposed Action would eliminate potential development of this natural area, and would provide public recreational access to this property. The Proposed Action would not hinder population growth in Stillwater County. No changes are anticipated for outdoor recreation-based businesses in Stillwater County. The Proposed Action will maintain the aesthetics along the shores of Big Lake. No actions are proposed in the Management Plan that would detract from the natural beauty of this area.

No Action: There may be a small, short-term economic benefit through housing construction and real estate sales if the area were to be commercially developed. However, the costs of providing services to rural residential developments typically far exceed this short-term economic return. Changes in ownership may result in changes to the natural areas.

e) Public Services, Taxes & Utilities:

Proposed Action: There would be no changes or need for increased public services in the property area. FWP would make payments to Stillwater County for fee-title lands in lieu of property taxes that are assessed for this property.

No Action: Under the No Action alternative and future development, Stillwater County may receive increased tax revenues in exchange for increased public services to new residences if the area were commercially developed. However, the potential for residential or commercial development on these parcels in the future is minimal.

f) Cultural & Historical Resources:

Proposed Action: A cultural resources report will be requested from the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) to determine if any known cultural resources exist on the site.

Acquisition of this property, and the fence construction and maintenance that will result, are not expected to significantly affect the type of cultural resources generally found in the region. Specific protection actions will be considered once a SHPO report is received. No facility development is anticipated.

No Action: There are no known cultural or historical resources in the area that could be affected by No Action.

g) Mineral Development:

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, the landowners are conveying whatever mineral interest they may have in the property to the state. However, ownership of mineral rights is undetermined, and may not be with the present landowners. A Minerals Remoteness evaluation was conducted for the property to determine the presence of metaliferous ore, coal, oil, and gas reserves. The Minerals Remoteness evaluation determined that the potential for mineral development was "so remote as to be negligible" for metaliferous and coal deposits.

The area may have oil and gas potential (Griffith letter, 7/31/12), and ownership of the oil and gas rights are indeterminate. The surface owner cannot preclude the mineral rights owner(s) from developing minerals under the surface. While currently depressed natural gas prices and more easily accessible gas reserves supports the idea that there may not be oil or gas development in the near future, the potential for future development does exist.

Current extraction technology (horizontal drilling), and future development of extraction technology may allow development of oil and gas reserves without surface disturbance of the property. If oil and/or gas development was proposed, FWP would work with mineral rights owners to minimize the impact on the WMA where possible. If there is oil and gas development, the Board of Oil and Gas requires reclamation of surface disturbance.

No Action: The potential for oil and gas development exists. The Board of Oil and Gas requires reclamation of surface disturbance. There would likely be no long-term ill effects of oil and gas development on the property.

VI. SECONDARY AND CUMULATIVE EFFECTS

Under the Proposed Action, the acquisition of this property and the protection and enhancement of valuable wildlife habitat portend significant positive effects for natural areas and public recreation. Long-term land and water resources will be improved through habitat improvement. Recreational opportunities would be enhanced with the land in public ownership. Given the riparian nature of the proposed parcels, little potential for future subdivision or commercial development exists on the property. The loss of a potential subdivision or private recreation area would not significantly impact Stillwater County.

VII. NEED FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT (EIS)

Based upon the evaluation of impacts to the physical and human environment under MEPA, this environmental assessment revealed no significant negative impacts from the proposed action and identified a limited number of minor impacts from the proposed action, therefore an EIS in not required and an Environmental Assessment (EA) is the appropriate level of review.

1) Public Involvement.
The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: *Stillwater County News, Helena Independent Record, Billings Gazette;*
- One statewide FWP press release;
- Public Hearing at the Billings FWP Region 5 Headquarters
- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners and interested parties;
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: *http://fwp.mt.gov*.
- A copy of the EA will be sent to State and Federal Land Management Agencies managing lands adjacent to or within Big Lake WMA

Copies will be available for public review at FWP Region 5 Headquarters in Billings.

2) Duration of comment period.
The public comment period will extend from August 6, 2012 through 5:00 PM on August 31, 2012. Written comments can be mailed to the address below:

Big Lake WMA Eastside Addition
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 5 Headquarters
2300 Lake Elmo Drive
Billings, MT 59105

Or email comments to: rmule'@mt.gov

VIII. EA PREPARATION

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Ray Mule', FWP, Region 5 Wildlife Program Manager. (406) 247-2960 or rmule'@mt.gov

IX. LITERATURE CITED

Big Lake Wildlife Management Area, Management Plan Draft, October 2009. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. 2300 Lake Elmo Dr. Billings, MT. 59105.

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PROPOSED BIG LAKE WMA EASTSIDE ADDITION
LAND ACQUISITION

SOCIOECONOMIC REPORT
JULY 2012

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to acquire an interest in land for the purpose of protecting and improving wildlife habitat. These acquisitions can be through fee-title, conservation easements, or leasing. In 1989, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill 720 requiring that a socioeconomic assessment be completed when wildlife habitat is acquired using Habitat Montana monies. These assessments evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and impacts on local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the proposed fee-title purchase of the Big Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) Eastside Addition. The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed fee-title purchase.

II.PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description

The WMA Eastside Addition lies adjacent to the east boundary of WMA, approximately 23 miles northwest of Billings, Montana in Stillwater County. A detailed description of this property is included in the attached Environmental Assessment (EA).

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

The property presently holds abundant numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds. Mule deer, antelope, various upland bird species, prairie dogs, and many other nongame species utilize the property throughout the year. A complete discussion of species is available in the EA.

C. Current Use

The property is currently used for cattle grazing and private recreation. The parcels consist of approximately 751 acres of lakebed or alkaline flats during low water periods. Upland grassland habitat dominates approximately 232 acres, while another 92 acres are dominated by dense greasewood. No dwellings or structures are present on the parcels.

D. Management Alternatives

Alternative A – Acquisition of Big Lake WMA Eastside Addition Parcels (Proposed Action):

FWP proposes to purchase approximately 1,105 acres of important wildlife habitat along the eastern shore of Big Lake as described in the EA. Through the Proposed Action, FWP would enhance waterfowl and upland habitat on these parcels. A second critically important benefit would be a resulting improvement to habitat quality and management effectiveness on the existing WMA. This project would conserve animal and plant species biodiversity and important wildlife habitat that exists on these lands, including riparian, sagebrush-greasewood, and mixed shrub grasslands. These parcels would be managed under the existing WMA Management Plan. The property is not currently listed for sale. However, the current owners have indicated their willingness to sell to FWP. FWP has completed an appraisal on one of the three parcels considered for purchase in this EA. This appraisal coupled with the understanding that the proposed purchase provides perpetual benefits for the management of the entire WMA was used as the basis for a purchase offer.

Alternative B – No Action:

This alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what the current owners decide to do with the property if FWP does not purchase the land by fee-title, or if someone other than FWP purchases the property.

Under the No Action alternative, FWP would forgo the opportunity to purchase the Eastside Addition parcels. Waterfowl and upland bird nesting habitat would continue to be compromised on Big Lake WMA due to the inability to adequately manage trespass livestock onto the WMA from adjacent private lands. It is possible that under the No Action alternative a portion of this property could be developed for rural home sites, with significant adverse impacts to natural habitats and recreation opportunities on the adjacent WMA.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Section II identified the management alternatives this report addresses. The fee-title purchase will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat, enhance the management of the existing WMA, and improve opportunity for hunting and other recreational activities. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the fee-title purchase from two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the fee-title purchase to FWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e., income and employment).

A. Financial Impacts

The financial impacts on FWP are related to the purchase price of the fee-title land, and maintenance/management costs. Maintenance/management costs related to the purchase are associated with maintaining fences and weed control.
Funding for this acquisition will come from the Migratory Bird Stamp Program.

The maintenance expenses associated with weed management and fencing are expected to be a maximum of $1,500 annually. These activities will be conducted in accordance with the current WMA management plan during routine maintenance activates already occurring on the existing WMA.

This purchase is not expected to reduce the tax revenues that Stillwater County collects on this property under Montana Code 97-1-603. FWP is required by Montana Code 87-1-603 to pay "to the county a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen." Current taxes on this land are approximately $415.00 per year based on the most recent assessment.

B. Economic Impacts

The WMA Management plan calls for rest from livestock grazing to benefit waterfowl nesting and upland habitats. Approximately 843 acres of the proposed purchase consist of lakebed or dense greasewood, thus receiving little to no utilization by livestock. The remaining acres are dominated by low productively alkaline soils providing minimal grazing opportunity. The livestock carrying capacity of the land proposed for acquisition is low, and no reduction in livestock stocking rates are anticipated by the current owner on their remaining grazing land. Selling this acreage will not have a detrimental effect on their operation. FWP management of the property may eventually include the establishment of a rest-rotation grazing system.

FWP will implement noxious weed management, and rebuild approximately 3.2 miles of fence. These actions along with annual maintenance activities will have a small but positive financial impact on local farm and ranch businesses over time.

Currently, the proposed parcels provide limited hunting opportunities for waterfowl and upland birds. Once purchased, the public will be able to access these parcels through the existing WMA for hunting and recreational activities. No decrease in recreation and associated economic impacts are anticipated.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The proposed fee-title purchase will provide long-term protection for wildlife habitat while enhancing FWP's ability to effectively manage Big Lake WMA for wildlife and recreation opportunity.

The proposed fee-title acquisition by FWP will not cause a reduction in tax revenues from their current levels to Stillwater County, Montana.

Annual fence maintenance and weed control activities will continue on this property. Hunting and other recreational activities will likely remain stable. The financial impacts of this acquisition to local businesses will be neutral to positive in both the short term and long run.