



# **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

**Region 1  
490 N. Meridian Road  
Kalispell, MT 59901**

**DECISION NOTICE  
and  
Finding of No Significant Impact  
for the  
PROPOSED NORTH SHORE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA  
LAND ACQUISITION**

**September 6, 2013**

### **Description of the Proposed Action**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) proposes to purchase approximately 189 acres of farmland and wetlands located along the north shore of Flathead Lake about 4.5 miles east of the community of Somers. Funding for the project would be provided by the Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) through MFWP's fisheries mitigation program to help offset impacts associated with the construction of Hungry Horse Dam. The landowner has agreed to sell this land to MFWP for \$1.6 million, below its appraised market value of \$1.73 million. If the sale is completed, BPA would retain a perpetual conservation easement on the property to ensure long-term protection of the acquisition.

The primary purpose of the proposed land acquisition using BPA funding is to protect ground water, surface water, and wetlands on or near Flathead Lake. This will help improve or maintain the high water quality of Flathead Lake for benefits of aquatic life and fish and wildlife habitat. Other benefits of this project include protecting and managing this land to restore or improve natural riparian/wetland habitats, to continue annual crop production to benefit resident and migratory waterfowl, to improve and maintain habitat for other wildlife, and to provide opportunities for seasonal and compatible public recreation.

MFWP proposes to incorporate this parcel into MFWP's wildlife management area program and designate this land as the North Shore Wildlife Management Area (North Shore WMA). Proposed management is designed to meet the purposes of the acquisition and be consistent with BPA's conservation easement. The proposed Management Plan was included as part of the draft environmental assessment (EA). The Management Plan allows for restoration of riparian/wetlands, upland buffers, and forest stands, as well as the continuation of some agricultural practices that also provide food and cover for migratory and resident birds.

The property borders the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service (FWS) Flathead Lake Waterfowl Production Area to the south along the Flathead Lake shoreline. It also borders the 160-acre North Shore State Park/Wildlife Management Area (SP/WMA) that MFWP acquired in 2008 to the west.

### **Public Involvement – Scoping**

MFWP worked with the River to Lake Initiative partners and others in developing this project for two years prior to the decision to move forward. The River to Lake Initiative partners include

the Flathead Lakers, Flathead Land Trust, Flathead Audubon, American Bird Conservancy, Intermountain West Joint Venture, Flathead Conservation District, Flathead River Commission, Natural Resources and Conservation Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. MFWP completed the acquisition of the North Shore State Park/WMA in 2008. The public was strongly in favor of that acquisition. Based on these two outreach efforts, MFWP did not feel we needed to complete a specific scoping process for this project.

### **Draft Environmental Assessment and Public Comments**

MFWP released the draft environmental analysis document for public review on August 1, 2013, and asked for public comments through August 31, 2013. MFWP scheduled the public open house/public hearing in Somers, Montana, for August 20, 2013, beginning at 6:30 p.m. MFWP sent postcards or electronic emails announcing the public comment period and public meeting to approximately 70 individuals and organizations and to about 25 adjoining or nearby landowners. MFWP ran two different legal ads that described the proposed project, the availability of the draft EA, and the public meeting information in two regional and two local newspapers. The draft EA was posted on MFWP's official web site. MFWP also issued a press release that described the project, availability of the draft EA, and the public comment timeline, and dates and locations of the public meeting in Somers. The proposed project was covered by an article in the Bigfork Eagle that was also picked up in the Daily Inter Lake and other newspapers, including the Missoula Independent. Another article was published in the Missoulian. The editors of the Daily Inter Lake also publicly supported the project in a weekly editorial. The story also ran on Montana Public Radio, the Montana Wildlife Radio Show on KOFI radio, and the local NBC and ABC television stations.

### **Summary of Public Comments and Public Meetings**

MFWP received 36 emails or letters supporting or strongly supporting the proposed project. Supporters stated their approval for the project because it would benefit Flathead Lake north shore, water quality, wetlands, wildlife, and public recreation. Of the six people who attended the open house/public hearing in Somers, two voiced strong support of the project during the public hearing. No one opposed the project or mentioned concerns during either the open house or public hearing portion of the meeting. MFWP did not receive any written comments opposing the project. We did receive one letter that questioned the use of the BPA funding on this property and one that would like MFWP to restore native Palouse prairie on portions of the property. The comments and MFWP responses to these two comments are below.

### **MFWP Responses to Public Comments**

**1. Comment about use of BPA funds for this project.** One individual questioned how MFWP could purchase property for fish that is not actually bordering a lake or river. To their knowledge, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) had turned down funding for a wetland conservation project within the Flathead Indian Reservation because it did not have fish habitat on it.

**MFWP Response:** MFWP and the CSKT have worked closely over many years with BPA to design the overall goals, purpose, and criteria for the Hungry Horse fisheries mitigation program, and all three agencies are committed to using this funding to benefit native fisheries, especially bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout. From 2005-2009 we jointly reviewed and prioritized shared funding to implement fisheries habitat conservation projects. However, implementation of individual projects by MFWP or CSKT using BPA fisheries

mitigation funding is now conducted to a much greater extent independently of each other. We are not aware of the specific circumstances of the project that this person referenced with respect to CSKT, but MFWP believes this North Shore Wildlife Management Area Acquisition will directly benefit Flathead Lake water quality and, thereby, the fisheries and aquatic habitat values of Flathead Lake. As shown and described in the draft EA (Fig. 6, p. 10, and cover photo, draft EA), the existing linear slough or wetland on the proposed project lands runs across the property between Fennon Slough to the north and Flathead Lake to the south and is only separated from Flathead Lake by artificial dikes that were placed there many years ago (p. 13, draft EA). Surface water runoff from this property either goes directly into this wetland or into other shallow ground water or poorly drained areas on this property (pp. 4, 16-17, draft EA) and has the potential to flow via the ground water and surface runoff directly into Flathead Lake or the lower Flathead River system. The north end of Flathead Lake is an important foraging and staging area for bull trout, particularly during the spring and early summer when there is a higher likelihood of direct runoff from these lands to the lake or groundwater. BPA staff visited the property in May 2012 and supported the use of BPA fisheries funding for this project for all of the reasons outlined above. MFWP's proposed Management Plan emphasizes wetland protection and both upland and wetland restoration to buffer the existing wetlands and to protect both surface and ground water quality of this property and, thereby, Flathead Lake, consistent with the purposes of the BPA fisheries mitigation program.

- 2. Comment about restoring Palouse prairie.** We received a suggestion to include complete Palouse prairie restoration as part of the future restoration of the property, including adding in native grasses and forbs/wildflowers, as well as including paved/gravel trails around the restoration area to enable use of fire and to restrict nonnative grass and other species invasion by rhizomes. Are there grants for this type of restoration?

**MFWP Response:** Our future management plan for this property includes restoring uplands as well as wetlands. As stated on pages 53-54 of the draft EA, we propose to “*maintain/enhance and possibly gradually expand native upland habitat, e.g., intact ponderosa pine stands with native understory.*” Although we appreciate the suggestion for Palouse prairie restoration in theory, we do not currently plan to implement complete Palouse prairie restoration at this time for a number of reasons.

First, based on our experience and the experience of others, restoring the full native prairie ecosystem complete with the native grasses, forbs, and wildflowers, along with natural ecological processes (e.g., fire), is extremely difficult and expensive to implement and maintain at this scale over the long run. The problems of native prairie restoration are that native species cannot out-compete invasive and nonnative grasses and noxious weed species. This property and the general Flathead Valley are heavily populated by invasive, nonnative, sod-forming grasses (e.g., reed canary, quack grass, timothy) as well as numerous species of noxious weeds. Secondly, it is particularly hard, if not impossible, to maintain native forbs on a substantial acreage because noxious weeds tend to either establish first or gradually take over. Unfortunately, one cannot spray the noxious weeds without killing the native forbs/wildflowers, and pulling and managing weeds by hand is cost-prohibitive and never-ending on larger acreages. Native grasses are also difficult to establish for many of these same reasons; however, once established they can persist for some time and aren't killed by

typical noxious weed spraying. Even maintaining native or native-like grasses may require repeated planting efforts and ongoing maintenance to prevent nonnative takeovers.

As described in the Management Plan, MFWP is committed to trying to restore primarily native grasses (without the native forb/wildflower component) along with native shrubs and tree species because we believe this approach will be most successful for two reasons: (1) much of the land has been in grain production and should have a reduced seed bank that would compete with the native grass species, and (2) we will be able to promote native grass establishment by managing noxious herbaceous weeds using traditional methods, such as through the limited and careful application of appropriate herbicides. Should our attempts at native grass restoration fail, we may need to incorporate native-like species (pubescent or tall wheatgrass) that can better compete with nonnative invasive species and weeds and yet will also provide nesting and cover qualities for a variety of wildlife species. Adding in the complexity, costs, and risks associated with planting/establishing native forbs and wildflowers into this restoration project would be costly, limit management options, and require extensive maintenance.


Restoration of a complete prairie natural ecosystem on a very small portion of this property is clearly not precluded by this Management Plan and could be possibly incorporated into the Management Plan over time. We are not aware of any grants for native prairie restoration at this time, but we would be interested in any proposals from partners who are willing to take the lead to fund establishment and maintenance of Palouse prairie on a portion of this property.

#### **MFWP Recommended Alternative and Final Decision Recommendation**

In reviewing all the public comment and other relevant information, and evaluating the environmental effects, I recommend that MFWP pursue the acquisition of the North Shore WMA and recommend that the MFWP Commission approve the proposed action. This action will also require the approval of the Montana Land Board.

Through the public review process described above, MFWP found no significant impacts on the human or physical environments associated with this proposal. Therefore, the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and an environmental impact statement is not required.

Noting and including the responses to public comments, this decision notice together with the draft EA will serve as the final document for this proposal. MFWP believes the completion of this project is in the best interests of protecting water quality, wetlands, and aquatic resources associated with Flathead Lake; it would provide opportunities to manage and improve habitat for wildlife, and it would provide the recreational opportunities for the public.



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James R. Satterfield Jr., Ph.D.  
Regional Supervisor

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9/6/2013  
Date