

Draft Management Plan: Proposed Clear Creek Addition to the Nevada Lake Wildlife Management Area

INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) purposes to purchase in fee title, the 760-acre parcels currently owned by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The properties of interest lie directly north of the Nevada Creek Reservoir on the north side of Montana Highway 141 and directly west and north of the existing Nevada Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The western portion of the Clear Creek properties is bisected by Chicken Creek with the main access road paralleling the creek (Figure 1).

The objectives for purchase of the Clear Creek Addition are:

- To protect and enhance critical elk winter range
- To protect and enhance other seasonal habitats for a diversity of fish and wildlife
- To establish and maintain public access and outdoor recreation opportunities
- To facilitate and complement management of the existing Nevada Lake WMA

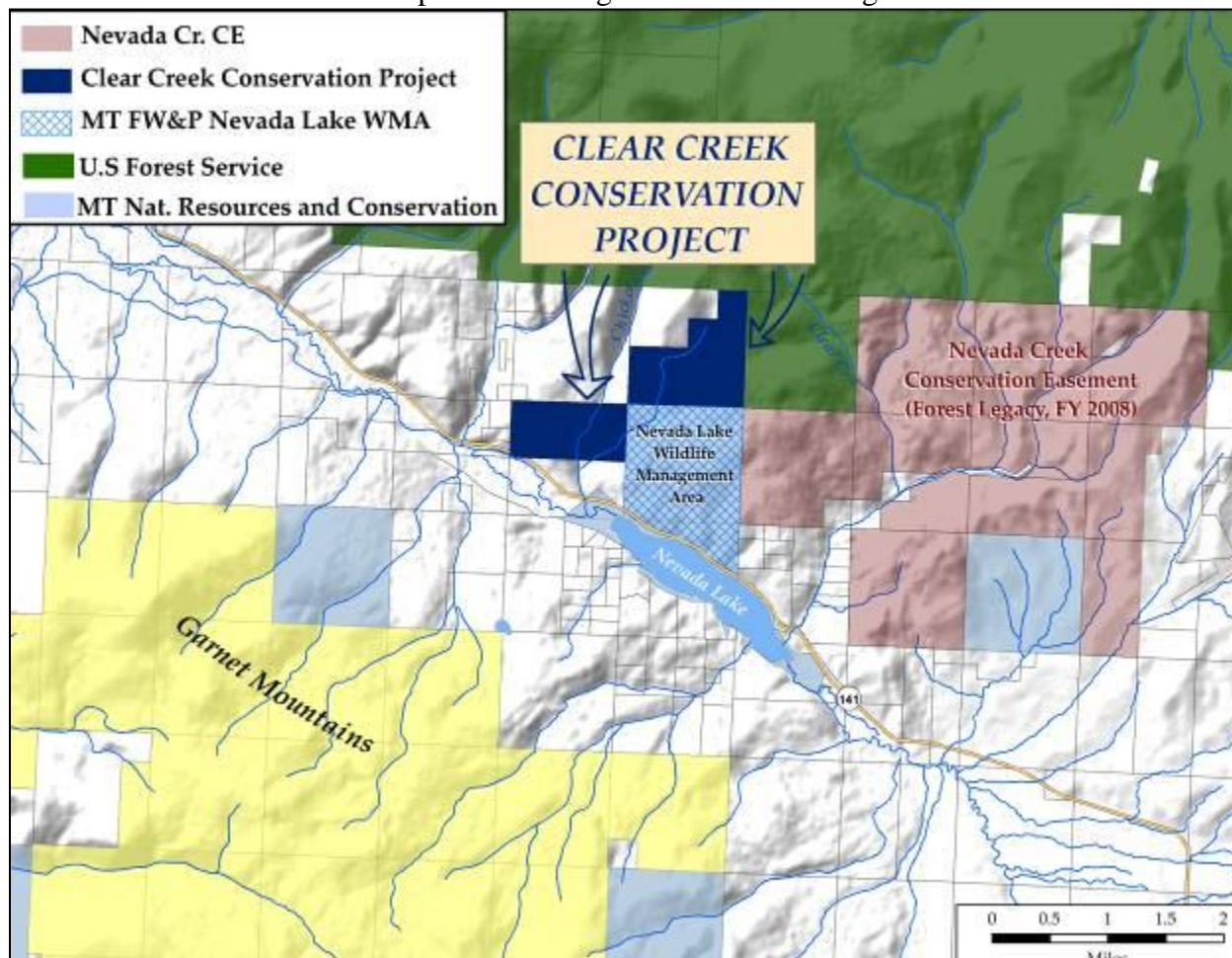


Figure 1. Location of the Clear Creek Addition lands adjacent to the Nevada Lake WMA.

I. Acquisition Date

Pending public review, Commission approval, and approval of the State Land Board, FWP plans to acquire the property in the fall of 2015.

II. Chain of Ownership

The current owner is The Nature Conservancy (TNC). TNC purchased the property in 2003 as part of the Blackfoot Community Project. FWP would acquire fee-title to the Clear Creek Addition and all water and mineral rights associated with it.

III. Property Description.

The Clear Creek Addition lies approximately 8 miles to the southeast of the community of Helmville, Montana.

Legal Description (general terms):

Powell County: T12N, R10W, section 11: the northern half;
Section 1: the southern half, the southern half of the NE corner,
and the NE corner of the NE corner.

IV. Landscape

The proposed addition adjoins the Nevada Lake WMA (740 acres) to the east and south. Thousands of acres of the Helena National Forest to the immediate north with the Scapegoat and Bob Marshall Wilderness further to the north. To the south lies the East Garnet Mountain Range and Hoodoo Mountain Wilderness Study Area.

V. Natural Resources

Wildlife

The Nevada Lake WMA provides critical habitat for grizzly bears, as well as habitat for more than 28 Montana Species of Concern and over 184 other native species including elk, white-tailed and mule deer, moose, and a variety of nongame birds and mammals. The subject property lies within a matrix of protected State and federal lands as well as some private ownership and is within an important linkage zone for grizzly bears and Canada lynx.

Grasslands and mixed conifer forest provide critical elk winter range for a large portion of the elk wintering within HD293 and HD298. The majority of section 1 is upland comprised of previously harvested timber, with riparian, and some sagebrush shrubland (Figure 2). The Northern half of section 11 is considered lower-montane foothill and valley grasslands, sagebrush steppe, ponderosa pine-woodland savanna, and to a lesser extent riparian and upper-montane grassland.

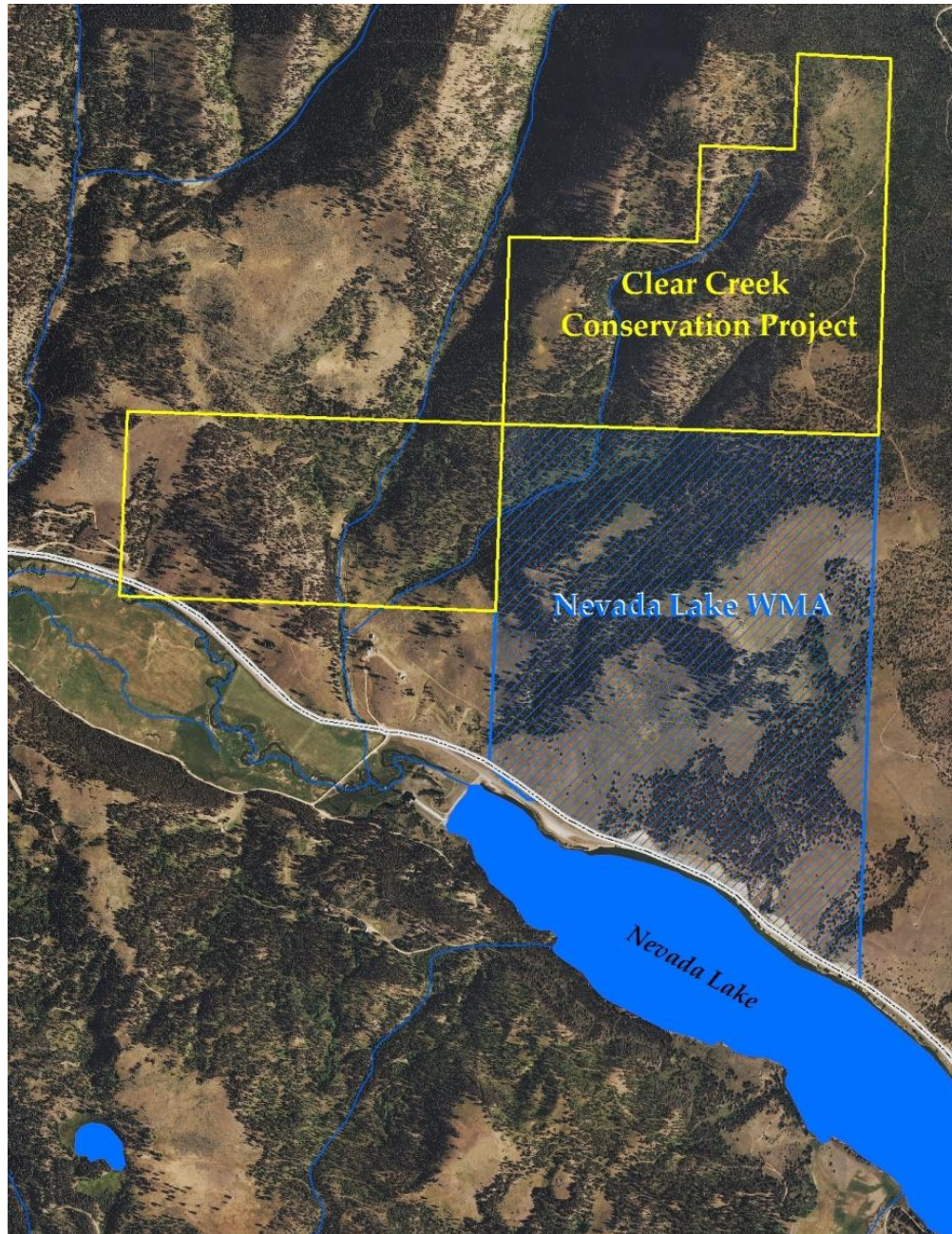


Figure 2. Aerial Map of Clear Creek Addition and adjacent Nevada Lake WMA.

Fisheries

Chicken Creek is a small 1st order tributary stream that enters Nevada Creek just below the Nevada Creek Reservoir. A population of 98% genetically pure Westslope cutthroat trout persists in all stretches of Chicken Creek at low to moderate levels. Riparian conditions are poor in the upper reaches of the stream due to overgrazing and overuse from livestock. Most of the vegetation is denuded and bank integrity is compromised as a result. Lower reaches are in moderate condition with limited habitat for WSCT and degraded vegetation.

MANAGEMENT OVERVIEW

Introduction

FWP would manage the Clear Creek Addition to maximize its value for wildlife while providing for seasonal, non-motorized recreational access. Conservation and enhancement of native grasslands and mixed conifer stands for wintering elk would take precedence over recreational opportunity. The Clear Creek Addition would be managed consistent with rules and regulations on nearby WMAs. Vegetation management would occur when there is opportunity to enhance habitat. FWP would act as a good neighbor to adjoining land owners by cooperating with fence maintenance, treating noxious weeds, providing road access consistent with existing easements or to facilitate management, or otherwise lending a hand.

I. Public Access

The public would have access to the Clear Creek Addition for hunting, fishing, trapping, hiking, wildlife watching, horseback riding, and other non motorized recreational pursuits from May 15 to December 1. (Trapping opportunity would be marginal as the only furbearers open to harvest in November are beaver, mink, muskrat, and otter and these species may not be found onsite). The property closure from December 2 through May 14 to would be to protect wintering elk. Rules and regulations would be consistent with those on the existing Nevada Lake WMA.

- ✓ *The Clear Creek Addition would be open to public use from noon on May 15 through December 1 for non-motorized travel and recreation.*
- ✓ *The WMA would be closed to mountain lion hunting during the winter and spring.*
- ✓ *Hunting would be allowed as per statewide regulations and regulations for Deer/Elk Hunting District 293, Moose Hunting District 293, and Black Bear Management Unit 290 (fall season and May 15 through June 15).*
- ✓ *Trapping would be allowed when the WMA is open to public recreation.*
- ✓ *There would be no roads open to motorized travel.*
- ✓ *Camping would be allowed.*
- ✓ *No firewood cutting or open fires would be allowed.*
- ✓ *Permits would be required for groups of more than 15 people.*
- ✓ *Pack in, pack out garbage, and litter would be mandated.*
- ✓ *Outfitting would be prohibited within the WMA.*
- ✓ *Commercial activities would be prohibited, except as authorized by permit, as specified by FWP's commercial use policy.*

Access Issues:

- The property is remotely located with access off a MT Hwy 141 and sits directly adjacent to Helena National Forest Lands. As a result, FWP anticipates a marginal increase in public use and potential for violation of travel rules from adjacent lands and nearby forest roads.
- Interest in yearlong recreation. Residents may have an interest in using the Clear Creek Addition when it is closed to pursue winter sports, trapping, lion hunting, or antler shed hunting. Public education regarding access rules and enforcement would be necessary.
- Illegal off-road vehicle travel may occur. FWP would have to place a gate between the neighboring Harrison property and the Clear Creek Addition to control motorized travel. Enforcement would be necessary, resulting in additional expenditures by FWP.
- Hunting season displacement of big game. There is potential for elk and deer to be pushed off the property in hunting season due to high hunter use.
- Signage boundary and rules. It would be necessary to sign the property's boundaries and clearly post rules at the primary access point off MT Hwy 141.
- Information on the Clear Creek Addition would have to be available to the public onsite and online. FWP would post a map and rules online. An interpretive sign with a map of the Clear Creek Addition and rules would be located just inside of the fence along MT Hwy 141. Signage along the road would identify it as FWP property.

II. Habitat Management

Forest Management

FWP does anticipate future timber management projects to occur within the first 3 years of ownership and currently has a developed forest stewardship plan. The management goals would target forest restoration and wildlife habitat enhancement projects. Forest insects and disease are present in many of the forest stands and because of previous timber management practices pre-commercial and commercial thinning projects would be necessary to restore grassland openings and mixed-age forest structure.

Livestock Grazing

Lease of the uplands of the Clear Creek Addition for livestock grazing is not anticipated. The Clear Creek Addition is relatively small with critical value for wintering elk. Provision of forage for elk and retaining them on the property are essential. There is not currently any grazing on Nevada Lake WMA.

Habitat Management Issues:

- FWP would remove existing fences between the current Nevada Lake WMA and the Clear Creek Addition to enhance wildlife movement between the properties.
- There is potential for heavy grazing pressure by elk. Monitoring would be necessary to assure that elk grazing is not adversely impacting range conditions. If elk populations exceed objective FWP will liberalize hunting regulations to reduce populations and impacts to range.
- Grasslands are vulnerable to conifer encroachment and forest thinning project may need to be implemented to maintain grassland openings and overstocking of Douglas fir.

III. Noxious Weed Management

In compliance with 7-22-2151, MCA, FWP is required by state statute to develop a noxious weed management plan, have the plan approved by the county weed board, and provide a biennial report on weed management activities. FWP has developed a noxious weed management plan (Appendix C of Environmental Assessment), that has been approved by the county, in which we have committed to Integrated Pest Management (IPM). Spotted knapweed is present along with houndstongue to lesser degree.

FWPs' approach to weed management on the Clear Creek Addition would be to treat patches of noxious weeds using herbicides (Milestone, Tordon and Escort XP), evaluate the outcome, re-treat as necessary, and then use appropriate insects as biological controls to keep noxious weeds at low densities. The *Larinus* seed head weevil and *Cyphocleonus* root weevil have been released on spotted knapweed and would require continued monitoring of effectiveness.

Issues:

- Weed infestations are present with spotted knapweed predominant. FWP would treat these patches with herbicides in the spring of 2015.
- Coordination with neighboring private land-owners will be necessary to most effectively treat weeds across the area. As a good neighbor FWP will work with neighbors to control weeds.

IV. Fire Suppression

Fire suppression on the Clear Creek Addition would be covered under existing cooperative agreements with the Department of Natural Resources.

V. Good Neighbor

Maintaining positive and productive relationships with neighboring landowners is a core concern for FWP. FWP would cooperate with neighbors by honoring existing easements, allowing vehicle passage as necessary to facilitate management, repairing and constructing fence as needed, and controlling weeds.

VI. Maintenance and Budget

The Clear Creek Addition has no structures or other improvements.

Estimated start up and annual maintenance costs are:

- Annual Fence maintenance= \$700
 - Parking Area for 8 vehicles= \$7,500
 - Annual Weed Maintenance= \$3,000
 - Gates \$250 each for 2 gates= \$500
 - Interpretive sign and boundary signs = \$1,800
- Total Estimated Start Up Costs= \$13,500

These initial expenditures made during the first 5 years of FWP ownership would cover the most significant costs associated with purchase of the property and providing for public use. Future expenditures to spot spray weeds, bring in additional insects for biological control, repair fences, and sign the property would be necessary to manage the property to the satisfaction of FWP, our neighbors, and the public whom we serve.



Figure 3. Clear Creek Addition looking northwest towards the Helmville Valley.