



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: August 15, 2019

Agenda Item: Kootenai Forestlands CE, R1

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: FWP proposes the purchase of a conservation easement (CE) from the Stimson Lumber Company (Stimson) to protect approximately 22,295 acres of highly productive forestlands around the city of Libby. This conservation project is a collaborative effort involving Stimson, The Trust for Public Land (TPL), and FWP. The proposed CE, to be held by FWP, would allow Stimson to retain ownership of these timberlands, preclude development, protect important wildlife habitat and key landscape connectivity, and provide public access and associated recreational opportunities. The CE would be purchased based on its appraised value. A maximum of \$6 million would come from the US Forest Service Forest Legacy Program. Stimson has agreed to sell the CE at 75% of the appraised value. If the appraised value is more than \$8 million, then TPL would provide the remaining cash as needed.

The property provides high-value winter range for moose, elk, white-tailed deer, and mule deer; habitat for 43 Species of Greatest Conservation Need (2015 State Wildlife Action Plan), and includes federally designated critical habitat for ESA-listed Canada lynx, grizzly bear, and bull trout. Hunting opportunities exist on this property for elk, white-tailed and mule deer, moose, black bear, mountain lion, wolf, turkeys, and forest grouse. Completion of this project would permanently secure free public access for hunting, hiking, fishing, snowmobiling, cross-country skiing, and other outdoor activities. The scattered parcels of this project share 133 miles of border with the Kootenai National Forest. By averting development of these lands, completion of this project could reduce costs of firefighting by 50-95% and prescribed fire by 43%. The project would also reduce human-wildlife conflicts that come with residential development of properties within wildlife habitat, especially those with grizzly bears, black bears, and mountain lions.

Public Involvement Process & Results: An EA was released for public comment from May 30 to June 29, 2019, and included a public hearing in Libby on June 12. Legal notices were published twice in four local newspapers and the *Helena Independent Record*, and the EA was posted on the FWP webpage. Notices were sent to all adjoining landowners. FWP received 12 public comments with seven in support of the CE proposal, four people raising concerns, and one person asking a question. All issues raised by those who commented are addressed in the decision document.

Alternatives and Analysis: Two alternatives were analyzed and considered in the EA: 1) Alternative A (Proposed Action) - FWP would acquire a CE as described above. Stimson would continue to own and manage the land using sustainable forest practices while protecting the valuable fish and wildlife habitat found on the property and continuing to allow compatible public recreation opportunities; and 2) Alternative B (No Action) - If the project is not completed as proposed, Stimson would continue to own the property without any of the restrictions of the proposed CE. Over time, land use changes could result in losses of effective habitat and public access.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission approve FWP purchasing a conservation easement on the Kootenai Forestlands Conservation Project to ensure conservation values and associated public benefits would be protected.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve FWP's purchase of the Kootenai Forestlands Conservation Easement.