

## **BIG SNOWY MOUNTAINS WMA PROPOSAL**



**Where the Mountains meet the Prairie.**



# WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(vers. 4/2020)

1. **Region:** 5 **Regional Supervisor:** Barb Beck

**Name of Applicant(s):** Ashley Taylor

2. **Date:** 05/29/2020

3. **Project Name:** Big Snowy Mountains WMA **Type of Project:** Fee Title

4. **Size:** The Big Snowy Mountains WMA consists of 5,677 deeded acres adjacent to the BLM's Twin Coulee Wilderness Study Area (6,936 acres). The BLM property is adjacent to USFS's Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area (88,696 acres). Sum recreational access provided by the project is 101,309 acres.

5. **Location:** Big Snowy Mountains WMA is twenty-nine (29) miles east of Judith Gap in Golden Valley County in FWP Region 5.

6. **Map(s):**

Figure 1. Big Snowy Mountains WMA property boundary in relation to Big Snowy Mountains

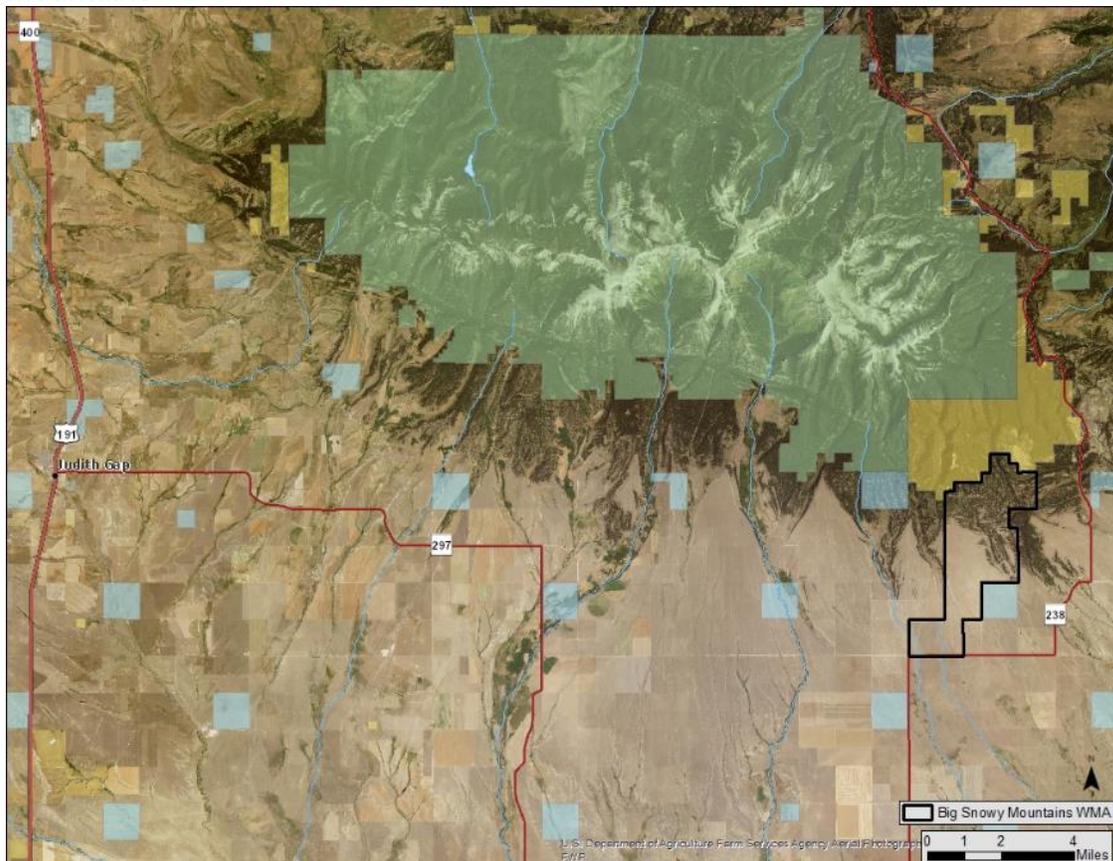
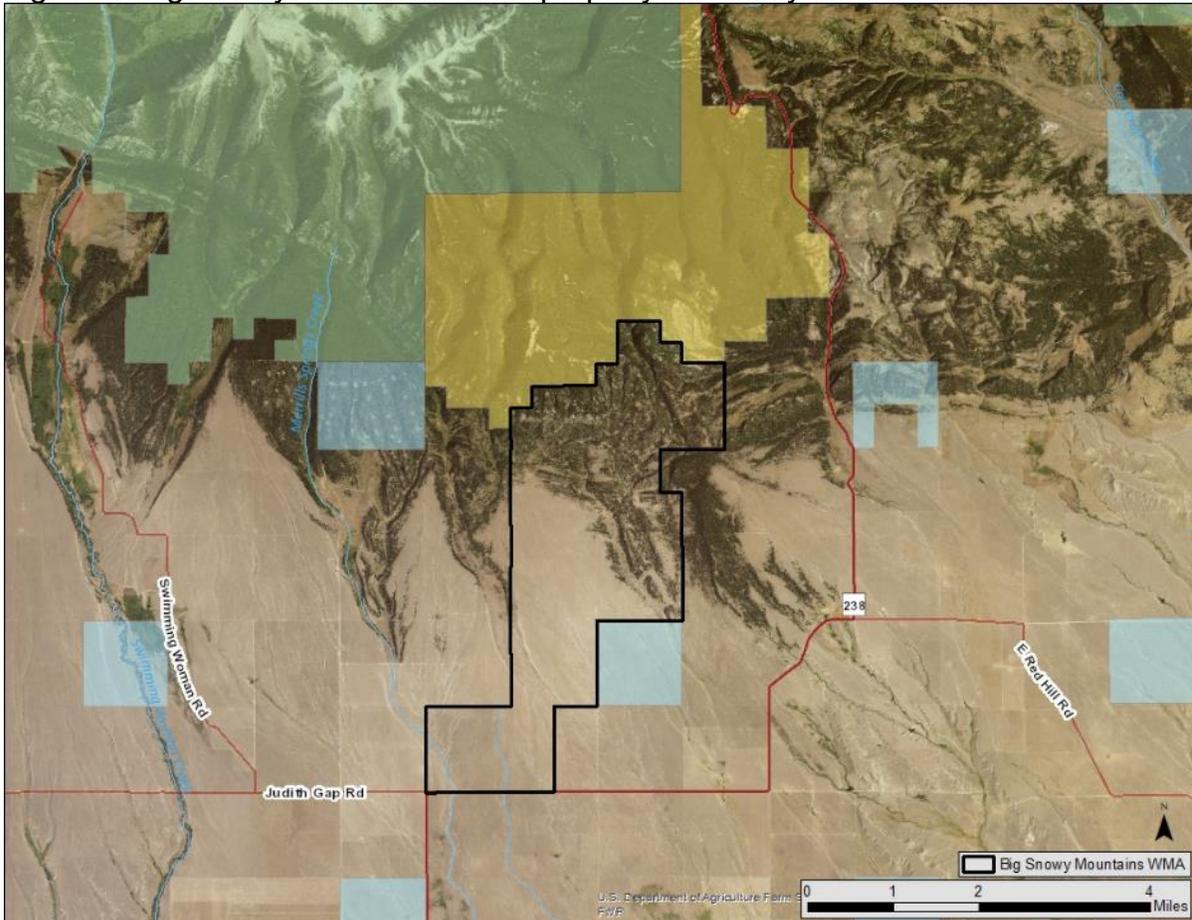


Figure 2. Big Snowy Mountains WMA property Boundary.

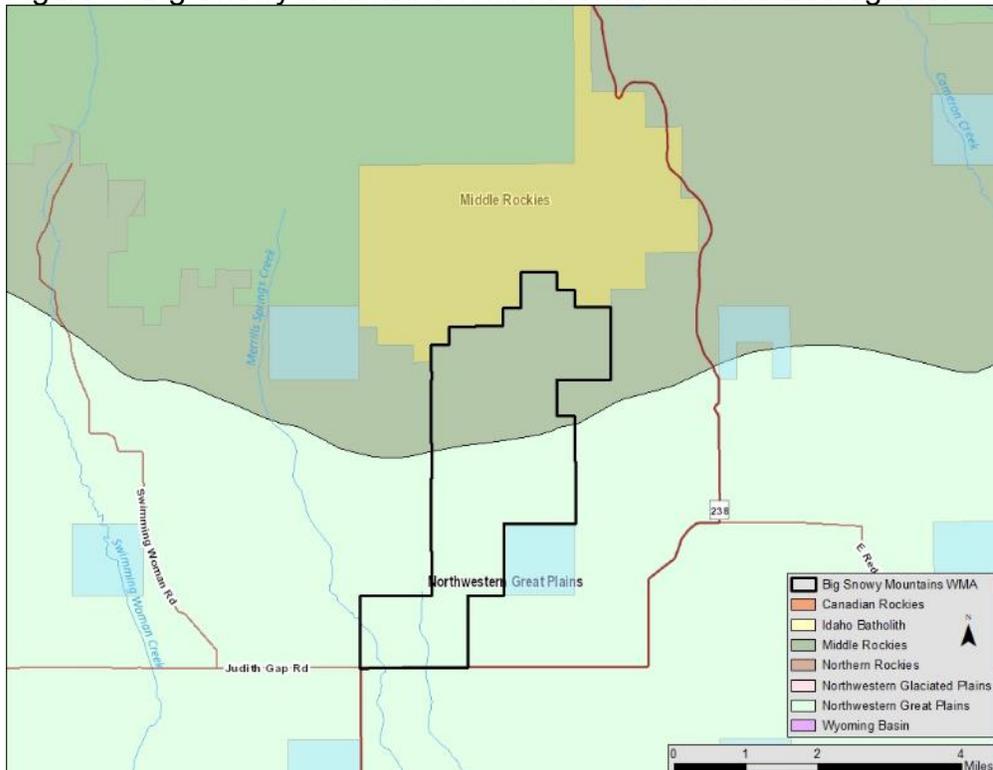


7. **Project Need (Limit to 1,500 characters) – up to 10 pts.** Big Snowy Mountains WMA is in the foothills of the Big Snowy Mountains, an isolated mountain range of public ownership surrounded by privately owned foothills, typical of island mountain ranges in central Montana. This native mountain foothill habitat provides habitat for a diverse assemblage of species, including, elk, black bear, mule deer, pronghorn, and other native species populations, including at least 22 “Species of Concern”. Therefore, these habitats are also beneficial in maintaining huntable and viewable populations of game and non-game species, both migratory and resident. Elevation ranges from 4,750 – 6,000 feet.

Habitat diversity on the property is evident as it is characterized as Middle Rocky Ecoregion and Northwestern Great Plains Ecoregion (Figure 3). Forested habitats consist of ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, Rocky Mountain juniper, and aspen. Large prairie grassland expanses provide winter range for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn. Native grass vegetation is a mix comprised mostly of rough fescue, Idaho fescue, and common forbs interspersed such as arrowleaf balsamroot and yarrow.

The landowner, Shodair Children's Hospital of Montana, wants this property to be an FWP WMA. Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation is facilitating the sale of this property. Fee title acquisition will ensure perpetual protection and management of the habitat to benefit wildlife and native plants. The property has minimal interior fencing and no structures. The property is surrounded by large absentee landowners who rarely allow recreational opportunities to the general public. This property will provide permanent access to incredible wildlife habitat and public recreation opportunities, including access to the Snowy Mountains Elk Population.

Figure 3. Big Snowy Mountains WMA overlaid with the Ecoregions.



Previous logging activity provides a diverse age class of trees.







Old burn on BLM wilderness in background next two pictures.



Meadow habitat









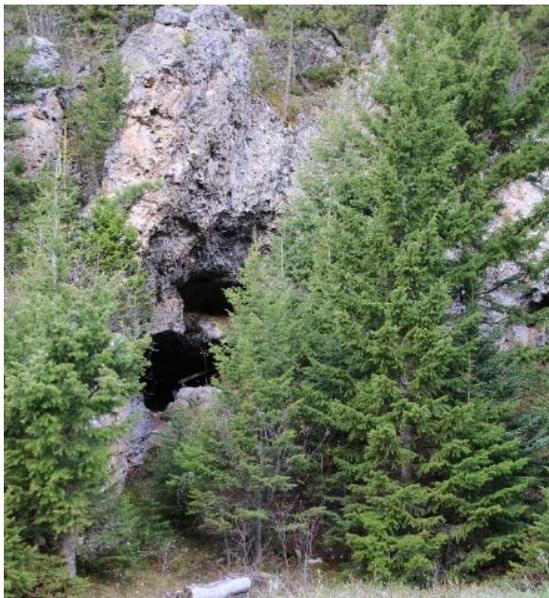
Aspen along the unnamed dry creek bed.



Rocky Mountain maple at the base of north facing slope.



Limestone rock walls provide small caves and crevices for wildlife habitat.





Northern boundary with BLM Wilderness behind the sign.



Transition from forest to prairie habitat.





Native prairie grassland





Teepee rings



**Statewide Habitat Criteria – up to 10 pts.** The Big Snowy Mountains WMA is entirely native mountain/foothill and prairie grassland habitats at the base of the Big Snowy Mountains. No farm/cropped land occurs on the property. The property is within the Middle Rocky and Northwestern Great Plains Ecoregions. The property's community type composition is approximately 49% Conifer Dominated Forest and Woodland (xeric-mesic), 49% Prairie Grassland, and 2% Deciduous Dominated Forest and Woodland. Approximately 86% of the ranch is within the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP) Tier I Terrestrial Community Type (human land use), 6% is Tier II and 8% is Tier III (Figure 4). Although approximately 483 acres (8%) are categorized as Tier III because 80+ years ago they were last farmed, the acres function as Tier I habitat as these acres have recovered entirely back to native vegetation. Past logging areas and old burns are the Tier II habitat. Big Snowy Mountains WMA is within the Snowys Tier II Focal Area (SWAP 2015, Figure 5).

Perennial flowing water is limited on the property so there is limited fisheries management opportunity. However, Big Snowy Mountains WMA is part of the watershed that feeds Currant Creek which is inhabited by Northern Red Belly Dace (Species of Concern).

Figure 4. Big Snowy Mountains WMA overlaid on the SWAP Terrestrial Community Type Tiers. Human disturbance to habitat is the lowest in Tier I and increases in Tiers II and III.

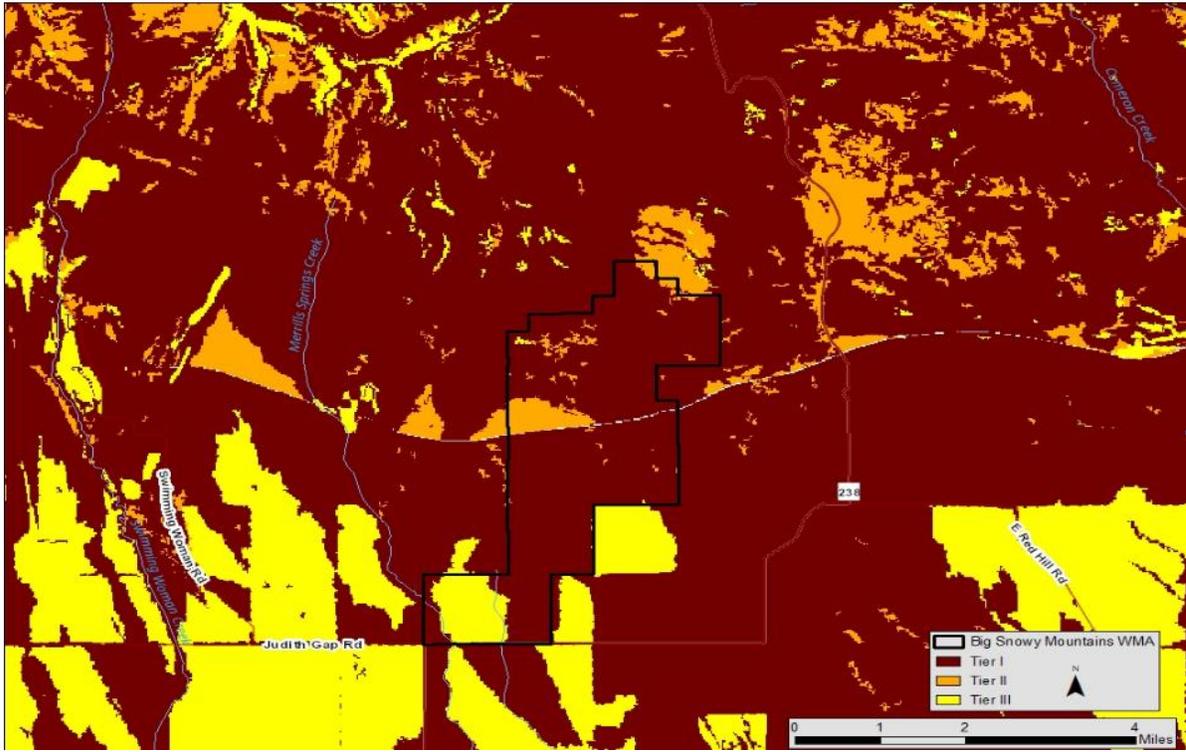
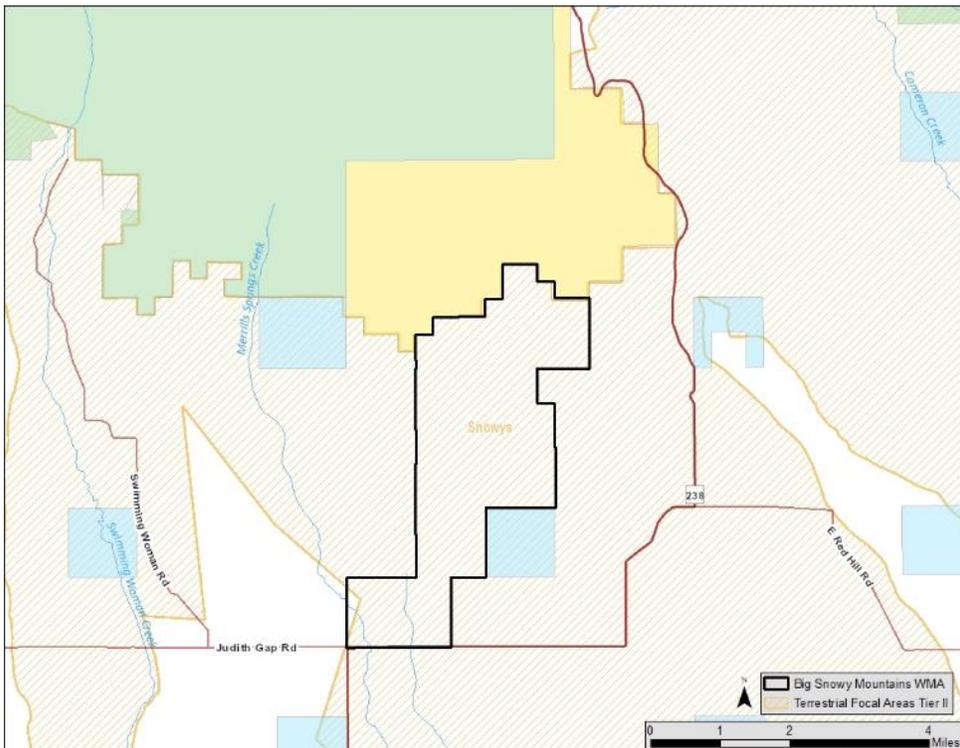


Figure 5. Big Snowy Mountains WMA overlaid on the SWAP Snowys Tier II Focal Area.



## 8. Project-Level Strategic Criteria

### a) Site-Specific Habitat Values – up to 10 pts.

Big Snowy Mountains WMA provides excellent wildlife habitat in a diverse and species rich area that is largely inaccessible to the public. These private land mountain foothills include large prairie grasslands with conifer dominated forests that are critical in providing year-round habitat for wildlife species such as elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, pronghorn and the occasional moose. Carnivores such as black bear, bobcat, mountain lion and the occasional wolf also use the property and neighboring landscapes. Nongame species such as golden and bald eagles, long-billed curlews, ferruginous hawks, and mountain plovers are also plentiful. Most of these species utilize the large expanses of native grassland. These forested and prairie grasslands also provide critical winter range for wintering elk, mule deer and pronghorn. During 2020 FWP winter elk surveys, 549 elk were observed in the vicinity of this property. Protections such as this proposed WMA are critical in large landscape conservation of these native habitats.

### b) Threat Status: **PICK ONE** (and provide brief explanation)

- **IMMINENT - 10 pts:** *the land is proposed for activity within five years which will cause irreversible impacts.*
- **PROBABLE - 5 pts:** *strong trends in the vicinity of property have been toward conversion of the habitat (e.g., subdivision; cropland conversion), but no specific threat is underway.*
- **POSSIBLE- 2 pts:** *sporadic occurrences for habitat conversion, which may happen to the property, particularly as it changes ownership.*
- **UNLIKELY – 0 pts**

#### Probable:

A change in ownership would likely result in the loss of FWP's ability to positively impact the habitat on this property through perpetual means. Many properties along the Big and Little Snowy Mountains have undergone landownership changes in recent years. These landownership changes are often to buyers primarily interested in recreation over agricultural values, along with associated public access limitations. The heightened interest in occupied elk habitat in this hunting district makes protection of these private lands extremely critical. Ultimately the landowner's goal is to see this property get into public ownership. This is a rare opportunity with a landowner in this area willing to take the time to go through the FWP process to sell this property. The landowners have already turned down offers to buy the property from other interested parties, in hopes of this property becoming an FWP WMA. In conversations with the neighboring landowner if Big Snowy Mountains WMA comes to fruition, subsequently they would be interested in selling their adjacent 7,584 acres.

c) **Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.**

Describe as follows:

- Does the proposal occur within a 2015 SWAP Regional Focus Area? (4 pts) **Yes, Terrestrial Focal Area Snowys Tier II.**
- Is this proposal part of an ongoing multi-partner initiative? (3 pts) **No**
- Does the proposal comprise substantial grasslands within an FWP Grassland Initiative priority county? (3 pts) **No**
- Is the proposal within an identified priority area in a species or multi-species conservation plan? (3 pts) **No**
- Does the proposal support an identified connectivity area/corridor? (3 pts) **No**

Big Snowy Mountains WMA lies within three different community types identified for a greatest conservation need (CTGCN) as defined in SWAP. As part of habitat protection standards as outlined in SWAP, effort should be made to “continue to utilize Habitat Montana (FWP, 1994) and other funding sources to support opportunities to conserve high priority CTGCN through fee title acquisitions and conservation easements” (SWAP, 2015). This directive describes how diverse this landscape is and the importance of protecting it.

The property also provides habitat for at least three bird and one mammal species in greatest need of conservation (SWAP 2015). Per Montana Natural Heritage Program, there is one mammal and six bird Species of Concern on the property. All species present, or located nearby, can be influenced by land practices one private landowner implements. In addition to wildlife values, several teepee rings are on the property which demonstrate the property’s historical and cultural values.

d) **Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.**

Big Snowy Mountains WMA is one contiguous block adjacent to the BLM’s Twin Coulee Wilderness Area (6,936 acres). The BLM property is adjacent to USFS’s Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area (88,696 acres). Sum recreational access provided by the project is 101,309 acres. The conservation footprint of this project is bigger because the property is adjacent to public land. In conversations with the neighboring landowner if Big Snowy Mountains WMA comes to fruition, subsequently they would be interested in selling their adjacent 7,584 acres. This would further expand FWP’s footprint in habitat protection and enhancement.

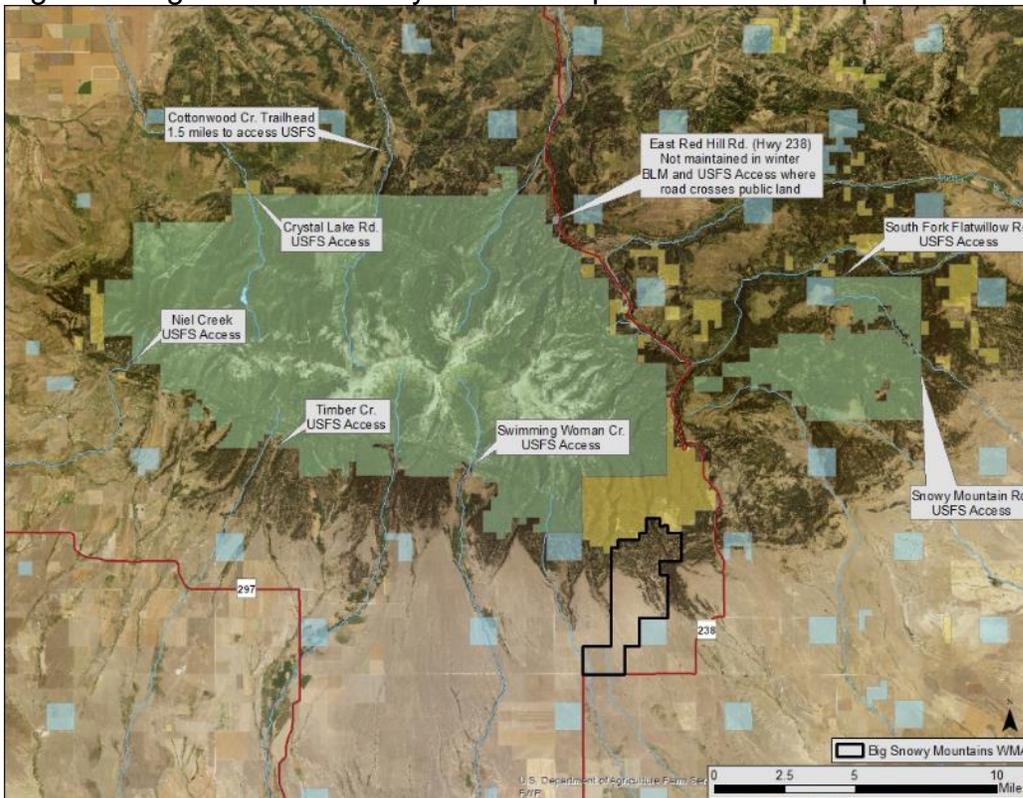
Other potential funding sources may be available from organizations such as Montana Wilderness Association, Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, The Wilderness Society, and Montana Wildlife Federation. This is a unique opportunity to secure public access to public land in an ecologically diverse landscape that is currently inaccessible.

e) **Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.**

Big Snowy Mountains WMA falls within FWP’s Deer/Elk Hunting District (HD) 511, Antelope HD 501, and Bear Management Unit 580. The Big Snowy Mountains are an island mountain range in central Montana that are rich in wildlife, especially elk, but have very few public access points to public land (Figure 6.) The lack of public access to elk is the largest contributing factor to the elk population being approximately 900% over objective. Therefore, any permanent public access we can secure to elk habitat is critical to potentially increase elk harvest. In addition, the central location of this property in Montana and proximity to Billings ensures it will receive substantial public use. Demand in this area is high for public access to mule deer, pronghorn, and black bear hunting in addition to elk.

The Big Snowy Mountain WMA is adjacent to public land to the north but surrounded on the remaining three sides by large landowners that do not allow public access. Shodair Children’s Hospital of Montana received this property from the Forrest Allen Estate in 2019. Limited public hunting occurred on this property in the past. Wildlife viewing, photography, and hiking are other wildlife-related recreation available on these properties.

Figure 6. Big and Little Snowy Mountains public land access points.



f) **Management Considerations – 10 pts.**

Big Snowy Mountains WMA is owned fee title by Shodair Children's Hospital of Montana. All taxes are paid and up to date. The property is currently leased for livestock grazing with the lease expiring April 1, 2031. Wildlife and/or habitat monitoring needs may be justified to develop baseline information to better understand current wildlife presence and distribution and/or monitor, maintain and/or improve habitat conditions. Similar to other FWP WMA's, a management plan would be created to perpetually protect the wildlife habitat and recreational values associated with this property. The property is adjacent to a county road and has few interior roads which have a good gravel base. Fencing and water development infrastructure may be needed to implement an approved grazing plan. Weeds are present on the property but are at a small and manageable level.

**REFERENCES**

Montana Natural Heritage Program and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2020b. Montana Species of Greatest Conservation Need List. <https://apps.fwp.mt.gov/gis/maps/fwpMapper/> accessed on 5/27/2020.

Montan Natural Heritage Program and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2020b. Montana Species of Greatest Inventory Need List. Accessed on 5/27/2020. <https://apps.fwp.mt.gov/gis/maps/fwpMapper/>

Montana's State Wildlife Action Plan. 2015. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 1420 East Sixth Avenue, Helena, MT 59620.