



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: August 13, 2020

Agenda Item: Big Snowy Mountains WMA Land Project, Region 5

Action Needed: Endorsement **Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

Background: FWP proposes to purchase approximately 5,677 acres, to establish the Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area, 29 miles east of Judith Gap, in Golden Valley County. FWP is partnering with Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) on this proposal. This private property 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. Big Snowy Mountains WMA would be one contiguous block adjacent to the BLM's Twin Coulee Wilderness Area (6,936 acres), which abuts the USFS's Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area (88,696 acres). This native foothill habitat provides for a diverse assemblage of species, including critical winter range (as well as year-round habitat) for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn, as well as habitat for black bear, white-tailed deer, and other native species. Many properties along the Big and Little Snowy Mountains have undergone landownership changes in recent years, involving buyers primarily interested in recreation over agricultural values and associated public access limitations. This property would provide permanent access to incredible wildlife habitat and public recreation opportunities, including access to occupied elk habitat within the Snowy Mountains Elk Management Unit. The primary management purposes of this property would be to provide enhanced wildlife habitat and compatible public recreation, including hunting, while increasing access to outdoor recreation opportunities in the Big Snowy Mountains.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP has not sought formal public review of this proposal. Upon endorsement by the commission, FWP would conduct an initial public evaluation. Depending on the response, FWP may proceed further with an environmental analysis, including additional public involvement and review.

Alternatives and Analysis: Proposal alternatives and analysis would be conducted by FWP if this proposal receives commission endorsement.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission endorse this proposal, allowing the department to further pursue and evaluate it and to offer opportunities for public review and comment. This proposal is a unique opportunity to conserve and manage priority wildlife habitat while opening up strategic public access.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission endorse the proposed Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area Land Project, allowing FWP to conduct further due diligence, analysis, and public review.