



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

**Meeting Date:** August 13, 2020

**Agenda Item:** Ash Coulee Conservation Easement- Region 6

**Action Needed:** Final      **Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

**Background:** FWP proposes to purchase the Ash Coulee Conservation Easement (CE) on approximately 3,400 acres in Valley County. The appraised value of the CE is \$772,000, which would be primarily funded using Habitat Montana and a grant from the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust. The CE would comprise shrub and prairie grasslands, as well as breaks associated with the Milk River. The property is critically important to wintering migratory antelope, serves as a key linkage between summer and winter ranges for migrating sage-grouse, and provides excellent year-round habitat for mule deer, white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and a diversity of nongame wildlife. The CE would protect healthy blocks of native prairie and riparian habitat from conversion to other cover types, benefitting wildlife and agriculture, while also increasing public hunting and recreational opportunities.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** An initial public review was conducted April/May 2017, resulting in nine comments that were addressed in the draft environmental assessment (EA). The EA was made available for a 30-day public comment period (June-July 2020). Legal Notice of the EA release and comment period was published in the Glasgow Courier and the Helena Independent Record, the FWP website and Region 6 Facebook page. Direct mailing and/or email notification was provided to adjacent landowners, interested parties, Valley County Commissioners, DNRC, BLM, and NRCS. A public meeting was held at the Cottonwood Inn in Glasgow on June 29, 2020; four members of the public were in attendance. The EA, CE, and management plan were available to interested parties by downloading them from the FWP website and hard copies were available at the FWP Region 6 office in Glasgow and at the public meeting in Glasgow. A total of 20 comments were received through the public comment period representing 19 individuals and one group. One handwritten comment was received during the public meeting; the remainder were received electronically. All comments received expressed support for the Ash Coulee CE. All comments are included verbatim in the Decision Notice, as received by FWP.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** No action is the only viable alternative and would mean that a conservation easement would not be purchased on this private property. The management plan developed cooperatively by FWP and the landowner, as well as the accompanying grazing infrastructure improvements, would not be implemented on the land, and the guarantee of perpetual public hunting and wildlife viewing access would be lost.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** FWP recommends that this purchase be completed. The project is strongly supported in the local area and by sports persons and groups.

**Proposed Motion:**

I move the commission approve FWP's purchase of the Ash Coulee Conservation Easement as presented.