

Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Easement Project Region 1



Photo of the project area showing its location along the Thompson Chain of Lakes and on both sides of Highway 2 (photo by Chris Boyer - kestrelaerial.com)

Wildlife Habitat Land Project Proposal June 2021

Prepared by:
Kris Tempel



WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

1. **Region:** 1 **Regional Supervisor:** Jim Williams
Name of Applicants: Kris Tempel (Region 1 Habitat Conservation Biologist) and Neil Anderson (Region 1 Wildlife Manager)
2. **Date:** June 25, 2021
3. **Project Name:** Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Easement Project
Type of Project: Conservation Easement
4. **Size:** 113,951 acres
5. **Location:** Blocks of land located north and south of Highway 2 along the Thompson Chain of Lakes in Lincoln, Flathead, and Sanders Counties, Region 1
6. **Map:** See Figures 1 & 2 (pp. 3 & 4)
7. **Project Need:** This proposed FWP conservation easement would protect 113,951 acres of highly productive, working forestland around the Thompson Chain of Lakes between Kalispell and Libby (Figs. 1 & 2). This project is a perfect complement to the Commission policy for purchasing interest in wildlife habitats. The proposed conservation easement would prevent residential and commercial development protecting the land, water, wildlife, open space, and scenic values of this incredible landscape. Completion of this project will ensure continued sustainable timber management guided by an FWP-approved management plan, provide wood-product jobs, protect incredible wildlife habitat and key landscape connectivity, and provide free, permanent, year-round public recreation access to extraordinary recreation land. The land would remain in private ownership and continue to contribute to the tax base of three counties. This property is within Priority Area E for the SO3362 Montana Action Plan for 2020. It provides key winter range and a movement corridor for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose. This project would protect critical habitat for bull trout, grizzly bear, and Canada lynx, ESA-listed Threatened species found on the property. The project borders the 142,000-acre Thompson-Fisher CE and the 100,000-acre USFWS Lost Trail Conservation Area as well as the Kootenai National Forest and DNRC lands. Collectively, conservation projects in Montana and Idaho have protected over 360,000 of working forestland.

Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Easement Project

MONTANA FWP

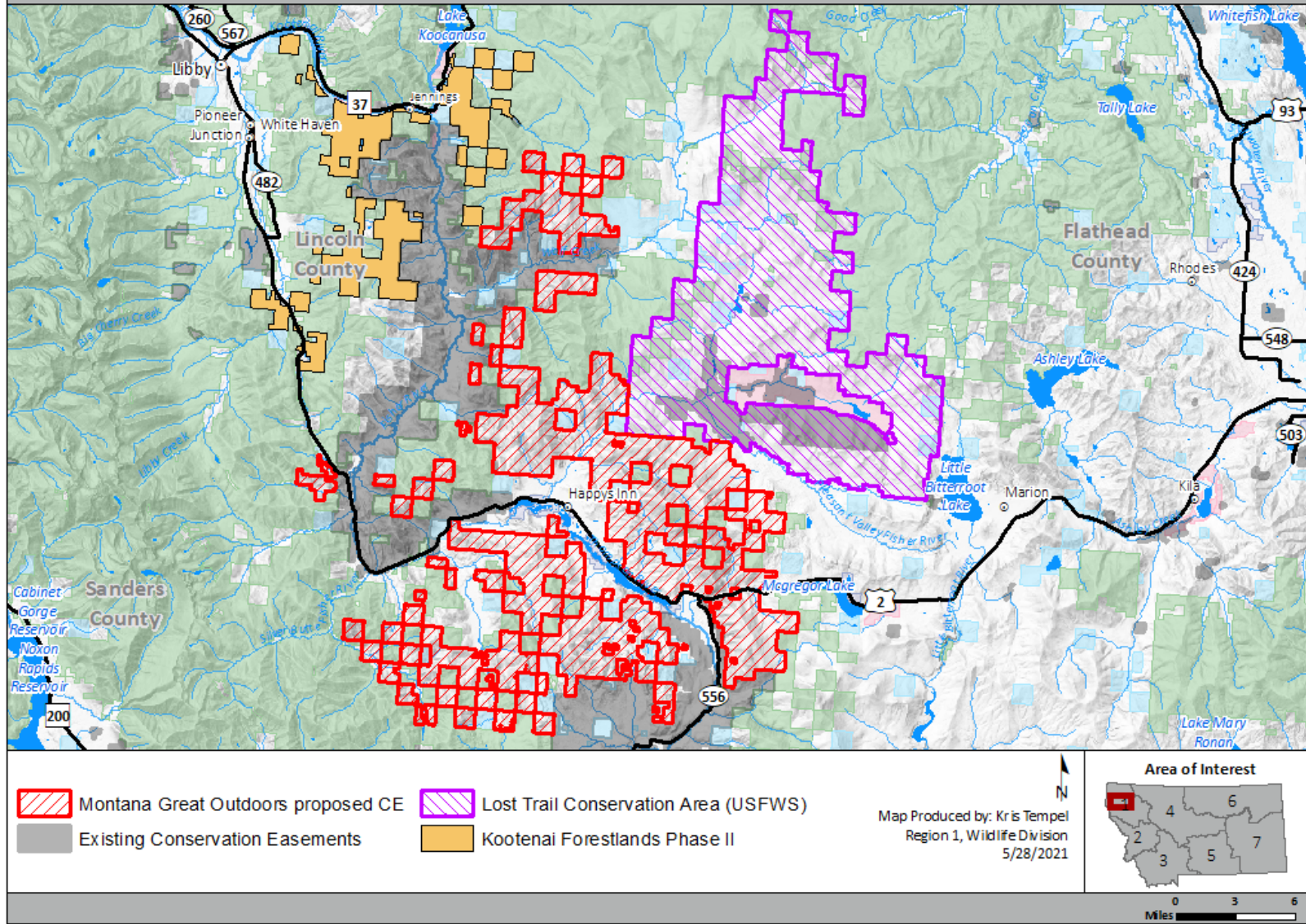


Figure 1. Map of the project area showing its adjacency to existing conservation easements (gray), the USFS Lost Trail Conservation Area (purple hatch), and Phase II of the Kootenai Forestlands CE project (orange).

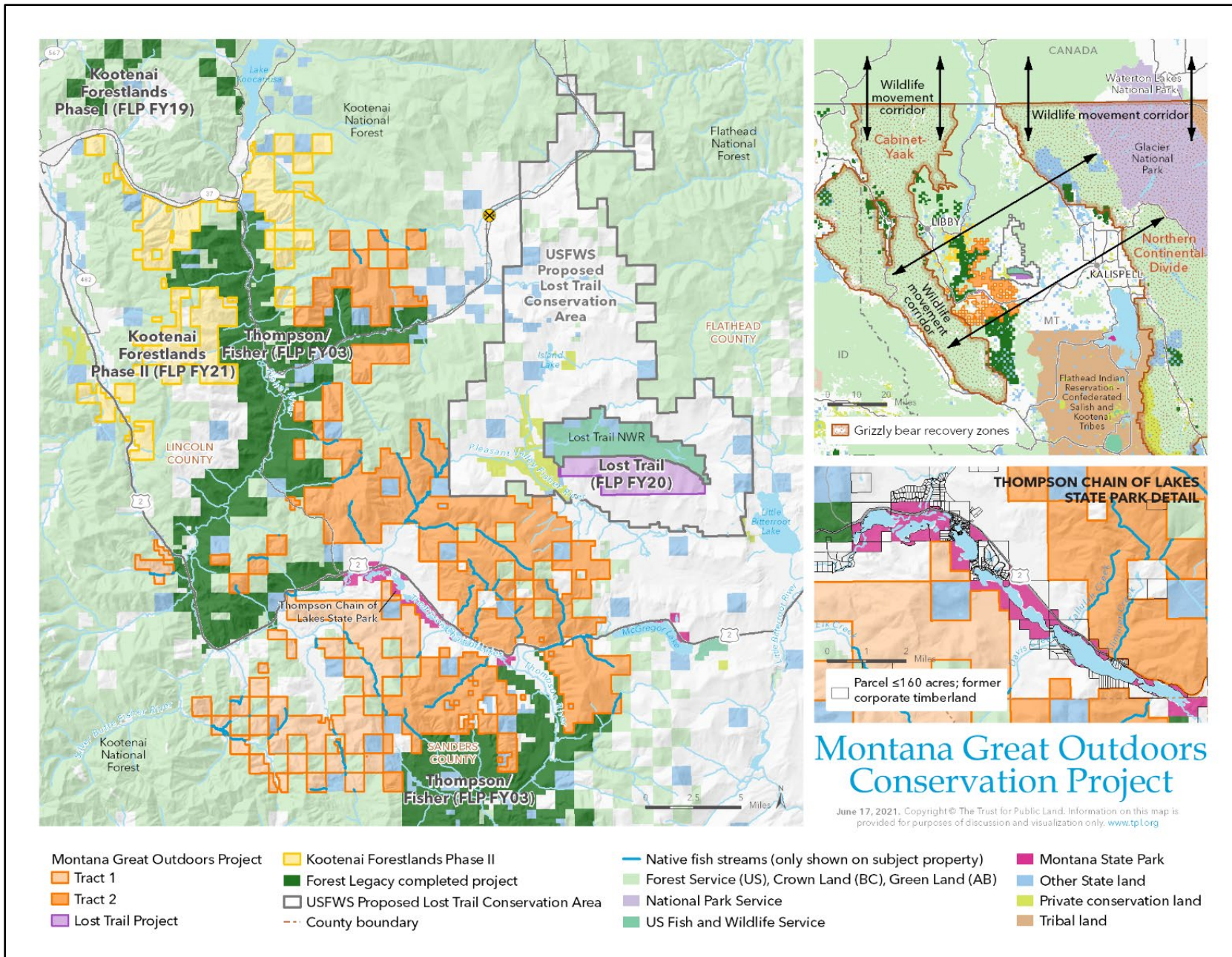


Figure 2. Map of the project area showing its relation to other conservation projects, proximity to the Thompson Chain of Lakes State Park, and wildlife connectivity corridors.

8. Statewide Habitat Criteria

The project area consists of 85% Tier I terrestrial community types including 2% wetlands, 5% floodplain and riparian, 5% montane grassland, 10% deciduous shrubland, 25% conifer-dominated forest and woodland (xeric-mesic), and 48% conifer-dominated forest and woodland (mesic-wet). The remaining 15% is harvested forest, a Tier II terrestrial community type. All 207 miles of flowing water on the property are designated mountain streams, a Tier I aquatic community type. The property contains 4,859 acres of riparian and floodplain habitat and 2,065 acres of wetlands (Fig. 3). There is no cropland on the property.



Figure 3. *One of the wetland complexes on the property (photo by Chris Boyer – kestrelaerial.com).*

9. Project-Level Strategic Criteria

a) Site-Specific Habitat Values

The project lands provide key habitat for 65 Montana Species of Concern of which 46 are also Species of Greatest Conservation Need as identified in Montana's 2015 State Wildlife Action Plan; including, but not limited to, westslope cutthroat trout, Columbia River redband trout, hoary bat, northern goshawk, veery, fringed myotis, and northern alligator lizard. Columbia River redband are a unique rainbow trout subspecies and the only rainbows native to Montana, which are highly threatened due to habitat loss. Thirty-nine thousand acres are designated as potential fisher habitat, a rare Montana Species of Greatest Conservation Need. The project is part

of a larger network of protected lands in Montana, Idaho, and Washington that have secured habitat for this species and kept it from being listed under the ESA.

The project lands are used by grizzly bear, Canada lynx, and bull trout; all ESA-listed Threatened species. These animals require large, resilient landscapes for their survival and this property's size and location between national and state forestland and existing conservation easements provides key landscape-scale connectivity. For example, grizzly bears forage and reproduce here and use the land as a movement corridor between the Northern Continental Divide and Cabinet-Yaak recovery zones, as well as for movements into Canada, ID, and WA (Fig. 4). The southwest portion of the property is within the Cabinet-Yaak Grizzly Bear Recovery Zone. The Cabinet-Yaak grizzly bear population has less than 75 bears and preserving genetic linkage to neighboring populations by protecting connectivity corridors, such as this property, is critical to their survival and recovery. Canada lynx use the entire property and 39,000 acres of it are designated as critical lynx habitat under the USFWS 2014 Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy, Revised Designated Habitat. Bull trout are found in East Fisher Creek, which is identified as critical habitat in the USFWS's 2010 Revised Designation Critical Habitat for Bull Trout.



Figure 4. Grizzly bear from the project area using the nearby Thompson Chain of Lakes State Park.

The project area also provides critical winter range for a variety of ungulate and big game species including mule deer, elk, white-tailed deer, and moose. Specifically, the property provides 61,000 acres of mule deer, 76,000 acres of elk, 43,000 acres of white-tailed deer, and 105,000 acres of moose winter range. The project lands are

unique in that they include higher elevation summer ranges which more typically exist on national forestland. These privately owned, conifer-covered mountain peaks with an abundance of riparian areas and wet meadows, are critical to the reproductive needs of mule deer and elk that raise their fawns and calves on the property. Studies of white-tailed deer conducted by FWP have documented that such areas provide an abundance of security for young deer and elk. FWP found that fawn survival rates in this area were significantly higher than for other areas of Montana (Dusek et al., 2006). Some of the mule deer have adapted to winter at these higher elevations within the project area. The steep slopes and dense conifer cover provide access to food, improved mobility, and are a significant deterrent to predators, as hunting can be easier in lower elevation winter ranges. In addition, the lower elevation lands in the project area provide important spring and fall migration habitat.

The property also supports populations of black bear, mountain lion, forest grouse, and turkeys. The 5% montane grassland existing on the property is a rare community type for northwest Montana.

b) Threat Status

The threat status of this project is imminent. In March of 2020, Southern Pine Plantations (SPP) bought all 630,000 acres of Weyerhaeuser forestland in Montana with the intention of selling it to multiple buyers within one year. A similar incident occurred in Idaho in 2016 when SPP purchased 172,000 acres of forestland and sold it to private buyers who stopped logging, locked out the public, and blocked access to the national forest. Just within the last year, SPP has sold 475,000 acres through 49 land sales, ranging in size from 4 acres to 291,000 acres (Figs. 5 & 6). Most sales were in the 350-acre range. The second largest sale was to a private individual who bought 125,800 acres between Flathead and McGregor lakes, now known as the Flathead Ridge Ranch. The largest transaction was a sale to Green Diamond Resource Company (Green Diamond) which bought 291,000 acres in January 2021, of which the Montana Great Outdoors project footprint is a part. This project now consists of 28,091 acres of SPP ownership and 85,860 acres of Green Diamond ownership (Fig. 7). This is a one-time opportunity to protect nearly 114,000 acres in a single transaction and at a highly discounted cost per acre (both landowners are willing to sell a conservation easement at a discounted price). Otherwise, much of this project area will almost assuredly be sold and divided into smaller tracts, increasing the number of landowners on this landscape and the cost per acre of a conservation easement, while fragmenting the wildlife habitat and decreasing the likelihood of ever achieving a conservation outcome.

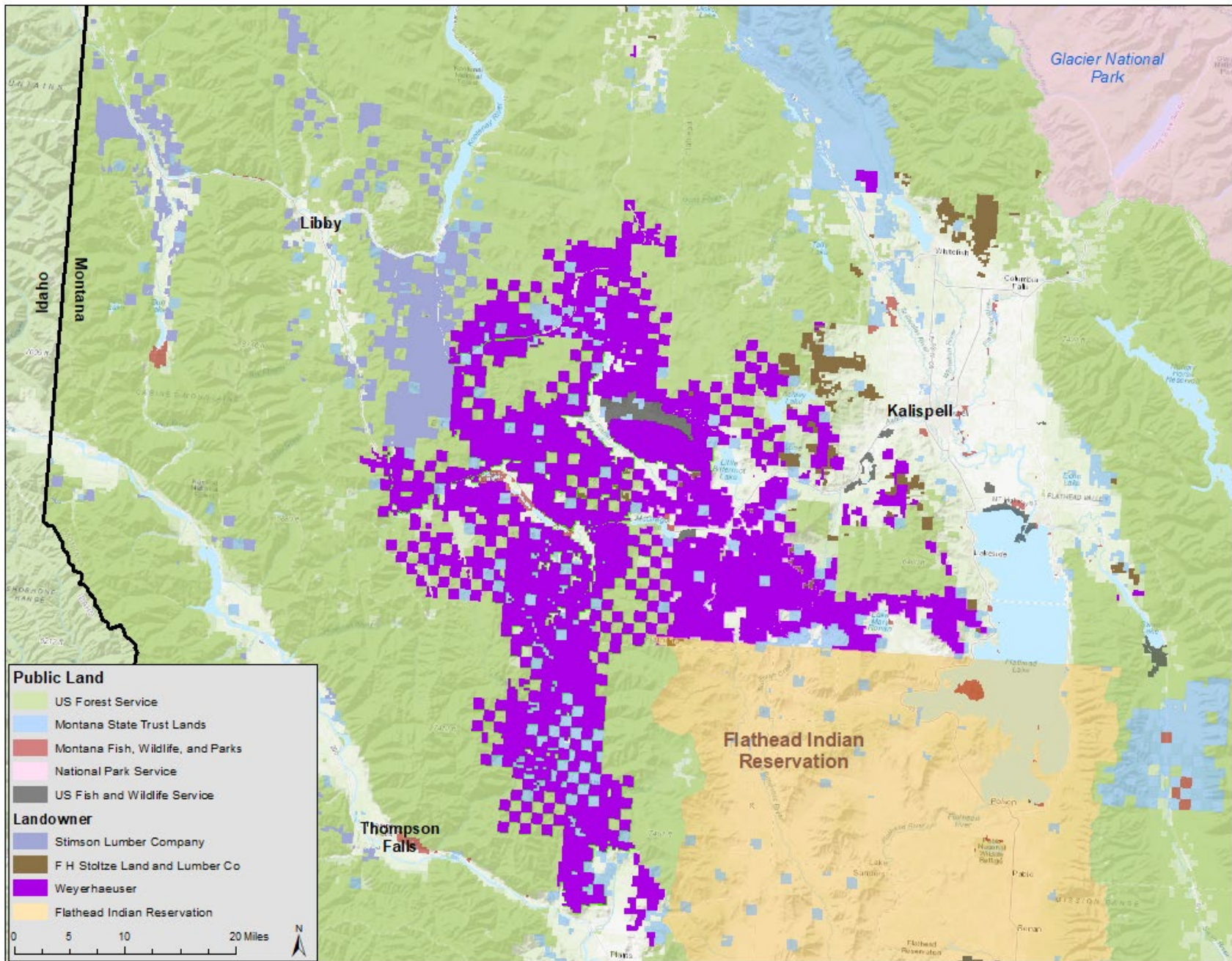


Figure 5. Landownership in northwest Montana in 2019.

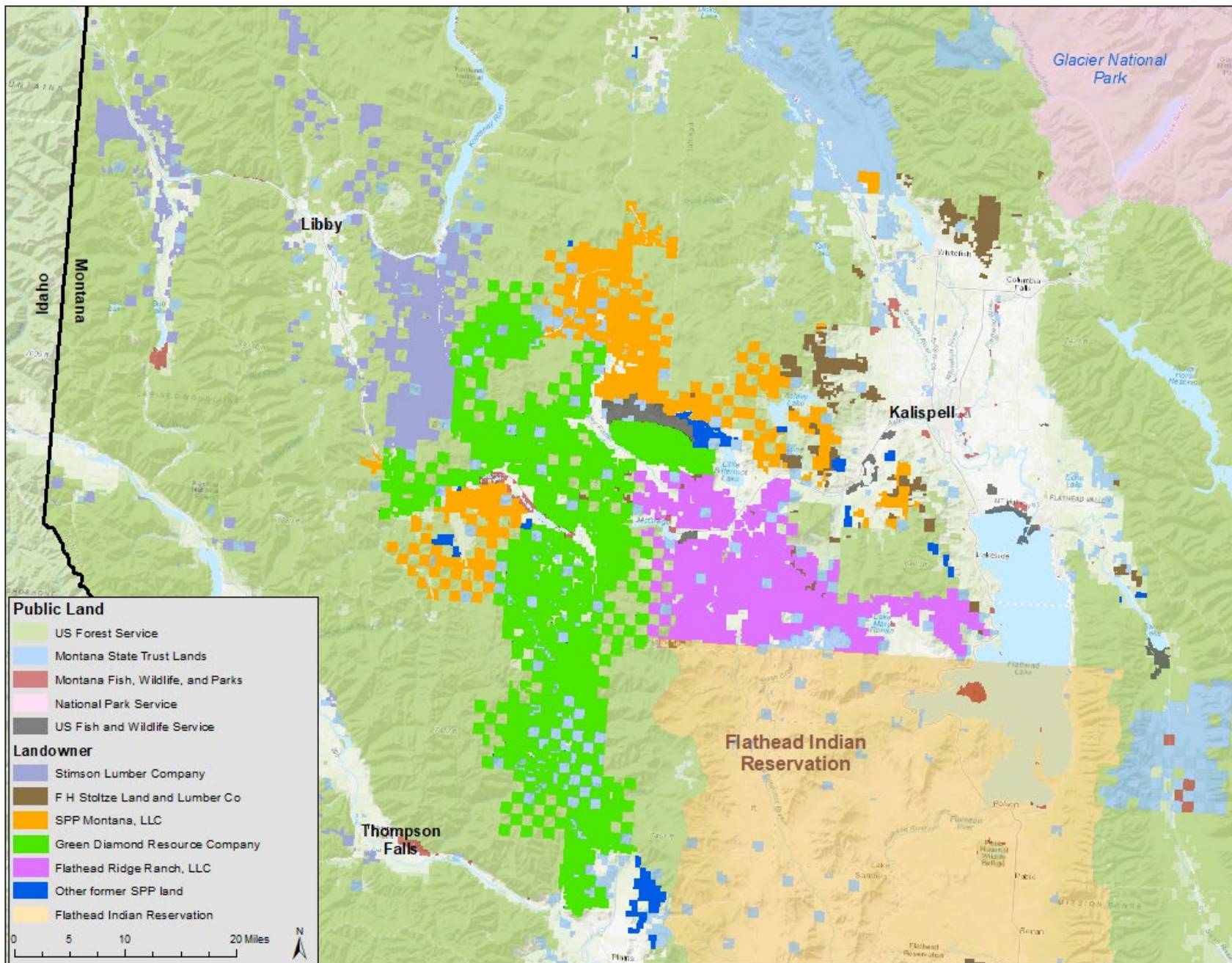


Figure 6. Current landownership in northwest Montana.

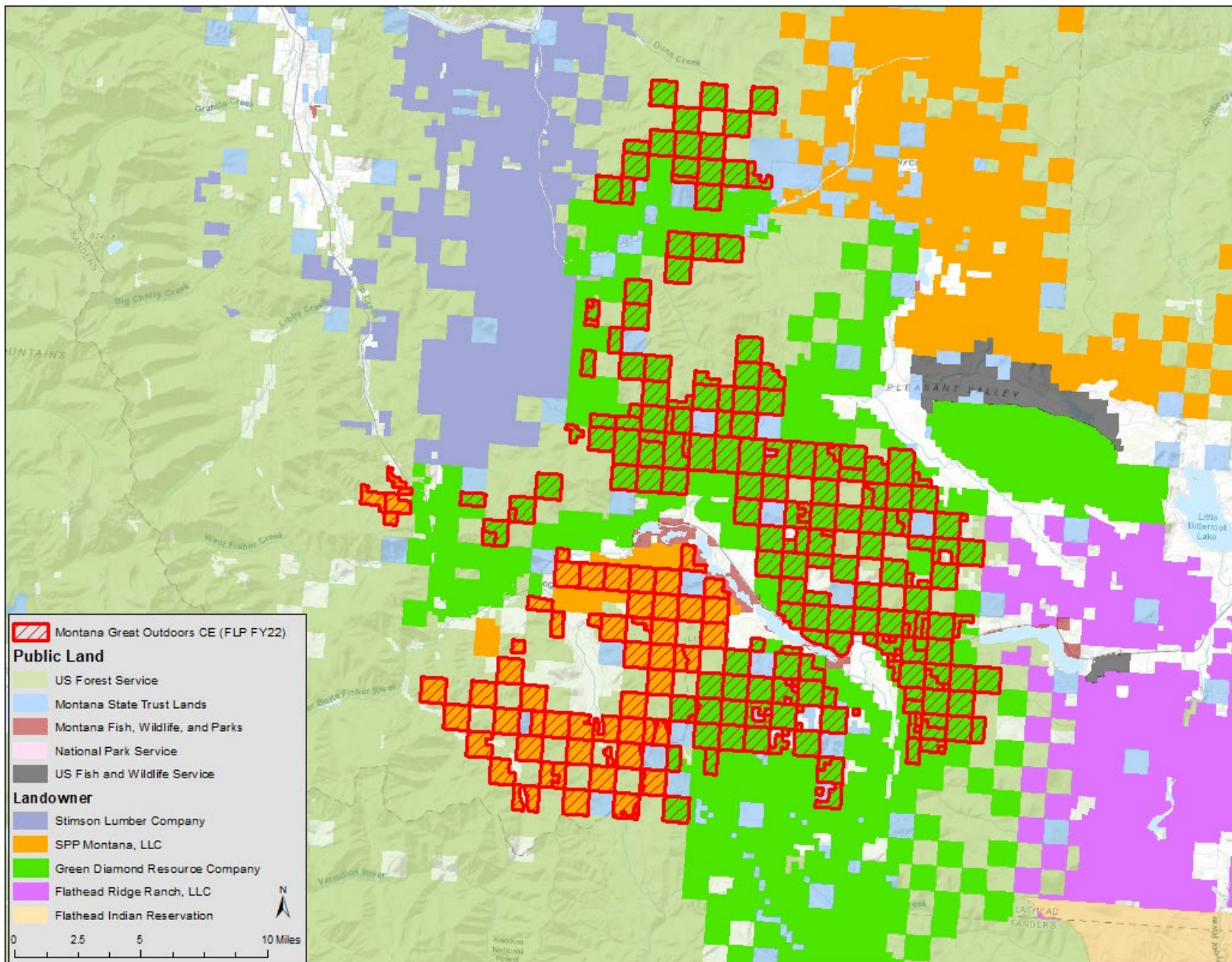


Figure 7. Montana Great Outdoors project area showing current landownership.

Additionally, this property could be easily opened up for development given the proximity to U.S. Highway 2 and the existing road network: 107 mi of county, 12 mi of state, and 64 mi of U.S. Forest Service roads. It has ready access to utilities and areas with gently sloping terrain. Landowners in Montana may subdivide their land into 160-acre parcels without governmental review, which could create 712 new parcels. Additional splits of these parcels into up to four lots requires only minor subdivision review, potentially resulting in 2,848 new parcels. Portions of both tracts could be subdivided into even smaller parcels. Lincoln County estimated that 6,300 new homes could potentially be built on 65,000 acres around the Thompson Chain of Lakes, which would make it the largest residential area in the county. The portion of the property near the beautiful crystal-blue colored Thompson Chain of Lakes is highly prized for homesites given the spectacular views of lakes, rivers, and meadow/wetland areas. As previously mentioned, portions of former corporate timberland in this area have already been sold and are currently under subdivision development, which will result in lost habitat, connectivity, and public recreation access. Older subdivisions around the Thompson Chain of Lakes have already had these impacts (Fig. 8).



Figure 8. Existing development adjacent to the property along a portion of the Thompson Chain of Lakes and Hwy 2.

c) Focal Priority

Fifty percent of the property is in two different Tier I Terrestrial Focal Areas: 30% in the Salish and 20% in the East Cabinet Front Terrestrial Focal Areas. Another 30% is the Tier 2 Thompson Terrestrial Focal Area. This project is part of an ongoing multi-

partner conservation initiative, which includes FWP, The Trust for Public Land, various timber companies, and multiple federal, state, and private funding sources, that have been working cooperatively to protect large landscapes of working forest, fish and wildlife habitat, and public recreation access in northwestern Montana over the last twenty years. This project builds on the success of numerous U.S. Forest Service Forest Legacy Program-funded projects completed over the last 20 years in Montana and Idaho that have cumulatively protected over 360 million acres of Tier I terrestrial and aquatic community types. This project ranked #1 of 47 projects nationally for the FY2022 Forest Legacy Program and was awarded \$20 million in funding, the highest amount ever given for one project.

This project is located within the Cabinet-Purcell ecoregion, part of the Crown of the Continent, one of North America's largest remaining intact ecosystems. United States and Canadian scientists, agencies, and non-profits are working together to advance landscape-scale conservation essential to the survival of grizzly bears and other wide-ranging imperiled species. The Crown of the Continent Landscape Conservation Design, a newly created Canadian/USA collaborative already consisting of 29 different NGOs, federal, state, provincial and local agencies, research institutes, and tribes, identifies both tracts as a priority for conservation to ensure a resilient, connected landscape that supports healthy ecosystems and human communities. Many other initiatives have identified these tracts as a high international conservation priority, such as the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Grizzly Bear Initiative, Northern Rockies Wildlife Corridors Keystone Initiative, Western Governors' Association Wildlife Corridors Initiative, the Cabinet-Purcell Mountain Corridor Collaborative, and Patagonia's Freedom to Roam Campaign.

This property was prioritized under federal Secretarial Order 3362 (SO3362), which directs Department of Interior agencies to work with western state agencies and private landowners to protect critical big game habitat, including migration corridors, stopover habitat, and seasonal ranges that this property provides. Ninety percent of the property falls within Priority Area E (the Heart of the Salish) of the 2020 Montana Action Plan for SO3362. It effectively links Focal Area 1 and Focal Area 2, as identified in the plan (Fig. 9). Due to its strategic location and importance for big game habitat and migration, this project was awarded \$400,000 in National Fish and Wildlife Foundation funding. An additional 100,000 acres within Priority Area E were recently designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as the Lost Trail Conservation Area (Fig. 9). Within the Conservation Area boundary, the USFWS can work with willing landowners to place conservation easements on their land. Green Diamond and SPP are the major landowners within the Conservation Area footprint and both are actively working with the USFWS on conservation easements.

Priority Area E

MONTANA FWP

Conservation Projects

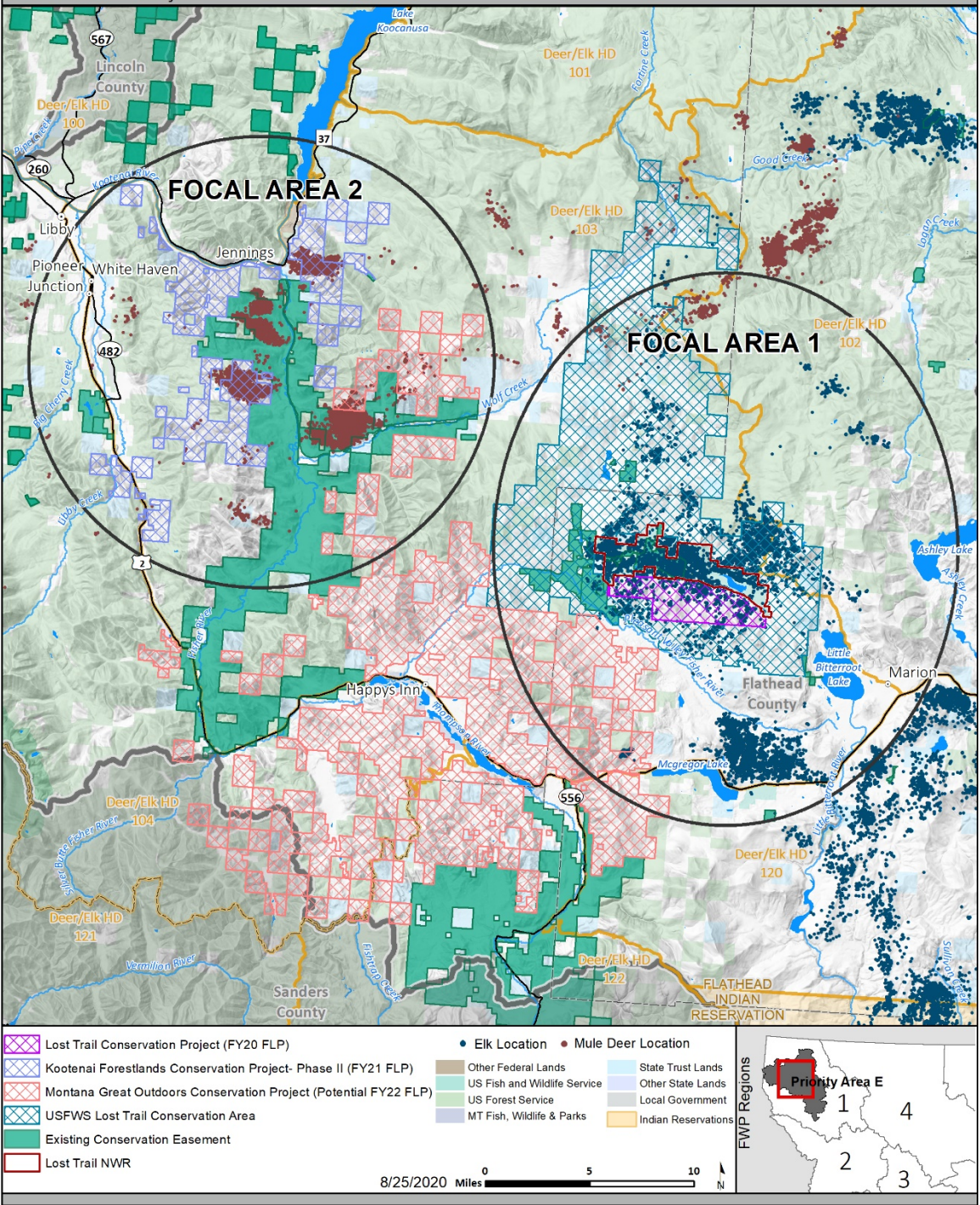


Figure 9. Map showing the location of this project within Priority Area E and the two designated focal areas of the Montana Action Plan for Secretarial Order 3362.

Several USFWS management plans identified this property as important for the recovery of federally listed species, including the 2015 Recovery Plan for Bull Trout, the 2018 Conservation Strategy for the Grizzly Bear in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, and the 2014 Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy, Revised Designated Habitat. The lands are also a high priority for habitat protection in the 2010 MT Assessment of Forest Resources, the 2003 MT Gray Wolf Management Plan, the 2014 Rangeland Conservation Agreement for Interior Redband Trout, and the 1999 Conservation Agreement for Cutthroat Trout. Lincoln County's Thompson Chain of Lakes Neighborhood Plan encourages conservation opportunities to maintain public use of private lands for recreation. It also encourages conservation easements on the project lands to link the northern and southern portions of the Thompson-Fisher Conservation Easement and to maintain landscape connectivity for fish and wildlife species.

d) Geographic Effectiveness

This 113,951-acre project builds on the success of the nearby completed conservation easement projects, including the 142,000-acre Thompson-Fisher CE, the 28,000-acre Kootenai Valleys CE, the 22,295-acre Kootenai Forestlands CE, and the 2,756-acre Lost Trail CE. Completed conservation easement projects in Montana and Idaho have cumulatively protected over 360,000 acres stretching from Glacier National Park to the Selkirk Mountains. As mentioned previously, the USFWS has approved a 100,000-acre Conservation Area around the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, which borders this project. Completion of this project combined with the USFWS Conservation Area and the proposed 27,289-acre Kootenai Forestlands Phase II CE would add an additional 240,000 acres of conserved habitat and public recreation access to this landscape (Fig. 2).

The project borders 223 miles of the Kootenai National Forest, 80 miles of state land, and 49 miles of existing conservation easements, contributing to the integrity of the surrounding forest landscape, securing access through this property to the adjoining public lands and conservation easements, and allowing for more seamless forest management. Conservation of this area increases core habitat protections for threatened and endangered species, state species of concern, and game species, while also providing landscape-scale connectivity. Conservation of this property in conjunction with existing conservation easements and federal and state land will ensure these species have opportunities to sustain their populations through time.

e) Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation

SPP currently has an open lands policy and has enrolled in Block Management. Green Diamond is still considering how they want to manage their land in Montana, but they are currently in talks with FWP about potentially placing their lands into Block Management. The public has historically used this land year-round for all types

of recreational purposes thanks to Plum Creek Timber Company's followed by Weyerhaeuser's open lands policy. Northwest Montana is at a crossroads where hundreds of thousands of acres could be permanently lost to all types of recreation access, especially if either of these landowners decides to opt out of Block Management now or in the future.

Under the terms of the conservation easement, public access to this property would be permanently secured and would also provide access through the property to the adjoining national forest and state land, allowing this conservation easement to function as an even larger block of land for public recreation opportunities. These parcels provide access to 24,660 acres of national forest and state land that would otherwise be landlocked and inaccessible. This nearly 114,000-acre property currently provides over 121,000 days of public hunting and angling which would be secured in perpetuity under this proposal. Outdoor activities on the project lands, including hunting, fishing, hiking, berry picking, mountain biking, and snowmobiling, currently contribute \$12 million to the local economy. One and a half million vehicles per year travel through the project area along 15 miles of Hwy 2. The project lands provide the scenic backdrop to 1.5 million travelers per year along Hwy 2 and for the nearly 170,000 visitors per year to Thompson Chain of Lakes State Park, the 6th most visited state park out of the 55 in the state.

f) **Management Considerations**

The habitat on this property is in good condition and not in need of restoration. Green Diamond and SPP will continue to be responsible for management costs on their respective properties, including weed control. Under the terms of the conservation easement, property management would be guided by an FWP-approved forest management plan. By eliminating future development, this project will reduce the potential for wildlife/human conflicts that would result from increased urbanization, thus reducing the need for additional staff time and funding spent on wildlife conflict in this area.

Reference

Dusek, G. L., A. K. Wood, S. T. Hoekman, C. A. Sime, and J. T. Morgan. 2006. Ecology of White-tailed Deer in the Salish Mountains, Northwest Montana. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Federal Aid Project W-120-R. 263 pp.

<https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwp/conservation/wildlife-reports/deer/wtdreport06-web.pdf>

