

Draft Environmental Assessment for the Proposed Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area Acquisition



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Abbreviations

CFAC	Columbia Falls Aluminum Company
ESA	Endangered Species Act
FLP	Forest Legacy Program
MCA	Montana Code Annotated
MEPA	Montana Environmental Policy Act
MNHP	Montana Natural Heritage Program
FWP	Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USFS	U.S. Forest Service
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

1.0 PURPOSE AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1 PURPOSE AND NEED

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase approximately 772 acres of forest along 1.3 miles of the Flathead River near Columbia Falls to protect water quality and important fish and wildlife habitat, while providing free public recreation access (Fig. 1). The property is highly developable and threatened by the rapidly growing city of Columbia Falls, but would be protected as a Wildlife Management Area under this proposal.

The Columbia Falls Aluminum Company (CFAC), a subsidiary of Glencore, a multi-national company, has decided to dispose of this property. The property is winter range for elk, moose, and white-tailed deer. Completion of this project would safeguard vital habitat and a travel corridor for bull trout and grizzly bears, Endangered Species Act-listed Threatened species found on the property. This key corridor is located at a geographic pinch point where the Flathead River flows through the very narrow Bad Rock Canyon. The project is adjacent to a large block of public lands and would add to a 12,000-acre network of conserved land along a 43-mile reach of the Flathead River between Columbia Falls and Flathead Lake.

The property is currently in the FWP Block Management Program and provides a limited opportunity for hunters to harvest elk and white-tailed deer just minutes from Columbia Falls. A trail has been constructed on the property by Gateway to Glacier Trail, Inc., a local nonprofit group granted a revocable license issued by CFAC to allow access for hikers, bikers, birdwatchers, and others. Under FWP ownership, public access would be managed to preserve wildlife presence and hunting opportunities while allowing compatible trail and property use.

CFAC has given FWP and the Flathead Land Trust, our partner on this project, until the end of 2021 to complete this project. If the project fails, the property would most likely be sold, subdivided, and developed into a high-density neighborhood which would include highly sought-after riverfront lots, directly impacting the property's many conservation values.

Project Objectives

The primary objectives of this land project include:

- Protecting habitat and a movement corridor for fish and wildlife species;
- Providing hunting and recreational opportunities for the public while preserving the wildlife use of the property; and
- Protecting the valuable wetlands and riparian areas on this property which in turn protects water quality in the Flathead River and Flathead Lake.

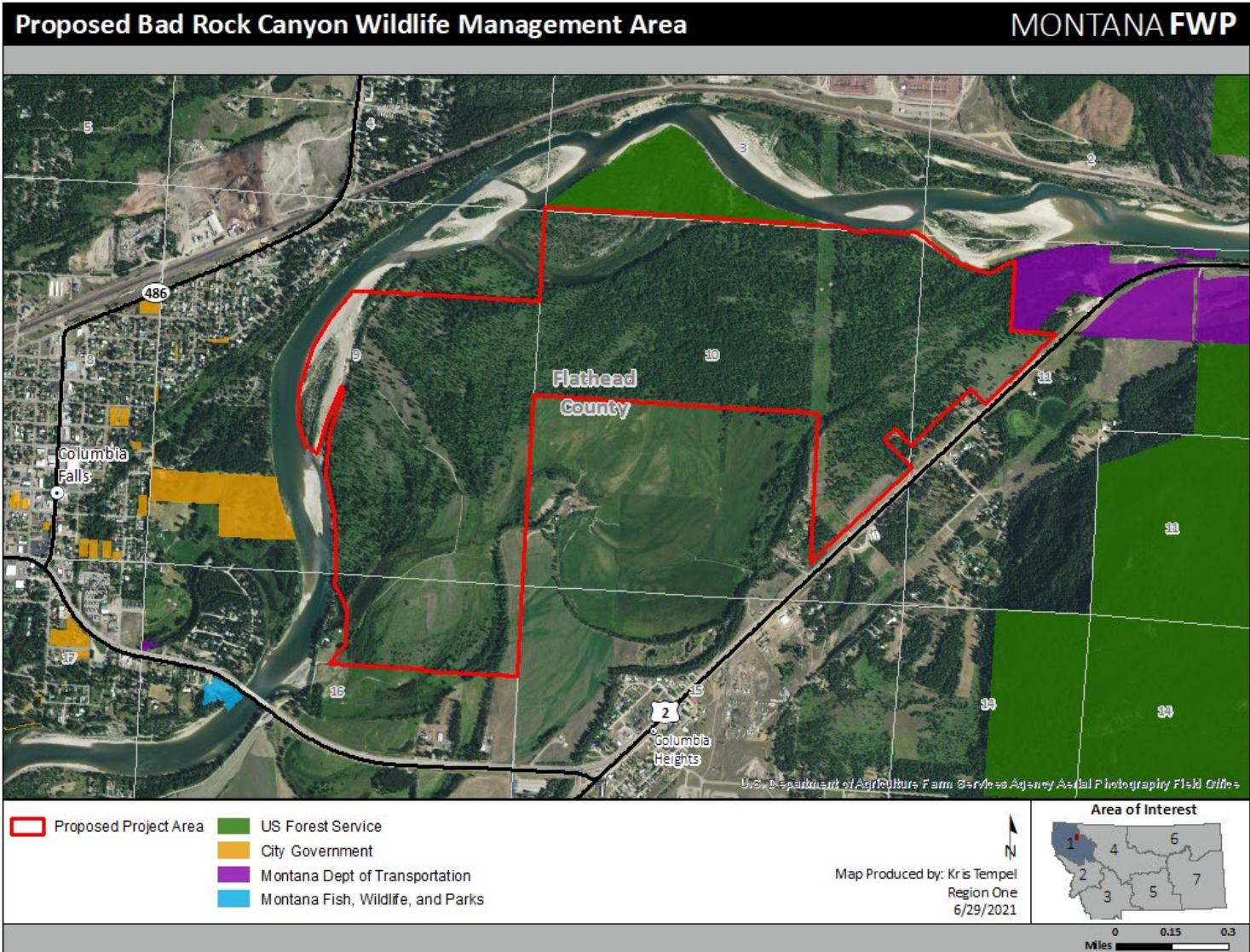


Figure 1. The location of the proposed Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area just to the east of Columbia Falls, MT.

1.2 FUNDING

The appraised value of the proposed Bad Rock Canyon WMA acquisition is \$7.26 million. Funding amounts and sources include: \$4 million from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Forest Legacy Program, \$2.5 million from Habitat Montana, and \$590,000 raised by the Flathead Land Trust through private individuals, organizations, and foundations. The landowner would be donating the remainder of the value.

1.3 RELEVANT AUTHORITIES, RELEVANT DOCUMENTS, AND OVERLAPPING JURISDICTIONS

1.3.1 Authorities

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife & Parks: FWP has the authority under state law (87-1-201 Montana Code Annotated [MCA]) to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In 1987, the Montana Legislature passed HB526 which earmarked hunting license revenues to secure wildlife habitat through lease, conservation easement, or fee-title acquisition (87-1-241 and 242 MCA). The Habitat Montana Program, developed as a result of that legislation, provides direction to the Fish and Wildlife Commission for all of FWP's wildlife habitat acquisition programs (12.9.511 ARM).

1.3.2 Relevant Documents

1993 and 2018 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan: The project area sits just to the west of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and Recovery Zone as identified in the USFWS 1993 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan and in the 2018 Recovery Plan Supplement: Habitat-based Recovery Criteria for the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (https://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/es/species/mammals/grizzly/20180516_SignedFinal_HBRC_NCDE_Grizz.pdf).

FWP Grizzly Bear Management Plan for Western Montana 2006-2016: The project area sits just to the west of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and is part of a key connectivity area as identified in this plan (https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwp/conservation/wildlife-reports/bears/westmt_gb_final_peis_12-17-06_hires_full.pdf), and also in the **Conservation Strategy for Grizzly Bear in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, 2019** (<http://igbconline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/NCDEConservationStrategy.3.25.20-1.pdf>).

2002 Bull Trout Recovery Plan and 2010 Revised Designation Critical Habitat for Bull Trout: This project is part of a migration route for bull trout, a federally listed Threatened species, which spawn and rear in the upper drainages of the Flathead River system and live as adults in Flathead Lake. This property also provides over-wintering habitat for bull trout (<https://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/es/bullTrout.php>).

2014 Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy, Revised Designated Habitat: This property lies between the Whitefish and Swan Mountain ranges, which are both designated critical habitat for lynx. This property is a movement corridor between the areas of critical habitat for this federally listed Threatened species (<https://www.fws.gov/mountain-prairie/es/canadaLynx.php>).

2007 MOU and Conservation Agreement for Westslope and Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout in Montana: The project area is occupied habitat for westslope cutthroat trout and a target for recovery efforts per a 2007 Memorandum of Understanding and Conservation Agreement for Westslope Cutthroat Trout and Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout in Montana that was signed by a host of government agencies, non-profit organizations, and other stakeholders (<http://fwp.mt.gov/fwpDoc.html?id=28662>).

2010 Montana Bald Eagle Management Guidelines - An Addendum to the 1994 Montana Bald Eagle Management Plan: Bald eagles are known to nest on the property and there is currently one known active nest. The Management Guidelines were prepared in cooperation with the Montana Bald Eagle Working Group to provide recommendations for protecting bald eagle habitat and reducing the risk of potential violations of the federal Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwp/conservation/wildlife-reports/bald-eagle/bald-eagle-guidelines-final-5_05_10.pdf).

2015 State Wildlife Action Plan: The project area supports conservation priorities set forth in Montana's 2015 State Wildlife Action plan. It is one of only 14 geographic terrestrial focus areas identified in the plan as in greatest need of conservation (<https://fwp.mt.gov/conservation/wildlife-management/nongame-wildlife>).

2010 Montana State Assessment of Forest Resources: This assessment identified "critical landscapes" for identifying where federal funding for private forestry assistance would be most beneficial based on an evaluation of eleven different criteria. The Project is located in an area that was rated as the highest priority for forestland protection in the 2010 Montana State Assessment of Forest Resources (<http://dnrc.mt.gov/divisions/forestry/forestry-assistance/state-assessment-of-forest-resources-and-forest-action-plan>).

2012 Flathead County Growth Policy: The Flathead County Growth Policy is a non-regulatory document adopted by the Flathead County Commissioners (Resolution #2015R) on October 12, 2012 and this property falls within the purview of this document (https://flathead.mt.gov/planning_zoning/gp.php).

1.3.3 Overlapping Jurisdictions

Forest Legacy Program: The USFS Forest Legacy Program (FLP) is one of several national programs established to promote the long-term integrity of forest lands. Specifically, the intent of the FLP is to identify and protect environmentally important private forest lands that are threatened by conversion to non-forest uses. The overall goal of the Montana FLP is to

conserve and enhance land, water, wildlife, and timber resources while providing for the continued working of Montana’s forestlands and maintenance of natural and public values. The Forest Legacy Program requires development of a management plan that ensures sustainable forest management into the future.

Flathead County and City of Columbia Falls: Approximately 72 acres of this property is zoned SAG-10 by Flathead County and an additional approximately 239 acres is also zoned SAG-10 by the City of Columbia Falls (https://flathead.mt.gov/planning_zoning/zoning.php and <https://www.cityofcolumbiafalls.org/planning-zoning>).

1.4 DECISION TO BE MADE

The decision that must be made is whether FWP ***should move forward with the purchase and proposed management of approximately 772 acres near Columbia Falls, Montana.*** Following completion of the draft EA and review of the public comments received, the FWP Region One Supervisor will issue a decision notice that makes a recommendation to the FWP Fish and Wildlife Commission on a course of action. The Commission will make a decision on which course of action, the Proposed Action or the No Action Alternative as described in Section 2.0 (Alternatives), will be followed. If approved by the Commission, this proposal would also be reviewed and a decision rendered by the Montana Board of Land Commissioners.

1.5 EARLY PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

FWP participated in a tour of the property with the Forest Legacy Program Subcommittee, part of DNRC’s State Forest Stewardship Steering Committee, on August 20, 2019. The project received support from the subcommittee and the full Steering Committee during their annual meeting on August 21, 2019.

FWP released a 30-day preliminary public evaluation notice on October 30, 2020 to solicit public input on the proposed project and requested the public’s help in identifying any issues, concerns, or other information that FWP should consider when evaluating the opportunity to conserve this property.

1.6 ISSUES RAISED DURING PUBLIC SCOPING

FWP received 127 comments through the public scoping process with the public expressing unanimous support for the proposed acquisition. The comments that required further response from FWP are as follows:

1. Several comments were concerned about potential conflicts between hunting and other recreation, as well as hunting and proximity to adjacent residential areas.
FWP Response: The CFAC property has been open for a limited hunting opportunity since 2010 without known conflicts. The Gateway to Glacier Trail is currently closed during the general hunting season to prevent conflicts between trail users and hunters.

Under FWP ownership, this general hunting season closure would continue and be enforced by FWP game wardens. The exact details of the hunting opportunity that could be afforded on the property under FWP ownership it has not yet been determined. If FWP were to acquire the property, proposed hunting regulations would be part of a separate decision process with opportunity for public comment and consideration given to the safety of surrounding residences.

2. Several comments were concerned about parking, illegal motorized use, and trash management.

FWP Response: If FWP acquires this property, a detailed proposed parking area plan would be developed. The proposed parking area would be the subject of a future separate decision process. If FWP acquires this property, fences would be repaired or installed where appropriate to discourage illegal motorized use. FWP would use wildlife friendly fencing techniques. Under FWP ownership, there would be no trash receptacles on the WMA and informational signs denoting “pack-in, pack-out” waste management would be installed at all access points. All WMA regulations would be enforced by FWP game wardens.

3. There was a general concern about the impacts of increased human use on wildlife.

FWP Response: The priority of the WMA would be to conserve wildlife habitat in perpetuity. This property provides habitat and movement corridors for numerous wildlife species, including grizzly bears, elk, white tailed deer, mountain lions, wolves, martens, foxes, and a variety of avian species. FWP would restrict human activities to mitigate potential impacts on wildlife, including closing the property to public entry from December 1st at 11:59 p.m. until May 15th at noon to protect big game winter range. This closure would benefit all species using the property during the winter and spring. The recreational trail would be restricted to a single trail and would not be a trail network. Social trails would be decommissioned to help funnel human activity to the main trail only. FWP would post informational signs at entry points to educate people about wildlife in the area and how to travel in bear country. Under FWP ownership, motorized use of the property would be prohibited.

4. One comment questioned how weeds would be managed.

FWP Response: Flathead County requires all landowners to manage weeds on their property. The primary noxious weeds on the WMA are houndstongue and Canada thistle. Trail construction, completed in 2020 and 2021, under current ownership, has resulted in new weed infestations due to soil disturbance. Prior to acquisition of the property, FWP would work with Flathead County to develop a weed management plan as required by MCA 7-22-2154. If acquired, FWP would need to work with the trail group to control weeds along the trail corridor and would also contract with a local weed control contractor to minimize weeds in the woodland and grassland areas of the property.

5. One comment asked if there would be a leash restriction for dogs and if the land would be used for logging.

FWP Response: All dogs would have to remain on a leash at all times within the WMA, unless being used for the purposes of hunting during an open hunting season. While the purpose of the WMA would not be to provide revenue through timber sales, some logging to maintain forest health would periodically be required. This could include the removal of downed or hazard trees or thinning to reduce fire potential and improve forest health. Any planned forest thinning or other forest health activity, other than hazard tree removal, would be the subject of a future decision process.

2.0 ALTERNATIVES

2.1 ALTERNATIVE A: PROPOSED ACTION

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would purchase the 772-acre CFAC property, and it would become the Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area. Acquisition of the property would ensure the protection of valuable fish and wildlife habitat and a connectivity corridor and would also allow for continued public use of the property along the Gateway to Glacier Trail. Property management and the specifics of public use are detailed in a draft management plan that would be implemented were FWP to acquire the property (Appendix C).

2.2 ALTERNATIVE B: NO ACTION

If no action is taken, FWP would not acquire the CFAC property. It is unclear what would happen to the property in that case, but CFAC has indicated an intention to put the property on the open market. It would likely sell to a residential or commercial developer. If the property were sold, the Gateway to Glacier Trail group could lose their trail license and the public would be excluded from the property. Development would likely result in negative impacts to the riparian and wetland areas as well as disrupting the wildlife movement corridor and degrading the fish and wildlife habitat. In addition, subdivision development in this area would likely result in a significant increase in human-wildlife conflicts.

3.0 AFFECTED RESOURCES AND PREDICTED ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

3.1 WILDLIFE AND AQUATIC RESOURCES

Eighteen Montana Species of Concern as well as bald eagles, a Special Status Species, have been observed on or near the proper according to the Montana Natural Heritage Program (MNHP) database. FWP is aware of one active eagle nest on the property. The MNHP database shows that an additional 35 Species of Concern have the potential to be found on the property (Table 1). Being undeveloped, the open lowlands of this project area still provide a safe crossing area for grizzly bears, black bears, mountain lions, wolverine and other wide-ranging carnivores

that move north and south between the Whitefish and Swan mountain ranges. The property is big game winter range for elk, moose, and white-tailed deer. These ungulates use the property year-round. FWP radio collar data show at least six grizzly bears, a federally listed threatened species, have used this area for foraging and as a travel corridor between the Whitefish and Swan mountains. The property buffers the river and in addition to nesting bald eagles, supports osprey, great blue herons, beaver, mink, and river otter.

The property's wetlands, forested riparian habitat, and spring creek protect the healthy function and excellent water quality of Flathead River which flows from Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness into Flathead Lake. This is the largest block of privately-owned riparian habitat along the Flathead River and the property's cottonwood gallery forest is a rare community type in northwestern Montana, especially along this dam-influenced section of the Flathead River above Flathead Lake. Cottonwood forests are in decline yet provide habitat for more than half the bird species in Montana. In the western U.S., they support a higher diversity of breeding birds than all other western habitats combined.

Groundwater is less than 8 feet below the surface, so conservation of this area would protect natural filters and vulnerable groundwater important to maintaining the excellent water quality in Flathead River and Lake. The project protects one mile of a warm spring creek which provides important waterfowl habitat in winter and spring when other areas are ice-covered. The Flathead Valley is a key migratory stopover in the Intermountain West portion of the Pacific Flyway used by hundreds of thousands of waterfowl annually.

The entire population of Flathead Lake bull trout use habitat along the property when migrating to upstream spawning grounds, some as far as 150 miles from Flathead Lake into Canada. Bull trout are a federally listed threatened species. FWP radio tag data document bull trout using the project's side channel habitat year-round. Fifty percent of the property is designated as high value, potential fisher habitat, a rare Montana species of concern. 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 10% of the property that consists of montane grassland is a rare, native habitat in northwestern Montana.

Table 1. Montana species of concern that occur or could potentially occur on, or in the vicinity of, the proposed acquisition.

Species	Scientific name	Species	Scientific name
Bull Trout	<i>Salvelinus confluentus</i>	Brown Creeper	<i>Certhia americana</i>
Pygmy Whitefish	<i>Prosopium coulteri</i>	Yellow-billed Cuckoo	<i>Coccyzus americanus</i>
Westslope Cutthroat Trout	<i>Oncorhynchus clarkii lewisi</i>	Great Gray Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>
Little Brown Myotis	<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>	Clark's Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga columbiana</i>
Townsend's Big-eared Bat	<i>Corynorhinus townsendii</i>	Black-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides arcticus</i>
Grizzly Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	Flammulated Owl	<i>Psiloscoops flammeolus</i>
Canada Lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i>	Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>
Fisher	<i>Pekania pennanti</i>	Horned Grebe	<i>Podiceps auritus</i>
Wolverine	<i>Gulo gulo</i>	Brewer's Sparrow	<i>Spizella breweri</i>
Rufous Hummingbird	<i>Selasphorus rufus</i>	Common Tern	<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
Evening Grosbeak	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>	Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonicus</i>
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Northern Hawk Owl	<i>Surnia ulula</i>	White-faced Ibis	<i>Plegadis chihi</i>
Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>	Loggerhead Shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	Ferruginous Hawk	<i>Buteo regalis</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	Alder Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax alnorum</i>
Trumpeter Swan	<i>Cygnus buccinator</i>	Franklin's Gull	<i>Leucophaeus pipixcan</i>
American Bittern	<i>Botaurus lentiginosus</i>	Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch	<i>Leucosticte tephrocotis</i>
Veery	<i>Catharus fuscescens</i>	LeConte's Sparrow	<i>Ammospiza leconteii</i>
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>	Black-necked Stilt	<i>Himantopus mexicanus</i>
Lewis's Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes lewis</i>	Forster's Tern	<i>Sterna forsteri</i>
Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>	Caspian Tern	<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
Cassin's Finch	<i>Haemorhous cassinii</i>	Common Loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>
Black Swift	<i>Cypseloides niger</i>	American White Pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>
Varied Thrush	<i>Ixoreus naevius</i>	Clark's Grebe	<i>Aechmophorus clarkii</i>
Pacific Wren	<i>Troglodytes pacificus</i>		

Proposed Action Alternative:

The Proposed Action would protect fish and wildlife habitat on the property in perpetuity. This alternative would ensure that the land would never be subdivided for residential development or other uses that would likely degrade or destroy the property's fish and wildlife habitat and inhibit wildlife movement across the property. FWP would manage public use in a manner that

limits impacts to fish and wildlife species, including use of the trail and hunting opportunities. Under FWP ownership, the entire property would be closed to public entry from December 1st at 1:59 p.m. until May 15th at noon each year to provide secure winter range for ungulates. This closure period would benefit all species inhabiting this property during winter and spring. The Gateway to Glacier Trail would also be closed each year to general public access at the start of the general hunting season, typically the third week in October.

The draft management plan for the property proposes to limit hunting use to keep animals on the property and to limit any conflicts between hunters. The exact details of the hunting opportunity for the property would be determined if FWP acquires the property, allowing more time to assess its potential. Any proposed regulations would be the subject of a separate decision process, including opportunity for public input. From noon on May 15th until the start of general hunting season, the public would be allowed to use the existing Gateway to Glacier Trail as already constructed, but any proposed unconstructed sections of the trail would be part of a future decision process and cultural/historical review. FWP biologists have determined that the current location of the trail does not impact the existing active bald eagle nest on the property.

In general, putting this land into FWP ownership, would likely increase public use of this property, but FWP would be able to manage the use into the future in a way that minimizes impacts to fish and wildlife species and their habitat.

No Action Alternative:

No immediate impacts would be likely to occur under the No Action Alternative, but if CFAC decided to sell the property, and depending on the type of future uses, it could result in the loss or degradation of the property's habitat values.

If CFAC decides to continue to own and manage the land, the Gateway to Glacier Trail would likely continue to be constructed and the completed portions would be open to the public. Management of the trail would be the purview of the trail group and the landowner.

3.2 VEGETATION

Most of the property is forested, comprising three main forest types. The majority (~60%) of the property is riparian forest habitat dominated by hardwoods including paper birch, black cottonwood, and aspen with some Engelmann spruce. Approximately 30% of the forest is a moist-mixed conifer habitat dominated by western larch and Douglas-fir. The remainder is dry-mixed conifer habitat, dominated by Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine, located on the bench east of the powerline. The current forest conditions are a result of past climate, logging, disturbances, and succession. Most of the upland and some of the riparian forest habitat was logged in the early 20th century, removing most of the mature conifer overstory at that time. Based on tree stumps throughout the area, western larch was the predominant species harvested during the first logging entry. Regeneration from this early logging, and existing regeneration that was released, now comprise the current overstory. Two more recent logging

entries in the early-2000s thinned the second-growth stand and have resulted in open, park-like conditions with an average spacing of approximately 40 feet. Most of the riparian forest area has not been logged and supports mature black cottonwoods. The primary disturbances influencing stand development in the riparian forest historically were fire and flooding. Based on historic aerial imagery from 1946, there has been some minor channel movement in the last 80 years that resulted in vegetation change along the northern boundary of the property. Otherwise, it appears that the forest has remained relatively unchanged by flooding events. Fire scars on stumps indicate a widespread fire event swept through the property at some point prior to or immediately after the initial logging activity.

Forests on the property are relatively healthy and not at an elevated risk of susceptibility to crown fire, insect infestations, or disease epidemics. Paper birch is being affected the most by damaging agents such as wood boring insects, a host of diseases, and aging out (birch are short-lived, typically dying off around age 80-100). Forests on the property provide habitat for a wide variety of game and non-game species. The riparian forest provides an important corridor for species moving between different habitat areas and supports unique plant species due to higher moisture. The riparian area is also an important source of shade and bedding areas for big game species. Large cottonwood trees with cavities provide important habitat for a variety of species including denning for black bears in the exceptionally large trees. The upland forest areas provide more open conditions that are important for foraging habitat, especially for white-tailed deer. Due to past thinning, the conditions of the upland forest are homogenous, lacking complexity, and therefore lack habitat diversity. There is also a scarcity of large, downed wood and snags in the upland forest area.

The primary noxious weeds on the property are houndstongue and Canada thistle. Trail construction has resulted in new weed infestations due to soil disturbance.

Proposed Action Alternative:

Under the proposed action, there would be very little impact to the vegetation on the property. There would be no plans to thin or manage the forest at this time. FWP may need to remove/fell a tree if it proposes a hazard to the public, especially near the trail. Any forest management activities would be conducted for the benefit of fish and wildlife species and would be the subject of a future decision process. Under FWP ownership, noxious weeds would be controlled either by FWP staff or a licensed contractor. Prior to acquisition of the property, FWP would work with Flathead County to develop a weed management plan as required by MCA 7-22-2154. Any future development of the property, such as a small parking area, would be minimal and subject to a separate decision process.

No Action Alternative:

Under the No Action Alternative, no changes to the vegetation would occur in the immediate future. Depending on future use of the property, especially if it was subdivided for residential or commercial development, the forest and riparian habitats and important wetlands could be severely reduced or even eliminated.

3.3 SOILS

The topography of Flathead County was formed during the ice ages when the enormous glacier that filled the Rocky Mountain Trench of British Columbia thinned as it spread southward through the Flathead Valley and into the Mission Valley. The Mission Range split the glacier sending one branch of ice down the Swan Valley and another to the southern end of Flathead Lake. When the glacier melted it left a deep fill of sediment in the floor of the Flathead Valley (Alt & Hyndman 2003).

The valley bottom is generally level to moderately sloping. Most steep slopes occur along the fringe, in the public and private timberlands surrounding the valley bottom, as well as in Glacier National Park. Approximately 75% of Flathead County has slopes over 25%, most of which occur in the mountainous areas within the National Forest or National Park (Flathead County Growth Policy 2012).

Soil types that are represented throughout the property at greater than 5% occurrence, as identified by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, include: chamokane soils, 3 to 7 percent slopes (33%); chamokane soils, 0 to 3 percent slopes (22%); banks very fine sandy loam, 0 to 4 percent slopes (14%); and mires gravelly loam, 12 to 30 percent slopes (USDA 2021). Other soil types exist on the project land, but at less than 5% of overall soil type.

Proposed Action Alternative:

There would be no impact to the existing soil conditions on the property under the Proposed Action Alternative. The soil resources would be protected and preserved under this alternative. Should FWP acquire this property, any plans for construction of a small parking area for the WMA and future sections of the trail would be the subject of a separate decision process.

No Action Alternative:

Under the No Action Alternative, there could be significant soil disturbance and impacts, especially if the property were subdivided for residential or commercial development.

3.4 LAND USE

The property currently receives limited use. There are no structures on the property. CFAC is part of FWP's Block Management Program where the property is currently open to youth hunters on a limited basis each fall. The Gateway to Glacier Trail group has partially constructed a trail on the property that is open for non-motorized public use.

Proposed Action Alternative:

Under the Proposed Action, land use is not expected to change on the property. FWP would have no immediate plans to manage the forest on the property as it is quite healthy. Under FWP ownership, the Gateway to Glacier Trail would remain and public access would be allowed throughout the majority of the year. FWP would continue to allow limited hunting opportunities on the property.

The property is already seeing public use due the construction of the Gateway to Glacier Trail, but the public is supposed to remain just within in the constructed trail corridor. Though it appears the public is already accessing much of the property via foot and horseback. Under FWP ownership, the property would likely experience an increase in public use since the entire property would be publicly accessible for a portion of the year. This increased use could impact neighboring residences, but active management of this property by FWP would likely result in fewer conflicts with the neighbors than the slowly increasing use of this property that is currently occurring. Any parking area for the WMA would be located away from neighboring residences, although no exact location has yet been determined. Construction of a parking area would be the subject of a future decision process with opportunities for the neighbors and public to submit comments.

No Action Alternative:

Under the no action alternative, CFAC may sell this property and the current land use could change dramatically. This property could become a subdivision or developed for commercial use. The trail system could be removed or be used only for private purposes. Public hunting opportunities would likely be lost. Impacts to neighboring properties could be dramatic in that the land abutting these properties could go from open space and wildlife habitat to residential or commercial development.

3.5 SOCIOECONOMICS

Flathead County encompasses 5,256 square miles and is the fourth most populous county in Montana with 103,806 people as estimated by Census Bureau (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Statistics for 2020 are not yet available, so all of the information in this section is based off of 2019 data which does not capture the unprecedented rate of population growth and development that has been happening in the county since the start of the pandemic in March 2020. Between 2010 and 2019, the county’s population grew by 14.2% which makes it the second fastest growing county in the state (U.S. Census Bureau 2021). Between 2015 and 2019, there were 5,820 acres sold throughout Flathead County for new residential development. As of 2019, 3 out of 10 of the fastest growing cities in Montana are located in Flathead County: Columbia Falls, Whitefish, and Kalispell.

A summary of the county’s economy and its changes over time are stated in the 2012 Flathead County Growth Policy (the most recent growth policy for the county):

The Flathead Valley was historically a natural resource-based economy. Logging, mining and commodities production have decreased over the past decade, and as a result the Flathead economy has had to diversify in order to accommodate this change. The County’s economy has experienced significant restructuring over the past thirty years, with significant growth in the retail trade and service industries during the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. However, the natural amenities and quality of life that contribute to the character of Flathead County continue to attract small businesses and technology companies that are becoming more prevalent in light of the new knowledge based,

globalized economy. The city of Kalispell's evolution as a regional trade and service center has also contributed to the growth of the County's economic base.

Proposed Action Alternative:

Under the proposed action, FWP would continue to pay property taxes equivalent to what a private citizen would pay (MCA 87-1-218(2)(c) and hunting and recreating opportunities would continue on this property. Outdoor recreation is a major economic force in the Flathead Valley and the community of Columbia Falls. Hunting as well as wildlife viewing is a large part of the outdoor recreation economy. The property currently provides important year-round wildlife habitat for a variety of game and non-game species, as mentioned previously in Section 3.1, Wildlife and Aquatic Resources. Under FWP ownership, the fish and wildlife habitat on the property would be permanently protected, and FWP would manage the property to maintain or improve habitat quality over time. This property currently generates approximately \$7,000 per year in direct expenditures to the local economy associated with the limited hunting opportunity provided through the FWP Block Management Program. A similar opportunity would continue under FWP ownership of the property. The property is located along the Flathead River which is used by 5,000 boaters and anglers per year. Angler use alone represents roughly \$750,000 per year in local economic activity. This project would allow other compatible public recreation uses, like wildlife viewing, that would provide additional economic benefits for the local community. Under FWP ownership, the Gateway to Glacier Trail would continue to provide the public an easy opportunity to access the property. Protecting the important wetland and riparian areas as well as the spring creek on this property would ensure that native trout fisheries in the Flathead River continue to persist. There would be no immediate need to harvest or thin the timber on the property, but forest management would likely be required sometime in the future. A future forest health improvement project could generate revenue for the local economy, though the amount would depend on the type of treatment required. Any proposed forest health project would be part of a future decision process with an analysis of socioeconomics included. Under FWP ownership, there would be no residential development on the property, so there would be no increased need for local services or new schools.

No Action Alternative:

Under the No Action Alternative, there would be no immediate change in property tax revenue for Flathead County, demand for public services or economic benefits since the land uses may not change in the short term. However, if the property were to be sold and developed, property tax revenue to the county could increase, but a change to residential use could also result in additional costs for county services for such things as wildfire suppression, transportation upgrades, maintenance and emergency services for new residences, and/or a need for new schools. Opportunities for public recreation access would also likely be lost, potentially decreasing activity associated with that segment of the economy. If the land were to be sold for residential development, an increase in demand for local services, including schools, may occur. It is also possible that if the property were used for something other than open space, that either an increase or decrease in demand for certain private businesses supplying goods and services to the community could occur depending on future use of the property. The same

would be true for future employment opportunities within the county, they could increase or decrease depending on a change in future management of the property.

3.6 AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

This property provides the scenic backdrop to floaters on the Flathead River and to those members of the public using the established portion of the Gateway to Glacier Trail. Recreation opportunities for the public currently include a limited hunting opportunity and access to the currently constructed portion of the trail. Though this property is located along the Highway 2 scenic corridor, it is not visible from the road.

Proposed Action Alternative:

Under the Proposed Action, current recreational access opportunities would continue and in fact likely increase. At the moment, the public is not allowed to use the property except for the designated trail system and this trail is closed to use during the general hunting season. Under FWP ownership, the entire WMA would be open to non-motorized use for a portion of each year. The WMA would be closed to protect big game winter range between December 1st at 11:59 p.m. and May 15th at noon and the Gateway to Glacier Trail would be closed during the general hunting season. The property would be maintained in its current undeveloped state and continue to provide a scenic backdrop for Flathead River users and those accessing the Gateway to Glacier Trail.

No Action Alternative:

Under the No Action Alternative, the aesthetics and recreation values of the property would not immediately change but could be altered significantly in the future. The public may not be able to access any of this property in the future, especially if the property was sold for development. Development could also negatively impact the property's current viewshed qualities for those floating the Flathead River.

3.7 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL

The property sits at the mouth of Bad Rock Canyon, a narrow canyon between two major mountain ranges, just downstream from the convergence of the three forks of the Flathead River. The canyon was named for a historic battle between the Blackfeet and Flathead tribes. For centuries, Bad Rock Canyon was used yearly by six native American tribes who traveled across the property and through the canyon, the only gap in the mountains providing access to the buffalo herds of the Great Plains, an essential source of food and materials for their people. Cultural features in Bad Rock Canyon, including a pre-contact archaeological site with lithic materials and the historic Tote Road built in 1890 as a supply road for construction of the Great Northern Railway, are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places.

Proposed Action Alternative:

No impacts to existing cultural or historical resources on the property are likely under the Proposed Action Alternative. An assessment of the project area by the Montana State Historic

Preservation Office determined that “as long as there will be no disturbance or alteration to structures over fifty years of age, we feel that there is a low likelihood cultural properties will be impacted” by this proposed project (Appendix B). There are currently no structures existing on this property. Any future development that could impact historical or cultural resources, such as developing a parking area for the WMA or new trail construction, would be subject to a separate decision process including cultural and historical review.

No Action Alternative:

Under the No Action Alternative, depending on future ownership, use, and potential development of the property, it is possible that any existing culture or historic resources could be impacted.

3.8 AIR, NOISE, AND ELECTRICAL

Currently, there is very little use of this property and therefore noise levels are low and air quality is relatively good, depending upon weather conditions and wildfire events.

Proposed Action Alternative:

There would be no expected changes to existing air quality or noise levels within the project area under the Proposed Action Alternative.

No Action Alternative:

Under the No Action Alternative, depending on future use and development of the property, it is possible that air quality and noise levels increase or decrease depending on what type of use ultimately occurs on the property.

3.9 RISKS TO HUMAN HEALTH AND SAFETY

The project area, historically and currently, is used by CFAC as open space. There are no known human health hazards associated with this property. This property is not part of the company’s Superfund site, which is located entirely across the Flathead River. This property was cleared from Superfund designation by both the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Montana Department of Environmental Quality.

Proposed Action Alternative:

There would be no expected increased risk to human health or safety on the project area under the Proposed Action Alternative.

No Action Alternative:

Under the No Action Alternative, depending on future use and development of the property, it is possible that risks to human health and safety could decrease due to less use by the public or risks could increase under some different future use such as expanded residential development in the forest.

3.10 CUMULATIVE IMPACTS

Proposed Action Alternative:

Completion of this project would protect important fish and wildlife habitat as well as a movement corridor between the Whitefish and Swan mountain ranges as well as movement into the Flathead Valley. It would provide public hunting and recreating opportunities only minutes from Columbia Falls. Initial scoping by FWP showed overwhelming support for this project. The Proposed Action would essentially continue status quo for the property. It would continue to be managed as a healthy riparian and upland forest with compatible public recreation access. We find no negative cumulative effects or impacts that would result from the Proposed Action.

No Action Alternative:

In the short term, little change would be likely under the No Action Alternative. CFAC would continue their ownership and current land uses. However, given that CFAC has indicated their desire to sell this property if this project is not successful, future use of the land could change significantly. Residential or commercial development would be a likely outcome.

4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT DETERMINATION

Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? No.

A limited number of minor impacts from the proposed action were identified in this assessment, as described previously. However, these impacts are considered to be minor. Based upon the above assessment, an EIS is not required and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

5.0 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND CONTRIBUTORS

5.1 PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this Draft EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- Two legal notices in each of these newspapers: *Flathead Beacon*, *Daily Inter Lake*, *The Hungry Horse News*, and *Helena Independent Record*;
- Direct mailing to adjoining landowners, interested parties, and those who provided input during scoping;
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks website: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

The public comment period will extend for (30) thirty days beginning August 10, 2021. Written comments will be accepted until **5:00 p.m.** on **September 8**, 2021. Comments can be sent to:

Bad Rock Canyon WMA
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Attn: Kris Tempel
490 N. Meridian Rd
Kalispell, MT 59901

Or ktempel@mt.gov

Copies of this EA will be available for public review at FWP Region One Headquarters in Kalispell and will be available on the FWP website: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/public-notice>

FWP has scheduled a virtual public hearing for **August 26, 2021 at 6:00 pm** to provide interested organizations and private individuals an opportunity to ask questions about the proposed project and submit public comment. The online meeting will be livestreamed via Zoom on the FWP website (<https://fwp.mt.gov/aboutfwp/regions/region1>) and the FWP YouTube channel. Instructions for participating in the virtual meeting will be posted online beforehand.

5.2 CONTRIBUTORS

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Fish and Wildlife Divisions, Kalispell
Lands Unit, Helena
Habitat Bureau, Helena

6.0 ANTICIPATED TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Public Comment Period:	August 10 - September 8, 2021
Recommended decision to Fish and Wildlife Commission:	October 1, 2021
FWP Fish & Wildlife Commission Review of Project & Decision:	October 28, 2021
Montana Land Board Review and Decision:	November 15, 2021

7.0 PREPARERS

Kris Tempel, FWP Habitat Conservation Biologist, Kalispell, MT

REFERENCES

Alt, D. and Hyndman, D. 2003. *Roadside Geology of Montana*. Mountain Press Publishing Company, pp. 50.

Flathead County. 2012. *Flathead County Growth Policy*. Flathead County Planning Board. Retrieved from: https://flathead.mt.gov/planning_zoning/growthpolicy2012.php

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APPENDIX A: TOURISM REPORT

TOURISM REPORT

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) & MCA 23-1-110

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has initiated the review process as mandated by MCA 23-1-110 and the Montana Environmental Policy Act in its consideration of the project described below. As part of the review process, input and comments are being solicited. Please complete the project name and project description portions and submit this form to:

Jan Stoddard, Bureau Chief, Montana Office of Tourism
MOTBD, Montana -Department of Commerce
301 S. Park Ave.
Helena, MT 59601

Project Name: Proposed Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area Acquisition

Project Description: The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes the acquisition of approximately 772 acres of forest along 1.6 miles of the Flathead River near Columbia Falls to protect water quality and important fish and wildlife habitat, while providing free public recreation access (see attached map and photo). The property is highly developable and threatened by the rapidly growing city of Columbia Falls, but would be protected as a Wildlife Management Area under this proposal.

The Columbia Falls Aluminum Company (CFAC), a subsidiary of Glencore, a multi-national company, has decided to dispose of this property. The property is winter range for elk, moose, and white-tailed deer. Completion of this project would safeguard vital habitat and a travel corridor for bull trout and grizzly bears, Endangered Species Act-listed Threatened species found on the property. This key corridor is located at a geographic pinch point where the Flathead River flows through the very narrow Bad Rock Canyon. The project is adjacent to a large block of public lands and would add to a 12,000-acre network of conserved land along a 43-mile reach of the Flathead River between Columbia Falls and Flathead Lake.

The property currently provides an excellent opportunity for youth hunters to harvest elk and white-tailed deer just minutes from Columbia Falls. FWP is proposing to continue a similar limited hunting opportunity on the property. Big game hunting use of the property currently generates \$7,000/year in direct expenditures.

CFAC has given FWP and the Flathead Land Trust until the end of 2021 to complete this project. If the project fails, the property would most likely be quickly sold, subdivided, and developed into a high-density neighborhood which would include highly sought-after riverfront lots.

Would this site development project have an impact on the tourism economy?

NO

YES

If YES, briefly describe:

Providing public recreational access, preserving important fish and wildlife habitat, and ensuring 26,500 days per year of public hunting and angling use in perpetuity are vital components to positively impacting the tourism and recreation industry economy.

Montana's 12.6 million non-resident visitors spent over \$3.8 billion in the state in 2019 (University of Montana's Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research ITRR, 2020). Recreation activities and camping in state parks are in high demand for visitors. This intent to visit has dramatically increased as a result of the pandemic and a desire for safe outdoor recreation experiences.

Additionally, the opportunity to fish Montana waters and native Montana fish populations is marketed to destination visitors from around the world, as well as in-state travelers. A 2016 report from the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research states that Fishing/Fly Fishing as a "Top Outdoor Recreation Activity" reported by 2% of visitors to Montana (2016). Additionally, the report also notes that nationwide participation in outdoor recreation specific to fishing is expected to increase in the coming decades. The Flathead River along the project property is used by 2,000 boaters and 3,000 anglers each year. Angler use alone represents roughly \$750,000 in local economic activity.

Public access, vital to resident and non-resident visitors, could be limited or excluded if this project does not move forward. A trail has been constructed on the property by Gateway to Glacier Trail, Inc., a local nonprofit group granted a revocable license issued by CFAC to allow access for hikers, bikers, birdwatchers, and others. Under FWP ownership, public access would be managed to preserve wildlife presence and hunting opportunities while allowing compatible trail and property use.

Does this impending improvement alter the quality or quantity of recreation/tourism opportunities and settings?

NO

YES

If YES, briefly describe:

Yes, as described, the project has the potential to improve quality and quantity of tourism and recreational opportunities. These improvements are critical to the safety, usability, and long-term sustainability of assets for outdoor recreation, including hunting and angling for residents and non-resident visitors. With these improvements, we are assuming the agency has determined it has necessary funding for the on-going operations and maintenance once this project is complete.

Signature Jan Stoddard

Date: 6/21/2021

APPENDIX B: STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICE CULTURAL REVIEW



June 21, 2019

Kris Tempel
FWP
490 N. Meridian Rd.
Kalispell MT 59901

RE: FLATHEAD RIVER AT COLUMBIA FALLS 800 ACRES CONSERVATION. SHPO Project #: 2019062106

Dear Kris:

I have conducted a cultural resource file search for the above-cited project located in Sections 9, 10, 11, 16, T30N R20W. According to our records there have been a few previously recorded sites within the designated search locale. In addition to the sites there have been a few previously conducted cultural resource inventories done in the areas. I've attached a list of these sites and reports. If you would like any further information regarding these sites or reports, you may contact me at the number listed below.

It is SHPO's position that any structure over fifty years of age is considered historic and is potentially eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. If any structures are to be altered and are over fifty years old, we would recommend that they be recorded, and a determination of their eligibility be made prior to any disturbance taking place.

As long as there will be no disturbance or alteration to structures over fifty years of age we feel that there is a low likelihood cultural properties will be impacted. We, therefore, feel that a recommendation for a cultural resource inventory is unwarranted at this time. However, should structures need to be altered or if cultural materials be inadvertently discovered during this project we would ask that our office be contacted, and the site investigated.

If you have any further questions or comments, you may contact me at (406) 444-7767 or by e-mail at dmurdo@mt.gov. I have attached an invoice for the file search. Thank you for consulting with us.

Sincerely,

Damon Murdo
Cultural Records Manager

File: FWP/WILDLIFE/2019

APPENDIX C: DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN

Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area Management Plan

DRAFT



July 2021

FWP.MT.GOV



THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

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TEMPORARY NOTICE FOR REVIEWERS: This management plan was drafted to serve as the guiding document for management of the subject property, if the proposed project is completed as proposed. The plan will only be implemented following the appropriate analysis, public involvement, and necessary approvals.

STATEWIDE GOAL FOR WMAS

Montana's Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) are lands managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to benefit a diversity of wildlife species and their habitats on behalf of the public and provide compatible public access for fish- and wildlife-related recreation.

GOAL FOR THE BAD ROCK CANYON WMA

The primary goal of the Bad Rock Canyon WMA is to manage the riparian corridor along the Flathead River and surrounding forests for fish and wildlife habitat and to provide movement corridors for a variety of fish and wildlife species, while protecting the river corridor from high density urban development. Where compatible with fish and wildlife management objectives, the WMA will also be managed to promote diverse public recreation, including hunting, nature walking, biking, horse-back riding, and wildlife viewing. Management of the WMA will strive to demonstrate integration and connection between forest health, water quality, wildlife habitat, and recreation.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The 772-acre Bad Rock Canyon WMA is east of and across the Flathead River from Columbia Falls in Flathead County, Montana. The WMA borders 1.3 miles of the Flathead River, as well as U.S. Forest Service, Montana Department of Transportation, and privately-owned land (Fig. 1). This property has critical low elevation habitat adjacent to a stronghold of public lands including the Flathead National Forest, Glacier National Park, and the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex in the Crown of the Continent Ecosystem (Fig. 2). It is a key habitat corridor located at a geographic pinch point where the Flathead River flows through a narrow canyon between two mountain ranges. It safeguards vital habitat and a travel corridor for bull trout and grizzly bears, ESA-listed species found on the property (Fig. 3). While most of the property is forested, it also comprises 131 acres of riparian habitat and 84 acres of wetland habitat. There is approximately one mile of a spring-fed creek flowing through the property (Fig. 4). The WMA is partially within the 100-year floodplain of the Flathead River. The property can be accessed from River Road off Highway 2. Gateway to Glacier Trails has constructed a native-surface, non-motorized trail through part of the property which, if completed as planned, would tie into a larger trail system being constructed between Columbia Falls and Glacier National Park.

As of the writing of this management plan (2021), FWP is contemplating ownership of the property, contingent on environmental analysis and necessary approvals.

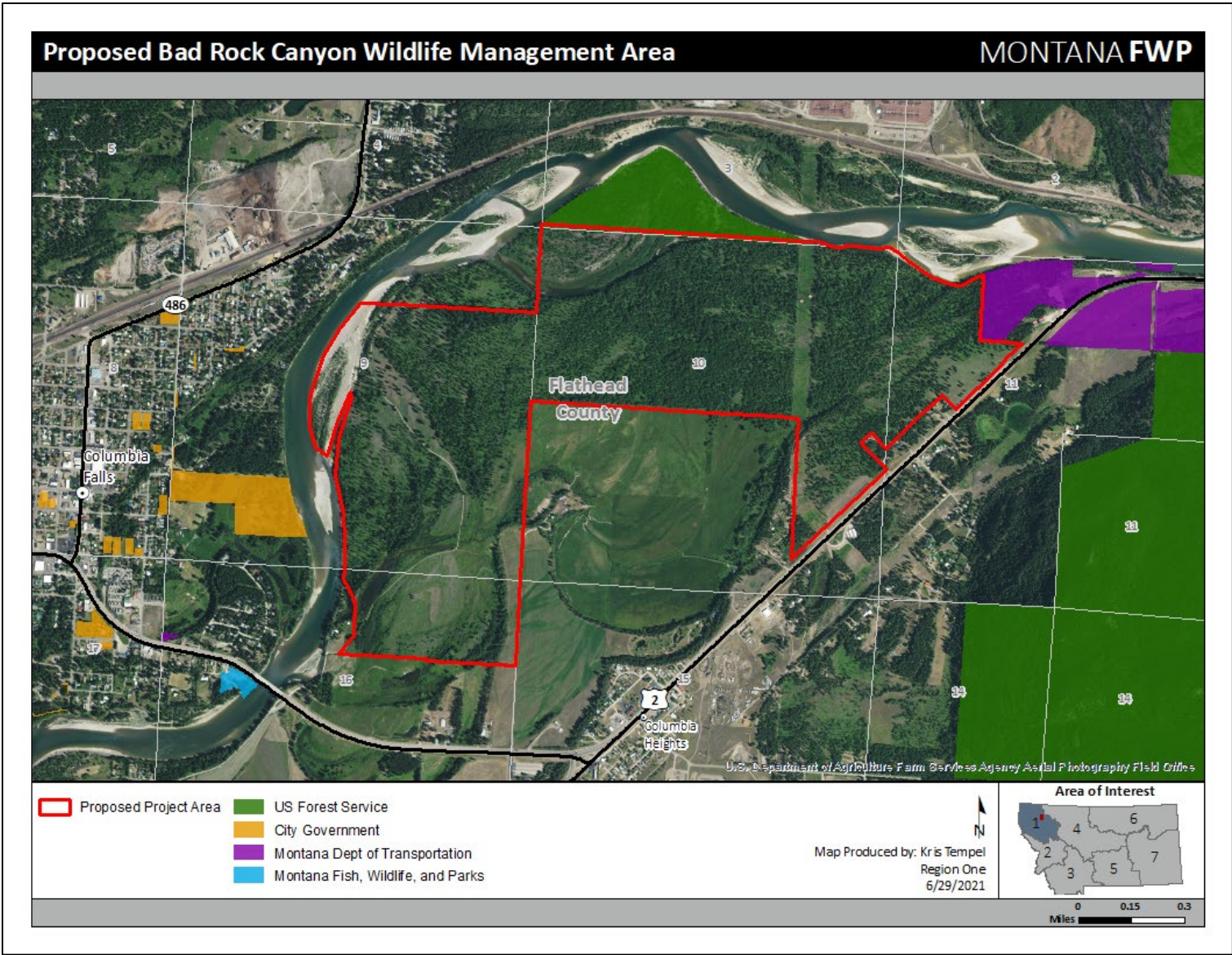


Figure 1: The Bad Rock Canyon WMA located adjacent to Columbia Falls and bordering the Flathead River and Hwy 2.

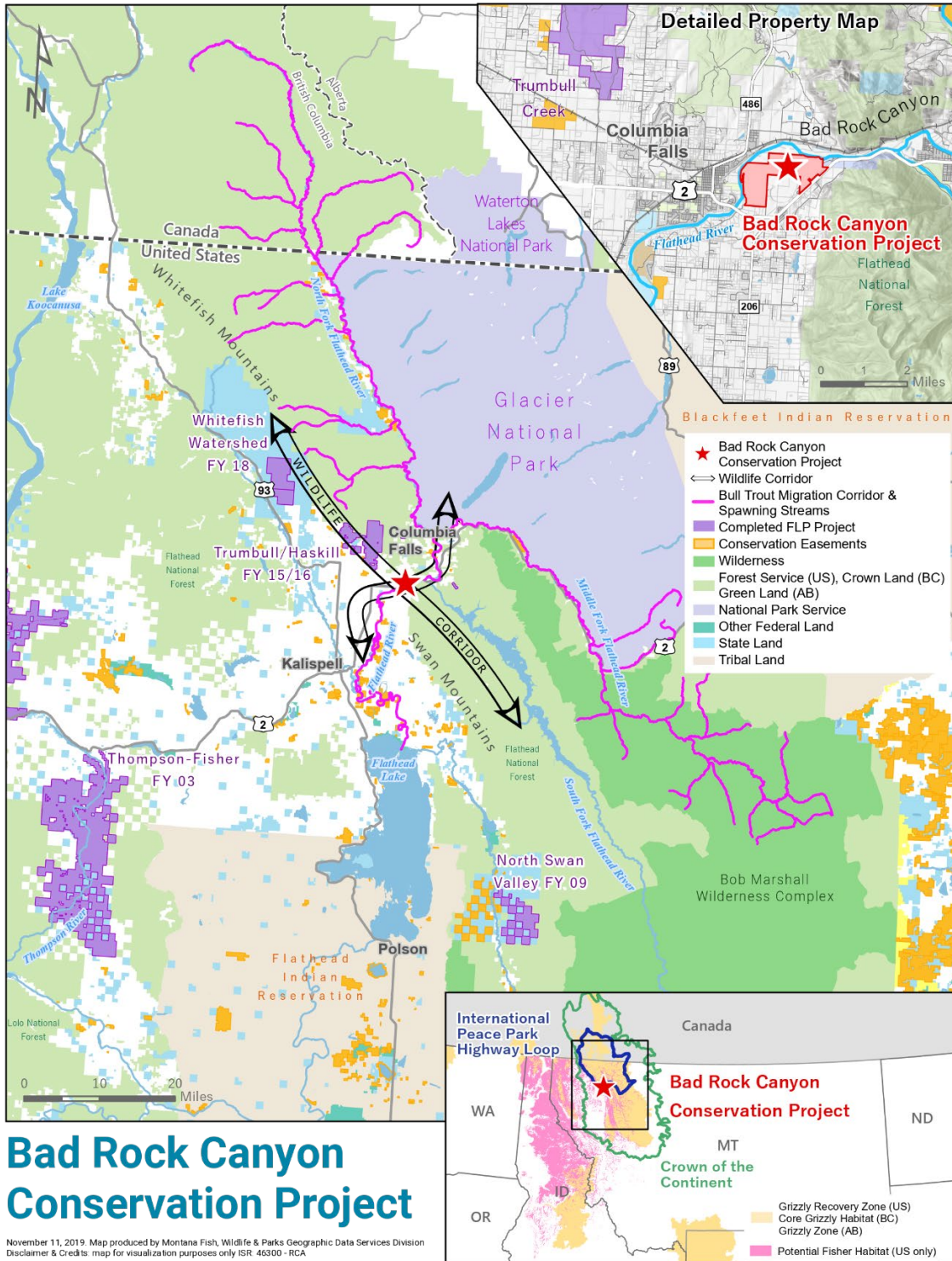


Figure 2: The Bad Rock Canyon WMA in relation to nearby federal land, illustrating its importance as a connectivity corridor.

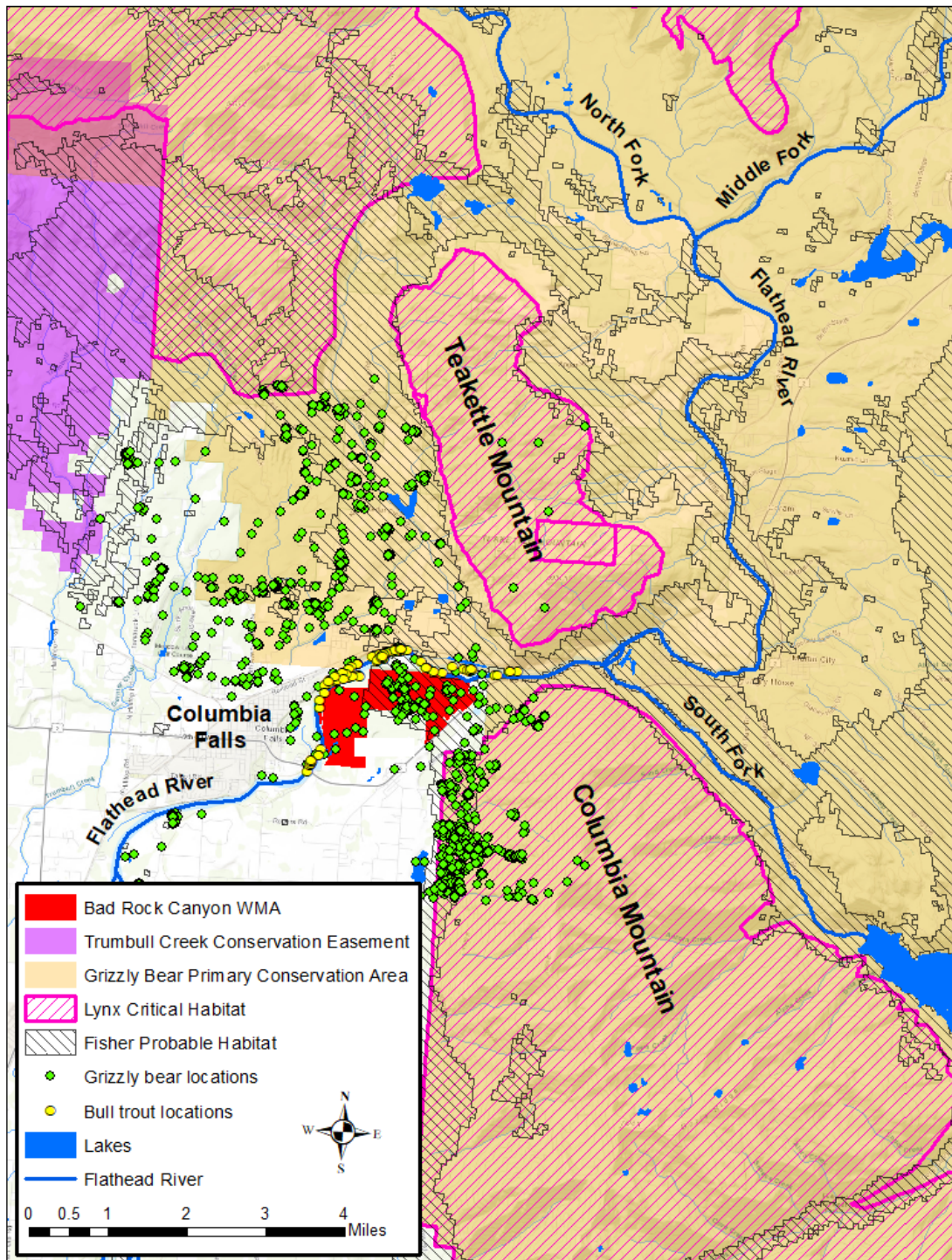


Figure 3: Grizzly bear movements and bull trout overwintering areas on the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.



Figure 4: *Spring-fed creek flowing through the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.*

This property was purchased by the Columbia Falls Aluminum Company (CFAC) in the 1960s as a buffer to their aluminum plant located across the river. It has seen little use since that purchase, except a timber thinning project in the early 2000s. In 2010, CFAC entered into the FWP Block Management Program, allowing youth and disabled hunters to use the property on a limited basis each hunting season.

Nearest climate data available for the WMA is for Glacier Park International Airport in Kalispell, approximately 15 miles to the southwest. Kalispell receives an average of 17 inches of precipitation annually, with snowfall accounting for a portion and averaging 57 inches per year. The average number of days with measurable precipitation is 132. The average July high temperature is 81 degrees, and the average January low is 16 degrees.

WILDLIFE VALUES

As human development increases at an unprecedented pace in the Flathead Valley, wildlife habitat and movement corridors are being disrupted and constricted. Cumulatively, numerous wildlife species are

being impacted at population levels. The Bad Rock Canyon WMA provides a unique opportunity to conserve important riparian and upland terrestrial habitat in the Flathead Valley that is used by a multitude of terrestrial and avian species. This property provides connectivity to adjacent habitat blocks in the valley and supports 1.3 miles of waterfront along the Flathead River. The spring creek flowing through the property provides open water for migrating waterfowl during times when other spots in the valley are ice covered. Species that use this area include a full suite of terrestrial predators, including black bears, grizzly bears, bobcats, martens, foxes, coyotes, wolves, and mountain lions (Figs. 5 – 10). Elk and white-tailed deer inhabit the WMA year-round, and the property provides a crucial wintering area for both species (Figs. 11-12). The riparian and wetland areas support migratory birds, with one active bald eagle nest on the property. Many species of raptors can be found throughout the property. The abundance of cottonwood trees and hollow tree cavities on the WMA make it unique in the area, and these cavities provide den sites for black bears, martens, and possibly fisher. The location of the WMA provides a natural movement corridor for migratory species, such as elk and bull trout. Bull trout migrate past this property when they leave Flathead Lake to spawn in the North and Middle forks of the Flathead River. Bull trout also over-winter in the slower, backwater areas along the property. Grizzly bears often use this property as they move throughout the riparian zones of the Flathead Valley.



Figure 5: Black bear using the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.



Figure 6: Fox using the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.



Figure 7: Coyotes using the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.



Figure 8: Grizzly bear using the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.



Figure 9: Marten tracks on the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.



Figure 10: Mountain lion using the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.



Figure 11: White-tailed deer using the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.



Figure 12: *Elk using the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.*

FOREST MANAGEMENT

Forest Habitat – Current Conditions

Most of the property is forested, comprised of three main forest types. The majority (~60%) of the property is riparian forest habitat dominated by hardwoods, including paper birch, black cottonwood, and aspen with some Engelmann spruce (Fig. 13). Approximately 30% of the forest is a moist-mixed conifer habitat dominated by western larch and Douglas-fir (Fig. 14). The remainder is dry-mixed conifer habitat, dominated by Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine, located on the bench east of the powerline. The current forest conditions are a result of past climate, logging, disturbances, and succession. Most of the upland and some of the riparian forest habitat was logged in the early 20th century, removing most of the mature conifer overstory at that time. Based on tree stumps throughout the area, western larch was the predominant species harvested during the first logging entry. Regeneration from this early logging, and existing regeneration that was released, now comprise the current overstory. Two more recent logging entries in the early-2000s thinned the second-growth stand and have resulted in open, park-like conditions with an average spacing of approximately 40 feet. Most of the riparian forest area has not been logged and supports mature black cottonwoods. The primary disturbances influencing stand development in the riparian forest historically were fire and flooding. Based on historic aerial imagery from 1946, there has been some minor channel movement in the last 80 years that resulted in vegetation change along the northern boundary of the property. Otherwise, it appears that the forest has remained relatively

unchanged by flooding events. Fire scars on stumps indicate a widespread fire event swept through the property at some point prior to or immediately after the initial logging activity.



Figure 13: *Cottonwood forest gallery on the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.*



Figure 14: *Moist-mixed conifer habitat on the Bad Rock Canyon WMA.*

Forests on the property are relatively healthy and not at an elevated risk of susceptibility to crown fire, insect infestations, or disease epidemics. Paper birch is being affected the most by damaging agents such as wood boring insects, a host of diseases, and aging out (birches are short-lived, typically dying off around age 80-100). Forests on the property provide habitat for a wide variety of game and non-game species. The riparian forest provides an important corridor for species moving between different habitat areas and supports unique plant species due to higher moisture. The riparian area is also an important source of shade and bedding areas for big game species. Large cottonwood trees with cavities provide important habitat for a variety of species including denning for black bears in the exceptionally large trees. The upland forest areas provide more open conditions that are important for foraging habitat, especially for white-tailed deer. Due to past thinning, the conditions of the upland forest are homogenous, lacking complexity, and therefore lack habitat diversity. There is also a scarcity of large downed wood and snags in the upland forest area.

Forest Habitat – Objectives

FWP’s Statewide Forest Management Plan directs the department to manage for desired habitat conditions and public use opportunities while maintaining the ecological integrity of forests. The forest management objective for Bad Rock Canyon WMA is to promote and maintain habitat diversity for a variety of forest dwelling species in the long term. Secondary objectives include mitigating hazardous fuels when those conditions develop that could threaten adjacent lands in the event of a wildfire and promoting stand conditions that are resilient to insects, disease, fire, and a changing climate.

Forest Habitat – Actions

- Conduct a walk-through inventory with special attention to understory stocking in the upland forest areas. Upon initial field review, the upland forest area is dominated by a single age class and lacks in young trees to replace old trees and provide habitat diversity. Following the inventory, determine if treatments could be implemented to promote natural regeneration or if tree planting is needed. *Medium Priority*
- Monitor overstory in upland forest areas for increasing insect or disease activity. In the event of a significant windthrow event, consider removing some downed trees (especially Douglas-fir) to prevent insect outbreaks. When appropriate, some down trees with high potential wildlife habitat value will be left. *Low Priority*

WEED MANAGEMENT

The primary noxious weeds on the WMA are houndstongue and Canada thistle. Trail construction, completed in 2020 and 2021, prior to FWP ownership, has resulted in new weed infestations due to soil disturbance. FWP will need to work with the Gateway to Glacier Trail group to control weeds along the trail corridor. FWP plans to contract with a local weed control contractor to minimize weeds in the woodland and grassland areas of the property.

Weed Management Objective:

Prevent, contain, reduce, and/or eradicate noxious weeds on Bad Rock Canyon WMA and prevent dispersal of weed seed from the WMA.

Weed Management Actions:

- Manage weeds in a manner consistent with FWP’s “Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan.” *High Priority*
- Inventory noxious weeds on the WMA. *High Priority*

- Control noxious weeds with emphasis on new infestations and areas of public use, such as WMA access roads and any parking area. Emphasis will also include control along property boundaries. *High Priority*

INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure on the WMA includes fences, roads, trails, and a sign for the Gateway to Glacier Trail. A Bonneville Power Administration (BPA) powerline corridor also bisects the property, which is a maintenance responsibility of BPA.

Infrastructure Management Objectives:

Infrastructure on the WMA will be maintained per FWP's WMA Maintenance Standards (Exhibit A).

Fences

Wire strand fences demarcate portions of the property boundary. There are remnants of interior fences running adjacent to a main access road within the property boundary. There are some fences and corrals from neighboring properties that might be encroaching within the property boundary.

Management Actions:

- Survey and determine ownership of the fences along the boundary between the WMA and neighboring private land. *High Priority*
- Survey, mark and remove any interior fences within the WMA. These fence segments serve no purpose, are in disrepair, and in some cases, include hog-wire fences prone to wildlife entanglement. *High Priority*
- Survey any corral fencing that may be encroaching on the property and remove if within property boundary. *High Priority*
- Work with adjacent property owners to make all shared boundary fences are wildlife friendly. *High Priority*
- Work with adjacent property owners to install additional boundary fences or markers where appropriate. *High Priority*

Roads

There is currently one main access road into the WMA in the southwest corner of the property off River Road in Columbia Falls, Montana. This road has been used as one of the main access points for public hunting on the property. A second access is via the BPA powerline easement off Highway 2, where a small

paved area exists on the property. There are currently no developed parking areas associated with the property.

Management Actions:

- Develop plans for a small parking area to accommodate public use on the WMA. This parking area would include an informational kiosk informing people on WMA regulations, bear safety, and pack-in pack-out garbage management. Once plans are developed and appropriate cultural and historic reviews are completed, release an environmental assessment for public review. *High Priority*

Signs

Currently, signage is minimal on the WMA. There is one sign on the property with information pertaining to the Gateway to Glacier Trail.

Management Actions:

- Install and annually inspect and maintain boundary, road, and entrance signs. *High Priority*
- Add signage to enhance user experience and interpret property resources, landscape changes, and to communicate a broader message about FWP and the role our WMAs play in providing wildlife habitat, hunting opportunities, and other diverse, recreational opportunities. *High Priority*
- Install wildlife safety signs for recreational users at all access points to the WMA. *High Priority*
- Install and maintain all signs per FWP and WMA maintenance standards. *High Priority*

Trails

Gateway to Glacier Trails has worked with FWP and CFAC to establish a trail that enters along River Road and then traverses east along the property. This trail is being developed in three phases, and the first phase is approximately 80% completed (Fig. 9). FWP is committed to working with Gateway to Glacier Trails to develop a trail that works in concert with the goals of the WMA. The trail will be closed to public use during the general hunting season each fall.

Unofficial, two-track trails exist throughout the WMA. These were most likely created via repeated off road vehicle use.

Management Actions:

- Work with Gateway to Glacier Trails to determine the best location for a public trail within the WMA that will have negligible impacts to the WMA and wildlife. Ensure trail maintenance remains the responsibility of Gateway to Glacier Trails. *High priority*
- Locate and document existing two-track trails on the WMA and decommission areas where appropriate and not necessary for property management to discourage public use. *High priority*

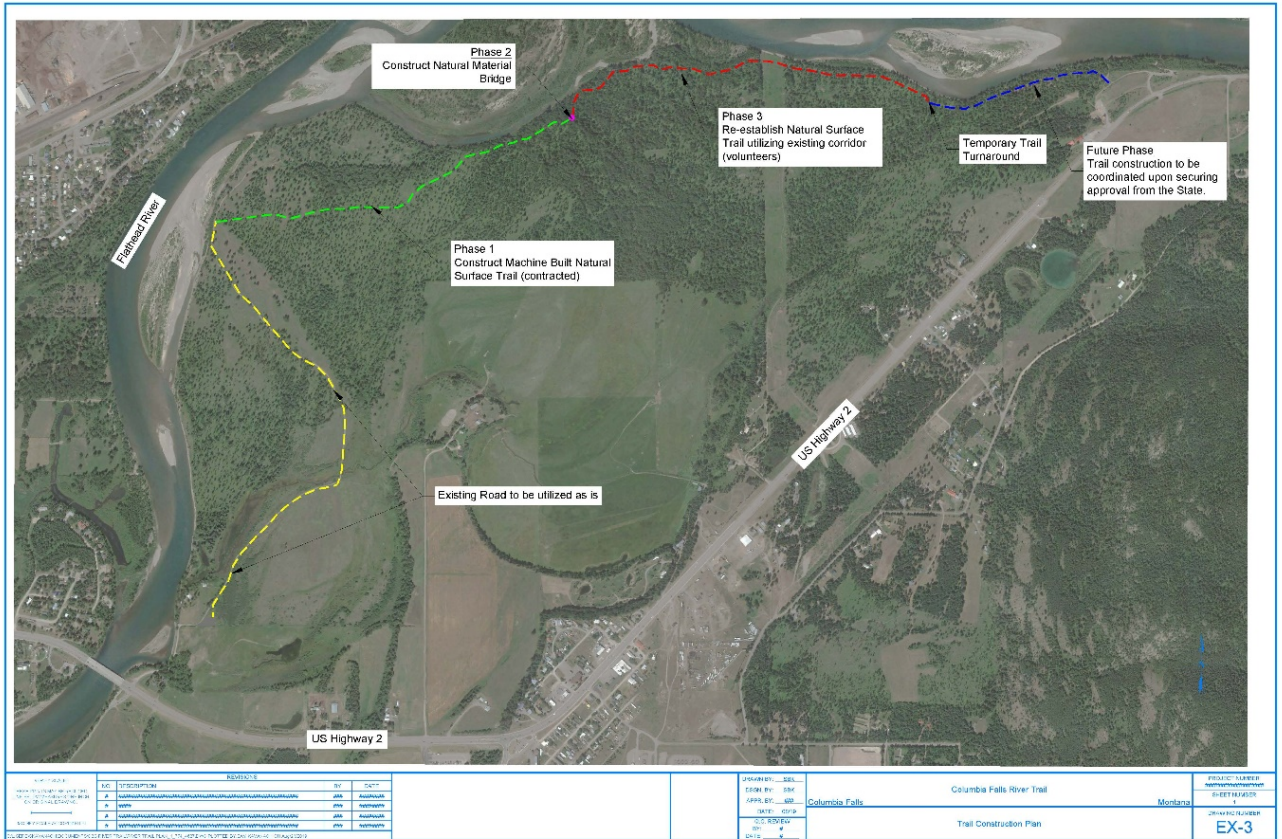


Figure 9: The proposed location of the Gateway to Glacier Trail on the WMA. The yellow portion is along the existing road and the green section, phase 1, is approx. 80% complete. The red and blue sections are still to be constructed.

PUBLIC USE

Commission rules regarding public use on all WMAs statewide are revised/adopted through both the Administrative Rule Making process and on a biennial schedule (<http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/wma/>). As a general objective, public access to the WMA is intended to be as uncomplicated as possible, with the intent of supporting public enjoyment opportunities so long as they do not conflict with FWP rules or the primary purposes (wildlife habitat functions) of the WMA. Restrictions include no use of motor vehicles (including e-bikes), no fires or fireworks, no camping, and a requirement that pets remain on leash.

The Bad Rock Canyon WMA is in the Flathead Valley, one of Montana’s fastest growing communities. The desire to recreate on public lands is increasing. The Bad Rock WMA provides opportunity for outdoor recreation, including hunting, fishing, nature walking, and wildlife viewing. The Gateway to Glacier Trail provides trail access for walking, jogging, biking, and horse-back riding. FWP will manage recreation to mitigate impacts to wildlife and wildlife habitat. Like most FWP big game winter range WMAs, this property

will be closed each year from December 1 at 11:59 p.m. until May 15 at noon to protect wintering ungulates. Open dates may change from time to time due to weather or other unforeseen events.

Hunting has been allowed on the property since 2010 through the FWP Block Management Program. Hunting was allowed Thursday through Sundays for youth and disabled hunters for just one party per day through a lottery system administered by FWP. In 2020, hunting was restricted to youth only, due to impacts from motorized use on the access road from Permit to Hunt from a Vehicle (PTHFV) hunters. For the last nine years, nearly all available hunting days on the property have been filled. FWP will continue to provide a limited hunting opportunity on the WMA, so as to keep animals on the property and reduce hunter conflicts. Exact details of the hunting opportunity will be determined after FWP has time to better assess the opportunity this particular parcel may provide. During the general hunting season, the Gateway to Glacier Trail will be closed to non-hunting public use for safety reasons. Appropriate signage will announce this closure at all access points to the trail. If recreational conflicts arise during any hunting season, FWP will prioritize hunting opportunity over other recreational uses for that period.

To mitigate potential impacts to wildlife and wildlife habitats, biking and horse-back riding will be restricted to the Gateway to Glacier Trail; however, horses may be used during hunting seasons and will not be restricted to the Gateway to Glacier Trail when associated with legally permitted hunting.

Management Actions:

- Assess the hunting opportunity on the property and draft proposed hunting regulations for the property. Release an environmental assessment for public review. *High Priority*
- Work with Gateway to Glacier Trail group on the appropriate trail location and access points. *High Priority*
- Seek partnerships that will diversify wildlife-related recreational and educational opportunities without detracting from the primary goal for the property. *High Priority*

EXHIBIT A – FWP WMA MAINTENANCE STANDARDS

Operations & Maintenance Funding Prioritization Guidelines

Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is responsible for the management, maintenance, and enhancement of 69 Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) totaling approximately 443,000 acres. WMAs span across a broad range of habitats. Maintenance of these lands is paid for through a biennial allocation of Habitat Montana Funds in accordance with MCA 871-242 which allocates a percentage of license sales to operations and maintenance on WMAs.

This document is intended to provide guidance to department staff tasked with determining WMA maintenance and enhancement needs and prioritizing funding for projects that address these needs.

Process

Periodically, Helena staff will call for the submission of funding proposals for larger Operations and Maintenance (O&M) projects that cannot be funded through regional WMA budgets. Area Wildlife Biologists and WMA managers identify needs on the WMAs and conservation easements they manage and submit proposals for projects that address these needs. Most projects follow under one of two categories: maintenance or habitat enhancement. These proposals are reviewed and approved by regional wildlife managers and submitted to Helena. Proposals are then evaluated by a committee consisting of WMA managers, Wildlife Managers, Wildlife Habitat Bureau Chief, and Wildlife Division Chief. Funds are allocated to high priority projects that meet one or more of the following criteria.

Prioritization Guidelines

The following guidelines detail state-wide priorities for O&M funding. These guidelines are provided as a tool to assist in the development of proposals and the allocation of funding.

1. Good Neighbor Statute

- Montana FWP is required by law to manage with “a goal of no impact upon adjoining private and public lands by preventing impact on those adjoining lands from noxious weeds, trespass, litter, noise and light pollution, streambank erosion, and loss of privacy.” (MCA 23-1-126).

2. Public safety

- Does the project address an existing or potential public safety hazard?

3. Legal obligations

- Projects that are necessary to meet prior obligations. These obligations may include commitments made in conservation easements, grazing leases, legislative statute, or other agreements. Note: All agreements that obligate O&M funding from the Wildlife Division require endorsement or signature by the Wildlife Division Chief.

4. *WMA Maintenance Standards*

- Projects that are necessary for a WMA to be in compliance with WMA maintenance standards (see Appendix A).

5. *Urgency*

- Is there a need to complete a project immediately? Would a delay in funding of a project have significant negative impacts to WMA resources or surrounding properties? Is the project pressing due to social considerations (high visibility, public controversy, etc.)?

6. *Management Plan*

- Is a project consistent with priorities or goals identified in the WMA's management plan?

7. *Cost-effectiveness*

- Does the project provide long-term benefit or solution? Would the project reduce future maintenance expenditures and save the department money in the long term?

8. *Feasibility*

- Does FWP have the resources/staff/funding to complete this project in a reasonable time frame?

9. *Improved Public Use*

- Does the proposal enhance visitor use and enjoyment of the WMA without negatively affecting wildlife and habitat resources or significantly increasing future maintenance or operations expenses?
- Does the project improve public access?

10. *Outside Funding/Partnerships*

- Does the proposal have outside funding sources or is it part of a larger partnership/effort?
- Are there other funding options that should be utilized first to fund the project?

11. *Habitat Enhancement Projects*

- Does the project improve habitat for priority species (game species, species of concern, endangered species) or state priority habitats (riparian, wetland, shrub grassland, intermountain grasslands, etc.)? Projects that impact multiple species or larger landscapes would be higher priorities.

Appendix A
FWP Wildlife Management Area Maintenance Standards

Version 11 7 2014

Introduction

The following is a list of land maintenance items that require at least periodic attention. Maintenance items are organized into two broad categories. The “Good Neighbor” category involves maintenance needs that affect the integrity of WMA lands but also provide secondary benefits to neighboring properties. The “General Maintenance” category involves all other land and facility maintenance needs that primarily benefit the functions of WMA lands and facilities. Maintenance standards serve as both a performance objective and a trigger for action, for when resources are found to be in substandard condition. As a general rule, resources in substandard condition will be ranked as high priorities for remediation. This write-up only includes Good Neighbor Maintenance Items but will be expanded in time to incorporate additional maintenance obligations. Finally, WMA land that has been managed over a number of annual maintenance cycles should generally meet these standards. However, a period of time may be necessary to get newly acquired lands up to minimum standards, which is a priority upon acquisition. Depending on size, complexity, and condition of property, start-up time after property acquisition may take five years or more before land is functioning at or above standard.

Good Neighbor Maintenance Items

Roads – Management Goal – Provide safe and passable roads fitting for the particular need. Roads are defined as those passages intended for motorized travel where FWP has direct management responsibility.

- Access roads (routes that provide primary access into or through a WMA, 2- and 3-season roads).
 - Safe and passable during dry conditions with two-wheel-drive vehicle.
 - Maintained to avoid resource damage (e.g., erosion).
 - Some of these are two-way traffic roads, but at a minimum they should be sufficient width to accommodate oncoming traffic or the same by use of pullouts.
 - Natural soil/subsoil or graveled, depending on use and soil texture.
- Spur roads (two tracks or similar used periodically/seasonally).
 - Safe and passable during dry conditions, may require 4-wheel-drive.
 - Minimum maintenance, primarily to avoid resource damage.
 - Periodic pullouts to accommodate ongoing traffic.
 - Natural soil/subsoil.
- Mowed roadsides where vehicles might park along roadways to minimize fire danger.

Parking Areas (designated parking areas off of county/state roads) – Management Goal – provide safe and sizeable parking areas that fit with the need to minimize parking along public roadsides.

- Flat, level substrate that will support vehicles in wet weather, particularly off of 3- or 4-season roads and highways.
- For parking areas that are vegetated, lots with heavy use should be mowed if there is a fire danger.
- Lot should include barriers to preclude driving beyond the parking area (e.g., rocks, logs, fence).

Litter – Management Goal – Maintain litter-free property.

- Pick up litter when detected during monthly or more frequent visits, emphasizing roadsides and parking lots.

Boundary Fence – Management Goal – Maintained annually or more frequently if livestock are present. For new fence, use fence standards to assure wildlife passage and effective livestock barrier.

Boundary Signs – Management Goal – Provide sufficient signing for users to avoid trespass onto adjacent lands.

- Boundary signs (4"x12") or other markers should be spaced at a minimum of 500' along the boundary of all WMAs. A 12"x18" sign should be placed on both sides of each corner and a sign for each gate and parking area. Note: Implementing this standard should focus first on likely human crossing points along WMA boundaries, emphasizing boundaries with private lands. This standard should be accomplished more completely as boundary fences are constructed or replaced.

Stream Erosion – Maintenance Goal – Manage WMAs to avoid accelerated erosion. In localized situations some WMAs may still be experiencing accelerated erosion due to historic land management practices. In these cases, the Division should support and, where feasible, facilitate natural vegetation establishment and stream bank armoring.

- Where grazed, meet or exceed minimum grazing standard. Monitor vegetation on a minimum of 5-year rotation.
- Use road construction BMPs, particularly where roads are associated with live streams. **Noxious Weeds** – Management Goal – manage vegetation to suppress noxious weeds in general and to avoid their spread within WMAs and to neighboring lands. Control of noxious weeds should not be conducted at the expense of native vegetation. Manage vast infestations with the intent of incorporating the species into the local plant community as a subdominant.
- New properties – bring up to minimum standards, if needed, through broad-scale, narrow-spectrum herbicide treatment that minimizes impacts to nontarget vegetation.
- Where weeds occur, conduct weed inventory annually or no less frequently than every 3 years.
- Roadsides and parking lots annually spot sprayed with effective herbicides.

- Aggressive chemical treatment of new starts within the interior of WMAs with the objective of eliminating them.
- Where feasible, vast infestations should be chemically treated annually along property boundaries, minimum width of 100'. The highest priority for these treatments is along highway rights of way and adjacent private and public lands where active weed management is taking place.
- Vast interior infestations should be managed with biocontrols as they become available and monitored to determine effectiveness. Where feasible, move established biocontrol agents for broad management. Update releases as biocontrols become available.

Water Conveyances – Management Goal – Keep ditches, canals, and water control structures functioning to achieve objectives and avoid downstream or overland conflicts.

- Inspect for and repair against accelerated erosion.
- Keep structures clean of debris, beaver dams, or other obstructions.

General Safe Operating Condition – Management Goal – Provide public use facilities that are in safe working condition.

- Facilities, structures, and areas of concentrated public use should be inspected regularly to identify potential safety hazards. Hazards are a priority for remediation.