



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: October 28, 2021

Agenda Item: Kootenai Forestlands Phase II Conservation Easement (Region 1)

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: FWP proposes the purchase of a conservation easement (CE) on 27,289 acres of highly productive timberland, wildlife habitat, and recreational land owned by Stimson Lumber Company near Libby. Stimson is one of the oldest continuously operating integrated wood products companies in the United States with roots dating back to the 1850s. FWP would hold the CE, and Stimson would retain ownership of the land and continue to sustainably manage for timber production. The CE would preclude development, protect important wildlife habitat and key landscape connectivity, and provide permanent public access opportunities. The property currently provides over 26,500 days per year of public hunting and angling use, which would be secured in perpetuity under this proposal. This CE would protect key winter range and a movement corridor for elk, deer, and moose, as well as critical habitat for bull trout, grizzly bear, and Canada lynx.

The appraised value of the proposed CE is \$16,300,000, an 83% increase from the preliminary estimate in 2019. Secured funding amounts and sources include: \$470,000 from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, \$50,000 from the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, and \$6,000,000 from the USFS Forest Legacy Program. Stimson has agreed to sell the conservation easement at 40% of its appraised value, a very substantial donation of value.

Public Involvement Process & Results: An environmental assessment was released for public comment from June 29 to July 28, 2021, and included a public hearing in Libby on July 14. Legal notices were published twice in three local newspapers and the *Helena Independent Record* and the EA was posted on the FWP webpage. Notices were sent to all adjoining landowners. FWP received 71 public comments with 68 in support of the CE proposal, one opposed, one person with a question only, and one from the mineral estate owner giving FWP formal notice that 3,560 acres of the proposed CE is subject to its existing and dominant mineral rights. All issues raised by those who commented are addressed in the decision document.

Alternatives and Analysis: Two alternatives were analyzed and considered in the EA: 1) Alternative A (Proposed Action) - FWP would acquire a conservation easement on approximately 27,289 acres of forestland near Libby, Montana, owned by Stimson Lumber Company. Stimson would continue to own and manage the land using sustainable forest practices while protecting the valuable fish and wildlife habitat found on the property and continuing to allow compatible public recreation opportunities; and 2) Alternative B (No Action) - If the project is not completed as proposed, Stimson would continue to own the property without any of the restrictions of the proposed conservation easement. They may, at some future time, change their public access policies or decide to develop or sell some or all of this land depending on company priorities and market conditions.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission approve FWP purchasing a conservation easement on the proposed 27,289-acre Kootenai Forestlands Phase II project to ensure conservation values and associated public benefits would be protected.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve FWP's purchase of the Kootenai Forestlands Phase II Conservation Easement as proposed.