



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION FWP PROPOSAL AND INFORMATION SHEET

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Meeting Date: Aug. 16, 2024

Agenda Item: Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Easement – Phase 1, Region 1

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: FWP proposes to purchase an approximately 32,981-acre conservation easement (CE), called the Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Easement – Phase 1, located in the Salish and Cabinet mountains between Kalispell and Libby with an appraised value of \$39,507,442. This is the first phase of a potentially two-phased project totaling 85,792 acres of important timberland and fish and wildlife habitat currently owned by Green Diamond Resources Company (Green Diamond). The proposed CE would prevent development, protect important wildlife habitat, maintain key landscape connectivity, and provide permanent free public recreation access to the affected lands while continuing to allow forest management and sustainable timber harvest. The land is part of the Heart of the Salish Priority Area identified for conservation efforts in Montana’s State Action Plan for Secretarial Order 3362, “Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors.” It provides a vital migration corridor and year-round habitat for about 20 moose, 40 elk, 350 mule deer, and 500 white-tailed deer. Hunters and anglers have used these lands for generations, and the property currently provides about 6,000 days of public hunting and angling use annually. This property is also habitat for grizzly bears and Canada lynx, drains into bull trout streams, and is potential habitat for wolverine, all species listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Secured funding amounts and sources include: \$1,500,000 from Habitat Montana, \$4,179,837 from private fundraising coordinated by the Trust for Public Lands, and \$20,000,000 from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Forest Legacy Program. Green Diamond has committed to donate about 35 percent of the conservation easement value (about \$13,827,605).

Public Involvement Process and Results: A draft environmental assessment (EA) was made available for public review and comment from April 15 to May 15, 2024. Public hearings were held in Kalispell on April 30 and in Libby on May 1. The draft EA was posted on FWP’s Public Notice webpage: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/public-notices>. The draft EA was also made available for public review on the Environmental Quality Council website at <https://leg.mt.gov/mepa/search/>, by individual request, and through notice to identified interested parties. FWP received 122 comments during the public comment period. All issues raised by those who commented that are pertinent to this proposal are addressed in the decision notice. Additional public comment will be solicited for a four-week period following the June commission meeting. Public comments will be posted online and provided to commissioners no later than two weeks prior to the August commission meeting.

Analysis and Alternatives: In the (EA), the department evaluated two alternatives that correspond with the alternatives presented below. FWP considered that if no action were to occur, Green Diamond may, at some future time, change their public access policies or decide to develop or sell some or all the affected property depending on company priorities and market conditions. Associated wildlife habitats, public recreation, and working timber lands could shift to other land uses, including subdivision development or other forms of land conversion.

Alternative A: The commission may approve purchase of the 32,981-acre CE on Green Diamond Lands in northwest Montana.

Alternative B: The commission may choose not to purchase the 32,981-acre CE on Green Diamond Lands.

Agency Recommendation and Rationale: Based on the results of the EA and record of decision, the department recommends the commission approve the purchase of the 32,981-acre Montana Great Outdoors – Phase 1 CE to ensure conservation values and associated public benefits would be protected.

Proposed Motion: I move that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the purchase of the Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Easement – Phase 1 as proposed.