



DECISION NOTICE

Case Ranch Company Regional Access Project

2/3/2026

ACTION

Decision Notice (DN). Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) shall prepare a DN for the proposed action. The DN must identify the agency decision, the reasons for the decision, and any special conditions surrounding the decision or its implementation.

With this action, FWP hereby adopts the Draft Environmental Assessment or Draft EA as final, without modification, and approves Alternative 2, the proposed action.

AUTHORITY: MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT

According to the applicable requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act or MEPA and its implementing rules and regulations, before a proposed action may be approved, environmental review must be conducted to identify, consider, and disclose any potential impacts of the proposed action on the affected human environment. The level of environmental review will vary with the complexity and seriousness of environmental issues associated with a proposed action. The level of public interest will also vary. The agency is responsible for adjusting public review to match these factors. *Title 75, Chapter 1, Parts 1 through 3, Montana Code Annotated (MCA)*.

Based on these factors, FWP determined a Checklist EA (Draft CEA) constitutes the appropriate level of review for the proposed action. Therefore, to assess and disclose potential impacts of the proposed action, FWP prepared a Draft CEA for public review and comment. See *Public Participation Process* below.

Further, FWP must consider any substantive comments received in response to an CEA and proceed in accordance with one of the following steps: determine the CEA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue an Environmental Impact Statement or EIS; determine the CEA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue a supplemental EA; or determine the Draft CEA adequately addressed the issues raised by the proposed action and make a final decision, with appropriate modification resulting from the analysis provided in the Draft EA and the analysis of any substantive public comments received. See *Public Comment and FWP Response* below.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The Draft CEA was made available for public review and comment from November 10, 2025 to November 25, 2025 and was posted on FWP's Public Notice webpage: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/public-notices>. The

Draft CEA was also made available for public review on the Environmental Quality Council or EQC website: <https://leg.mt.gov/mepa/search/>, by individual request, and through notice to identified interested parties. FWP received five comments during the public comment period.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to accept assignment (delegation) of the “right of public hunting access” component of a conservation easement (CE) to be held by Five Valleys Land Trust (FVLT) on approximately 1,710 acres of the Case Ranch in Missoula County. If selected and implemented, this proposed action would bind FWP to implement, review, and update a *Public Hunting Access Plan* (Appendix A) for the subject properties annually, or up to every five years, in cooperation with the landowner(s). Following guidance in the conservation easement and the *Public Hunting Access Plan*, FWP would be responsible for verifying that the landowner offers the opportunity for at least 200 hunter days of fair and equitable, free public-hunting access between September 1 and December 31 each year into the future, excluding the landowner’s family and employees. FWP would provide an enforcement presence consistent with its presence on other conservation easements, Block Management Areas, Fishing Access Sites and similar points of public access on or surrounded by private lands.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the project is for FWP to secure and manage public hunting access on 1,710 acres of the Case Ranch Company conservation easement, to be held by Five Valleys Land Trust. The intent of this joint conservation easement project is to protect both property’s fish and wildlife habitat and public recreational values while keeping the property in private ownership and management. The Case Ranch will remain a working ranch and will retain agricultural and cultural values in the Potomac Valley. Protecting this property will conserve native habitat, retain, and enhance native forestlands, grasslands, and riparian habitat condition and integrity, and will provide public access to wildlife resources.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED

Alternative 1: No Action

In addition to the proposed action, and as required by MEPA, FWP analyzes the "No-Action" alternative in the CEA. Under the No-Action alternative, the proposed action would not occur. Therefore, no additional impacts to the human environment would occur. The No Action alternative forms the baseline from which the potential impacts of the proposed action may be measured.

Under the No Action alternative, FWP would not accept assignment of the rights for public hunting access on the Case Ranch from FVLT’s conservation easement. This could result in a failed CE project (i.e., the CEs would not be purchased and finalized, due to lack of a public hunting access component in the CEs as required by the Montana Fish & Wildlife Conservation Trust, a project funder), in which case the opportunity to secure perpetual public hunting access could be lost.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would accept assignment of the rights of public hunting access on the Case Ranch from FVLT (under its conservation easement on the property). FWP would be obligated to implement, review, and update a *Public Hunting Access Plan* (Appendix A) for the subject property annually, or up to every five years, in cooperation with the landowner(s). Following guidance in the conservation easement and *Public Hunting Access Plan*, FWP would be responsible for verifying that the landowner offers the opportunity for at least 200 hunter days of fair and equitable, free public-hunting access (excluding the landowner’s family and employees) each year into the future. FWP would provide an

enforcement presence consistent with its presence on other conservation easements, Block Management Areas, Fishing Access Sites and similar points of public hunting access on or surrounded by private lands.

PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE

FWP received substantive public comments on the Draft EA. A substantive public comment was defined as the identification of a specific issue or impact. In some cases, multiple individuals provided the same or similar comment; these comments were summarized, categorized, listed once, and a single FWP response is provided below. The following constitutes a synopsis of public input received and FWP's response to those comments. The following provides the public comments received and FWP response(s).

One comment was received expressing concern about the means of accessing the property, which is addressed below.

Summarized Comment: I approve of perpetual conservation easements – it appears that more than 200 hunter days could be accommodated IF sportsmen were allowed to drive across the ranch and hunt the public land. There must be roads for ranch management that the public could use.

FWP Response: Thank you for your comment. Means of how the public may access the property will be determined through the Public Access Management Plan which will be reviewed and agreed upon between the landowner and FWP annually.

Comment Summary: Four letters of support were received, all stating that this project would provide an important benefit to sportsmen and the hunting heritage. Additionally, two of the letters highlighted that this project would increase hunter connectivity to the adjacent public lands.

FWP Response: FWP appreciates the letters of support and agrees that this project will benefit sportsmen and the hunting heritage.

DECISION

Based on the environmental review provided in the Draft CEA, and in accordance with all applicable laws, rules, regulations, and policies, FWP determined the proposed action (Alternative 2), will not have significant adverse impacts on the human environment associated with the proposed action and constitutes a reasonable and appropriate strategy to achieve identified objectives. Therefore, preparation of an EIS is unnecessary. FWP hereby adopts the Draft CEA as final and approves Alternative 2, the proposed action.

With this DN, FWP hereby adopts the Final EA, with modifications, and approves the proposed action.

Sincerely,



Kendra McKlosky
Region 2 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks