



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: February 13, 2020

Agenda Item: Coal Creek Conservation Easement, Region 7

Action Needed: Final Approval **Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

Background: FWP proposes to purchase two separate and distinct but overlapping conservation easements (CEs) totaling approximately 10,072 acres in Custer and Prairie counties, Montana. The two CEs will function as a single cohesive unit known as the Coal Creek Conservation Easement. The CE would protect and enhance a large silver sagebrush bottom along Coal Creek, several spring-fed wetlands in the associated uplands, sagebrush grasslands, badlands, and ponderosa pine hills. These diverse habitats support numerous game and nongame species. More than 90 percent of the property is critical mule deer winter range. It is within sage-grouse general range, and designated bighorn sheep core range. Hunting opportunity also exists for antelope, whitetail deer, turkeys, and sharp-tailed grouse. The property is within the range of 17 Species of Greatest Conservation Need.

The easement would preclude the conversion of native ground, limit development, institute grazing standards, and offer managed public access opportunities in perpetuity. An independent appraisal valued the easement at \$3,693,000. NRCS ALE funding would cover approximately 48 percent of the total cost and Habitat Montana funds would cover the remainder.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Public scoping was conducted from April 12, 2019 to May 12, 2019. Two scoping comments were received and addressed in the EA. The draft EA was released on Sept. 18., 2019, a public hearing was held in Miles City Oct. 3, 2019, and the comment period concluded Oct. 17, 2019. One comment was received during the EA comment period that expressed support for the CE. A Decision Notice was released on Oct. 21, 2019, that recommended proceeding with the CE.

Alternatives & Analysis:

Proposed Action: To purchase the Coal Creek Conservation Easement on high-priority wildlife habitat. This would assure habitat functions and public recreational access while remaining in private ownership.

No Action: FWP would forgo a partnership to conserve and enhance valuable wildlife habitats and to ensure public access.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends approval of this proposal to conserve and enhance wildlife habitat and public recreation opportunities on this land.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve the Coal Creek Conservation Easement as presented.