

## Success through strong partnerships



**FRIENDS AFIELD** FWP partnered with the National Wild Turkey Federation's Flathead Valley Chapter to give five youth hunters an introduction to chasing wild turkeys this May.

**T**he more time I spend as director of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, the more humbled I am by the strength and success of our many partnerships.

Take the Montana Great Outdoors Project, an 86,000-acre conservation easement in northwestern Montana. Completed last year, this 134-square-mile holding in the Cabinet and Salish mountains between Kalispell and Libby is prized for its elk hunting, hiking, camping, and other recreation. The easement permanently protects public access and critical habitat for elk, moose, deer, grizzly bears, Canada lynx, bull trout, and other important species. It also prevents development while allowing the landowner to continue sustainable logging, supporting wood-product jobs.

The \$96.9 million deal was completed in two phases following years of work by FWP, the Trust for Public Land (TPL), the U.S. Forest Service, and Green Diamond Resource Company, the sixth-generation Seattle-based timber company that owns the land. The Montana Land Board's approval sealed the deal for the state to purchase the final phase of the easement in December.

Green Diamond donated more than a third (roughly \$33.8 million) of the appraised value to help get the project across the finish line. TPL provided almost \$4 million in private funding. FWP, which will hold the easement, committed \$3 million from the Habitat Montana fund. Big credit also goes to the U.S. Forest Service's Forest Legacy Program, which brought in \$55.8 million from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF uses royalties from

off-shore drilling). It took every partner being fully committed, but we got it done, and the public will benefit for generations to come because of those efforts.

A few months before that, FWP partnered with the national Wild Sheep Foundation, Montana Wild Sheep Foundation, North-Western Energy, and a private landowner to complete the 1,080-acre Stafford Ferry Conservation Easement in the Missouri River Breaks, protecting habitat for one of Montana's largest herds of bighorns and providing a much-needed boost in public access.

Jump back another few years and FWP partnered with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Shodair Children's Hospital to purchase nearly 5,700 acres of prime elk habitat in the southern foothills of the Big Snowy Mountains south of Lewistown, now known as FWP's Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area.

The strength of our partnerships goes well beyond land protection and access. FWP's Future Fisheries Improvement Program, now celebrating 30 years, has completed hundreds of projects across the state to enhance and restore wild fish habitats. For every dollar the Montana Legislature has provided this program, FWP's partners have brought three more, quadrupling the agency's funding to help complete more than 700 projects to date. And that doesn't account for the countless hours of volunteer labor provided by local chapters of groups like Trout Unlimited and Walleyes Unlimited.

Speaking of volunteers, this past May the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) Flathead Valley Chapter partnered with FWP and private landowners to give five new hunters ages 10 to 15 a proper introduction to wild turkeys. With help from experienced mentors, three of them came home from their weekend hunt with a harvested turkey. All five gained new knowledge, confidence, and great memories. Matthew Cowan, FWP's Region 1 education technician and president of the NWTf Flathead Valley Chapter, says the main goal was to create meaningful experiences that inspire young hunters to get outdoors and enjoy themselves.

As FWP celebrates its 125th anniversary (see page 32), it's important that we also pay tribute to our partners. For more than a century, they have helped make what we do possible, and we're proud of all that we are able to accomplish working together.

—Christy Clark, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks