

PAYING IT BACK (AND FORWARD)

Each year FWP distributes nearly \$30 million to Montana landowners in Block Management Program payments, conservation easements, and other wildlife habitat and hunter access programs. **BY ANDREW MCKEAN**

The way Joe and Betsy Purcell see it, hunters saved their Bitterroot Valley ranch.

Just days after the Purcells accepted a 2017 Montana Neighbor Award from Governor Steve Bullock, a forest fire roared down from Lolo Pass. The U.S. Forest Service, trying to save homes farther down the valley, set a backfire on the Purcell Ranch. After the embers were quenched and the smoke had cleared, the couple began the hard work of restoring their property.

“Just as we were figuring out where to start, here shows up a group of hunters, asking how they can help,” Joe Purcell says. “Within 24 hours of that first group, hunters from all over the state and country started showing up here. Without those hunters, and without Block Management that brought them to us, we would never be upright and going now, three years after the fire.”

The Purcell Ranch has been enrolled in the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks’ Block Management Program for the past dozen years. Hunting is managed a little more intimately on their ranch than in other places—

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limited to three hunters per day, and the Purcells greet each one, often with baked goods—but the idea is the same as in Scobey or Dillon or anywhere else you’ll find Block Management enrollees. Landowners receive a payment from FWP to compensate for their time and the wear and tear on their properties that comes from daily visits by hunters. The more hunter days a landowner provides, the more funding they’re eligible to receive, up to an annual cap of \$15,000.

Block Management is funded mostly by nonresident big-game license revenue and the base hunting license fee required as part of most Montana hunting licenses. Other funds come from special tags like the popular Super Tag raffle. In 2019, more than 1,200 landowners enrolled 7.1 million acres of private and isolated public land in Block Management. During the three-year period ending that year, FWP paid Block Management cooperators an average per year of more than \$5.5 million in direct cash payments, plus another nearly \$2 million per year in services.

Block Management is only the most visible and popular landowner program that FWP administers. During the past three years, the department has distributed nearly \$30 million annually to ranchers,

farmers, and other property owners across the state. The money is a combination of funds generated by hunting licenses, a federal tax on guns and ammo, and federal and private organization grants that flow through FWP to landowners to provide public access, enhance habitats, and conserve natural landscapes.

The department administers so many accounts and distributes so many payments through various programs that it takes a sharp-eyed auditor to keep track of it all. “We have multiple documents with many pages, detailing all the programs, the various sources of funds, and then how those funds are paid,” says FWP’s Hunting Access Bureau chief, Jason Kool, who has a graduate degree in natural resources. “But for this job, a degree in accounting would probably be just as useful.”

Kool has more programs to track all the time. As an example, the 2019 Montana Legislature created the Public Access Land Agreements Program and directed FWP to find and pay landowners who provide access to otherwise inaccessible public land. That’s in addition to the Unlocking Public Lands, Access Public Lands, Managed Access Sites, FWP Livestock Loss Reimbursement, Regional Access Projects, and Game Damage



MORE THAN MONEY Betsy and Joe Purcell at their Bitterroot Valley ranch. “It’s never been about the money,” says Joe about the couple’s participation in Block Management. “We’re in it because it’s a way we could give back to people and give them a chance to have a positive outdoor experience.”



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Programs. Most landowners who participate in these programs receive payments from the state via FWP.

KEEPING RANCHES INTACT

The eyes of someone without an accounting degree might glaze over looking at all these balance sheets. But each program plays a vital role in Montana’s tradition of public hunting and ensures that landowners are recognized and compensated for the public hunting access and wildlife habitat they provide.

One such landowner is Cindy Kittredge, who placed an FWP conservation easement on her family’s 2,200-acre ranch outside Cascade in 2007. She wanted to protect the property from the creeping exurban sprawl of Great Falls, 20 miles downstream on the Missouri River, and maintain her family’s farming and ranching heritage. With real estate agents and others calling or knocking on the door every few weeks offering to pur-

chase parcels overlooking the river, she also saw the easement as a way to prevent the visual degradation that she, her husband Jim, and their neighbors feared. “For people who have lived most or all of their lives on a ranch, there’s a visual and psychic loss of familiar landscapes as new houses are built and viewscape change,” Kittredge says. “We wanted to conserve the viewscape as much as we wanted to be stewards of the land and water habitat and keep our ranch operational.”

Funds to purchase the Kittredges’ Bird Creek Ranch conservation easement came

from FWP’s Habitat Montana and Migratory Bird Wetland Programs. Several conservation groups including Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever pitched in, too. “FWP was critical in providing the funding we needed to operate a working ranch, and to protect things like vistas, while also giving us the financial flexibility to create a trust fund for our land,” Kittredge says. “Without FWP, we might have been forced to sell to housing developers.”

A glance at a department spreadsheet (see page 21) shows that during 2017, 2018, and 2019, FWP and other funders paid landowners a total of about \$20 million per year for conservation easements alone. More than \$16 million of that came from competitive grants through the USDA’s Forest Legacy and Agricultural Conservation Easement Programs, and from nongovernmental sources. “For every hunting license dollar we spend from Habitat Montana,

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we've been able to leverage another nearly four dollars in additional funding—all for conservation easements that protect critical wildlife habitat and provide public hunting,” says Ken McDonald, head of the FWP Wildlife Division.

YEAR-END BONUSES

In an FWP conservation easement, the landowner restricts certain development on the property—such as subdividing parcels, plowing native grasslands, or leasing land for hunting—in exchange for a one-time payment of roughly 40 percent of the property's value. That cash, which can be substantial given Montana's skyrocketing property values, helps ranchers stay on their land and can even reduce and pay inheritance taxes.

While the money is essential for landowners selling a conservation easement, cash compensation is rarely the main incentive for those entered in Block Management. “We'd probably be doing this even without

payments,” says Purcell. “But every little bit helps. Those Block Management checks go to buy more fenceposts and fence wire. But it's never been about the money. I raised my son by hunting on land in the Block Management Program, but across the [Bitterroot] valley, I see more ‘No Hunting’ signs going up all the time. We're in Block Management because it's a way we could give back to people and give them a chance to have a positive outdoor experience.”

At the other end of the state, Lee Cornwell has been a Block Management participant since the program's inception. His family-owned ranch near Glasgow receives a little over \$10,000 each year in compensation for providing hunting access to about 15,000 acres of private property. “Our ranch has so much federal and state land in it, even if you wanted to be a jerk and keep people off, you probably couldn't,” says Cornwell, who serves on FWP's Private Land/Public Wildlife Council. “We're in Block Manage-

Yes, FWP pays property taxes

Contrary to popular belief, FWP pays property taxes on almost all of its holdings. In addition to payments to landowners, each year FWP pays Montana counties a total of roughly \$875,000 in property taxes, mostly for wildlife management areas but also for fishing access sites, state parks, and administrative office sites owned by the agency.

ment because it's what we'd be doing anyway. We've been here for 100-some years. A lot of the families that hunt our place have been hunting here about that long.”

Cornwell uses the ranch's Block Management check to pad the year-end bonuses his ranch hands receive. “I hate to say it, but by participating in Block Management, we sometimes have to put up with a bunch of nonsense from hunters,” Cornwell says. “Actually, it's our employees who put up with the nonsense, so it makes sense to give them a little something extra for putting up with me, but also with those hunters.”

Because payments are calculated annually for each of the roughly 1,300 landowners who participate in Block Management, the economic benefit varies according to the size and type of operation. For landowners who have smaller agricultural operations but provide thousands of hunter days, the maximum \$15,000 Block Management payment can be an important part of their operation. It diversifies their income stream, helping them through years when commodity prices don't cover all the bills.

Conversely, for a huge ranch with limited hunting opportunities, Block Management payments don't make an operational difference. But other services that FWP and its employees provide to the program's participants can be extremely helpful.

That's the case with Stimson Lumber Company. Stimson, with some 130,000 acres of private timberland in northwestern Montana, has enrolled nearly all of that property under various arrangements with FWP. Some of the land has an underlying

“Without FWP, we might have been forced to sell to housing developers.”



KEEPING THE FAMILY FARM Cindy and Jim Kittredge say real estate agents and even passersby regularly offer to buy parcels of their ranch that provide views of the nearby Missouri River.



HOLIDAY HELP The Cornwell Ranch near Glasgow receives roughly \$10,000 from FWP each year to provide hunting access on 15,000 acres. The money is not significant for such a large livestock operation, but it helps with year-end bonuses for workers on the 128-year-old ranch, says family member Lee Cornwell.



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FWP conservation easement, some is enrolled in Block Management, and some is managed under a Recreation Management Agreement with the department.

“Our lands are working forests that provide wood products, jobs, clean water, wildlife habitat, and a place where people can recreate and find enjoyment,” says Barry Dexter, the company’s director of

inland resources. “The conservation easement allows the company’s owners to receive a financial benefit for keeping their forest working and providing habitat and public access rather than seeking other forms of monetization, such as selling parcels for development.” Another benefit for Stimson is FWP’s enforcement authority for fish, game, and trespass violations. “We

appreciate the ability to contact FWP with access issues, and they are responsive in helping us curb the problems,” Dexter says.

Then there are those unquantifiable rewards that come from FWP programs.

“Block Management has been among the best things in the world for us,” Purcell says. “After our fire, we didn’t ask them, but hunters came. They came from all over to save a ranching family whose land and livelihood was devastated. So, you can imagine what Block Management means to us. We literally cannot imagine our operation without it.” 🐾

Average total annual landowner payments*

*made through FWP Wildlife Division programs in 2017, 2018, and 2019 (cash and in-kind).

Payment Type	Hunting License Dollars	Outside Dollars	Outside Sources
Conservation Easements T	\$25,490	NA	
Conservation Easements C	\$4,564,518	\$16,017,948	FL; ACEP; DV; HCP; NFWF; Other
Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program T	\$53,077	\$ 32,881	ABC; FSA; PF
Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program C	\$274,278	\$ 131,133	VPA-HIP
Working Grasslands Initiative T	\$6,102	\$81,279	P-R
Working Grasslands Initiative C	\$27,392	\$ 567,498	P-R; VPA-HIP; NFWF
Migratory Bird Wetland Program T	\$50,555	\$35,731	NAWCA
Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program T	NA	\$93,266	P-R
Block Management T	\$1,906,697	NA	
Block Management C	\$4,166,597	\$1,404,532	P-R
COMBINED	\$11,074,706	\$18,364,268	
	ANNUAL TOTAL: \$29,438,974		

C **Cash Payment:** Directed to landowners in the form of a lease payment, conservation easement payment, or Block Management payment.

T **Tangible Items or Services:** Payments for materials and contracted services or costs realized by FWP for its services in support of hunter access management. Materials and contracted services include things like gates, fence supplies, herbicide, shelterbelt materials, and services for installing or applying such items.

FL: Forest Legacy
ACEP: Agricultural Conservation Easement Program
DV: Donated Value
HCP: Habitat Conservation Program
NFWF: National Fish & Wildlife Foundation
ABC: American Bird Conservancy
FSA: Farm Service Agency

PF: Pheasants Forever chapters
VPA-HIP: Voluntary Public Access Habitat Improvement Program
P-R: Pittman-Robertson Act funds
NAWCA: North American Wetlands Conservation Act
DU: Ducks Unlimited