

## BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

This past May, a wind farm developer came into FWP headquarters in Helena looking for information. He was planning to install wind turbines near Martinsdale and wanted to learn the locations of crucial fish and wildlife habitat he should avoid disturbing. We showed him how to find the information in our Crucial Areas Planning System, or CAPS. The system is composed of detailed computer-generated maps that identify the state's most highly valued recreation areas and fish and wildlife habitat.

This Internet-based mapping tool allows developers, counties, and public agencies to assess the conservation value of particular locations when they begin planning power lines, residential housing, and other projects. (They could do this previously, by consulting with FWP staff—which we still recommend—but it's much easier now.) If they know about a bull trout spawning tributary or sage-grouse lek beforehand, they can either proceed in ways that don't harm the habitat or decide the required mitigation expenses are not worth the effort. It's their choice; CAPS is nonregulatory. The important thing is that they have the fish and wildlife data up front, before proceeding so far into a project that revision becomes costly and contentious.

Montana needs economic development. But it also needs elk winter range, trout streams, and state parks to maintain its valuable hunting, fishing, and other outdoor tourism industries. It's not a matter of choosing between an energy transmission line or a pronghorn fawning ground. Montana requires both. That's a main reason our department created CAPS.

The system contains data on vital fish and wildlife areas from 100 years of reports, surveys, and maps, much of it having sat for years in file cabinets and desk drawers. It also contains maps of projected residential and energy development, such as coal-bed methane. And it contains FWP biologists' assessments of risks to crucial areas—like from climate change or urban sprawl—and their suggestions for preventing degradation or disturbance to intact, unfragmented sites.

With CAPS, we can more readily predict locations of likely conflicts and take steps to reduce them. For instance, if we see that a proposed highway crosses a historical mule deer migration route, we can work

with state and federal transportation departments to alleviate the problem, such as by installing wildlife passageways or re-routing the road. The system also helps focus future FWP acquisitions and conservation easements on areas with the highest value to fish and wildlife.

CAPS is dynamic: The maps reflect what we know now, and FWP will update them as we obtain new information. Soon we'll be adding key wildlife migration routes as well as essential hunting and fishing sites identified by dozens of Montana sportsmen's groups.

Montana has long been a national leader in wildlife conservation,



**It's their choice whether to proceed or not; CAPS is nonregulatory.**

a tradition that continues. CAPS is the first "decision support system" released in the West. Other states are working on similar projects as part of an initiative agreed upon two years ago by the Western Governors' Association. Like Montana, they want to see economic growth, but not to the extent that it degrades valuable fish and wildlife systems.

As for the wind farm developer who stopped by recently, it's anyone's guess what will become of his proposal. But one thing's for sure: If his project goes through, he knows where to site his turbines to do the least possible harm to crucial terrestrial and aquatic habitat in the Martinsdale area.

They say you can't have your cake and eat it, too. But if CAPS works as planned, maybe Montanans can have the best of both worlds by fostering healthy economic development in ways that protect the state's equally important fish and wildlife resources.

—JOE MAURIER, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*

*To use the new mapping system or learn more about it, visit [fwp.mt.gov](http://fwp.mt.gov) and search for "CAPS."*

## NATURAL WONDERS ILLUSTRATION BY PETER GROSSHAUSER

**Q. Do you have to wear a life jacket while in a boat, or just have it in the boat?**

**A.** The law requires that a boat must carry at least one life vest or other PFD (personal flotation device) for each person in the boat. Children under age 12 must wear a life vest. Everyone else, including adults, is advised to wear one—especially when water temperatures are cold and the threat of hypothermia from an accidental dunking increases.

