

Lost Trail Conservation Project Region 1



Dahl Lake with the project lands in the background (Photo credit: Chris Boyer – kestralaerial.com)

Wildlife Habitat Land Project Proposal June 2019

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THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

(vers. 4/2019)

1. **Region:** 1 **Regional Supervisor:** Jim Williams
Name of Applicants: Kris Tempel (Region 1 Habitat Conservation Biologist),
Alan Wood (Wildlife Science Program Supervisor), Neil Anderson (Region 1
Wildlife Manager)
2. **Date:** June 14, 2019
3. **Project Name:** Lost Trail Conservation Project
Type of Project: Conservation Easement
4. **Size:** 7,274 acres
5. **Location:** Approx. 6 miles northwest of Marion, Flathead County, Region 1
6. **Map:** See Figure 1 (p. 2)
7. **Project Need:**

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and The Trust for Public Land are working to place a conservation easement (CE) on 7,274 acres of highly productive Weyerhaeuser timberland in northwest Montana (Fig. 1). The project lands run along the southern border of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge (NWR). Success of this project may lead to conservation of an additional 55,000-acres adjoining the project and surrounding Lost Trail NWR using USFWS conservation programs. The proposed CE would allow Weyerhaeuser to continue sustainable forest management, preclude development, sustain wood-product jobs, protect incredible wildlife habitat and a key landscape connectivity corridor, and provide permanent, year-round public access to extraordinary recreation lands. This project protects the north slope of Dredger Ridge, a favorite walk-in elk hunting area. The proposed project would protect grizzly bear and Canada lynx, threatened species found on the property. This project is a perfect complement to the Commission policy for purchasing interest in wildlife habitats. It meets all three goals for Habitat Montana: 1) conserving wildlife populations by requiring the property to be managed to protect its wildlife habitat, 2) adding to a larger landscape of conservation stretching from the Continental Divide to the border of Idaho and beyond, and 3) allowing traditional forestry practices to occur while preserving wildlife habitat and a key connectivity corridor.

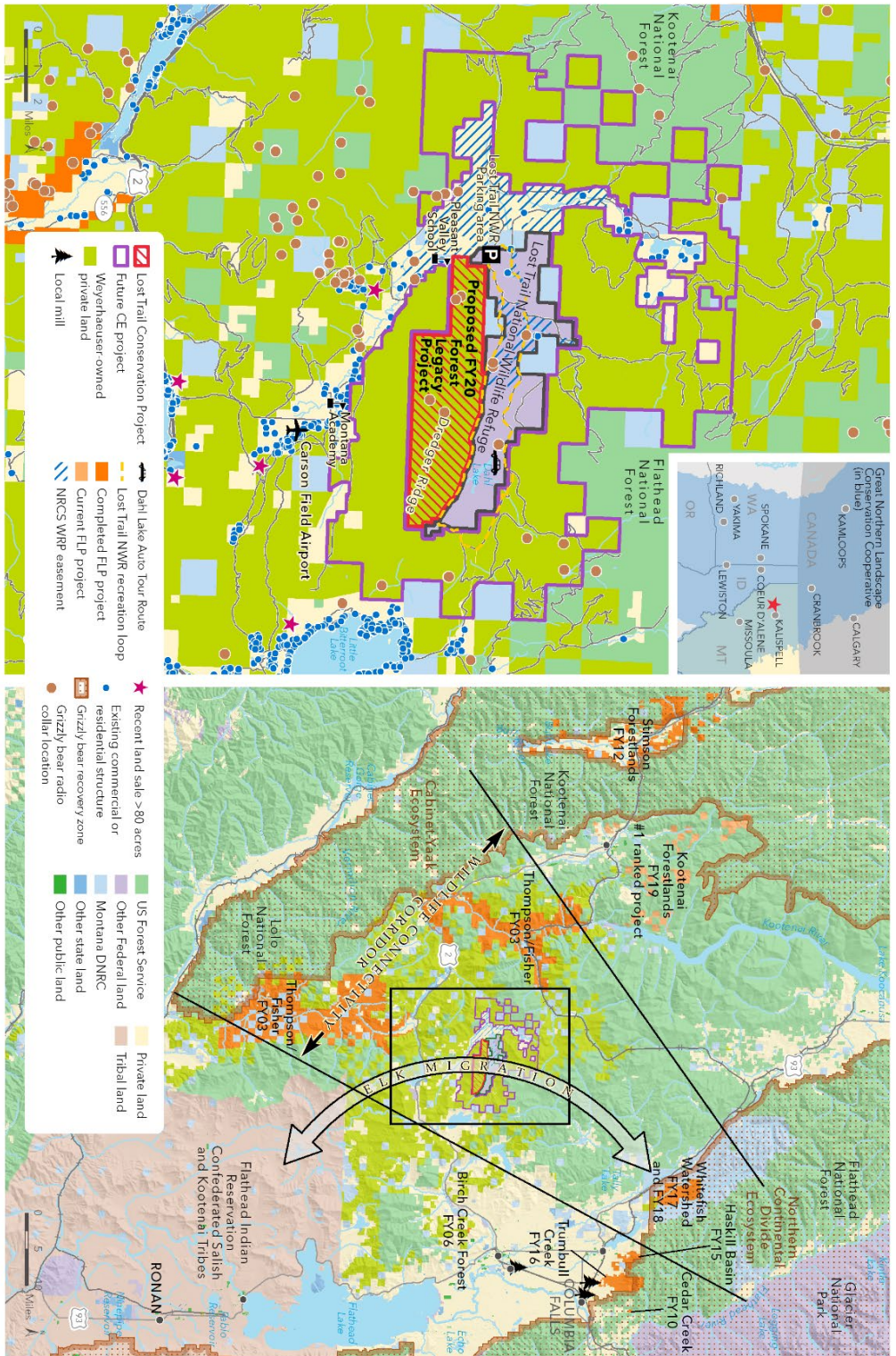


Figure 1. Map of the project area with important wildlife migration corridors highlighted.

Lost Trail Conservation Project

FY20 FOREST LEGACY PROPOSAL

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8. Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria

The Lost Trail Conservation Project consists of 99.5% Tier I terrestrial community types. Broadly, approximately 5,889 acres (81%) of the property are forest and woodland systems and approx. 1,085 acres (15%) are grassland systems. More specifically, the property has 3,252 acres (45%) of conifer-dominated forest and woodland (xeric-mesic), 2,632 acres (36%) of conifer-dominated forest and woodland (mesic-wet), 1,085 acres (15%) of montane grassland, and 190 acres (3%) of deciduous shrubland. Approximately 39 acres of the property consist of floodplain/riparian, wet meadow, or herbaceous marsh community types. The property contains approximately 6 miles of intermittent stream habitat. There is no cropland on the property.

9. Project Level Criteria

a) Site-Specific Habitat Values

The project lands provide key habitat for 38 Species of Greatest Conservation Need as identified in Montana's 2015 State Wildlife Action Plan; including, but not limited to, fisher, wolverine, northern goshawk, peregrine falcon, Lewis's woodpecker, western toad, and northern alligator lizard. The largest population of breeding western toads in western Montana exists on the project area and the adjoining Lost Trail NWR, which provide crucial habitat for this state species of concern and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) sensitive species. Thirty percent of the project is potential fisher habitat. The entire property is dispersal habitat for male wolverines and 50% is dispersal habitat for female wolverines. The project lands are home to grizzly bear and Canada lynx, ESA-listed Threatened species. Sixty percent of the project area is critical habitat for Canada lynx (USFWS 2009 Canada Lynx Recovery Plan). The 15% of the property that consists of montane grassland is a rare, native habitat in northwestern Montana and makes this conservation project unique in the area (Fig. 2). The project includes 22 acres of important old-growth forest, a unique forest community type, which is used by species such as brown creepers, Townsend's and MacGillivray's warblers, olive-sided flycatchers, Townsend's solitaire, great gray and great horned owls, and Cooper's and red-tailed hawks. The property supports populations of mule and white-tailed deer, elk, moose, black bear, mountain lion, wolf, forest grouse, and turkeys. It is also key winter range for elk. The project lands are home to at least two large elk herds. The resident herd, of approximately 300 animals, uses this area year-round. Another herd of migratory elk move up to 80 miles from winter range on the Flathead Indian Reservation to the project area during the summer, with some continuing north to the Flathead National Forest just west of Whitefish (Figs. 1 and 3).



Figure 2. *Weyerhaeuser forest management is creating forest conditions conducive to maintenance of a healthy grass understory dominated by rough fescue.*

b) Threat Status

The threat status of this project is imminent. Weyerhaeuser is a Real Estate Investment Trust, a publicly traded company, and the largest private landowner in the country. To generate revenue for shareholders, they sell land when development and subdivision generate a greater return than timber harvest. Weyerhaeuser was planning to list two 600-acre portions of this property this year and next year but put those plans on hold to allow for this conservation opportunity. The company is confident that if listed, these properties would sell within two-years, which could prevent future public access and impact the habitat qualities of the property. Ninety-five percent of the project is developable and would be highly attractive due to the views of Lost Trail NWR and the recreation access. The county's classification system indicates 75% is highly developable (less than 15% slope) and another 20% is reasonably developable (15% to 25% slope).

c) Focal Priority

The entire property is in the Salish Tier I Terrestrial Focal Area and 35% is in the Fisher River Tier II Aquatic Focal Area. This project is part of an ongoing multi-partner conservation initiative, which includes FWP, The Trust for Public Land, various timber companies, and multiple federal, state, and private funding sources, that has been working together to protect large landscapes of working

forest and fish and wildlife habitat in northwestern Montana over the last twenty years. The project lands are part of an area that has been identified in several USFWS management plans as important for the recovery of federally-listed species, including the 2018 Conservation Strategy for the Grizzly Bear in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and the 2014 Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy, Revised Designated Habitat. The Yellowstone to Yukon Initiative, American Wildlands, and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF) have identified the Cabinet-Yaak area, of which the project is a part, as a priority corridor for grizzly, lynx, and elk. This project has national and international significance, lying in the heart of the Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GNLCC) project area that runs from northern Colorado to northwest British Columbia. The proposed project directly addresses the needs GNLCC has identified for maintaining ecological integrity and connectivity in the face of climate change and forest conversion. The project area is one of the highest ranked linkages identified in the NFWF Great Migrations and Crucial Corridors Initiative business plan. The project lands are designated as high priority for habitat protection in state conservation plans including the 2010 Montana State Assessment of Forest Resources and the 2003 MT Gray Wolf Management Plan. Using the Crucial Habitat Assessment Tool (CHAT), the Western Governors' Association's 2015 Wildlife Corridor Initiative determined the project lands provide some of the best landscape connectivity and habitat for priority wildlife species (e.g., grizzly bear, wolves, lynx, elk). From radio collar data shared by the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the project lands have been shown to be an important migratory corridor for elk (Fig. 3). FWP collar data also shows the property to be an important connectivity corridor for grizzly bears (Fig. 4).

d) Geographic Effectiveness

This single block of 7,274 acres shares nearly 7 miles of border with the 7,965-acre Lost Trail NWR and 4,093 acres of Natural Resource Conservation Service-held Wetland Reserve Program easements. It would complement the nearby 142,200-acre Thompson-Fisher Conservation Easement, an FY03 Forest Legacy Program project. This project consists of the ridge top and lands sloping down to Dahl Lake and the sensitive wetland areas of the NWR, so conservation of these lands would help protect the water quality so important to the migratory birds and other wildlife species using the Lost Trail NWR. Success of this project would also likely leverage an additional 55,000-acre conservation project over Weyerhaeuser land adjoining the project area and surrounding Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) through either a partnership with the USFWS using their conservation programs or further FLP funding (Fig. 1).

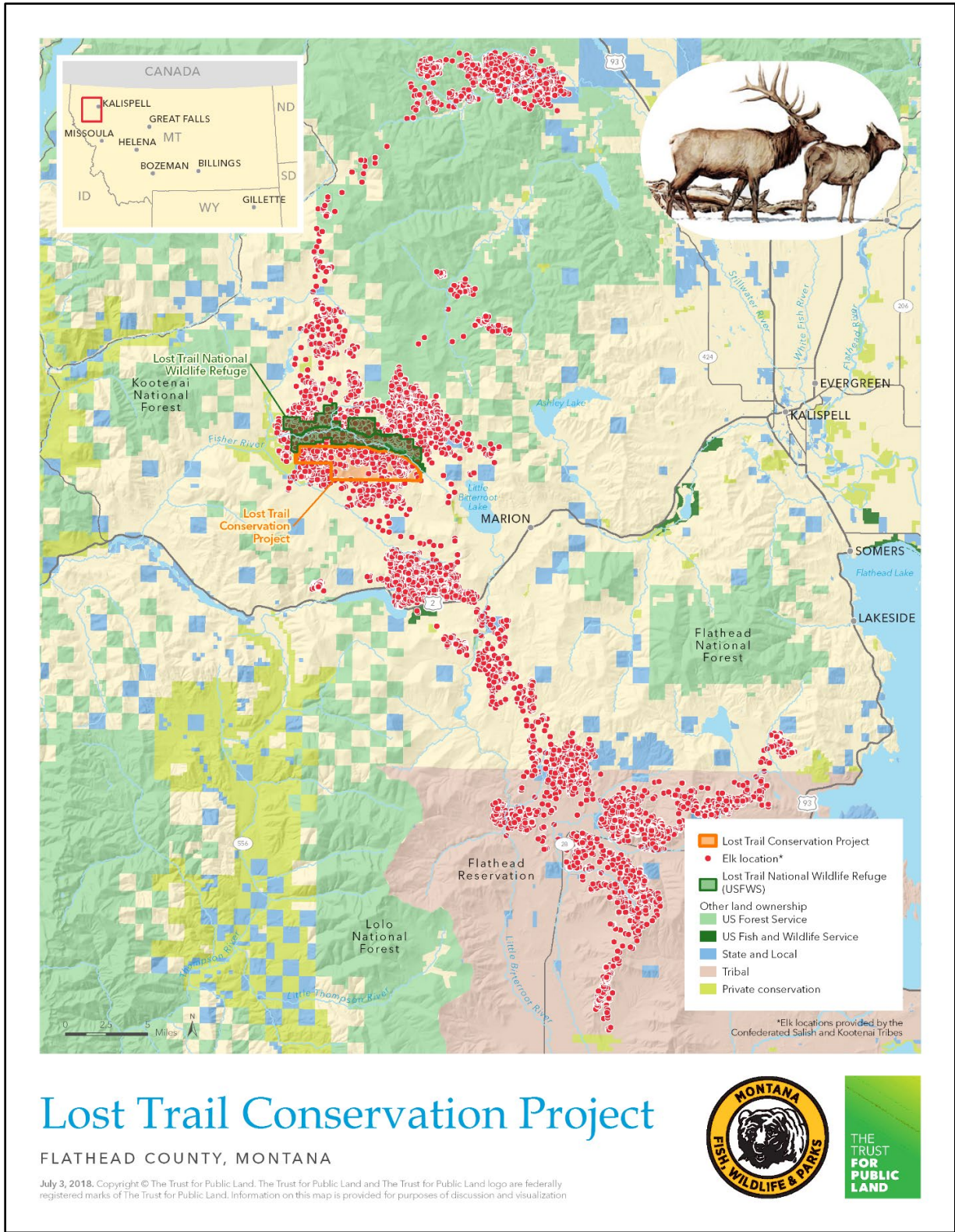


Figure 3. Map showing elk movement from winter range on the Flathead Reservation through and onto the project lands and north to the Flathead National Forest.

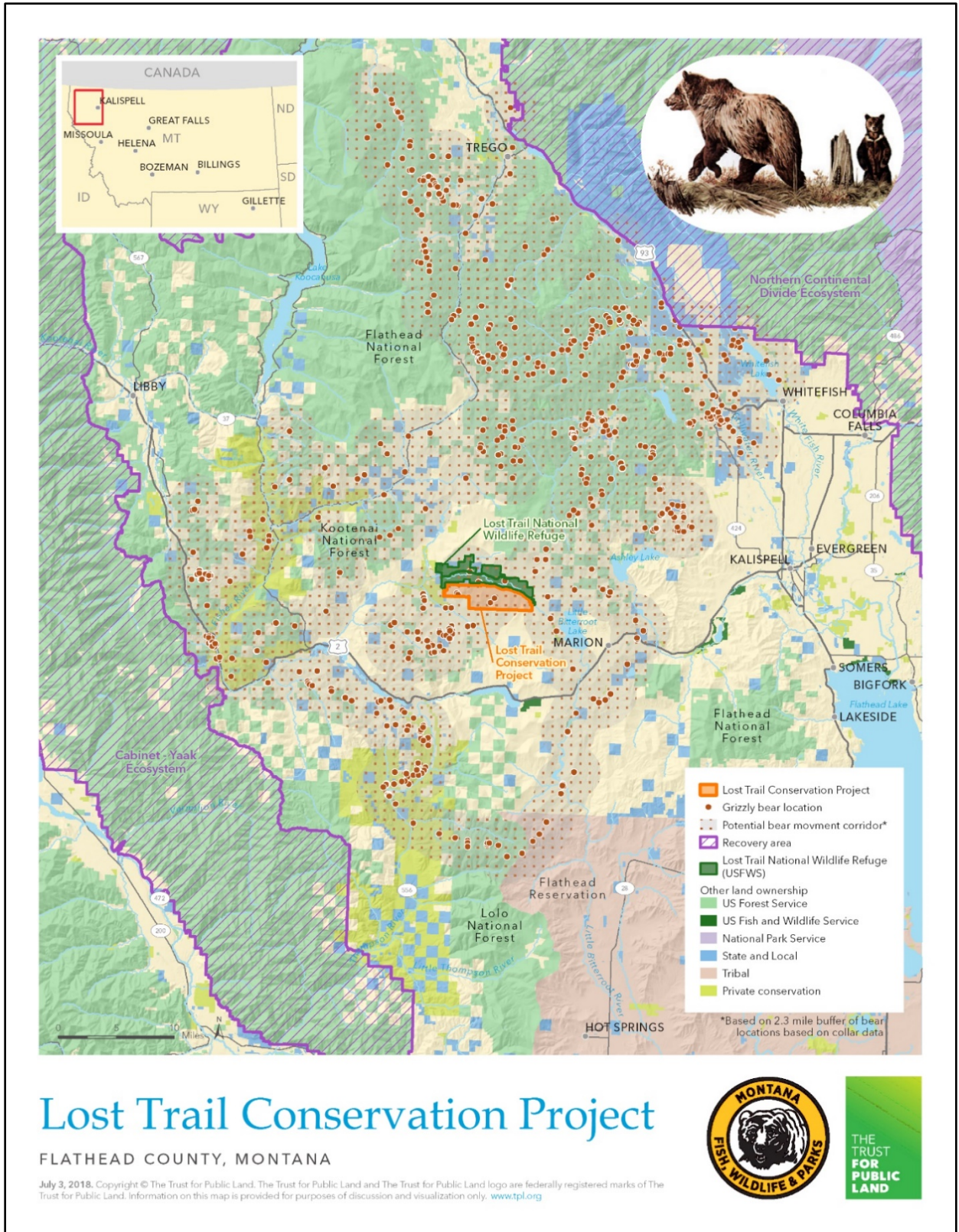


Figure 4. Map showing grizzly bear movement between the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem and the Cabinet-Yaak Ecosystem with the project lands as a key corridor.

e) **Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation**

The project lands are currently open for hunting under the Block Management program. Weyerhaeuser has an open lands policy that allows general public recreation throughout the year in addition to seasonal hunting, fishing, and trapping. The area has been managed as a walk-in hunting opportunity for more than 25 years which holds elk on the property and keeps them available for public harvest (Fig. 5). Under the terms of the conservation easement, free public access to the project lands would be permanently secured. This project protects the north slope of Dredger Ridge, part of Hunting District 103, which is the most used and successful elk hunting area in Region 1. Though the project area only represents 1% of the acreage in HD 103, it provides an average of more than 400 hunter days each year. The property is easily accessed on the western boundary by open county roads and around the rest of the property walking through adjoining USFWS or Weyerhaeuser properties.



Figure 5. *The mix of forest, grassland and rock outcrops adjacent to the wetlands on the national wildlife refuge, along with walk-in hunting opportunities provides an ideal mix of habitats for elk and many other wildlife species.*

f) **Management Considerations**

The habitat on this property is in good condition and not in need of restoration. Weyerhaeuser currently manages it under Sustainable Forest Initiative standards, which would continue under the terms of the conservation easement. Since this is a conservation easement project, Weyerhaeuser would be

responsible for the property management costs, including weed control. Under the terms of the conservation easement, the property would be managed by Weyerhaeuser under an approved forest management plan similar to the one we developed for our other timber company easement properties which would protect important habitats for key species in perpetuity. By eliminating future housing development, the project is likely to reduce ongoing FWP obligations by reducing future wildlife/human conflicts in an area that is highly prone to such conflicts. It would help reduce the need for additional time, effort and funding spent in wildlife conflict, which would likely offset the increased need to monitor our growing portfolio of conservation easements.