

Kootenai Forestlands Conservation Project Phase II Region 1



Wildlife Habitat Land Project Proposal June 2020

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THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL

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 2, 2020
3. **Project Name:** Kootenai Forestlands Conservation Project Phase II
Type of Project: Conservation Easement
4. **Size:** 27,929 acres
5. **Location:** Blocks of land located between 3 to 15 miles east and southeast of Libby, Lincoln County, Region 1
6. **Map:** See Figure 1 (p. 2)
7. **Project Need:** FWP and The Trust for Public Land are working to place a conservation easement (CE) on 27,929 acres of highly productive Stimson timberland in northwestern Montana southeast of Libby (Fig. 1). This project would preclude development, ensure continued sustainable timber management guided by a multi-resource management plan, provide wood-product jobs, protect incredible wildlife habitat and key landscape connectivity, and provide free, permanent, year-round public access to extraordinary recreation land. This property is within Focal Area 2 of Priority Area E for the SO3362 Montana Action Plan for 2020 (Fig. 2). It protects key winter range and a migratory corridor for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose. It will protect critical habitat for bull trout, grizzly bear, and Canada lynx, ESA-listed Threatened species found on the property. The project complements the recently completed 22,295-acre Kootenai Forestlands CE (Phase I) and the 27,992-acre Kootenai Valleys CE and is adjacent to 142,000-acre Thompson-Fisher CE. Collectively, nearby conservation projects in Montana and Idaho have protected a quarter million acres of Tier I forested and aquatic community types. 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.

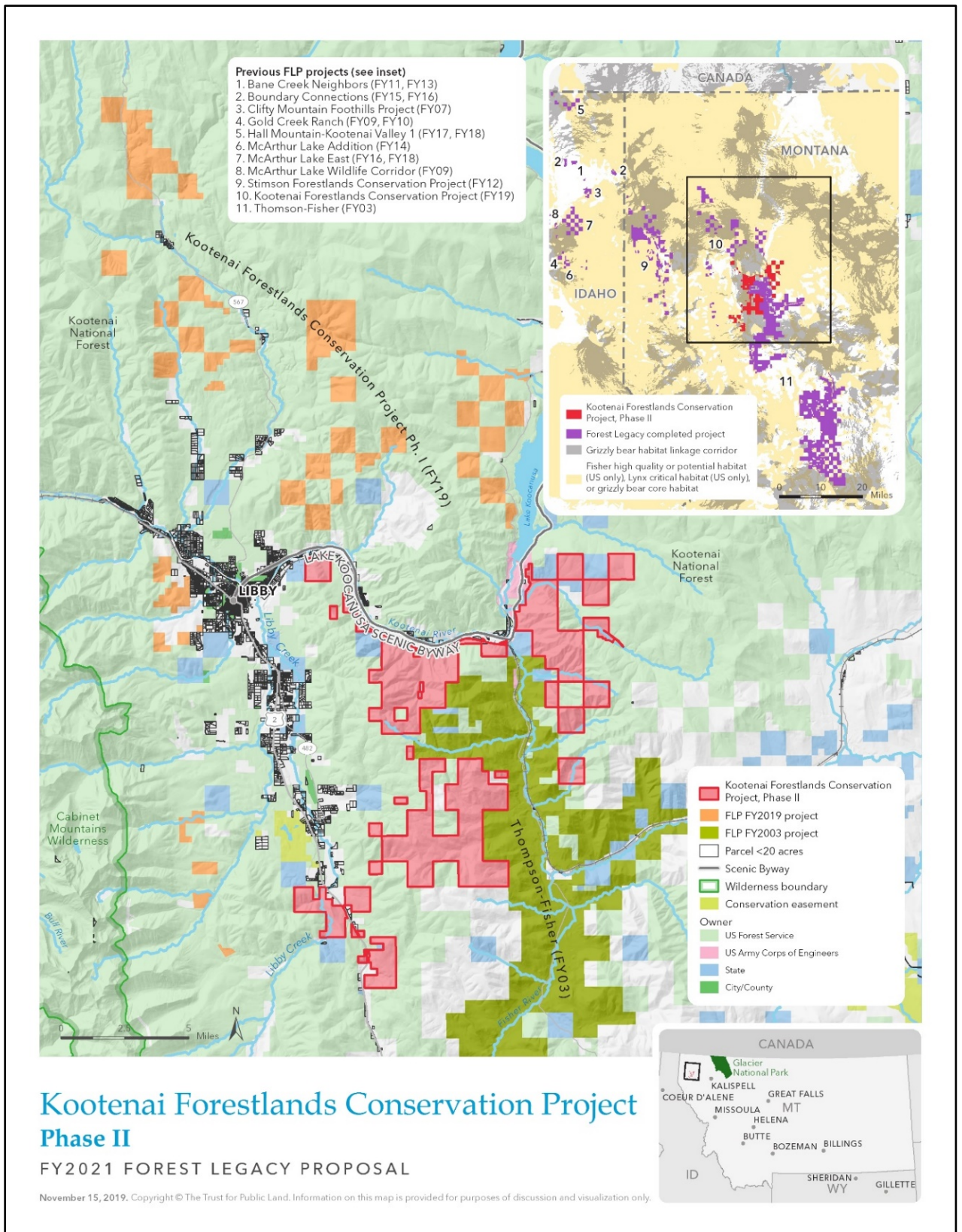


Figure 1. Map of the project area showing its adjacency to the Thompson-Fisher CE (green) and Phase I of the Kootenai Forestlands project (orange).

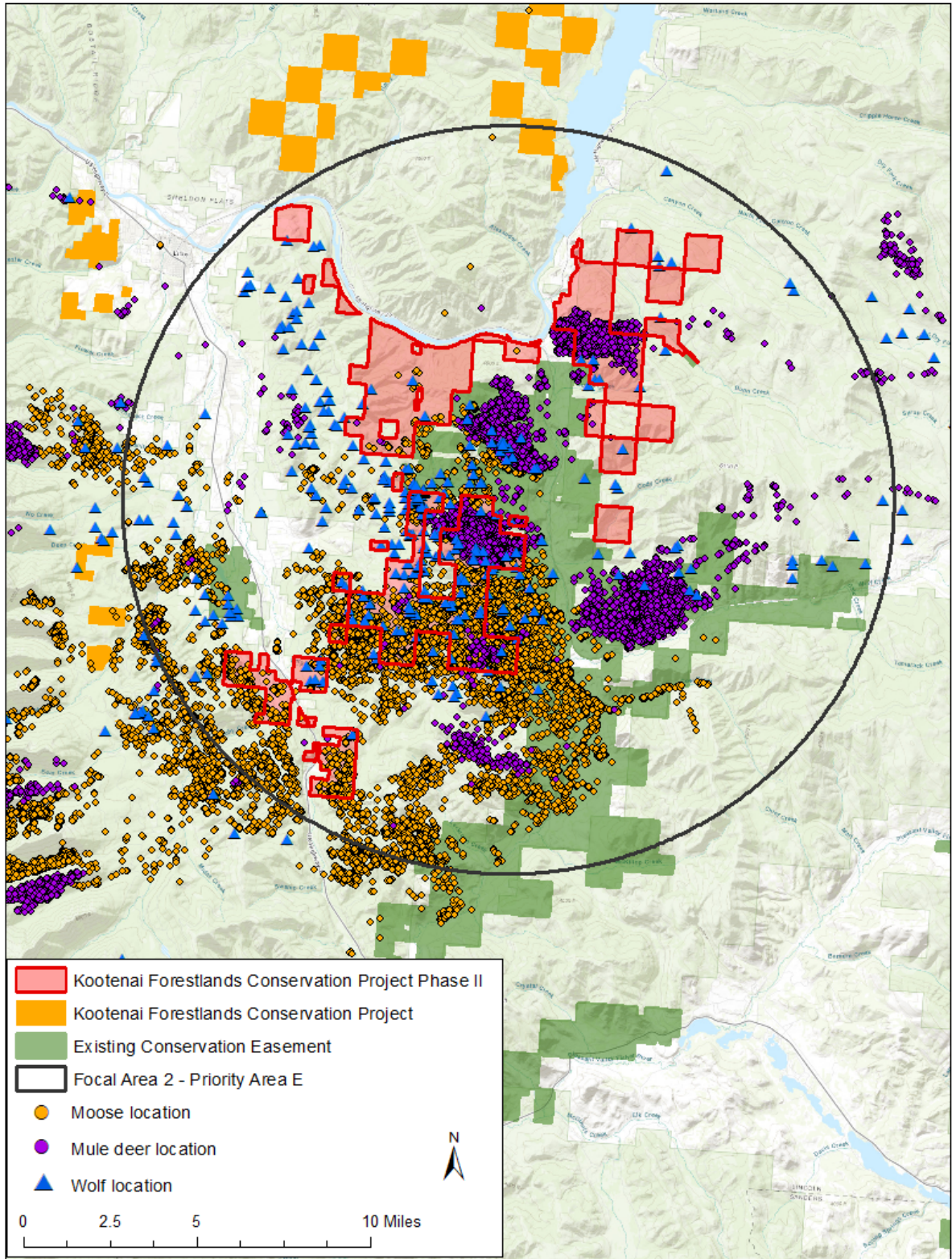


Figure 2. Map of the project area showing its location within Priority Area E, Focal Area 2, of the 2020 State Action Plan for SO3362 and also how moose, mule deer, and wolves use the property and surrounding landscape.

8. Statewide Habitat Criteria

The project area consists of 100% Tier I terrestrial community types: 60% conifer-dominated forest and woodland (mesic-wet), 20% conifer-dominated forest and woodland (xeric-mesic), 15% montane grassland, and 5% deciduous shrubland. All the streams on the property are considered Tier I aquatic communities. The property contains approximately 14 miles of critical bull trout habitat along the Kootenai River and Libby Creek and 23 miles of westslope cutthroat trout habitat throughout the property. In total, the property contains 47 miles of streams, 367 acres of riparian habitat, 345 acres of wetlands, and 14 miles of the Kootenai River. There is no cropland on the property.

9. Project-Level Strategic Criteria

a) Site-Specific Habitat Values

The project lands provide key habitat for 42 Species of Greatest Conservation Need as identified in Montana's 2015 State Wildlife Action Plan; including, but not limited to, westslope cutthroat trout, wolverine, northern goshawk, peregrine falcon, Lewis's woodpecker, western toad, western skink, hoary bat, and western pearlshell. The entire project area is high value winter range for elk, moose, white-tailed deer, and mule deer (Fig. 3). It is part of 40-mile migration corridor for mule deer that move between their summer range in the Cabinet Mountains Wilderness, the Stillwater drainage west of Whitefish, and winter range on the project area (Fig. 2). Due to the abundance of moose, elk, and mule deer, the project area is home to three wolf packs (Fig. 2). One of these packs consistently dens on the property. Sixty percent of the project is designated as potential fisher habitat, a rare Montana species of concern. The project is part of a larger network of protected lands in Montana, Idaho, and Washington that have secured habitat for this species and kept it from being listed under the ESA. The property also consists of 80% high value marten habitat. The project lands are used by grizzly bear, Canada lynx, and bull trout; all ESA-listed species. They each require large, resilient landscapes for their survival. The project lands are designated critical habitat and are some of the last intact habitat in the lower 48 states. The Cabinet-Yaak grizzly bear population has less than 50 bears and is currently listed as Threatened, but may be upgraded to Endangered. Preserving genetic linkage to neighboring populations by protecting connectivity corridors, such as this property, is critical to their survival and recovery. A 2015 scientific study by Proctor et al. identified 80% of these lands as part of an international network of critical lands connecting this population to four other small grizzly bear populations in British Columbia, Montana, Idaho, and Washington. ESA Threatened bull trout are found on the property in the Kootenai River and Libby Creek, which are identified as critical habitat in the USFWS's 2010 Revised Designation Critical Habitat for Bull Trout. This project protects over

14 miles of Critical Habitat along this stream and river. The property also supports populations of black bear, mountain lion, forest grouse, and turkeys. 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.



Figure 3. *Radio collared moose on the project area in winter.*

b) **Threat Status**

The threat status of this project is probable. Lincoln County has experienced strong population growth for three consecutive years, increasing 1.4% last year alone. According to the Libby Chamber of Commerce, the growth is driven by a growing health care industry, demand for skilled labor, and new restaurants needed to serve an influx of tourists to the scenic area. Much of the project area, particularly parcels located along Libby Creek, the Kootenai River, and adjacent tributaries, is highly vulnerable to development given the existing network of forest roads that provides easy access, relatively gentle terrain, and exceptional views (Fig. 4). As in all of Montana, landowners may subdivide their land into 160 acres without any governmental review, allowing this property to be easily divided into 174 separate parcels. Splitting a 160-acre parcel into two to four lots requires only a minor subdivision

review, which could result in 696 new parcels. Opening this property to development would extend the Wildland-Urban Interface 2-5 miles into the Kootenai National Forest along multiple drainages. Opening these parcels to development would significantly increase the potential for wildlife/human conflicts and the demand for FWP staff time to help deal with those conflicts. In the last decade, much of the preliminary plat approval, lot creation, and development activity in Lincoln County have been concentrated in the Libby Creek and Kootenai River areas and extending up adjacent tributaries where many of the project lands are located. The map below demonstrates the threat of development to the project area (red on the map) (Fig. 5). Over the last 20 years, corporate timberlands (purple) have been sold, subdivided (black parcel lines), and developed (blue dots). This project would stop the expansion of development into the wildland urban interface within the boundaries of this nearly 28,000-acre conservation easement.



Figure 4. *Development potential with Cabinet Mountains Wilderness views adjacent to Hwy 2.*

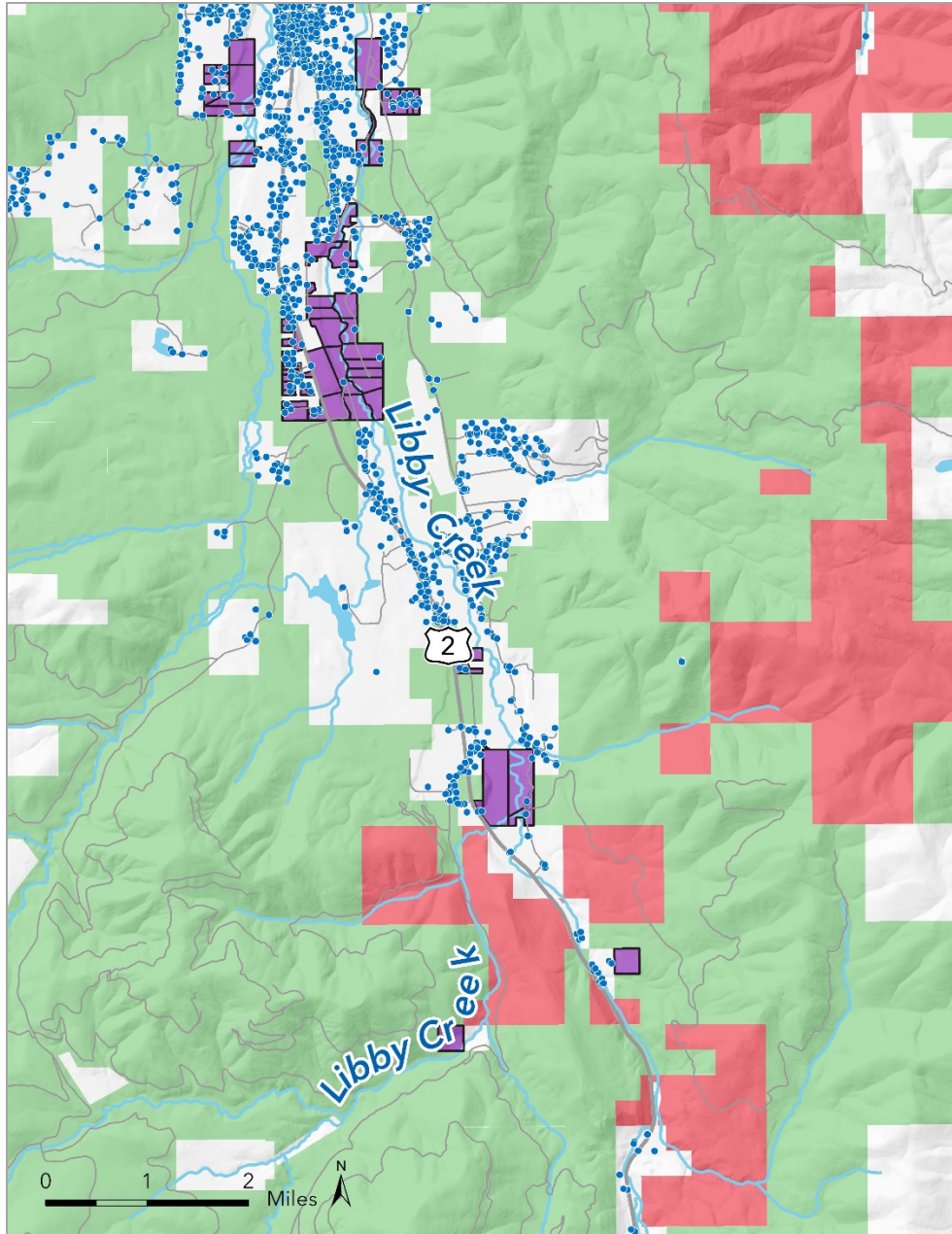


Figure 5. Map showing the development threat to the proposed conservation easement property. Purple polygons are former corporate timberlands, black lines are subdivisions of parcels, and the blue dots show the location of residential structures.

c) Focal Priority

Fifty percent of the property is in the Salish Tier I Terrestrial Focal Area and 25% is in the East Cabinet Front Tier I Other Priority Terrestrial Focal Area. Forty percent of the property is in the Upper Kootenai River South Tier I Aquatic Focal Area and 60% 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 cooperatively to protect large landscapes of working forest, fish and wildlife habitat, and public recreation access in northwestern Montana over the last twenty years. The project builds on the success of the nearby Forest Legacy Program-funded 142,000-acre Thompson-Fisher Conservation Easement, the 28,000-acre Kootenai Valleys Conservation Easement, and the recently completed 22,295-acre Kootenai Forestlands Conservation Project Phase I, which was the first phase of this project. Forest Legacy projects in Montana and Idaho have cumulatively protected a quarter million acres of Tier I forested and aquatic community types. This project ranked #3 of 46 projects nationally for the FY2021 Forest Legacy Program and was awarded \$6 million in funding. The project is part of an area that has been identified in several USFWS management plans as important for the recovery of federally-listed species, including the 2015 Revised Draft Recovery Plan for Bull Trout, 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. These lands were designated as the highest priority for habitat protection in the 2010 Montana Assessment of Forest Resources, the 2003 Montana Gray Wolf Management Plan, and the 1999 Conservation Agreement for Cutthroat Trout. The Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative targets habitat for grizzly bears and other wide-ranging and imperiled species dependent on large landscapes that provide connectivity between habitat islands that are shrinking due to climate change. The project lands were identified as critical to this landscape conservation initiative in a recent scientific publication (Proctor et al., 2015). The property is in the Cabinet-Purcell ecoregion, part of the Crown of the Continent, one of North America's largest remaining intact ecosystems. United States and Canadian scientists, agencies, and non-profits are working together to advance landscape-scale conservation essential to the survival of grizzly bears and other wide-ranging species. The project lands are a priority for landscape-level conservation as part of the international Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative, a Department of Interior-sponsored initiative which focused on a regional approach to conservation that preserves adaptable, resilient landscapes. The USFWS and British Columbia Ministry both support this project because it advances these goals. The Northwest Power and Conservation Council leads an international partnership focused on conserving and restoring ecological processes and fish and wildlife habitat in the Columbia Basin. Montana delegates endorsed this project because it helps achieve their Kootenai Sub-basin goals by protecting 14 miles of the river, which will also enable partners to enhance and restore riparian ecosystems. As mentioned previously, the project area provides big game habitat and migration corridors within the Heart of the Salish Priority Area E of the 2020 Montana Action Plan required by Secretarial Order 3362, which directs Department of Interior agencies to work with western state agencies and

private landowners to protect critical big game habitat, including migration corridors, stopover habitat, and seasonal ranges. The Trust for Public Land applied for and received \$290,000 in funding for this project from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors. Other initiatives have identified this property as a high conservation priority, including the American Wildlands' Corridors of Life, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation's Grizzly Bear and Northern Rockies Wildlife Corridors Keystone Initiative, Western Governors' Association Wildlife Corridors Initiative, the Cabinet-Purcell Mountain Corridor Collaborative, and Patagonia's Freedom to Roam Campaign, to name a few. Though the property is not within a Grassland Initiative priority county, it does consist of 15% montane grassland which is rare for properties in northwest Montana.

d) Geographic Effectiveness

When completed, this 27,929-acre project will consolidate what is now scattered parcels of unprotected habitat into a much larger functional block of land since it shares 109 miles of border with the Kootenai National Forest and state land and another 16 miles with the 142,000-acre Thompson-Fisher Conservation Easement (Fig. 1). This conservation easement project will secure public access to adjoining public lands. It will contribute to the integrity of the surrounding public land and the already existing conservation easement, improving management opportunities for all ownerships, reducing management conflicts with 696 potential new private owners if the parcels were developed, and providing a landscape-level block of habitat for the species in this area. The project will complement nearby conservation easements that total over 192,000 acres: the adjoining 142,000-acre Thompson-Fisher conservation easement completed in 2004, the 28,000-acre Kootenai Valleys conservation easement completed in 2012, and the 22,295-acre Kootenai Forestlands Phase I conservation easement completed in 2019, all similar working forestlands with high wildlife values. This project also complements all the Montana and Idaho Forest Legacy Program projects that cumulatively protect one quarter million acres of important fish and wildlife habitat. Conservation of this area increases core habitat protections for threatened and endangered species, state species of concern, and game species, while also providing landscape-scale connectivity within the Kootenai National Forest that, in conjunction with already protected land, will ensure these species have opportunities to sustain their populations through time.

e) Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation

The project lands are currently open for hunting under the Block Management Program and all of the parcels are easily accessible by a network of county

and logging roads. Stimson has an open lands policy that allows general public recreation secured through FWP's biennial Commission rule process, providing year-round access in addition to seasonal hunting, fishing, and trapping. Under the terms of the conservation easement, free, year-round public access to the project lands will be permanently secured and will additionally help secure access to the adjoining national forest and state land, allowing this conservation easement to function as a much larger block of land for public recreation opportunities. This nearly 28,000-acre property currently provides over 26,500 days of public hunting and angling which would be secured in perpetuity under this proposal. The project area generates \$2.2 million/year in direct expenditures to the local economy from big game hunting and fishing. Other outdoor activities on the project lands contribute additional local spending.

f) **Management Considerations**

The habitat on this property is in good condition and not in need of restoration. Stimson Lumber Company acquired this property in 2017 and 2018 from Weyerhaeuser and continues to manage it under the Sustainable Forest Initiative standards. Stimson plans to add these lands to the Native Fish Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) entered into by Plum Creek when they owned the land. In the meantime, they are following the standards within the HCP since their other Montana lands are under this plan. Stimson will continue to be responsible for property management costs, including weed control. Under the terms of the conservation easement, the property would be managed by Stimson under an approved forest management plan by extending the plan FWP and Stimson developed cooperatively for Phase I of this conservation project. By eliminating future housing development, the project will reduce the potential for wildlife/human conflicts resulting from increased urbanization, thus reducing the need for additional time, effort, and funding spent on wildlife conflict in this area. While this project will add to our growing portfolio of conservation easements, there will only be a minimal increase in FWP stewardship costs since the FWP Land Steward already monitors 92,000 acres of Stimson Lumber Company conservation easements in the immediate vicinity.