



DECISION NOTICE

ASH COULEE CONSERVATION EASEMENT

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED PROJECT

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase a conservation easement on approximately 3,400 acres in Valley County, Montana. The conservation easement will be funded by Habitat Montana and a grant from the Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust. Based upon a value determined by an independent appraiser the purchase of the easement would not exceed \$772,000. The easement, called the "Ash Coulee Easement", is comprised of native shrub and prairie grasslands, as well as breaks associated with the Milk River. The property has been found to be critically important to wintering migratory antelope and serves as a key linkage between summer and winter ranges for migrating sage grouse. The Ash Coulee Easement provides excellent year-round habitat for mule deer, white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and a diversity of nongame wildlife. The easement would protect healthy blocks of native prairie and riparian habitat from conversion to other cover types, benefitting wildlife and agriculture, while also increasing public hunting and recreational opportunities.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) PUBLIC PROCESS AND COMMENT

The Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) requires FWP to assess impacts to the human and natural environment.

Formal public participation in the MEPA process was initiated with a public scoping process. Public scoping was conducted April 2017 to May 2017, wherein the public was asked to identify any issues and concerns related to this conservation easement proposal. Copies of the scoping notice were mailed to neighboring landowners, interested parties, and the Valley County Commissioners. Notice of the public scoping was placed in local and state newspapers, and on the FWP website. A total of 9 comments were received during the scoping process and addressed in the draft Environmental Assessment (EA).

The draft EA was released on June 10, 2020 with a 30-day comment period ending July 10, 2020. Legal Notice of the EA release and comment period was published in the Glasgow Courier and the Helena Independent Record. Public Notice was placed on the FWP Website and the information was shared via the FWP Region 6 Facebook page. Direct mailing and/or email notification was provided to adjacent landowners, interested parties, Valley County Commissioners, DNRC, BLM and NRCS. A public meeting was advertised and held at the Cottonwood Inn in Glasgow on June 29, 2020; four members of the public were in attendance. The Draft EA, the easement and the management plan were available to interested parties by downloading from the FWP Website. Hard copies were available at the FWP Region 6 office in Glasgow and were available at the public meeting in Glasgow.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

A total of 20 comments were received through the public comment period representing 19 individuals and 1 group. One handwritten comment was received during the public meeting, the remainder were received electronically. All comments received expressed support for the Ash Coulee Conservation Easement.

Comment #1:

Name: Steve Sukut

City: Glasgow

I support this proposed easement and applaud the work the R6 FWP personnel have done. Thank you.

Comment #2:

Name: Bert Otis

City: Emigrant

Dear Fish Wildlife & Parks Commission,

Please support the Ash Coulee CE. The landowner should be Thanked for offering this opportunity to the public.

Thank You Bert Otis

Comment #3:

Name: Joe Etchart

City: Glasgow

Mr. Drew Henry

Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks

Dear Drew,

Please count me among the strong supporters of the Ash Coulee Perpetual Conservation Easement proposal. I believe it is absolutely in the best interest of all, as it will assure that the country stays in traditional use while insuring public access into perpetuity..... all the while significantly improving the habitat and the range management utility of the entire tract. Being familiar with that site on the ground, I am confident that the investment envisioned works to the benefit of all interested parties.

Thanks for the opportunity to comment.

Joe Etchart

Box 429

Glasgow, Montana 59230

Comment #4:

Name: Stephen Dickerson

City: Forsyth

I agree it should be purchased and used for all hiking, hunting and fishing access if feasible to the Milk river.(BLM land appears to be adjacent to the river).

Comment #5:

Name: Gregg Stoll

City: Manistique

Having hunted Ash Coulee over the years I am fully supportive of purchasing a permanent hunting easement for this property. As a general comment I feel the Block Management program and other easement arrangements obtained for the public have been wildly successful and these are a part of the reason I have hunted Montana for 20 years. As a non resident it has made for wonderful hunting opportunities. Thank you.

Comment #6:

Name: Greg (last name unknown/email)

City: Unknown

I am in full support of the Ash Coulee Conservation easement in Valley County.

Comment #7:

Name: Charles Taylor

City: Whitefish

This Ash Coulee section is incredibly promising! We maintain Montana's values to increase flourishing habitat. It presents the fantastic work between private landowners and our great state.

Comment #8:

Name: Travis Heater

City: Trout Creek

I strongly support the purchase of the Ash Coulee Conservation Easement by MT FWP. This conservation easement will retain the property as a working ranch in an era when family ranches are struggling. The preservation of native ecosystems in eastern Montana, particularly near the river systems is important to maintaining healthy native wildlife populations. Securing public hunting and recreational access is particularly important due to limited accessible public land in this region of the state. The Ash Coulee Conservation Easement will fit in well between the Vandalia WMA, the Buffalo Coulee Conservation Easement, and other state lands to provide linkage between these other publicly accessible lands.

Comment #9:

Name: Michelle Stilwell

City: Cedar Bluff

I think this is a great use of sportsman money. I support this fully.
Kenny Stillwell

Comment #10:

Name: Gary Bryson

City: Unknown

I support this easement

Comment #11:

Name: Randy Hodges
City: Stevensville

I support the purchase of the Ash Coulee conservation easement. I feel that securing access to this piece of land in perpetuity will be a great benefit to the public.

Comment #12:

Name: Steve Schindler via the Montana Sportsmens Alliance
City: N/A

The Montana Sportsmens Alliance is supporting the Ash Coulee CE,

Leadership team
Steve Schindler-Glasgow
Joe Perry -Conrad
Dale Tribby -Miles City
JW Westman – Laural
Robert Wood Hamilton
Doug Krings -Lewistown
Laura Lundquist –Missoula
Gary Hammond – Billings
Jeff Herbert - Helena
Don Thomas – Lewistown

Comment #13:

Name: Robert Sullivan
City: Missoula, MT

As a resident of western Montana I urge MTFW&P to pursue these two conservation easements. Our part of the state continues to be overwhelmed with development. Luckily it's not too late to preserve parts of The Last Best Place. Good on you for looking ahead.

Comment #14:

Name: Derek Casanovas
City: Unknown

Supportive of this conservation easement - this will provide some valuable habitat that is protected for mule deer, ducks and other migratory birds. Great cooperation between the landowner and FWP.

Comment #15:

Name: Jeff Johnson
City: Unknown

I'm very supportive to this easement, and the proposed habitat improvement for wildlife in this section. As a visitor, hunter and (hopefully eventual resident), I love the push for more habitat and opportunity being provided by Montana FWP.

Comment #16:

Name: Unknown/email: white.derek44@...

City: Unknown

The Ash Coulee easement would be a great thing for hunters and wildlife in NE Montana.

Comment #17:

Name: Jason Snyder

City: Spokane, Washington

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this proposed conservation easement acquisition. I am a lifelong hunter, former resident of Montana, and current non-resident hunter. A large reason why I still purchase Montana hunting licenses is the ability to hunt in vast tracts of native prairie habitat.

As a hunter, I am concerned with the long term loss of available habitat, particularly in prairie grasslands such as this. In addition, I am also concerned with dwindling public access to private lands. I see this acquisition as a valuable asset that addresses both of these concerns..

I commend the current landowner for their conservation ethic, and fully support the acquisition of this easement. This will be a win for both the landowner and the hunting community.

Thank you.

Comment #18:

Name: Gerald Martin

City: Bozeman, MT

I support the Ash Coulee Conservation Easement.

Comment #19:

Name: unknown; email: neffa3@...

City: unknown

I 100% support this easement as proposed. Please keep up the good work.

Comment #20:

Name: Marcus Svee

City: Corvallis

I think that this conservation easement would be very beneficial to both public land users and the landowner in question.

I applaud FWP and the landowner(s) for working through the details.

I strongly support this move and hope to see it move forward.

Comment #20:

Name: Justin Schaaf

City: Fort Peck

I'm writing to voice my support for the Ash Coulee Easement. It's an incredible opportunity for Region 6 and Montana. The close proximity to Hinsdale and the Milk River would be crucial for wildlife in the area.

DECISION NOTICE

Utilizing the EA and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP which addresses the concerns and issues identified in the proposed action.

FWP's analysis supports purchasing the perpetual conservation easement encompassing approximately 3,400 acres in Valley County, Montana that comprise the Ash Coulee Conservation Easement.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environment Impact Statement is not required.

After review of this proposal, it is my decision to accept the draft EA as supplemented by this Decision Notice as final, and to recommend proceeding with the proposed Ash Coulee Conservation Easement, contingent upon approvals by the Fish and Wildlife Commission.

The Final EA may be viewed on FWP's website: <http://www.fwp.mt.gov> or be obtained upon request from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Region 6 Headquarters, 1 Airport Rd., Glasgow, MT 59230 or (406) 228-3700.



Mark Sullivan

Date: July 21, 2020

FWP Regional Supervisor, Region 6