



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: December 14, 2021

Agenda Item: Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Easement Acquisition Project, Region 1

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background: FWP is proposing to place approximately 113,951 acres of highly productive working forestland (former Weyerhaeuser timberlands) around the Thompson Chain of Lakes between Kalispell and Libby under conservation easement (CE). This proposal involves two landowners – SPP Montana and Green Diamond Resources Co, which would result in two separate conservation easements. The proposed CEs, to be held by FWP, would allow the landowners to retain ownership and sustainable harvest of these timberlands, preclude development, protect important wildlife habitat and key landscape connectivity, and provide public access and associated recreational opportunities. The US Forest Service Forest Legacy Program, Habitat Montana, and other grants or contributions would be likely funding sources if this proposal were to proceed to completion.

This project would conserve key winter range and a movement corridor for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose as well as critical habitat for bull trout, grizzly bear, and Canada lynx, all ESA-listed Threatened species found on the property. Conservation easement terms would preclude the human-wildlife conflicts that come with residential development of properties within wildlife habitat, especially those with grizzly bears, black bears, and mountain lions. The property currently provides over 121,000 days per year of public hunting and angling that would be secured in perpetuity under this proposal. The project borders the Thompson Chain of Lakes State Park, the 142,000-acre Thompson-Fisher CE, and the 100,000-acre USFWS Lost Trail Conservation Area as well as the Kootenai National Forest and DNRC lands (see map).

Public Involvement Process & Results: As part of the Forest Legacy funding application process, FWP has received letters of support for this proposal from a diverse mix of interests, including the following: the Lincoln, Flathead, and Sanders County Commissions; US Senators Daines and Tester; the Kootenai National Forest; the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes; and local timber companies. No formal public involvement has yet occurred. If the commission endorses moving forward with this proposal, FWP would conduct appropriate due diligence, analysis, and public review processes.

Alternatives and Analysis: Proposal alternatives and analysis would be developed by FWP (upon endorsement by the commission) and released in a draft EA for public review/comment opportunity.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends endorsement of this conservation easement proposal, which would allow the department to continue working on this proposal to conserve valuable fish and wildlife habitat and public recreational opportunities.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission endorse the proposal to further negotiate the Montana Great Outdoors Conservation Easement Acquisition Project and complete associated analysis.