



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: October 28, 2021

Agenda Item: Bad Rock Canyon Fee Title Acquisition (Region 1)

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: FWP proposes to purchase approximately 772 acres of forest along 1.3 miles of the Flathead River near Columbia Falls to protect important fish and wildlife habitat and water quality, while providing free public recreation access. The property is highly developable and threatened by the rapidly growing city of Columbia Falls but would be protected as a Wildlife Management Area (WMA) under this proposal. The property is winter range for elk, moose, and white-tailed deer. Completion of this project would safeguard vital habitat and a travel corridor for bull trout and grizzly bears, Endangered Species Act-listed Threatened species found on the property.

The appraised value of the proposed Bad Rock Canyon WMA acquisition is \$7.26 million. Funding amounts and sources include: \$4 million from the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) Forest Legacy Program, \$2.5 million from Habitat Montana, and \$590,000 raised by the Flathead Land Trust through private individuals, organizations, and foundations. The landowner would be donating the remainder of the value.

Public Involvement Process & Results: An EA was released for public comment from August 10 to September 8, 2021, and included a virtual public hearing on August 26. Legal notices were published twice in three local newspapers and the *Helena Independent Record*, and the EA was posted on the FWP webpage. Notices were sent to all adjoining landowners. FWP received 209 public comments, all in support of the acquisition. All issues raised by those who commented are addressed in the decision document.

Alternatives and Analysis: Two alternatives were analyzed and considered in the EA: 1) Alternative A (Proposed Action) - FWP would purchase the 772-acre CFAC (Columbia Falls Aluminum Co.) property, establishing the Bad Rock Canyon Wildlife Management Area. Acquisition of the property would ensure the protection of valuable fish and wildlife habitat and a connectivity corridor and would also allow for continued public use of the property along the Gateway to Glacier Trail; and 2) Alternative B (No Action) - FWP would not acquire the CFAC property. It is unclear what would happen to the property in that case, but CFAC has indicated an intention to put the property on the open market. It would likely sell to a residential or commercial developer. If the property were sold, the Gateway to Glacier Trail group could lose their trail license and the public would be excluded from the property. Development would likely result in negative impacts to the riparian and wetland areas as well as disrupting the wildlife movement corridor and degrading the fish and wildlife habitat. Subdivision development in this area would likely result in a significant increase in human-wildlife conflicts.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends the commission approve FWP purchasing approximately 772 acres along the Flathead River near Columbia Falls to be owned and managed by FWP as a Wildlife Management Area.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve FWP's acquisition of approximately 772 acres of land east of Columbia Falls as proposed.