



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

**Meeting Date:** February 22, 2023

**Agenda Item:** Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement purchase, Region 2

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

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**Background:** FWP proposes to purchase a conservation easement (CE) on approximately 540 acres of land west of Victor in Ravalli County. The proposed Sweathouse Creek CE encompasses land that is at high risk of subdivision and development if sold by the current owners, the Hackett Family. This foothills property along the east slopes of Bitterroot Range provides winter habitat for deer and elk and wildlife movement connectivity from higher elevation to valley bottom riparian habitats. The diversity of forest, foothill grasslands, and riparian habitats supports a diverse mix of nongame species, including an estimated 38 wildlife species of conservation concern. The fair market value of the conservation easement is \$3.38 million, of which the landowner is donating \$300,000 of value. Funding for the remaining \$3.08 million would primarily be derived from the Habitat Montana Program matched with federal Pittman Robertson Wildlife Restoration funds. Additional funding has been secured through the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond, Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, and the Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association. The Sweathouse Creek CE would maintain working agricultural lands in the Bitterroot Valley and would protect critical habitats for elk and deer as well as many other species in perpetuity. The CE would secure public hunting access to the entire property while also providing public fishing, trapping, hiking, and wildlife watching opportunities in the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains. Although separate, this proposal is part of a package of conservation outcomes. The Hackett Family has been working on with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the Bitterroot Land Trust to establish a permanent right of way for public access to the popular Sweathouse Falls Trailhead. The right of way and associated public parking area would be administered by the USFS.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** A draft environmental assessment (EA) was made available for a 30-day public comment period (Oct. 5 – Nov. 4, 2022). The EA was posted on FWP's website, and legal notices were published twice in three local, regional, and statewide newspapers, and once in one of the two local newspapers. FWP notified adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups, and agencies of the EA's availability and the public comment opportunity. FWP held a public hearing on this project in Stevensville on Oct. 24, where five people were in attendance and two people commented. In total, FWP received 10 public comments on this proposal representing 12 individuals. A summary of comments can be found in the accompanying Decision Notice. This project has been reviewed through three separate public processes, and the results of those processes have all indicated enthusiastic support for the project (Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Ravalli County Open Lands Bond, and the environmental assessment).

**Analysis & Alternatives:** FWP Region 2 staff worked internally and with the landowners on potential alternatives to protect the land and its conservation values. Based on the landowner's desires, the capacity of FWP staff, and the favored method of land conservation in the local community, we determined that a CE was the best mechanism to protect the land and its conservation values.

*Alternative A:* FWP would purchase a CE on the Hackett Ranch, to be known as the Sweathouse Creek CE. The CE would preclude subdivision and protect agricultural lands and the wildlife habitat they provide in perpetuity and would secure multi-use public access in the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains.

*Alternative B:* The commission could choose not to approve the Sweathouse Creek CE project, which would leave the property vulnerable to being developed. The current landowners have expressed that selling the land is their only option if the CE project fails. Because of the prime location of the property and the rapid expansion of the human population in the Bitterroot Valley, we expect that much of the land would be subdivided and developed as home sites. This would diminish habitat values, increase wildlife-human conflicts, and likely result in the loss of public access for outdoor recreation.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** FWP recommends the Sweathouse Creek CE project be completed. The project would protect critical habitats, maintain working lands, and has strong local support.

**Proposed Motion:** I move that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve FWP's purchase of the Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement as proposed.