



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

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Meeting Date: Oct. 19, 2023

Agenda Item: Lower Yellowstone River Wildcat Bend Acquisition

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: In 2019, a group of eastern Montana residents formed the Lower Yellowstone Coalition (coalition) to expand outdoor recreation opportunities along the Lower Yellowstone River, with the goal of boosting tourism for communities along the river from Hysham to Fairview. In support of the coalition's mission, the 2021 Legislature authorized FWP to spend \$4 million for river access and habitat protection along the Lower Yellowstone River between Hysham and Sydney. Building on the coalition's work, FWP convened a governor-sponsored, 12-member citizen advisory committee (CAC) during the summer of 2021, to guide use of the \$4 million with an eye toward opportunities and recommendations for improved access and habitat conservation along the corridor.

Among the CAC's recommendations to FWP was the acquisition of the Wildcat Bend property in Rosebud County. The 328-acre property is located approximately two miles upstream of the Far West Fishing Access Site and primarily consists of riparian habitat. This property was identified by the CAC as a high priority for habitat conservation. A large suite of wildlife species use this property including mule and white-tailed deer, wild turkey, pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, waterfowl, and song birds. The property would provide boat-in and walk-in access to anglers, hunters, hikers, and the recreating public. Development may include improvements to the existing parking area and a primitive trail system.

The property appraised for \$1,185,000, and FWP concluded due diligence for Wildcat Bend in April 2023. Pheasants Forever has been reaching out to partners to raise up to \$500,000 to assist FWP in acquiring this property. To date, they have raised \$345,000 and expect to meet their goal. Annual operation and maintenance for the site is estimated at \$6,460. The balance of funding for this acquisition is from the \$4 million Yellowstone River account.

Public Involvement Process & Results: In 2019, the Montana Office of Tourism and Business Development held listening sessions in eastern Montana to discuss opportunities to garner more bed tax revenue. Participants said there is a lack of public access opportunities and amenities in eastern Montana. In 2020, the coalition held multiple community conversations to help identify priority opportunities and provided the recommendations to FWP in November 2021. FWP sought comments on the Fish and Wildlife Commission's endorsement to pursue negotiations with the Wildcat Bend landowners at their February 2022 meeting. A draft environmental assessment (EA) for the acquisition of Wildcat Bend was made available for public comment Aug. 1 through Aug. 30. The comments will be made available to the commission prior to their Oct. 19 meeting. The public also will be able to comment at the October meeting. Approval of the Montana Board of Land Commissioners will be required before the department could purchase the property.

Alternatives & Analysis:

Alternative A: The commission approves the department's purchase of the Wildcat Bend property for the conservation of riparian habitat and public access.



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Alternative B: The commission could choose not to approve the purchase, and public access opportunities to this area of the Lower Yellowstone River would not be available.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: The department recommends the commission approve the purchase of the Wildcat Bend property on the Lower Yellowstone River to support habitat conservation, public access, and the desire of many eastern Montana residents and businesses.

Proposed Motion: I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the department's acquisition of the Wildcat Bend property.