



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION FWP PROPOSAL AND INFORMATION SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

**Meeting Date:** October 10, 2024

**Agenda Item:** Prairie Habitat Conservation Leases

**Action Needed:** Final

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

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**Background:** FWP launched the Prairie Habitat Conservation Lease Program with a programmatic Environmental Assessment (EA) in fall 2022, a supplemental EA in spring 2023, and a subsequent invitation for applications during summer 2023. A habitat conservation lease is a voluntary, incentive-based standard agreement with private landowners that helps ensure high-priority prairie habitats are conserved while continuing to support traditional agricultural activities, primarily livestock grazing. Owners of enrolled lands commit to retaining wildlife habitats for 30- or 40-year durations. Standard lease terms are specified in the lease template, provided with this information sheet.

Prairie species expected to benefit from these agreements include sage-grouse, a number of migratory grassland birds that have experienced long term population declines, pronghorn, mule deer, elk, waterfowl, shorebirds, small mammals, amphibians, and reptiles. Prairie habitats across the state support 130 or more state species of conservation concern. In addition to direct habitat benefits, these agreements would support ongoing agricultural operations, public hunting, and other forms of wildlife related recreation. The habitat conservation lease tool may also help with avoiding potential federal listings of imperiled native species.

FWP set a goal of enrolling 500,000 acres over approximately a five-year time frame. FWP brought 10 habitat conservation lease proposals totaling approximately 53,000 acres to the commission during its meeting on June 20, which were approved. These three additional 40-year term habitat conservation leases FWP is proposing total approximately 20,009 acres. This comprises the 52 Ranch totaling 18,255 acres and the QT Ranch totaling 640 acres, both in Region 7, as well as the Williams Ranch totaling 1,114 acres in Region 3. The lease agreements would be funded from a combination of Habitat Montana, Pittman Robertson, and other state, federal, or private sources as available.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** The Habitat Montana statute (87-1-241, MCA) requires FWP to 1) consider potential impacts of adjacent private lands, 2) notify adjacent private landowners of the proposed enrollments and provide them with the associated analyses, and 3) conduct a public meeting within the affected area, all within a 30-day public comment period. In addition to commission approval, habitat conservation leases involving more than 500 acres or more than \$1 million of value also require approval by the Board of Land Commissioners (87-1-209, MCA). Thirty-day public comment periods and associated outreach steps are underway for the three habitat conservation leases, occurring both in Regions 3 and 7. Results of the public outreach will be provided as a supplement to this cover sheet after the 30-day comment periods close.

**Alternatives & Analysis:** The commission may choose to: 1) approve the three 40-year term habitat conservation leases, in anticipation of similar future project packages, or 2) reject one or more of the three proposed habitat conservation leases and offer some other alternative.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** FWP recommends the commission approve the three conservation leases. The leases provide a win-win habitat conservation solution for landowners who are not interested in perpetual conservation easements.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve FWP's proposal to enroll the three conservation leases totaling approximately 20,009 acres of private land into the Prairie Habitat Conservation Lease Program as proposed by the department.