



Protecting Montana's wildlife, land, waters, and
hunting & fishing heritage for future generations.

September 18, 2024

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission

Re: Prairie Temporary Habitat Conservation Leases

Dear Commissioners,

On behalf of the Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF), Montana's oldest and largest hunter and angler-based conservation group, founded in 1936 by conservationists, landowners, hunters, and anglers, we submit these comments on several proposed temporary habitat conservation leases. MWF is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization with more than 5000 members and 14 affiliate clubs throughout the state, all united in our mission to protect and enhance Montana's public wildlife, lands, waters, and fair chase hunting and fishing heritage.

First, we express our support for the QT Ranch and 52 Ranch Habitat Temporary Conservation Leases. These leases facilitate public access to approximately 18,255 acres of the 52 Ranch and 640 acres in the QT Ranch in Eastern Montana. Both leases open previously inaccessible lands to the public and align with the administration's broader goal of enrolling 500,000 private land acres into conservation lease agreements.

We commend the 52 Ranch landowners for providing additional access beyond what the temporary lease requires and encourage both ranches to explore participation in Block Management (BMA) to further secure public access on a larger and more sustainable scale. Enhanced public access to the QT Ranch in the future, in line with the lease's cost, is a priority.

The funding for these leases comes primarily from state hunting license fees and federal Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration funds, contributed by hunters. While we generally support temporary leases over having no conservation easements at all, we are concerned about the long-term impacts of dedicating large portions of available funds to temporary leases. There is a risk that we will lack the funds to pursue permanent conservation easements when willing sellers express interest. This would result in higher costs for lesser conservation outcomes.

The two leases for the QT and 52 Ranches amount to \$2,226,906.50 for 40 years of conservation management across 18,895 acres, which equates to \$117.86 per acre. If these figures were made more transparent to the public, we believe FWP would receive more feedback. Additionally, providing details on specific threats to these parcels would help us and the public better evaluate the proposed leases.

Similarly, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the Williams Family Trust Temporary Habitat Conservation Lease. However, MWF opposes the advancement of this lease. Our members value fiscally responsible conservation efforts, and this proposal does not meet that standard. The Williams Family Trust property is enrolled in the Block Management Program and is a high earner. Allocating \$339,770 for the same access and land conservation for 40 years is not a prudent use of resources, especially given that this property lies outside the core habitat for the Sage-Grouse. The benefits of this lease are minimal at best, and the public does not gain sufficient value from this investment unless there is a significant risk that the land will be developed or removed from the BMA program if the lease is not approved.



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We urge the department to enhance transparency across all temporary lease proposals. To facilitate clearer public understanding and feedback, we are asking the department to include a comprehensive property evaluation, annualized cost per acre, total price, detailed public access information, and an assessment of specific threats to each parcel. This level of transparency will foster better public engagement and a more informed dialogue.

In closing, while we support the advancement of the 52 Ranch and QT Ranch leases, we cannot support the Williams Family Trust lease due to the concerns outlined. We appreciate the department's ongoing efforts and the landowners' commitment to conservation, though we are asking for a more balanced and transparent approach moving forward.

Sincerely,

Garrett Titus
Montana Wildlife Federation
Conservation Policy Specialist
garrett@mtwf.org