

Habitat leases are another great option for helping wildlife

How does FWP conserve critical wildlife habitat on private land where existing programs don't work for some landowners?

By creating a program that does.

That's what we have done with habitat conservation leases. Under these voluntary, incentive-based agreements, landowners commit to specific land-management practices that protect priority wildlife habitat, such as not converting native prairie into plowed row crops, or not burning sagebrush to create more rangeland. In return, FWP pays the landowner a one-time per-acre fee—15 to 20 percent of the land value—for the lease. The leases last 30 to 40 years depending on the fee.

Habitat conservation leases are just the latest FWP option for conserving critical wildlife habitat. For years, our department has purchased land and bought conservation easements (CEs) where there's support from landowners, local officials, and the community. We continue to do so whenever there's the opportunity.

For instance, in the past few years this department has bought three new wildlife management areas (WMAs): 5,677-acre Big Snowy Mountains WMA north of Ryegate, 772-acre Bad Rock Canyon WMA near Columbia Falls, and 328-acre Wildcat WMA along 2.2 miles of the lower Yellowstone River near Forsyth.

During that time, FWP has also purchased the 22,350-acre Kootenai Forestlands CE near Libby, 3,400-acre Ash Coulee CE near Hinsdale, and 540-Sweathouse Creek CE in the Bitterroot Valley.

Another new WMA acquisition and several CE contracts are now in the works.

But fee-title acquisitions for WMAs and buying conservation easements don't work for some landowners. They may want to protect wildlife habitat but not sell their land or encumber their property with a CE that lasts "in perpetuity" (forever). A habitat lease may be a better alternative.

We're excited about habitat leases because they have the potential to protect vital wildlife lands, especially eastern Montana sagebrush prairies and grassland wetlands, that might otherwise be lost. Habitat leases that protect sagebrush could help keep the sage-grouse from being listed as a federally endangered species. Wetland protections will benefit waterfowl and other water birds.

Our goal is to use habitat leases to secure 500,000 acres over the next five years. That's on top of what we'll protect with traditional fee-title acquisitions and conservation easements in Montana.

Habitat lease funding will come mainly from Habitat Montana. The program uses funds from big game hunting licenses sales to conserve, as the enabling 1987 legislation states, "important [wildlife] habitat that is seriously threatened." We will also use Habitat Montana funds to leverage additional federal dollars for habitat leases.

Most habitat leases will provide for some public recreation access. But as with FWP conservation easements, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service easements, and many land trust easements, the primary purpose of this new habitat program is wildlife conservation.

Protecting wildlife habitat has always required innovation. Selling federal waterfowl stamps to create national wildlife refuges was a novel idea back in 1934. The same is true with the Pittman-Robertson bill, Montana's first purchases of elk winter range in the late 1930s, and, later, FWP's acquisition of land converted to wildlife management areas. Conservation easements were a new idea when first introduced in the 1980s, and they and fee title acquisitions continue to be a key part of Montana's habitat programs.

Now we also have habitat leases, yet another option and part of a long tradition of devising new ways of working with landowners to secure critical wildlife habitat that otherwise might be developed.

—**Dustin Temple**, *Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks*

This issue went to press two weeks before the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission's June 20 meeting, during which commissioners were expected to decide whether to support the department's proposal to purchase habitat leases on several eastern Montana properties. Check the FWP website for meeting results. And to learn more about the program, type "Montana FWP Habitat Lease Program" into your search engine.



Habitat leases could protect vital habitats like this sage-steppe prairie in the Centennial Valley for decades.