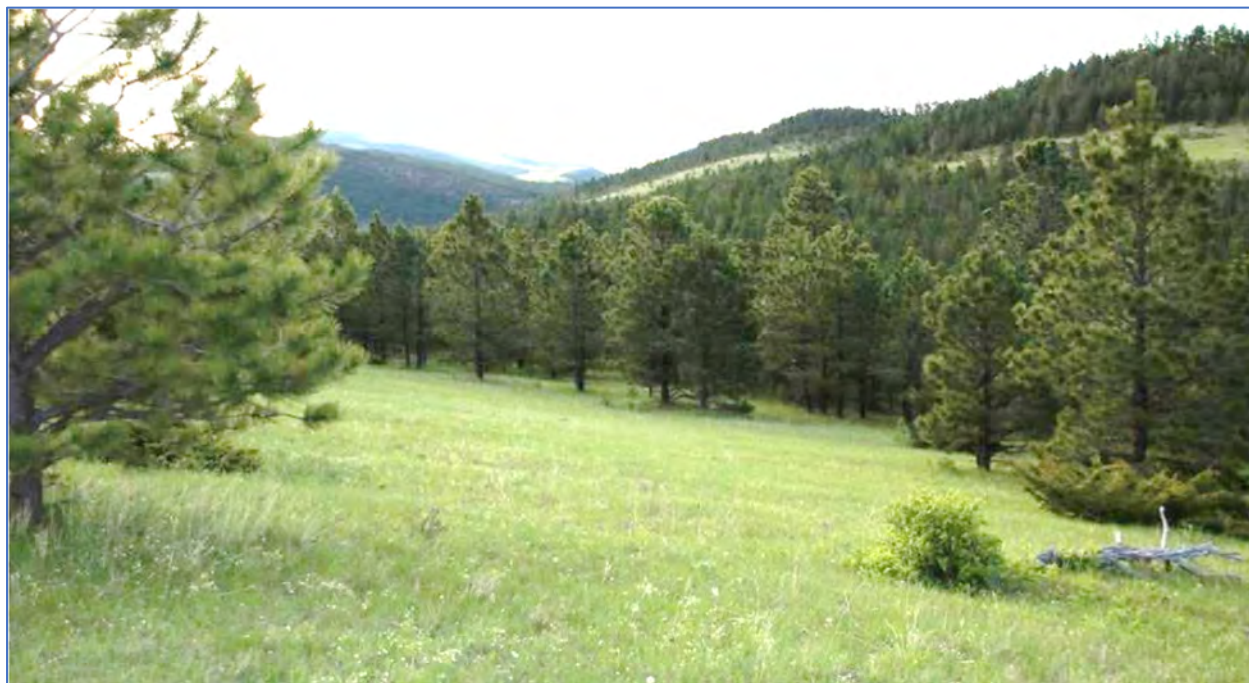


HABITAT MONTANA

REPORT TO THE 69th MONTANA LEGISLATURE

SEPTEMBER 2024



Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area (Image: Ashley Taylor)



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview	4
Fee Title Acquisitions and Conservation Easements	4
Habitat Conservation Leases.....	4
Conservation Totals.....	4
History of Habitat Montana.....	5
House Bill 526	5
Early Years to Present Day	5
Partner Support.....	9
Forest Legacy Program.....	10
Benefits Associated with Wildlife Habitat Conservation	11
Managing Conservation Land Projects	13
Habitat Conservation Accomplishments– Habitat Montana and Other Funding Sources	15
Conservation Easements	16
Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement.....	16
Fee Title Acquisitions and Land Exchanges.....	18
Big Snowy Mountains WMA.....	18
Willow Creek Addition to Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area.....	20
South Addition to Big Lake WMA	21
Wildcat Wildlife Management Area.....	23
Elk Island WMA Land Exchange.....	25

OVERVIEW

This report provides the history of Habitat Montana and summarizes wildlife habitat conservation projects completed by Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) for Fiscal Years 2023-2024 (July 1, 2022-June 30, 2024) using Habitat Montana program funds, as well as funding from other sources. Habitat Montana was originally established through legislation passed by the 1987 Montana Legislature (HB526, MCA 87-1-241 et seq.). A program rule (ARM 12.9.511) further directs FWP to apply Habitat Montana policies to all FWP wildlife habitat acquisition programs, where appropriate.

FWP has been conducting habitat conservation using a combination of fee title acquisitions, conservation easements, and long-term conservation leases.

Fee Title Acquisitions and Conservation Easements

During the reporting period July 1, 2022-June 30, 2024, FWP purchased one conservation easement, totaling 549 acres and four fee title acquisitions totaling 6,492 acres. The purchase cost of these projects was \$15,168,000 (Tables 1 and 2). In addition, FWP completed a minor land exchange.

Habitat Conservation Leases

During the reporting period, FWP completed a programmatic environmental assessment for a habitat conservation lease program focused on conserving rangeland habitats, with a goal of enrolling 500,000 acres into 30- and 40-year leases over a 5-year timeframe. A light response to the first application period prompted FWP to re-evaluate details of the program, resulting in a supplemental environmental analysis, which was completed spring 2023. At the time of publishing this report, FWP is processing 15 applications, totaling approximately 131,000 acres. No new enrollments were completed during the reporting period.

Conservation Totals

Specific to Habitat Montana program funding, as of the end of June 2024, 60 properties involving 339,743 acres of wildlife habitat have been protected through conservation easements, costing \$52.2 million in Habitat Montana funds. Fee title acquisitions purchased through the program total 141,231 acres (74 transactions involving 34 wildlife management areas or other sites), costing \$54.6 million in Habitat Montana funds.

In total, *involving all funding sources including Habitat Montana*, the Wildlife Division is responsible for 598,008 acres in conservation easements, 396,133 acres in fee title, and 71,891 acres of leases/rights of way (associated with Wildlife Division-managed lands). The Wildlife Division also administers 51 active conservation leases, involving 330,000 acres of wildlife habitat.

HISTORY OF HABITAT MONTANA

The Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has been involved with conserving key wildlife habitats since 1940, with the initial purchase of 1,004 acres of crucial elk winter range along the east foothills of the Little Belt Mountains for \$4.50/acre, known today as the Judith River Wildlife Management Area. This set the stage for emphasizing the value of habitat conservation in Montana, which continues today for FWP and a broad array of conservation partners. During these early years, there was no specific funding source to purchase, conserve, and manage important wildlife habitats. When key habitats were for sale and funding was available, land was acquired and became part of the department's system of wildlife management areas, ensuring these habitat areas would continue to support critical wildlife needs, related recreation opportunities, and other values for future generations.

House Bill 526

A fundamental concern dating back to the 1940s, but still true today, is the interest in keeping priority wildlife populations abundant through conservation of key seasonal habitats. Conserving wildlife habitat and providing compatible outdoor recreation are considered by many citizens to be important endeavors that support Montana's way of life. In the 1980s, conservationists discussed the possibility of setting aside consistent funding for the department for purchasing priority habitats when they became available and, of equal importance, to provide consistent funding for managing properties once acquired.

The 1987 Montana Legislature saw the introduction of HB 526, which would be funded with hunting license fees. The debate was between those who did not want the department buying land and those who saw habitat conservation as the foundation for maintaining priority wildlife populations. The compromise by the legislature was authority given to the department to purchase interests in land, with the legislature directing the agency to attempt conservation easements or lease before fee title acquisition. Fee title purchase was still allowed because the legislature understood the landowner would determine which method was in their best interest.

HB 526 became reality and is currently generating about \$3 million per year for conserving important wildlife habitats. Approximately 92% of revenue for this program comes from nonresident hunting licenses. Discussed in more detail under **Managing Conservation Lands**, Habitat Montana also generates about \$900,000 annually for conducting maintenance work.

Early Years to Present Day

From the very beginning of Habitat Montana, FWP tried to implement the intent of the legislation, but its success was limited. The reason was twofold: first, the department was unfamiliar with conservation easements and needed to develop its expertise in implementing this conservation tool; and second, landowners were skeptical of easements. These two problems no longer exist.

The first year that Habitat Montana funding was available, the department purchased two properties in fee title, the Robb Ledford Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and an addition to the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA.

In 1989, the second year of operation, two additional WMAs were purchased. A major effort to acquire a conservation easement on the Brewer Ranch changed to a fee title purchase at the request of the landowner. The department assured the FWP Commission that easement terms would be placed on the Brewer property and then sold. This happened five years later.

In 1990, FWP purchased its first wildlife conservation easement (160 acres adjacent to Dome Mountain Wildlife Management Area). In 1992, FWP made an agreement with a landowner to enter into a five-year management agreement which both parties intended to lead to a conservation easement, which did happen in 1998.

A major threshold was crossed in 1994 with the success of exchanging the Brewer property, with easement terms in place, for an easement on the Page/Whitham property north of Fort Peck Reservoir. Interest by the agricultural community accelerated with the involved landowner answering many questions from other interested landowners. Since then, FWP has had a variety of conservation easement project proposals to select from.

The 1991 Legislature directed FWP to review its habitat program. The department hired two consultants, Econ, Inc. to look at FWP administrative functioning for the program, and Canyon Consulting, Inc., to evaluate public participation in the program.

In September 1992, Canyon Consulting recommended implementing a policy that defined the public benefits to be derived from the habitat program. The Commission adopted policies through the administrative rule making (ARM) process, directing FWP to provide the following public benefits (ARM 12.9.510):

- Conserve and enhance land, water, and wildlife
- Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunities
- Provide incentives for habitat conservation on private land
- Contribute to non-hunting recreation
- Protect open space and scenic areas
- Promote habitat-friendly agriculture
- Maintain the local tax base, through payments in lieu of taxes for real estate, while demonstrating that productive wildlife habitat is compatible with agriculture and other land uses.

One of Econ's main recommendations, to develop a comprehensive statewide plan, was completed in 1994, the "Statewide Habitat Plan, an implementation of FWP Commission Habitat Montana Policy".

In 1993, the Wildlife Division Administrator asked for a habitat mapping effort from the Regional Wildlife Managers to discern which habitats were the most at risk. The habitats defined in the Statewide Plan are 1) Montane Forest, 2) Intermountain Grassland, 3) Riparian/Wetland, 4) Shrub-Grassland, 5) Prairie Forest, and 6) Prairie Grassland. In a display of unanimity, every region identified **Intermountain Grassland, Riparian/Wetland, and Shrub-Grassland** as the habitats most in need of attention. Intermountain Grasslands are choice areas for residential development.



Riparian, wetland, and grassland habitats intermingled with crops, Bird Creek Conservation Easement.
(Image: Nate Kluz)

Such developments can disrupt winter range for wildlife as well as affect wildlife movements, migration routes, and genetic connectivity. Riparian and wetland habitats comprise less than 5% of the state but are highly productive habitats. Many species of wildlife depend on these habitats in some stage of their life cycle. Because of site productivity, riparian habitats in particular are often subject to conversion to other uses. Sagebrush-grasslands have diminished across the West, including in Montana. This is a habitat of special concern. Montana is a leader in sagebrush conservation in a state where half of these habitats are in private ownership. Priority habitats of the program have remained largely the same and are further detailed in the current State Wildlife Action Plan for Montana published in 2015. This document can be downloaded from the FWP website link: <https://myfwp.mt.gov/getRepositoryFile?objectID=70168> . FWP is currently in the process of updating the State Wildlife Action Plan with continued emphasis on priority habitats.

In 1998, the FWP Commission asked for an internal audit of the department's conservation easements. This was divided into two sections, a review of the legal aspects of the easements, and a review of the rigor of the baseline inventory reports. Fifteen easements were chosen by the legal audit contractor, Knight, Masar and Harris, Attorneys at Law. The contractor working on baselines did likewise. The audit, delivered in 1999, showed no major problems with the easements and associated baselines. In 2000, the other 15 easements were reviewed, again with no major problems. The primary author of the report, Robert Knight, came before the Commission to answer questions. He said the language and form of the easements were up to date and there were no specific problems. Department staff from the Wildlife Division, Legal Unit, and Lands Unit work regularly on updating and formulating new conservation easement language to adapt to changing concerns, continued experience, and improvements in conservation easement standards.

A broad base of public support resulted in the 2005 Legislature removing the sunset provision for HB526, making Habitat Montana permanent. The program has resulted in substantial conservation accomplishments, which are summarized in the **Overview** section of this report.

Over the program's history, FWP's work on wildlife land projects has varied. Early efforts using Habitat Montana funds focused on expanding existing wildlife management areas such as the Blackfoot-Clearwater (deer and elk winter range), Judith River (elk winter range) and Ninepipe (wetlands/waterfowl and pheasant habitat) or acquiring new WMA's such as Robb/Ledford (elk winter range), Dome Mtn.(elk winter range), and Mt. Silcox (bighorn sheep winter range). Gradually, the focus shifted toward conservation easements on important habitat types including sagebrush-grassland (Brewer, South Ranch, Fluss, Cowell, Peters); riparian (Hirsch, Bice, Hart); and intermountain grassland (Keogh, Maher, Bolin, and Sieben Rattlesnake Creek) as examples.

With the establishment of the Forest Legacy Program in Montana (see **Forest Legacy Program** section for more information), FWP broadened the scope of habitat conservation to include high priority forest lands that are at risk of conversion. This has resulted in several predominantly forested lands enrolled in FWP conservation easements, including the Thompson-Fisher, North Swan, Kootenai Forestlands, Haskill Basin, and Lost Trail. Since the start of Habitat Montana in 1987, the state legislature has adopted



Post-timber harvest understory burn to reduce ladder fuels and invigorate shrub and forb production for improved wildlife habitat, Threemile Wildlife Management Area, 2024. (Image: Jason Parke)

statutes with specific requirements for land acquisition and conservation easement processes. FWP's wildlife land processes include the following program and statutory requirements (this list does not include negotiation, due diligence, and other real estate transaction steps): 1) internal request for habitat proposals; 2) proposal ranking and initial selection using standardized ranking criteria; 3) concurrence from the FWP Director; 4) conduct public scoping (for projects of 640 acres or larger); 5) develop a management plan for the property; 6) work with the county weed coordinator to assure weed management compliance on fee title projects; 7) develop a Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) environmental assessment that includes analyses of potential impacts to social/economic values, neighboring properties, tax revenue, government services,

employment opportunities, local schools, and private businesses; 8) make documentation available to adjacent landowners as well as the general public; 9) notify the affected county commission with project details and analysis materials; 10) conduct a public hearing during the public review period; 11) publish a decision notice; 12) if the project remains viable, post the proposal for public review prior to final consideration by the Fish and Wildlife Commission; and 13) for conservation easements and habitat conservation leases costing more than \$1 million in state funds or for fee title purchases of more than 500 acres or involving more than \$1 million in value, approval by the Board of Land Commissioners is also required.



Wildlife Management Area maintenance equipment, a result of past legislative funding authorizations. Fleecer Wildlife Management Area is in the background, 2023. (Image: Paul Peterson)

Partner Support

Habitat Montana came into existence from a need felt by the people of Montana. Montanans cherish their wildlife and outdoor opportunities. Montana hunters, outdoor recreationists, and conservation organizations have long considered the Habitat Montana Program essential to their interests, and without their support this program would not exist today. Conservation organizations have often partnered with FWP to protect tracts of important habitat for their mutual conservation benefit. Partners include: Private Landowners; The Nature Conservancy; Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation; Ducks Unlimited; Pheasants Forever; Vital Ground; National Wild Turkey Federation; Mule Deer Foundation; Trout Unlimited; Safari Club International; Cinnabar Foundation; The Trust for Public Land; The Conservation Fund; The Confederated Salish-Kootenai Tribes; US Forest Service; US Bureau of Land Management; US Fish and Wildlife Service; USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service; Bonneville Power Administration; Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust; National Fish and Wildlife Foundation; Blackfoot Challenge; Montana Wildlife Federation; NorthWestern Energy; PPL-Montana; Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership; Butte Skyline Sportsman Association; Anaconda Sportsmen Club; Montana Audubon; Five Valleys Land Trust; Flathead Land Trust; Bitter Root Land Trust; Montana Association of Land Trusts; and many other organizations. The program has a committed constituency that values enduring conservation.

Forest Legacy Program

The Forest Legacy Program is administered by the US Forest Service (USFS) in partnership with state agencies. Montana has greatly benefited from this program since its start in the state in 2000. Assigned to FWP by Governor Racicot, the program has complemented Habitat Montana by broadening FWP's scope of priority habitats, to also include forestlands of high habitat importance. With over a decade of experience implementing Habitat Montana, taking on state administration of the Forest Legacy Program was a natural fit for FWP. Forest Legacy's purpose is to



Conducting a programmatic 5-year review of the Montana Forest Legacy Program, Whitefish Watershed Conservation Easement, 2023. (Image: Rick Northrup)



Tour of Stoltze Land and Lumber Company sawmill operation, one of the stops during the National Forest Legacy Summit meeting, hosted by FWP, 2024. (Image: Rick Northrup)

conserve privately-owned “working forests” of national significance, primarily through conservation easements. The program serves to keep forests intact and managed for sustainability, supporting forest products, wildlife habitat, clean water and air, and public recreation. Since participating in the program, Montana has been very successful competing nationally to fund projects, primarily in northwest Montana. To date, Forest Legacy has helped fund 247,800 acres of FWP conservation easements and 17,500 acres of fee title acquisitions in the form of wildlife management area lands. FWP updated the Montana Forest Legacy Program *Assessment of Need* in 2020, replacing the original 2000 publication. Funding partners for these forest projects have included: The Trust for Public Land; The Nature Conservancy; US Fish and Wildlife Service; Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation; F.H. Stoltze Land and Lumber Co.; Stimson Lumber Co.; Green Diamond Resource Company; Bonneville Power

Administration; SPP Montana; Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust; and many other organizations and landowners.

Benefits Associated with Wildlife Habitat Conservation

The intent of Habitat Montana and its associated funding sources, including Forest Legacy, is to conserve wildlife habitat in a manner that recognizes and supports traditional agricultural uses of the land (ARM 12.9.508 et seq.).

For over 35 years, Habitat Montana projects have demonstrated how wildlife and agriculture can coexist and even benefit each other. FWP is employing a number of “working lands” measures on Wildlife Management Areas to enhance wildlife habitat productivity while directly benefiting agriculture and local communities. These include:

Local producers lease farm ground on various Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs) across the state to produce grain and hay crops while assisting with food plots, weed control, and cover restoration.



Wetland and mixed grass prairie, supporting waterfowl, shorebirds, grassland birds that have experienced steep population declines, and multi-generation ranching, in perpetuity, Gordon Cattle Company Conservation Easement (Image: Rick Northrup)

- Neighboring ranchers lease WMA grasslands for grazing livestock in a manner that provides habitat diversity, enhances palatability of exotic grasses (such as brome grass), and establishes “cooperative grazing systems” with neighboring lands to improve cover and forage over a larger area, restoring plant communities, benefiting wildlife and livestock.
- Parts of select WMAs have periodically been offered for one-time haying or grazing opportunities to enhance specific wildlife habitats while providing helpful relief to area producers who are experiencing extreme drought or who have been adversely affected by large-scale rangeland fires.
- WMAs provide 37 farming and grazing leases to local producers, involving nearly 100,000 acres of WMA grazing lands and 2,300 acres of farm ground. Another 91,000 acres of adjacent rangelands are incorporated into cooperative grazing systems.
- Forest management prescriptions on WMAs are implemented to directly enhance habitat functions while also benefiting contract foresters, logging companies, and wood product mills.

Although FWP’s core purpose with Habitat Montana and related programs has been incentive-based strategic habitat conservation, the benefits of conservation easement projects are often broader, including: guaranteed public access to outdoor recreation; soil and water conserved; landscape-scale ecological functions sustained; watershed quality maintained and improved for

communities, fisheries, and other downstream users; species subject to listing under the federal Endangered Species Act are delisted or avoid listing; conservation easement projects have helped keep ranchers on the land, supporting rural and agriculture-based lifestyles and allowing family ranches to expand; conservation easements have averted urban-sprawl in fire-prone forest settings and associated costs related to forest and fire management issues; rural business and agricultural economies have been supported and enhanced; the wood products industry has benefitted by retaining and supporting sustainable working forests; scenic open-space values have been preserved; and other less measurable quality-of-life benefits have been maintained or enhanced for now and future generations.

Consistent with the Mission and Goals of Habitat Montana (ARM 12.9.508 et seq.), FWP wildlife management areas and conservation easements support durable wildlife habitat benefits, are managed to be compatible with wildlife and agriculture, and support economic and cultural values, while enhancing Montana's quality of life for present and future generations.



Public field review of livestock grazing treatments on Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area, 2023. (Image: Rick Northrup)

MANAGING CONSERVATION LAND PROJECTS

Ongoing management of conservation lands is a critical function supported in part by Habitat Montana. The following sections provide information on maintenance and taxation of FWP wildlife lands and monitoring and managing conservation easements.

Land Maintenance: Twenty percent of the Habitat Montana revenue is used for operation and maintenance of all FWP wildlife lands. According to statute (87-1-242, MCA), 50% of these funds are deposited in the Habitat Trust Account. The remaining 50% and interest from the Habitat Trust Account are available for funding maintenance projects, totaling approximately \$900,000 annually in recent years. The majority of these funds are used to meet the intent of the Good Neighbor Policy (23-1-126(2), MCA) including fence maintenance, road maintenance, and weed control on FWP fee ownership lands. FWP funding from non-earmarked hunting license revenue, Pittman Robertson funds, state and federal grants, and donations are also used to pay for operations and management costs of WMAs, totaling well over \$1 million that are in addition to Habitat Montana funding. Each year the Wildlife Division completes an average of 15 large maintenance and construction projects at a cost of approximately \$1 million.

The 2009 legislature passed a measure that allowed FWP to invest income from forest treatments back into forestry work on FWP lands. Led by a full-time forester, the Wildlife Division has since worked on many WMA forestry projects including on Mt. Haggin, West Kootenai, Woods Ranch, Mt. Silcox, Marshall Creek, Threemile, Calf Creek, Sun River, Gallatin, and Blackfoot Clearwater WMAs. These and anticipated future projects serve to enhance wildlife habitat and address fuel and forest health issues. A separate forestry report by FWP will be available prior to the 2025 Legislative Session.

Taxes: For Wildlife Division lands, FWP pays to the county in which the land resides “a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable



New cattle guard installation, Blacktail Wildlife Management Area, 2023. (Image: Paul Peterson).

to a private citizen” (MCA 87-1-603). For tax year 2023, FWP paid \$534,412 in tax payments on Wildlife Division lands.

Conservation Easement Monitoring: Conservation easements are visited at least annually to assure easement compliance and to work with landowners on any issues that may arise. The major terms in FWP conservation easements involve both *protection* and *management* of the Land.

- **Protection:** This refers to easement terms such as subdivision and building limitations on the land; normal farming practices continue, but no new conversion of native habitats to tillage agriculture is allowed; and only commercial activities that are compatible with the conservation values are allowed. Mining or other mineral extractions are addressed in the easement with the goal of minimizing impacts to the conservation values.
- **Management:** This refers to day-to-day practices agreed to in a management plan that assure vegetation, soils, water, and other habitat features are conserved as a part of ongoing agricultural activities, and recreation is maintained at an appropriate level to serve the public good while avoiding conflicts. Management often includes developing and implementing livestock grazing systems, access plans for the recreating public, and habitat restoration. Initial improvements necessary for implementing management plans are often paid for in part using Habitat Montana funds (e.g., parking lots, gates, fences, stock water systems). Once improvements are in place, the ongoing management of conservation easements by FWP is monitoring, maintaining regular communication with landowners, updating management plans as needed, working with and informing new landowners of easement terms, and working on periodic compliance issues.



Working lands, Grady Conservation Easement, 2024. (Image: Nate Kluz)

HABITAT CONSERVATION ACCOMPLISHMENTS– HABITAT MONTANA AND OTHER FUNDING SOURCES

The following sections summarize all FWP wildlife conservation easement and fee title projects completed during Fiscal Years 2023-2024. The funding sources vary among projects. A more detailed narrative summary follows under the corresponding headings in the order listed (Tables 1, 2).

Table 1. Wildlife conservation easements (WCE) purchased through the Fish, Wildlife and Parks' Wildlife Division during July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2024.

Transaction Date	Site Name	Type	Purchase Cost	Funding Source	Acres
October 13, 2023	Sweathouse Creek	WCE	\$3,080,000	Pittman Roberson (USFWS) \$2,516,865 Elk Auction License - \$250,000 Habitat Montana - \$241,135 MT Fish and Wildlife Cons. Trust - \$67,000 Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Assoc. - \$5,000 (Landowner donation of value - \$300,000)	549
Total Acreage					549

Table 2. Fee title land acquisitions (FEE) and land exchanges (LEX) completed through the Fish, Wildlife and Parks' Wildlife Division during July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2024.

Transaction Date	Site Name	Type	Purchase Cost	Funding Source	Acres
Nov. 21, 2022	Big Snowy Mountains WMA	FEE	\$8,220,000	Habitat Montana – \$4,998,771 Pittman Robertson - \$2,752,259 MT Fish and Wildlife Cons. Trust - \$75,000 Rocky Mtn Elk Fndn - \$393,970	5,677
Dec. 16, 2022	Willow Creek Addition to Mt Haggin WMA	FEE	\$2,590,000	Pittman Robertson - \$1,960,244 Habitat Montana - \$321,356 MT Fish and Wildlife Cons. Trust - \$258,400 Rocky Mtn Elk Fndn - \$50,000	829
Dec. 27, 2022	South Addition to Big Lake WMA	FEE	\$93,000	Mig Bird Wetland Program - \$93,000	116
Jan. 30, 2024	Wildcat WMA	FEE	\$1,185,000	Lower Yellowstone River - \$700,000 MT Fish and Wildlife Cons. Trust - \$256,622 Pheasants Forever - \$228,378	328
April 23, 2024	Elk Island WMA	LEX	NA	NA	2.6
Total Acreage					6,944



Figure 1. General location of wildlife conservation easement (CE), fee title acquisition, and land exchange projects completed by FWP, July 1, 2023 through June 30, 2024.

Conservation Easements

Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement

The Sweathouse Creek CE comprises foothill habitat along the west side of the Bitterroot Valley, providing winter range for deer and elk, breeding habitat for grassland and perching birds, transition habitat for wildlife movements between the Bitterroot River corridor and the Bitterroot Mountains, and a trout fishery including bull and westslope cutthroat. The conservation easement ensures public hunting access and was integral in establishing a permanent year-round parking lot and access to the Sweathouse Falls Trail, in the Bitterroot National Forest.

Habitat: Foothill Grasslands, Coniferous Forest, Riparian, Stream

Partners: Hackett Ranch, Bitterroot Land Trust, Bitterroot National Forest, Ravalli County, Ravalli County Fish and Wildlife Association, Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust

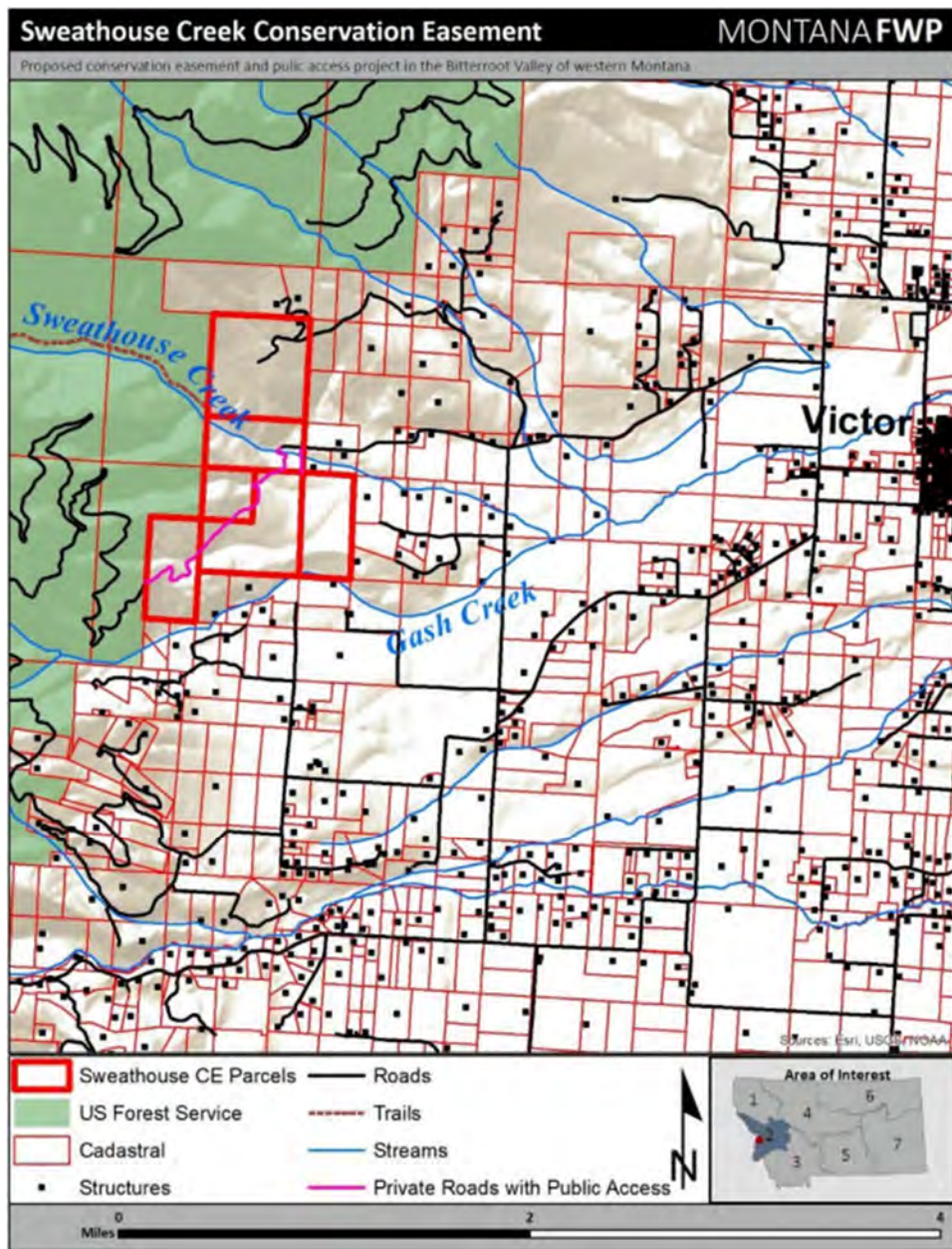


Figure 2. Location of Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement and adjacent subdivision activity, Ravalli County.



Figure 3. Mix of native and agricultural lands, Sweathouse Creek Conservation Easement. (Image: Rebecca Mowry)

Fee Title Acquisitions and Land Exchanges

Big Snowy Mountains WMA

The Shodair Children’s Hospital received a donated ranch from the Forest Allen Estate. With the intent of further benefiting the public, the hospital sold the 5,677-acre property to FWP, resulting in the Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area. The WMA provides winter range and year round habitat for elk and deer, habitat for 22 animal species of concern, including nesting habitat for grassland birds that have experienced substantial population declines, and year round habitat for other wildlife including pronghorn, black bear, mountain lion, and bobcat. The property provides important public access to the Big Snowy Mountains, including the BLM Twin Coulee Wilderness Study Area and USFS Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area (over 100,000 acres of public land access). FWP will retain a livestock grazing lease on the WMA and is investing in grazing infrastructure for applying grazing in a manner that helps achieve wildlife habitat objectives.

Habitats: Foothills Grassland, Mixed Grasslands, Conifer Forest, Aspen, Riparian

Partners: Shodair Children’s Hospital, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust



Figure 4. Prairie meets the forest, Big Snowy Wildlife Management Area. (Image: Ashley Taylor)

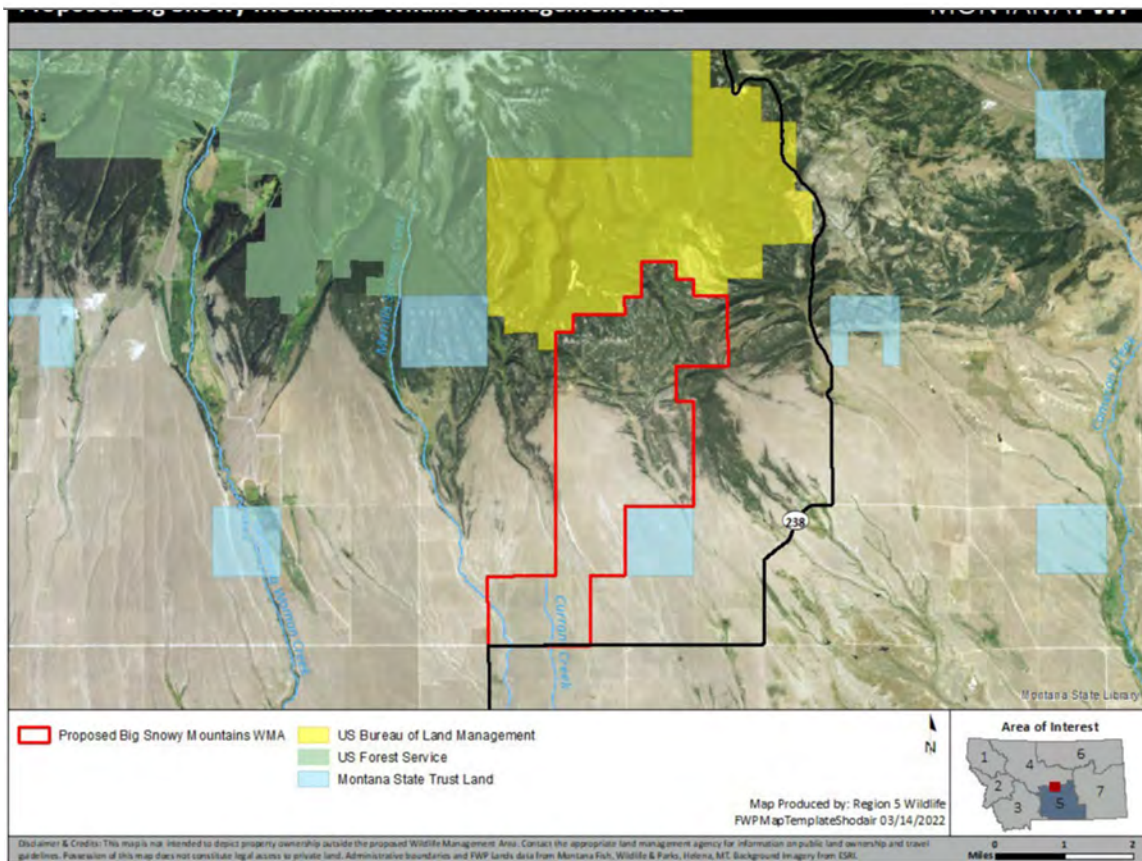


Figure 5. Overview of Big Snowy Mountain Wildlife Management Area, 20 miles north of Ryegate in Golden Valley County.

Willow Creek Addition to Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area

The 829-acre Willow Creek Addition to Mount Haggin WMA abutted 1.5 miles of the WMA on two sides and is adjacent to the WH Ranch Conservation Easement, also administered by FWP. The addition provides mule deer and elk winter range and pronghorn fawning and summer range. The land includes extensive bitterbrush stands, prime browse for wintering deer, and one mile of Willow Creek where recent genetics data has confirmed the presence of pure strain westslope cutthroat trout and a potential bull trout reintroduction site. Public recreation opportunities will extend onto this new addition, consistent with WMA management.

Habitats: Foothill Shrub and Grasslands, Conifer Forest, Aspen, Stream, Riparian

Partners: Landowner, Rock Mountain Elk Foundation, MT Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust

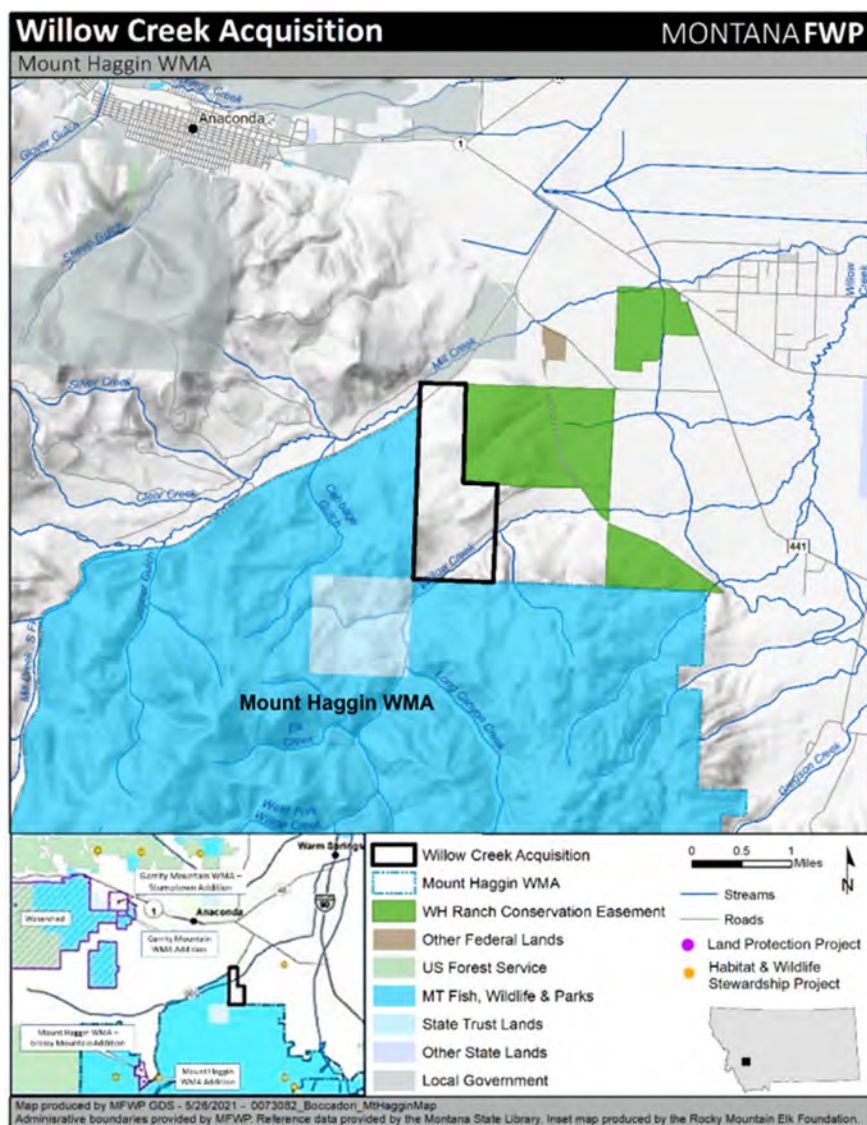


Figure 6. Willow Creek Addition (bold black outline) to Mount Haggin Wildlife Management Area, Deer Lodge County.



Figure 7. Elk and mule deer feeding on bitterbrush, Willow Creek Addition. (Image: Vanna Boccadori)

South Addition to Big Lake WMA

Big Lake WMA is part of the Big Lake wetland complex in southcentral Montana. The purpose of the WMA is to provide quality waterfowl nesting and migration staging habitat. This unique prairie wetland habitat provides for a diverse assemblage of species, including waterfowl, shorebirds, upland game birds, grassland birds, antelope, mule deer, prairie dogs, and other native species. The area is estimated to provide habitat for at least 11 “Species of Concern.” Water levels and wetland extent within the lake basin fluctuate dramatically from year to year depending on local precipitation. This acquisition of an adjacent 114-acre parcel allows FWP to build fence along an upland boundary, rather than through the lake basin. Flooding impacted the boundary fence in this area, resulting in chronic fence maintenance and trespass cattle issues. This addition ensures livestock could effectively be excluded from the WMA, regardless of water level fluctuations, benefiting FWP and the neighbor who offered this parcel to the department.

Habitats: Mixed Grasslands, Wetland

Partners: Landowner

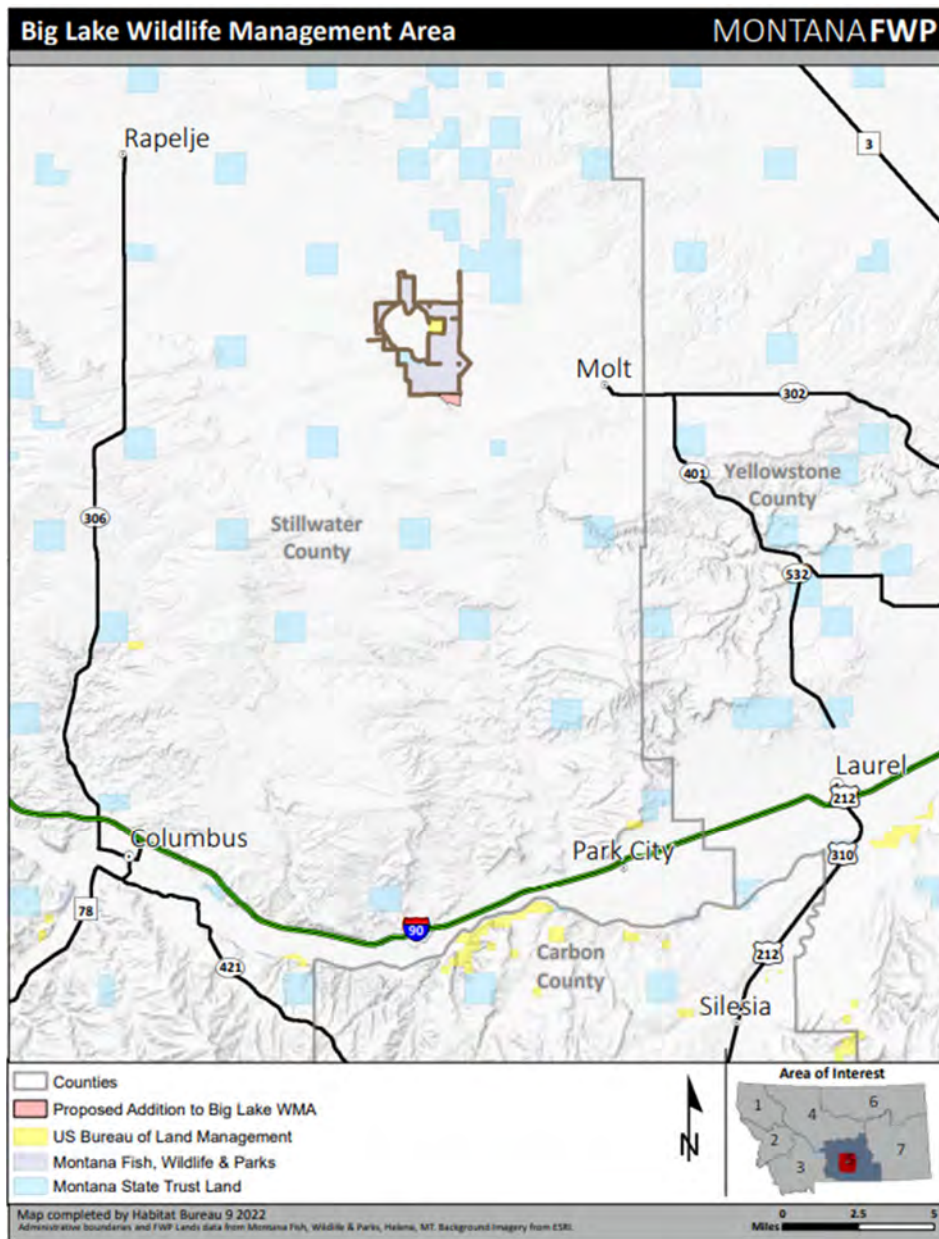


Figure 8. General location of Big Lake Wildlife Management Area, 18 miles northwest of Laurel in Stillwater County.

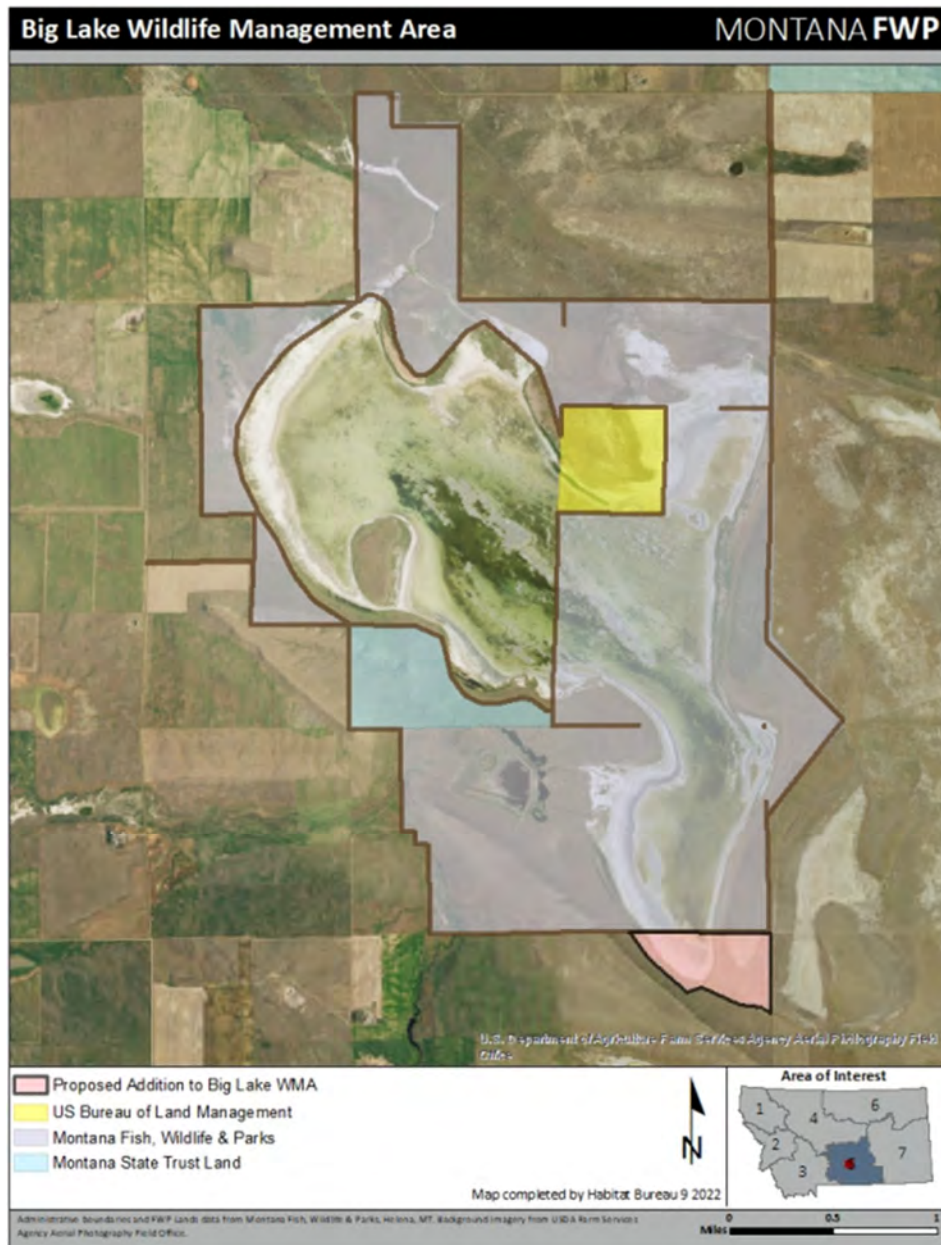


Figure 9. Addition to Big Lake Wildlife Management Area (pink), located at the south end of the property.

Wildcat Wildlife Management Area

The 328-acre Wildcat WMA was identified as a priority property by the Lower Yellowstone Coalition and Pheasants Forever helped spearhead fund-raising for the project. The parcel is composed almost entirely of cottonwood-dominated riparian bottomlands, providing year-round habitat for white-tailed deer, pheasants, turkeys, reptiles, and amphibians as well as breeding

habitat for a diverse mix of perching birds and bats, some of which are recognized as species of concern. The property provides public recreation, including hunting and wildlife watching.

Habitats: Cottonwood Gallery, Riparian, Wetland

Partners: Pheasants Forever, Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust, Lower Yellowstone River Coalition

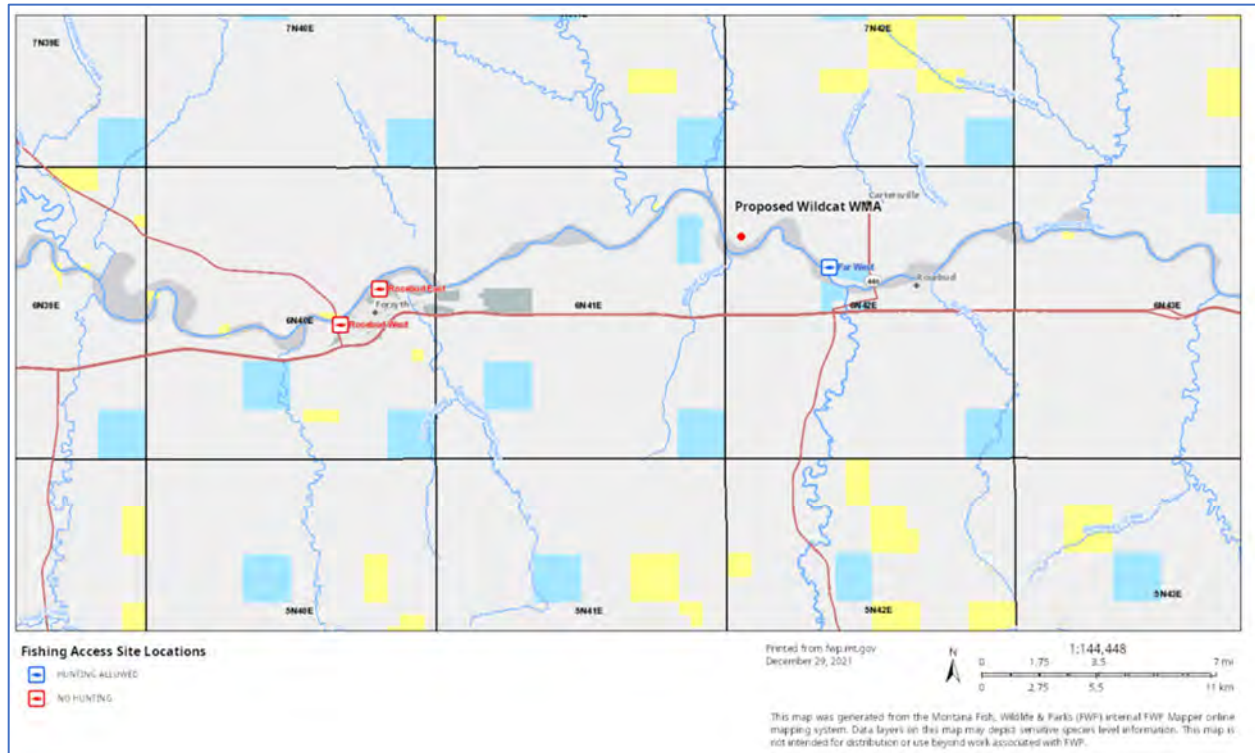


Figure 10. Location of Wildcat Wildlife Management Area, Rosebud County.

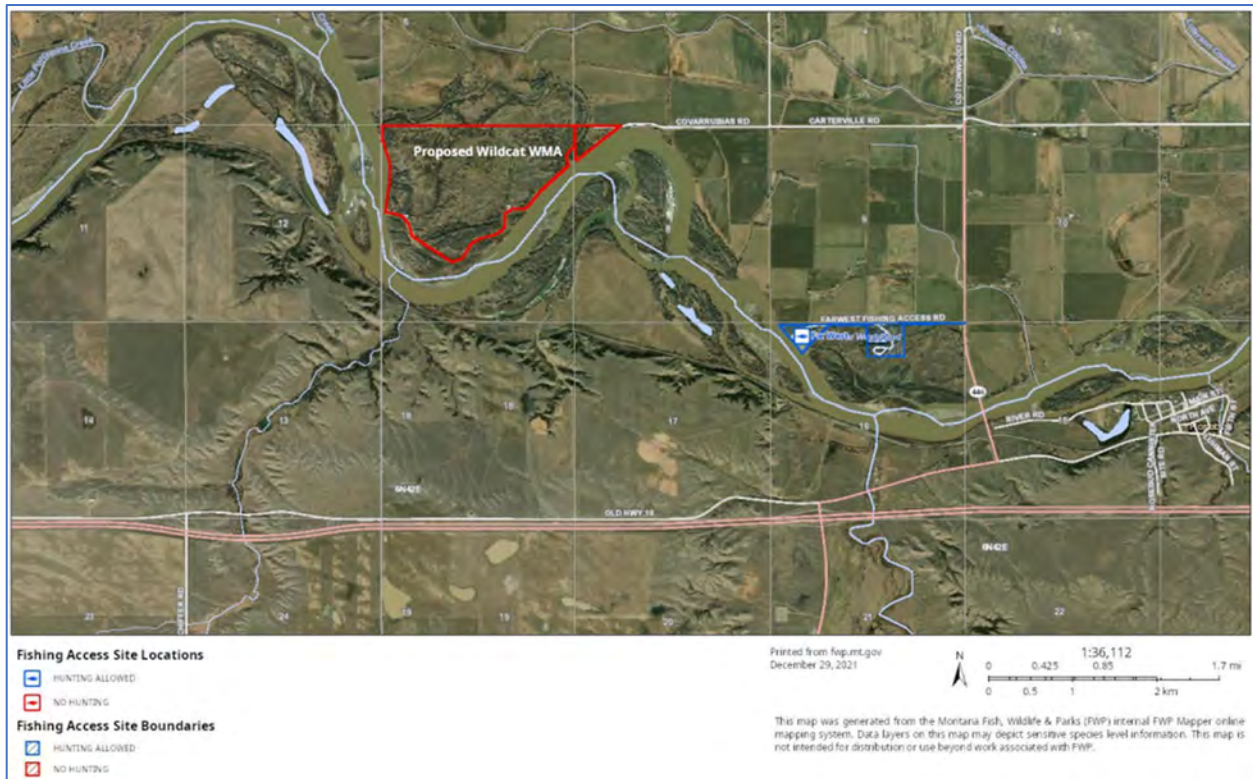


Figure 11. Overview of Wildcat Wildlife Management Area in association with Far West Fishing Access Site.

Elk Island WMA Land Exchange

Elk Island WMA comprises primarily riparian river bottomlands and croplands that are leased to local producers for farming and enhancing wildlife habitat. A small 1.07-acre parcel had been mistakenly surveyed in with a property that was acquired by FWP as part of the WMA in 2007. The landowner who sold the property to FWP requested to exchange 2.61 acres in return for the small parcel, which comprises an old farmstead. FWP concurred with the private landowner that it wasn't the agency's intention to include the homestead parcel. Through the land exchange, FWP acquired excellent winter cover for upland game birds and white-tailed deer, which was adjacent to the WMA.

Habitats: Planted Shelterbelt

Partners: Landowner



Figure 12. A minor land exchange associated with Elk Island Wildlife Management Area.