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**Preserving preservation: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Block Management and Habitat Montana programs would expire in 2006 without reauthorization from the 2005 Legislature**

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By **DARYL GADBOW** of the *Missoulian*

Most Montana hunters are familiar with Block Management, the highly popular Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks program that pays landowners to provide public hunting access on almost nine million acres of private land in the state.

Far fewer hunters are familiar with Habitat Montana, another FWP program that benefits landowners, wildlife and hunters. The program allows FWP to protect critical wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities through purchased or donated conservation easements and purchases of land.

The legislation that created Habitat Montana - House Bill 526 - was passed in 1987. It raises about \$3 million a year - funded by hunter license fees - for habitat conservation projects. Since 1988, the program has protected 258,000 acres of key, threatened wildlife habitat, while allowing some 30 Montana ranch families to continue their agricultural heritage and keep their ranches intact. The majority of that land - 213,540 acres - was protected under conservation easements, agreements that prohibit the owners from subdividing or engaging in commercial enterprises, including fee hunting.

Both Block Management and Habitat Montana, which are funded primarily by sales of nonresident hunting licenses, are due to expire in March, 2006, unless reauthorized by the 2005 Montana Legislature.

As successful and popular as it's been, the Block Management Program is likely to face little opposition in the Legislature, according to FWP officials. In fact, said Jeff Hagener, director of FWP, most people would like to see the program expanded.

But Hagener and other FWP officials said the Habitat Montana Program could face some challenges.

"Probably, the average sportsman knows about Block Management more than Habitat Montana, because they're in contact with it every year," said Steve Knapp, chief of FWP's Habitat Bureau in Helena. "But most of Habitat Montana Program lands are open to hunting, generally through the Block Management Program.

"The department would like to see the program continue," he added. "We think it's been very positive, because its purpose is to preserve wildlife habitat, which is one of the most fundamental activities our organization could be involved with."

However, Knapp said, "some people don't like the idea of the department owning land, or even holding conservation easements. I'm sure there will be some opposition to the program continuing."

Even though private lands are not removed from local tax rolls through Habitat Montana conservation easements, he said, some people object to the state's involvement because of "philosophical differences."

And, Knapp continued, there is always concern about revenue being diverted from the program for other purposes, such as paying landowners for game damage, even though the funds are earmarked specifically for habitat protection.

Mike Thompson, FWP regional wildlife management area manager in Missoula, has helped negotiate several Habitat Montana conservation easements with landowners in western Montana.

Continuation of the program is crucial at this time, according to Thompson.

"Wildlife management and hunting in (western Montana's FWP) Region 2 right now is really at a crossroads," he said. "We have an extremely fast-expanding human population. If we want to perpetuate the recreational experience and the

wildlife we cherish in this part of the state, we're going to have to take care of habitat, and pick the necessary pieces to keep that going. This is the window of time we have to protect the values we hold dear in western Montana. We have wildlife populations that depend on key habitats, and those habitats tend to be the same places people want to live.

"It doesn't have to be all or nothing. We don't have to protect it all. But we have to identify and protect key pieces. That's what HB 526 (Habitat Montana) has allowed us to do. If we wait much longer, we will have already developed some places we need to hold these populations together."

Other organizations also work to protect open spaces and wild lands through conservation easements, said Mack Long, FWP Region 2 supervisor.

"Land conservation easements don't have to depend on FWP," said Long. "Critical habitat is what we look for and where we try to put our money. And we try to work with other groups to leverage our ability to do that."

An example of that type of cooperation can be seen from downtown Missoula. The protection of 1,200 acres of valuable winter elk range on Mount Jumbo, and its resident elk herd, was accomplished by several groups with the help of a 120-acre land purchase by FWP through Habitat Montana, Long said.

"The harder the winter, the more important that piece of habitat is," he said. "That 120 acres helped leverage 1,200. Without protecting that land, we were probably going to lose that elk herd."

Typically, however, the Habitat Montana Program is used to protect wildlife habitat on ranch property. Conservation easements can be a valuable tool for ranchers to stay in business in difficult financial times, according to Long.

"The biggest comment I hear from landowners," said Long, "is that it's their opportunity to put their stamp on the land, and keep it as it was, and pass it on from generation to generation."

The Mannix Bros. Inc. Ranch - brothers David, Randy and Brent Mannix - of Helmville placed a Habitat Montana conservation easement on their ranch in 1994.

"We went shopping for someone to pay for a conservation easement," said David Mannix. "We had an uncle who we leased property from who needed to sell out. The property worked well with our ranch and we wanted to purchase it. But we didn't have the cash. We put a conservation easement on 2,500 acres of our deeded land, and the 500 acres of our uncle's property. The value of the easement on the total 3,000 acres paid for the 500 acres. So we were able to acquire it."

FWP considered the prime deer and elk habitat on the Mannix ranch a critical component of its game management plans for the area. So the easement was a good deal for the department, according to Long.

FWP always tries to make public access for hunting part of the easement agreements it negotiates in Habitat Montana, Long said.

"But sometimes wildlife values are important enough that we will pursue that protection," he said, "even if public access is not available."

In the case of the Mannix easement, the family had traditionally granted public access for hunting anyway. So that wasn't a problem, according to David Mannix.

"They very much wanted access for hunting," Mannix said. "We agreed, because we didn't mind having some public hunting, and as the agreement is written, we have to allow some. But we'd always done that anyway."

Since the easement agreement, the Mannix brothers have also entered FWP's Block Management Program.

Mannix said his family and FWP officials were able to resolve some initial differences in how the ranch would be managed under the Habitat Montana easement.

"They showed the flexibility to sit down at the table and work with us on this," Mannix said. "It's worked out well. If I had the choice to make over again, I would. I'm not afraid of being able to manage around wildlife values. I think you can have both agricultural values and conservation values. I like the Habitat Montana legislation and I think conservation easements are a good tool. They're a much better tool than outright ownership (by the state). It's better

for the community to have ranchers still active and involved in the community. At the same time it's a good tool for a rancher to capitalize on some values that are out of reach financially without selling the land."

Wildlife managers from other states are envious of FWP's Habitat Montana program, according to Knapp.

"Here's a short story," he said. "Several years ago, some guys from the Colorado Fish and Game Department came out to see what we do with our wildlife management areas. But we said 'We'll show you a new program (Habitat Montana) we have where we acquire conservation easements.' We told them the agreements have terms on how the land will be managed, allowing the landowner to continue agricultural activity, which will help the rancher and help wildlife. At the same time, it's better for vegetation and plant growth, and hunting is allowed."

"They said 'Holy mackerel, that is a real habitat program. We don't have anything like this. The easement does something for land management, helps the landowner stay in business, and even benefits hunters. Your challenge will be to keep it.'

"He was probably right," added Knapp. "That pretty well sums up how we feel about what the program does. When the people gave us HB 526, they gave us the tools to buy land or acquire easements. For FWP as an agency, in particular the Wildlife Division, one of the most fundamental activities we can carry out is preservation of wildlife habitat. I can't think of anything in the long run that would be more important."

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### **FWP focuses protection efforts on three primary habitat types**

By DARYL GADBOW of the Missoulian

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks is focusing on three major habitat types for protection under the Habitat Montana program, according to Steve Knapp, chief of FWP's Habitat Bureau.

The three habitat types, which all face severe threats from development in the state, are intermittent grasslands, riparian areas, and sagebrush grasslands.

"Intermittent grasslands are simply the foothills of western Montana, where people are building homes, and they are often the best winter ranges (for deer and elk)," said Knapp.

Riparian areas - river and creek bottomlands and wetlands - are important habitat because they make up less than 2 percent of the land base in Montana, according to Knapp.

"But they're the most productive wildlands there are, as far as diversity and numbers of wildlife," he said. Riparian areas are also prime candidates for subdivision in the state.

Sagebrush habitat remaining in the West is only 50 percent of its original distribution, according to Knapp.

"It's been vilified, burned, plowed for crops and grass," he said. "It's an important habitat type for many wildlife species. So it's also a priority for us. We can pat ourselves on the back a little, because we only began to focus on sagebrush habitat 10 years ago. Now it's a bigger concern because of the sage grouse (which are being considered for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act). We've made some headway in preserving that habitat. It will continue to be a focus."

Through conservation easements, land purchases and leases, Habitat Montana gives FWP a tool to act quickly to protect those critical habitats when they face imminent threat of development, according to Mack Long, FWP Region 2 supervisor in Missoula.

"We have key areas we'd like to see protected," said Long. "If the opportunity comes about, we'd like to jump on it as soon as we can. Habitat Montana gives us the opportunity to move ahead as soon as possible."

