SENATE FISH AND GAME
EXHIBIT NO. 1
DATE 3/3/05
BILL NO. HB 79

House Bill 79
March 3, 2005
Presented by Jeff Hagener
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and committee members, for the record I am Jeff Hagener, Director of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). I am a proponent of HB 79.

FWP is mandated to protect, preserve and manage the fish and wildlife resources of this state. Fundamental to that mission is the conservation and enhancement of habitat that is important to these fish and wildlife resources. Habitat conservation, using the tools of conservation easements, leases and fee title acquisition, helps to ensure that Montana will maintain its highly valued wildlife resources and the recreational opportunities associated with those resources. We strongly support HB0079 and its intent to remove the sunset provision from the Habitat Montana program. Habitat Montana is a voluntary, incentive-based program that works with interested private landowners.

I believe it is important to briefly re-iterate the goals of the program:

a. Conserve and enhance important land, water and wildlife resources.
b. Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunities.
c. Provide incentives for habitat conservation on private land.
d. Contribute to non-hunting recreation.
e. Protect open space and scenic areas.
f. Promote habitat friendly agriculture.
g. 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.

The department pays the same taxes on wildlife lands that it owns in fee. Last year that amounted to $267,300.00. Landowners who sell a Conservation Easement to the department continue to pay taxes on those lands. These lands remain in the agricultural classification, Class 3 or forest Class 10.

The Legislative direction to conserve "important habitats that are seriously threatened," while spreading such projects geographically across Montana, is a challenge that involves a diversity of habitats and people. Intermountain grasslands, shrub-grassland and riparian habitat types are prioritized as those most in need of attention. Since 1987, this program has worked cooperatively with private landowners to deliver 220,389 acres of easements for $22 million; 37,581 acres of fee title for $15 million; and 11,259 acres of lease for an annual cost of $27,000. I would like to highlight the fact that successful efforts stretch from Thompson Falls to the Tongue River and from the Bighole Valley to the prairies north of the Milk River. For example, pro-active work conserving important sagebrush grassland habitat for sage grouse and other species in eastern Montana and southwestern Montana is a critical component in the effort to keep sage grouse off the endangered species list. For your information, we have provided a more

detailed summary of program accomplishments in *Habitat Montana, Report to the 59th Legislature, A Portfolio of Land Conservation Efforts (MFWP 2005).*

The Private Land/Public Wildlife Council unanimously endorsed the removal of the sunset to continue the Habitat Montana Program. Additional surveys conducted by FWP and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) also showed strong support for the program. The FWP survey of 800 hunters indicated a majority supported habitat improvement and habitat acquisition if more funding became available. In the WAFWA survey of 3000 general households, three-fourth of those households rated the Habitat Montana Program as important or very important.

This program has created a unique opportunity to blend support from the hunting public in the conservation of important wildlife habitat on private lands, primarily using conservation easements. It functions well by keeping working ranches in place. This is an important relationship to maintain and an important program to keep in place.