

Senate Bill 80
January 10, 2012
Presented by Paul Sihler
Senate Fish and Game Committee

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, for the record my name is Paul Sihler, and I am the administrator of the Field Services Division at Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. I rise in support of SB 80.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) has purchased a fair amount of land over the last few years, and I am aware that there are different opinions and perspectives within Montana, and indeed among the members of this committee, on land acquisition by FWP. However, one thing I suspect there is unanimous agreement upon by every member of this legislature, and probably every Montanan, is that FWP needs to be a good neighbor and take good care of the land it owns.

SB 80 extends the sunset for another six years on the Good Neighbor program, which provides FWP with the direction, authority and funding to operate and manage the land it owns. This program requires the Department to make a significant financial down payment on future operations and maintenance costs at the time we purchase land. Over just the last four years, this has generated \$2.3M of funding for O&M by requiring the Department to put an amount equal to 20% of the purchase price of land in a dedicated maintenance account. The 2013 Legislature must pass SB 80 for this requirement to continue.

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, in the interest of full disclosure, FWP had concerns about the original bill that created these requirements. In fact, we opposed the introduced version in 2009. But we've learned over the last four years, however, that the program works well. Dedicating funding to operations and maintenance at the time a property is purchased is the responsible thing to do.

Clearly this one-time infusion of funding for O&M will not fund all of our long-term O&M needs, but FWP has other ongoing funding sources for maintenance through the Habitat Montana and fishing access site funding. These funding sources, combined with the Good Neighbor program, provide the Department with critical and needed resources for its land management responsibilities.

I urge you to keep this tool for operations and maintenance in the Department's tool box, and to pass SB 80. Thank you for the opportunity to speak today, and I'll be here to answer any questions.