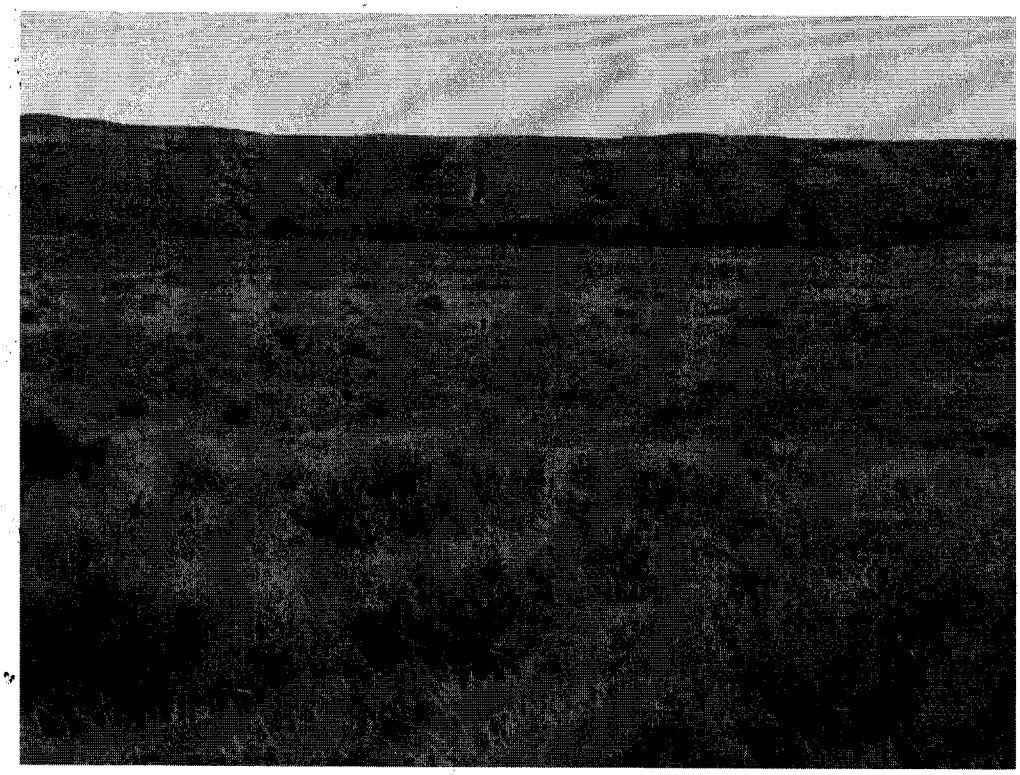
SENATE FISH AND GAME
EXHIBIT NO. 8
DATE 1-22-13
BILL NO. SR 155

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Wildlife Division

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

MILK RIVER RANCH FEE TITLE PROPOSAL



October 17, 2012

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

1.0 Purpose and Need for Action

1.1 Proposed action

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MFWP) proposes the fee title acquisition of a portion of the Milk River Ranch, which consists of approximately 2,992 acres of primarily Milk River riparian habitat and associated uplands The Milk River Ranch is located 42 miles northwest of Havre along the U.S.-Canadian border. The property includes 10 miles of riverfront habitat along the Milk River. The property proposed for acquisition is comprised of over 95% intact native habitat. The native habitat consists primarily of Great Plains floodplain vegetation communities which are predominantly silver sagebrush grassland, cottonwood/shrub riparian habitat, greasewood flats and native mixed-grass prairie and badlands habitats.

The purchase of the Milk River Ranch is divided into two separate acquisitions. This EA addresses the acquisition of 2,992 acres of primarily native riparian and grassland habitats by MFWP. DNRC is proposing to purchase an additional 1513+ acres of the Milk River Ranch. The parcels proposed for purchase by the DNRC consist primarily of a mixture of agricultural and grazing land.

1.2 Need for the Action

The primary purpose of this action is to conserve and enhance rare native riparian and grassland habitats that provide habitat for a variety of game and non-game species and also help maintain a corridor for connectivity between wildlife populations in Canada and in the United States. This property would become a Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and would be managed with the intent of conserving and enhancing the fish and wildlife resources in the area and providing recreational opportunity. Conserving these native habitats and instituting wildlife friendly management practices and habitat improvements would help preserve and enhance mule deer, pronghorn antelope, white-tailed deer, elk, ring-necked pheasants, Hungarian partridge, waterfowl populations and even more species of grassland and riparian songbirds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. The property provides habitat for many species including Tier I species (species of greatest conservation need based on the Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy), species of concern, potential species of concern, and threatened and endangered (T&E) species.

Recent increases in small grain prices and decreases in Conservation Reserve Program enrollment have resulted in increasing loss of wildlife habitat due to conversion to agricultural production. A large percentage of the native habitat in the northern part of Hill County has already been converted to cropland. If this property was purchased by another landowner, the potential for conversion of some or all of the native grassland and riparian habitats to agricultural production would be high. The ranch also provides connectivity and a potential migration corridor between large tracts of native habitat in Canada and the narrower strip of native habitat remaining along the Milk River in

Montana. Acquisition of this property would protect these habitats from potential future subdivision or energy development and help maintain genetic diversity and viability of wildlife metapopulations.

A second purpose for this project is to provide access to this property for hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities. Milk River riparian habitats are valued for their abundant wildlife and recreational opportunities in addition to their potential productivity for ranching and agricultural operations. The majority of land along the Milk River in Montana is in private ownership. Recreational opportunities and access for hunters along the Milk River have become more restrictive in recent years. Acquisition of this property would ensure access to the a portion of the Milk River for hunting, fishing, canoeing, bird watching, and wildlife viewing for current and future generations.

Thus, the need for this project is twofold. The first need is to protect valuable wildlife habitats from the threat of development, while the second need is to secure perpetual public use of this land for hunters, fishermen, and other recreationists. Resident and migrating wildlife species would benefit from improved habitat conditions, while hunters, anglers, and other recreationists would gain access to this scenic property and to the adjacent Milk River.

The Milk River Ranch is currently a privately owned property. The purchase price of this property will be based on an independent appraisal commissioned by MFWP. The acquisition of this property would be funded primarily using Pitmann-Robertson and Habitat Montana funding. The property is currently listed for sale with a land broker. Sale of this property to another private landowner result in a lost opportunity for habitat protection and improvement by FWP in the near future.

1.3 Objectives of the Action

- Protect and enhance native riparian and grassland habitats.
- Protect 10 miles of important Milk River habitat.
- Maintain connectivity between wildlife populations in Montana and Canada.
- Provide permanent access to the Milk River and surrounding property for public hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, hiking, and other recreational activities.
- Provide increased public hunting access to manage wildlife populations in order to prevent potential incidences of agricultural damage.
- Promote increased tourism and benefit local communities by providing increased recreational opportunities.
- Protect and enhance Milk River water resources.

1.4 Location

The Milk River Ranch property is located approximately 42 miles northwest of Havre near the US-Canadian border. The property straddles the Milk River as it flows southeast out of Canada. The property consists of 2,992 acres of predominately native riparian and mixed-grass prairie habitats. The property is located within MFWP Region 6 and all of the property is within hunting district 600. The property is located 17 miles upstream of the Fresno Wildlife Management Area. Maps of the property are included in Appendix I of this document.

1.5 Current Land Use

The Milk River Ranch is currently a family-owned property. The primary use of the property is livestock and agricultural production. The property to be acquired by MFWP is used by the owners primarily for livestock grazing; there is no crop production on this portion of the property. They currently run approximately 150-200 head of cattle primarily during the summer and fall. The current landowners do not live on the property, so there are no residences on the property. The only buildings currently on the property are an older barn, several smaller outbuildings, and a set of corrals. There are approximately 7.5 miles of existing fences on the property. There are no gas or large power lines crossing the property. There is an electrical line servicing the one barn on the property. The primary public access to the property is from the south along County Road 145N. The landowners allow limited free public recreation on the property.

1.6 Legal Description

Township 37 North, Range 9 East, P.M.M., Hill County, Montana.

Section 1: S1/2N1/2, S1/2

Section 2: Government Lots 9, 10, 11, 12, S1/2N1/2, N1/2S1/2

Section 2: SE1/4SE1/4 (Ref Deed Book 97, Page 257, Doc. #391459)

Section 3: Government Lots 9, 10, SE1/4NW1/4, N1/2SE1/4

Township 37 North, Range 10 East, P.M.M., Hill County, Montana

Section 4: SW1/4SW1/4

Section 5: S1/2SE1/4, SE1/4SW1/4

Section 6: Government Lot 5, that part of Government Lots 6 and 7 lying North of Milk River, Government Lots 12, 13, 14 and 15, SE1/4NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, S1/2SE1/4,

SE1/4SW1/4, and that part of the S1/2NE1/4 lying North of Milk River and that part of N1/2SE1/4 lying North of Milk River. (Ref. Deed: Book 109 of Deeds, Page 473, Document No. 414020.)

Section 6: That portion of the S1/2NE1/4 and N1/2SE1/4 lying South of Milk River. (Ref. Deed: Book 117 Deeds, Page 283, Document No. 441040.)

Section 7: N1/2S1/2NE1/4NE1/4, N1/2S1/2NW1/4NE1/4, N1/2N1/2NE1/4, NE1/4NW1/4

Section 8: NE1/4NE1/4, N1/2SE1/4NE1/4, NE1/4NW1/4NE1/4, N1/2NW1/4NW1/4

Section 9: W1/2NW1/4, SE1/4NW1/4, N1/2NW1/4SW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, E1/2SE1/4SW1/4, SE1/4

Section 10: S1/2SE1/4

Section 14: W1/2

Section 15: SE1/4NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, E1/2

1.6 Application to Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy

MFWP's conservation strategy identifies habitats and species that are in the greatest need of conservation in Montana. The Milk River Ranch is located in the Montana Glaciated Plains Terrestrial Focus Area (CFWCS, 2005). The majority of the property consists of native grasslands and riparian habitats, which are both Tier-I habitat types with high priority for conservation. There are numerous Tier-I species, species of concern, and potential species of concern that have either been documented on the property or are expected to occur on the property.

1.7 Authority

The following laws and rules are applicable to the proposed action:

Montana FWP has the authority under State law §87-1-201, Montana Code Annotated (MCA) to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In addition, §87-1-209 MCA grants the department the authority to purchase land or water suitable for game, bird, fish, or fur-bearing animal restoration, propagation, or protection, for state parks, and for outdoor recreation.

The department also has the authority under state law §87-1-709 MCA to acquire by purchase such lands or other property or interests therein as may be necessary for the

purpose of carrying on any wildlife restoration project created and established under the provisions of said Pittman-Robertson Act.

In 1987, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill 526, which earmarked hunting license revenues to secure wildlife habitat through lease, conservation easement, or fee title acquisition (§87-1-241 and §87-1-242, MCA). This is now referred to as the Habitat Montana program. As with other MFWP property acquisition proposals, the MFWP Commission and the State Land Board (for properties greater than 100 acres or $100,000) must approve any land acquisition proposal by the agency. This Environmental Assessment (EA) is part of that decision making process.

2.0 Alternatives

2.1 Alternative A – Proposed Action:

The proposed action is for MFWP to purchase 2,992 acres of the Milk River Ranch to become the Milk River Wildlife Management Area. The property would be managed to conserve and enhance the existing native vegetation communities and wildlife populations. MFWP would acquire the mineral rights for the property, except for the gravel rights at an existing gravel pit in Section 14. There is no crop land on the property that MFWP is proposing to purchase and thus no need for reclamation of these properties or other habitat restoration. The vast majority of the acreage proposed for purchase by MFWP is native rangeland and these acres would not need any intensive habitat modification. The small portion of the rangeland that has been converted to non-native grass production could be reseeded to more wildlife friendly grass mixes if desired in the future. The possibility of continued grazing on the Milk River Ranch would be evaluated. If grazing is determined to be compatible with the wildlife values and goals of the ranch, a rest-rotation grazing system would be implemented. Additional costs to modify the fencing or water sources of the current grazing systems and conduct other habitat improvements on this property would primarily be funded through MFWP's Habitat Montana and Upland Game Bird Enhancement Programs. There may also be potential to secure funding from federal habitat improvement programs or from nongovernmental conservation organizations.

Possible Habitat Improvement Programs on this property are:

1) Implementation of a rest-rotation grazing system
2) Reseeding non-native fields
3) Planting shelterbelts
4) Installation of wildlife-friendly fence designs.

2.2 No Action Alternative

Under the no action alternative, the Department does not purchase this land. Due to the fact that the property is currently listed for sale with a land broker, it is likely the property would sell to the highest bidder. If sold to another buyer, one scenario is that a percentage of the property would be placed into agricultural production. Due to the scenic nature and river access provided by the property, it is also possible it could be divided into smaller parcels for sale to multiple buyers. A third scenario would be the purchase of this property for its hunting and recreational value. All three scenarios could result in a loss of native wildlife habitat or a loss of recreational opportunity. This purchase of the Milk River Ranch is a cooperative project by MFWP and DNRC. Failure to complete the MFWP portion of this acquisition would likely affect completion of the DNRC portion of this project.

2.3 Alternatives Eliminated from further Evaluation

The potential for purchase of a conservation easement on the property was eliminated from further evaluation. A conservation easement would protect the habitat and wildlife values of the property from development. However, the current landowner has not expressed interest in the sale of a conservation easement to MFWP. It is unknown if a future landowner purchasing the property would be interested in a conservation easement with MFWP.

3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

3.1 Habitat

The vast majority of this property (>95%) is unbroken native range. The productive soils in this region have historically resulted in high rates of conversion of native range for agricultural production. Very few properties in this region have such a high proportion of intact native vegetation. The wetland/riparian habitat and mixed-grass prairie habitat present are both Tier-I habitats of high wildlife and conservation value based on the Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation strategy (CFWCS). There are two primary drainages, the Milk River and Lost River that traverse the property. The riparian habitat along the Milk River consists largely of silver sagebrush grasslands and associated plains cottonwood bottoms. See Table 1 for a summary of land cover types on the property.

There are also stretches of riparian shrub habitats consisting largely of chokecherry, buffaloberry, Russian olive, and species of willow. The Milk River above Fresno Dam is a relatively naturally functioning river and provides a year-round water source for wildlife and livestock. The Lost River is also within the property's boundary and is an ephemeral river and often active flows end during late summer.

The riparian areas transition through more rugged badlands and cliff habitats into mixed-grass prairie habitat in the uplands. These grassland habitats are a mixture of cool and warm season grasses and generally appear to be in fair to good condition. The grasslands

are dominated by fescue, western wheatgrass, slender wheatgrass, and green needlegrass with a variety of other grass, forbs, and shrub species.

A very small portion of the habitat (~100 acres) had been seeded to non-native grasses for hay production. These areas were seeded to a mixture of forbs and pubescent wheatgrass, but have been invaded by crested wheatgrass. These areas would provide some opportunity for habitat improvement or restoration.

Table 1. Land cover of MRWMA based on GAP analysis

Northwestern Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairie	1010
Western Great Plains Badland	627
Northwestern Great Plains Floodplain	445
Inter-Mountain Basins Greasewood Flat	401
Open Water	255
Introduced Upland Vegetation – Forbland	123
Northern Rocky Mountain Lower Montane, Foothill and Valley Grassland	32
Northwestern Great Plains Riparian	29
Western Great Plains Cliff and Outcrop	27
Northwestern Great Plains Shrubland	26
Western Great Plains Sand Prairie	12
Western Great Plains Wooded Draw and Ravine	4
Western Great Plains Closed Depression Wetland	2
Western Great Plains Open Freshwater Depression Wetland	2

The overall potential for wildfire on the property is relatively low. There are no coniferous forest habitat types. The plains cottonwood and silver sagebrush floodplain habitats are wetter areas that can actually serve as a potential fire break. The badlands habitats have sparse vegetation and provide very little fuel for wildfires. The upland grassland habitats are more xeric habitats and have more moderate potential for wildfires.

3.2 Wildlife

The variety of productive riparian and grassland areas provide habitat for a diverse number of game and nongame species of wildlife. There are mule deer, white-tailed deer, elk, antelope, pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian Partridge, mourning doves, and a variety of waterfowl species all present in huntable numbers on the ranch. The property is classified as crucial winter range for both mule deer and antelope. The riparian areas provide habitat for a variety of shorebirds, raptors, songbirds, amphibians, reptiles, bats, and other nongame species. The badlands and rocky cliff habitats provide cover for elk, deer, bobcats, and other game species. These breaks-type habitats also provide specialized roosting habitat for bats and nest sites for raptors. The upland grassland sites provide forage for big games species, nesting cover for upland birds and grassland songbirds, and habitat for a variety of reptiles and amphibians. The one Threatened and Endangered candidate species, as classified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife

Service, that may occur on the property is the Sprague's pipit. It is unlikely any other Fish and Wildlife Service T&E species (including black-footed ferret and greater sage grouse) would occur on this property. A list of species of concern and potential species of concern that are either known to occur or predicted to occur on the property is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Species of Concern and Potential Species of Concern known to or predicted to occur on the Milk River Ranch.

Common Name	**Scientific Name**
Dwarf shrew	*Sorex nanus*
Merriam's Shrew	*Sores merriami*
Swift Fox	*Vulpes velox*
Baird's Sparrow	*Ammodramus bairdii*
Bobolink	*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*
Brewer's Sparrow	*Spizella breweri*
Burrowing Owl	*Athene cunicularia*
Chestnut-collared Longspur	*Calcarius ornatus*
Ferruginous Hawk	*Buteo regalis*
Golden Eagle	*Aquila chrysaetos*
Great Blue Heron	*Ardea herodias*
Loggerhead shrike	*Lanius ludovicianus*
Long-billed curlew	*Numenius americanus*
McCown's Longspur	*Rhunchophanes mccownii*
Sharp-tailed grouse	*Tympanuchus phasianellus*
Sprague's Pipit	*Anthus spargueii*
Veery	*Catharus fuscescens*
Greater Short-horned Lizard	*Phrynosoma hernandesi*
Western Hognose snake	*Heterodon nasicus*
Great Plains Toad	*Anaxyrus cognatus*
Northern Leopard Frog	*Lithobates pipiens*
Plains Spadefoot Toad	*Spea bombifrons*

3.3 Fisheries and Water Resources

The Milk River would be the primary source for fishing opportunity on the property. Water testing conducted by the Milk River Watershed Council Canada upstream of the property classified the water quality in the stretch of the river as "good". The primary game fish species found along this stretch of the Milk River are burbot, sauger, walleye, yellow perch and northern pike. Nongame species known to occur include fathead chub, black bullhead, silvery minnow, brassy minnow, lake chub, longnose sucker, mountain sucker, Iowa darter, spottail shiner, stonecat, brook stickleback, longnose dace, northern redbelly dace, and white sucker.

3.4 Current Recreational Opportunities

The current owners of the property do allow restricted access for hunting, fishing, and floating of the Milk River. The level of use by the public is currently significantly below the potential level of recreation this property would provide if managed as a WMA. The WMA would be located in deer and elk hunting district 600. In 2010, there were estimated to be over 2,500 hunters in this hunting district who spent over 12,500 days hunting. The primary access to the ranch is along County Road 145N. The property is contiguous with over 4,200 acres of School Trust Land. These lands lie primarily on the eastern edge of the property. These state lands have traditionally provided walk-in hunting opportunities for the public. Access to the western end of the property, north of the Milk River, would be primarily by foot or horse unless an easement or access agreement could be reached with neighboring landowners or another existing road access route is identified.

3.5 Buildings and Developments

There has been very little development on the property. There are no permanent residences on the property. Currently the only buildings present on the property are a barn, several smaller outbuildings, and a set of corrals. These buildings would not be in suitable condition for public use and may be torn down and removed by the current landowner. These buildings are all located in a 1-acre area near the county road. There is also a gravel pit about an acre in size located on the southeastern edge of the property that is not currently in use. The U.S. Geological Service (USGS) has a water gauging station and weather station located on the property.

3.6 Cultural and Historic

The cultural and historic resources on the property are largely not documented. The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) reports the presence of a burial site and rock cairn on the property. Reports from the landowner indicate that there may also be other cultural sites on the property including teepee rings and buffalo jumps, although these sites have not been formally verified. The landowner reports that at one point there was a fur trading post on the property, but no structures from this post remain. There are no historic buildings identified on the property. Paleontologists from the University of Notre Dame indicate that the property has significant fossil resources and value and Montana State University has expressed interest in the property's archaeological and paleontological rights

4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This environmental analysis examines the consequences of Alternative A (proposed action) and Alternative B (no action). Alternative C, the purchase of a conservation easement, was removed from further evaluation as this alternative was deemed to be infeasible.

4.1 Physical Environment

4.1.1 Land Resources

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action land resources within the property would be protected and managed for fish and wildlife habitat values and recreational use. The majority of the property would be accessed through walk-in recreation. There are no plans for the creation of additional roads on the ranch. The increased public use expected on the property could result in greater use of existing county and section line roads and potential pioneering of new roads. MFWP should be able to minimize these activities through identification of open roads and signing of any unauthorized trails. The purchase of the property would prevent potential sod busting or other soil disturbing activities and would promote protection of soils and geologic features. The property owner would retain the rights to development of archaeological and paleontological resource. Extraction of these resources could have impacts to other land resources. There are conditions limiting development of these resources. Some of these limitations include: the owner cannot disturb greater than 5 acres at one time; the owner must submit a reclamation bond to ensure adequate reclamation of any disturbed sites, the owner must also submit an operating plan for department approval prior to any development, the owner is responsible for noxious weed control relating to these activities.

The Natural Resources and Conservation Service's Soil Survey database identifies the project area as the following under farmland classifications:

	# of acres	**% of total**
Not prime farmland	1322	43.6%
Farmland of statewide importance	1475	48.6%
Prime farmland if irrigated	116	3.8%
Prime farmland	118	3.9%

The Landowner intends to deed the archeological and paleontological rights on the property to Montana State University. This could lead to excavations of locations within the WMA. Potential excavation activities could remove some vegetation and disturb soils in a specific area.

No Action: Under this alternative the land may be sold to another buyer and there would be the potential for increased development of the property. If portions of the ranch are converted to agricultural production, this could result in increased erosion. If the land was sold and placed into agricultural production or subdivided there would be a need for additional road development. There would also likely be construction of additional

residences and outbuildings on the property which could have a negative impact on land resources.

4.1.2 Air Resources

Proposed Action: The county road that would provide the primary means of accessing the property is a gravel road. Increased public visitation to the ranch could result in increased production of dust. The impact of this dust to air quality would likely be negligible. Any impact could be mitigated if necessary by working with the county to apply dust-reducing agents to the road to minimize airborne dust. The residences most likely to be affected by dust are several miles from the property, but near the county road that would be the primary access route for the property.

No Action: If the property was sold or management practices were changed there would be the potential for increased conversion of native rangeland to agricultural production. Sod busting of native prairie could result in increased release of dust and particulate matter into the air. Sale of the ranch could result in increased road development and dust production. This option would also allow for potential oil and gas development on the property. Oil and gas development can result in the release of volatile organic compounds and methane which could impact local air quality.

4.1.3 Water Resources

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action, water resources on this parcel would be maintained or enhanced. Riparian areas would be protected and potentially improved by the action. There are no proposed changes that would result in increased discharge, changes in drainage patterns, alteration of river or streams courses, or changes in the quality or quantity of groundwater. Existing water rights are primarily for stock use from the Milk River and Lost River. These water rights would transfer to MFWP upon closing. Modifications to grazing practices on the property would have the potential to improve riparian vegetation and water quality. Changes in the livestock grazing system may require the improvement or development of additional livestock water sources.

No Action: It is likely that there would be no immediate impacts to the water resources on this land. Potential increased agricultural conversion could lead to increases in sediment and nutrient loads in the Milk River and its tributaries.

4.1.4 Vegetation Resources

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action the vegetation on the property would be protected and may be enhanced. The native vegetation communities currently found on the ranch would be protected from agricultural conversion. A weed management plan is being developed for the ranch in accordance with MFWP's Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan and the Montana County Weed Control Act (7-22-2154, MCA). The weed management plan would be developed through consultation with the Hill County Weed District. MFWP would also have the ability to evaluate the effects of current

livestock grazing on the property and change these practices to improve vegetative diversity and condition.

Based on consultation with the County office the floodplain for this area has not been delineated. Therefore, no determination can be made regarding the acres of this property within a floodplain. The Milk River runs through the property, so a portion of the property could lie within a floodplain. There are currently no plans for construction of any structures on the property other than signs and fences.

Initial MFWP management strategies for the new WMA would include the following. Additional details about these strategies can be found in Appendix II, Milk River WMA Draft Management Plan

:

1. Conduct a baseline vegetation survey to evaluate existing rangeland conditions, species present, and use that data to establish a vegetation monitoring plan for the property.
2. Assess the use of livestock grazing as a management tool.
3. Evaluate vegetation enhancement options for non-native grass reclamation and the enhancement of existing riparian shrubs or shelterbelts.
4. Noxious Weed Management
    - Conduct an inventory and map current weed locations
    - Develop a long-term weed management plan that may include biological, chemical, and mechanical treatment of noxious weeds.
    - Annually monitor roads and trails that are open to vehicles for new weed establishment.
    - Develop a noxious weed management plan for the property and coordinate with Hill County Weed District to implement weed management controls.

Fires on the property would be subject to immediate suppression upon detection. Fire suppression on the property would be covered by the county under an existing cooperative agreement between Hill County and the DNRC. Under this agreement the county agrees to provide fire protection in exchange for equipment, planning, and training. The DNRC would also assist and provide funding for fires too large for the county to control. MFWP may institute fire restrictions and temporary closures to reduce the risk of human-caused fires if drought conditions and extreme fire danger warrant such measures.

The owner intends to deed the archaeological and paleontological rights to the property to Montana State University. There are conditions limiting development of these resources and the impacts to the vegetation resources. Some of these limitations include: the owner (of those resources) cannot disturb greater than 5 acres at one time; the owner must submit a reclamation bond to ensure adequate reclamation of any disturbed sites, the owner must also submit an operating plan for department approval prior to any development, and the owner is responsible for noxious weed control relating to these activities.

No Action: If the property is sold and/or management practices on the ranch change it is possible that a portion of the ranch could be developed for agricultural production, energy development, or subdivision. All of these outcomes would result in a loss of native rangeland and a negative impact to vegetative resources.

4.1.5 Fish/Wildlife Resources

Proposed Action: This action would benefit a variety of wildlife species by conserving, enhancing and protecting wildlife habitats on this parcel. The predominantly native habitats on the property would be preserved. The connectivity between the property and native habitats and wildlife populations to the north would be maintained. In the long-term there would be potential for completion of habitat improvement projects in both riparian and upland habitats. These improvements could result in increased populations of both game and nongame fish and wildlife species. Protection of riparian habitats will also benefit water quality and fish populations found in the Milk River. Hunting, fishing, and other recreational opportunities, which have historically been allowed on the property, would continue to be provided. The designation of this property as a WMA would likely increase the overall recreational use of the property. The protection of Tier-I riparian and grassland habitats would decrease potential fragmentation and benefit many species of concern and the one T&E species likely to be found on the ranch.

Initial MFWP management strategies for the new WMA would include the following. Additional details about these strategies can be found in Appendix II, Milk River WMA Draft Management Plan:

1. Identify and conduct baseline wildlife and fisheries surveys
2. Identify and assess existing motorized access points for the WMA. Determine if access points require improvement or closure to meet the management objectives of the WMA.
3. Define off-road vehicle use or use of closed roads through education and signing and minimize disturbance of wildlife and potential dispersal onto neighboring properties.
4. Replace or modify existing fences with wildlife-friendly fence designs.
5. Evaluate existing barriers to fish movement and develop strategies to improve fish passage and habitat.
6. Promote trapping and hunting activities within the WMA per existing MFWP regulations
    - Trapping on the WMA would be allowed, but the trapping would be only with written permission from MFWP and the number of individuals trapping on the WMA would be limited. The primary trapping opportunities would be for coyote, bobcat, swift fox, beaver and muskrat.

No Action: Under this alternative the land could be sold and agricultural or subdivision development could occur. Depending on the extent of development, the loss of native habitats could result in a decline of both game and nongame wildlife species. Development would also further fragment the existing habitat and may further restrict connectivity with wildlife populations north of the border.

4.2 Human Environment

4.2.1 Noise and Electrical effects

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action there would be no significant negative impact to noise levels in the area. There would be increased used of the area by recreationists, but most of this use would be walk-in based recreation and would not impact noise levels. There would be no foreseeable development requiring increased electrical capacity. This action would not create adverse electrostatic or electromagnetic effects. There would be no interference with radio or television reception.

No Action: Noise and electrical impacts to the property are difficult to predict if another party purchases the ranch. If oil and gas or other mineral rights on the ranch were developed, there could be an increase in noise levels in the area. If the property were subdivided there would be a need for additional electrical development for additional residences. The overall electrical and noise impacts would be minor.

4.2.2 Land Use

Proposed Action: Currently this property is primarily a family owned/operated livestock operation. The proposed action for the area would be for the property to be managed primarily for fish and wildlife habitat in perpetuity. Livestock use and impact on the vegetation would be evaluated and opportunities to continue or adjust livestock grazing explored. If livestock grazing on the property is continued, grazing practices (e.g. grazing system, stocking rates) may be modified. There may be a need to fence off riparian areas and develop additional water resources. The property would be open for public use. The increased public use of the property would result in increased traffic on roads accessing the property. Increased public use of the property could result in increased potential for trespassing on neighboring landowners. Signing of the property boundaries would help minimize this potential impact. Increased public use by hunters would aid in management of ungulate populations and decrease potential game damage problems in the area.

No Action: Changes in future landownership and land use could affect habitat quality and current wildlife numbers. There would likely be fewer public recreational opportunities. If public access on the property was restricted, the potential for game damage on surrounding properties would increase.

4.2.3 Risk/Health Hazards

Proposed Action: No significant impact would occur under the proposed action. The seller has stipulated that to the best of their knowledge the property is free from the presence of hazardous waste or materials and no hazardous waste or materials have been generated, stored, released, or disposed of on or within the property. MFWP will conduct a hazardous materials survey prior to the property's acquisition. MFWP Game Wardens

would enforce state hunting laws on the new WMA. An evaluation of existing roads and structures on the property would need to be completed to determine any potential safety risks associated with these structures.

No Action: It is unknown if any new risks or health hazards may occur if the property is purchased by another party.

4.2.4 Community Impacts

Proposed Action: The proposed action would eliminate potential agricultural development, subdivision, or future oil and gas development on the property. The increased revenue potential of these activities would be lost or reduced. The increased recreational opportunity providing by creating this WMA would draw more sportsmen and visitors to the area. The creation of a private hunting preserve would be averted. Increased public access to recreation may provide additional outdoor recreation-based revenues for businesses in Hill County. This issue is also addressed in the Socio-Economic Assessment of this acquisition.

No Action: With this alternative, the land would be sold and could see increased agricultural or energy development or potential subdivision that would provide some monetary benefit to the local community. There would be a loss in recreational opportunities and a decrease in recreation based revenue for the community.

4.2.5 Public Services/Taxes/Utilities

Proposed Action: There would be no changes or need for increased public services in the property area. There would be no impact to Hill County property tax revenue since under Section 87-1-603, MCA, FWP is required to pay "to the county a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen."

No Action: Impacts to public services, taxes, and utilities would be dependent on the type of future development on the property. Subdivision of the property would likely require additional public services and utilities. Subdivision or energy development on the property could result in generation of additional tax revenue for the County.

4.2.6 Aesthetics/Recreation

Proposed Action: The creation of a WMA on this land would result in a positive impact to both aesthetics and recreation in this portion of the Milk River. High quality public hunting and fishing opportunities would be created and maintained in perpetuity. The natural beauty of the Milk River frontage would also be enhanced and preserved. There are no plans for construction of any buildings or structures that would interfere with the scenic views and aesthetics of the property.

Initial MFWP management strategies for the new WMA would include the following. Additional details about these strategies can be found in Appendix II, Milk River WMA Draft Management Plan:

1. Create a Travel Management Plan for the new WMA
2. Define prohibited activities and used on the WMA. Some of these restrictions included are:
    - No off-road vehicle use
    - Certified weed free hay required
    - No cutting of trees or firewood
    - No organized dog training/field trials
    - Fires are allowed in portable camp stoves, fireplaces and fire rings, unless otherwise prohibited by emergency fire restrictions
    - Weapons discharge allowed only for lawful hunting purposes
    - No commercial use without a commercial use permit
    - No fireworks
    - No littering
    - No removal of natural resources
3. Coordinate with MFWP staff to improve fishing access on the Milk River
4. Develop steps to minimize impacts to neighboring landowners, such as:
    - Install appropriate boundary and regulation signage.
    - Collaborate with the county road department to address issues with impacts access roads and to minimize the generation of dust within travel corridors.
    - Install garbage receptacles to help minimize littering.
    - Coordinate with local MFWP Game Wardens and other staff to provide a MFWP presence on the property to discourage vandalism, littering, poaching, and other violations.

No Action: It possible the public recreational opportunities could be significantly reduced if the property were sold to another party. Should energy or agricultural development occur, it would reduce the aesthetic and recreational quality of the area. Subdivision of the property would result in construction of more buildings which could impact the aesthetic value of the property.

4.2.7 Cultural/Historic Resources

Proposed Action: A cultural resources report for the property was conducted by the Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) to determine if any known cultural resources exist on this site. The report identified a cultural burial site and a rock cairn on the property.

The current landowner has indicated that although no formal inventory of the property has been done that the ranch has high cultural, historical, and paleontological value. The Milk River Ranch was identified by the Montana-Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council as having important cultural significance and supported its protection.

The protection of native habitats from agricultural development or subdivision will help protect the valuable cultural, historical, and paleontological resources on the property from disturbance. Increased recreational use by visitors may increase potential for unauthorized extraction of artifacts or fossils. MFWP could minimize this impact through signing at major access points and additional monitoring of the area.

Under the proposed action, the current owner would retain the rights to the archaeological and paleontological rights (but intends to deed them to Montana State University). Under the proposed purchase agreement, there are conditions limiting development of these resources. Some of these limitations include: the owner cannot disturb greater than 5 acres at one time; the owner must submit a reclamation bond to ensure adequate reclamation of any disturbed sites, the owner must also submit an operating plan for department approval prior to any development.

Any ground disturbing activities conducted by MFWP would require consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office and the owner regarding potential impacts to cultural or paleontological resources.

No Action: The impact to the cultural and historical resources on the property, if sold to another party, would be difficult to quantify. Agricultural conversion of native rangeland would likely have a negative impact on these resources. Subdivision of the property would lead to increased disturbance for the construction of buildings and roads and would have a negative impact.

4.3 Cumulative Impacts

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action the purchase of the property would result in the creation of a Wildlife Management Area. The native range on the property would be protected and connectivity along the Milk River corridor would be maintained in perpetuity. Wildlife and fisheries populations in the area would benefit from the protection of these habitats. Increased public recreational opportunities on the property would be protected in perpetuity. There are currently no plans for the construction of any buildings or other large structures on the property. There would be positive cumulative impacts if MFWP were to purchase the property and no foreseeable negative long-term or negative cumulative impacts of this action.

The proposed action of the 2,992 acres of the Milk River ranch would eliminate the future exploration and development of subsurface resource in perpetuity but would not limit such development on other nearby properties.

The purchase of the Milk River Ranch is a joint project between MFWP and DNRC. MFWP is primarily purchasing native Milk River riparian habitats and associated uplands. The DNRC purchase consists of native range and both irrigated and non-irrigated cropland. The DNRC manages trust lands to produce revenue for the trust while considering environmental factors and protecting the future income-generating capacity of the land. The combination of purchases by DNRC and MFWP would add an

additional 4,500+ acres of land available for public recreation creating a block of almost 10,000 acres of public land when adjacent public lands are included. The two agencies would manage their individual properties, but may work cooperatively on issues such as grazing and recreation management.

No Action: Sale of the property to another party and potential development of this property for either agricultural production or subdivision could have a negative long-term impact to wildlife and fisheries species in the region. The loss of native habitats on the ranch may also impact migration corridors and connectivity between wildlife populations in the U.S and Canada. The level of this risk is unknown because the future impacts to resources and public access would be dependent on the actions of a future property owner(s). Failure of MFWP to acquire this property would likely prevent DNRC from acquiring the property they are considering purchasing.

5.0 EVALUATION OF NEED FOR AN EIS

Based on the above assessment, which has not identified any significant impacts from the proposed action pursuant to ARM 12.2.431, an EIS is not required and an EA is the appropriate level of review. The overall impact from the successful completion of the proposed action would provide substantial long-term benefits to both the physical and human environment.

6.0 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

6.1 Public Involvement.

Public notification of this EA and opportunity to comment will be provided through the following means.

- A statewide press release
- Two public notices in each of these papers: Great Falls Tribune and Havre Daily News
- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners and interested parties
- Public notice and posting of the EA on the FWP web page, http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices
- There will be an informational meeting and public hearing on this proposal in Havre from 7-9 pm at the Hill County Electric Hospitality Room on 10/30/2012.

Copies of the EA will be available for public review at the Region 6 Headquarters in Glasgow and at the FWP area office in Havre.

6.2 Duration of Comment Period.

The public comment period will extend for 24 days starting October 17. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 pm on November 9th and can be mailed to the address below

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
ATTN: Milk River Ranch Acquisition
54078 Hwy 2 West
Glasgow, MT 59230

Or comments can be emailed to

shemmer@mt.gov

6.3 Offices/Programs contacted or contributing to this document

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Lands Bureau, Helena
- Legal Bureau, Helena
- Wildlife and Fisheries Division, Helena

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
Montana Natural Heritage Program, Helena

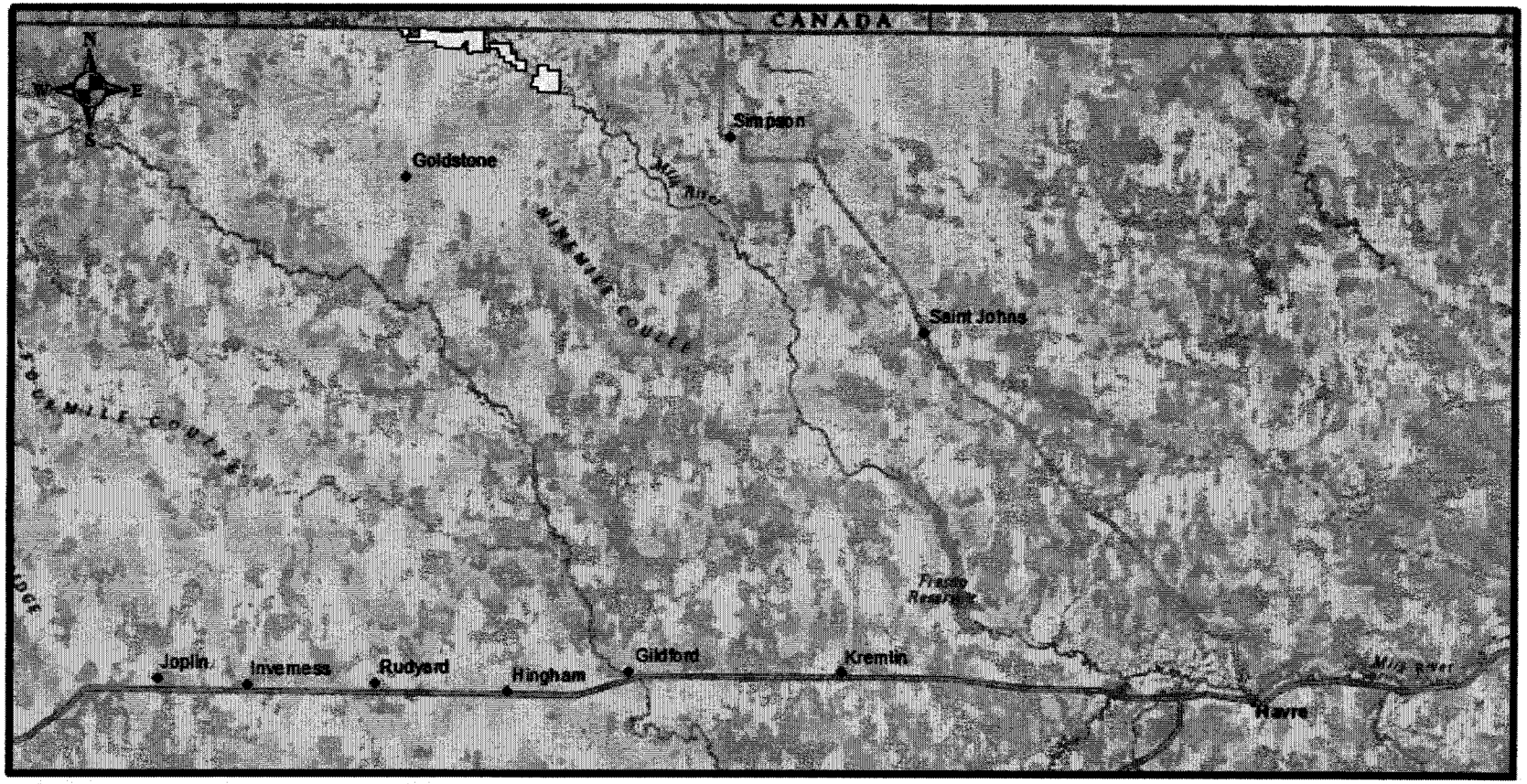
6.4 Person Responsible for Preparing the EA

Scott Hemmer
Havre Wildlife Biologist
Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
2165 Hwy 2 East
Havre, MT 59501
406-265-6177

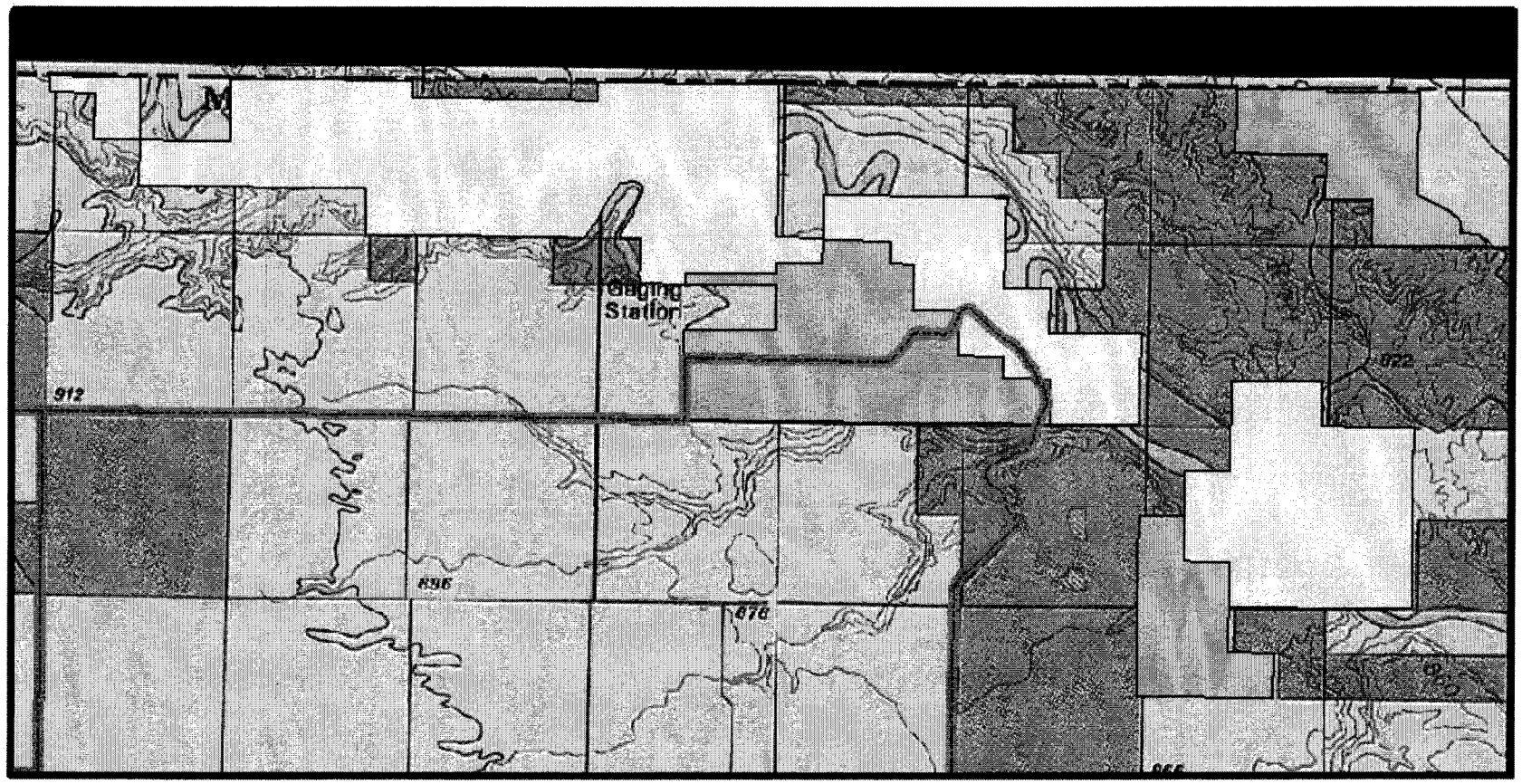
APPENDIX I

PROPERTY MAPS

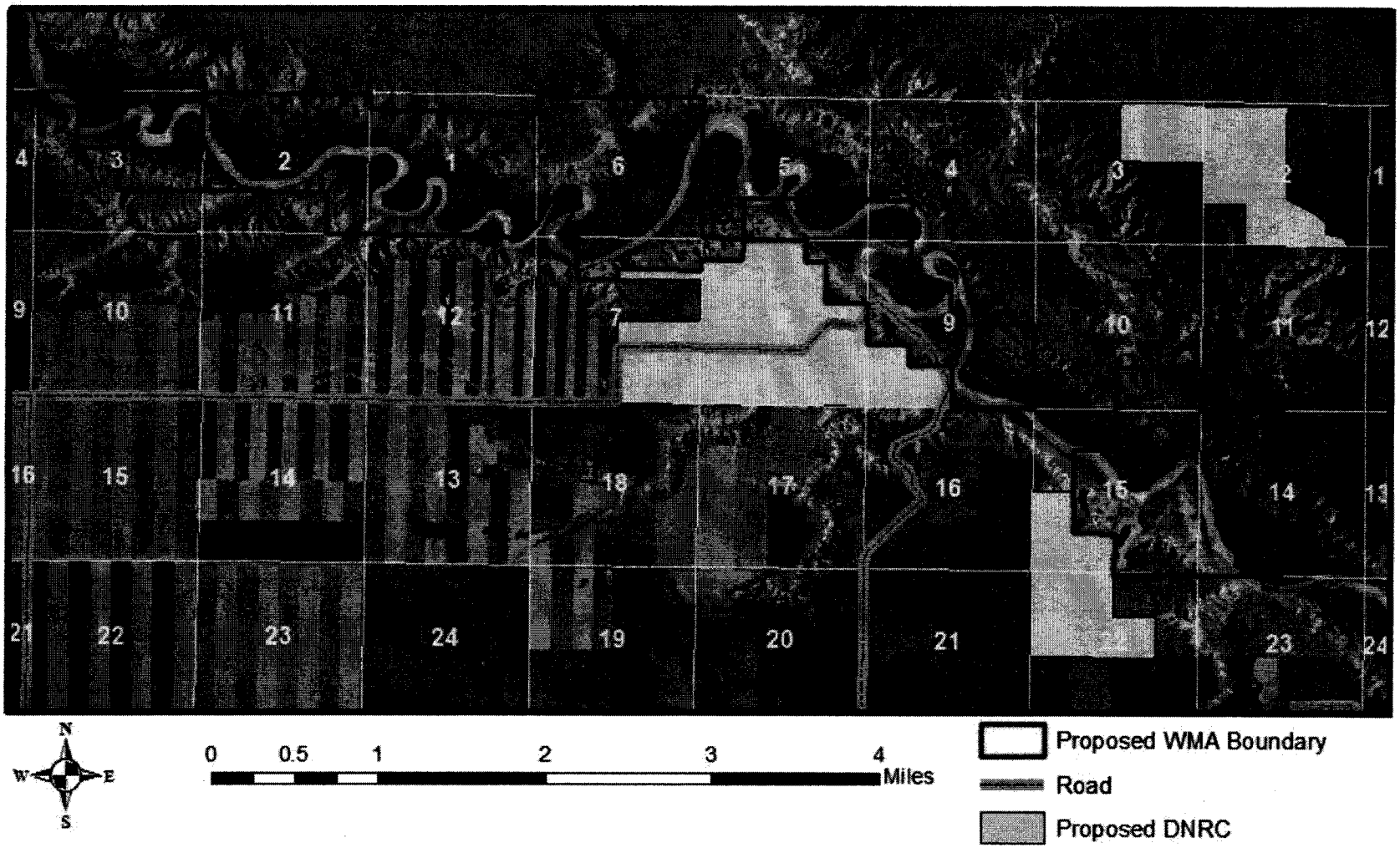
Milk River Ranch Location



Milk River Ranch Acquisition



Proposed Milk River WMA Boundary



Appendix II

Milk River Wildlife Management Area Draft Management Plan

INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MFWP) proposes to purchase fee-title ownership of 2,992 acres of property along the Milk River to establish the Milk River Wildlife Management Area (MRWMA). The property would consist of 10 miles of riverfront property along the Milk River. The native property on the ranch would be protected and the land would be managed to enhance hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and other recreational opportunities. This draft management plan is presented as a means of disclosing MFWP's management intent for the public to review.

PROPERTY DESCRIPTION

The Milk River Ranch is located 42 miles northwest of Havre and 27 miles north of Gildford along the U.S.-Canadian border. The property is located on both sides of the Milk River. The legal description for the property is:

Township 37 North, Range 9 East, P.M.M., Hill County, Montana.

Section 1: S1/2N1/2, S1/2

Section 2: Government Lots 9, 10, 11, 12, S1/2N1/2, N1/2S1/2

Section 2: SE1/4SE1/4 (Ref Deed Book 97, Page 257, Doc. #391459)

Section 3: Government Lots 9, 10, SE1/4NW1/4, N1/2SE1/4

Township 37 North, Range 10 East, P.M.M., Hill County, Montana

Section 4: SW1/4SW1/4

Section 5: S1/2SE1/4, SE1/4SW1/4

Section 6: Government Lot 5, that part of Government Lots 6 and 7 lying North of Milk River, Government Lots 12, 13, 14 and 15, SE1/4NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, S1/2SE1/4, SE1/4SW1/4, and that part of the S1/2NE1/4 lying North of Milk River and that part of N1/2SE1/4 lying North of Milk River. (Ref. Deed: Book 109 of Deeds, Page 473, Document No. 414020.)

Section 6: That portion of the S1/2NE1/4 and N1/2SE1/4 lying South of Milk River. (Ref. Deed: Book 117 Deeds, Page 283, Document No. 441040.)

Section 7: N1/2S1/2NE1/4NE1/4, N1/2S1/2NW1/4NE1/4, N1/2N1/2NE1/4, NE1/4NW1/4

Section 8: NE1/4NE1/4, N1/2SE1/4NE1/4, NE1/4NW1/4NE1/4, N1/2NW1/4NW1/4

Section 9: W1/2NW1/4, SE1/4NW1/4, N1/2NW1/4SW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, E1/2SE1/4SW1/4, SE1/4

Section 10: S1/2SE1/4

Section 14: W1/2

Section 15: SE1/4NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, E1/2

RESOURCE VALUES

Vegetation

The MRWMA consists primarily of native vegetation. The majority of the native vegetation types are riparian habitats and mixed-grass prairie. The habitat along the Milk River floodplain consists primarily of shrub-grassland communities dominated by silver sagebrush. In addition, there are smaller patches of cottonwood galleries and riparian shrub habitats interspersed along the river corridor. The prairie grassland habitats consist of a variety of warm and cool season grasses including fescue, western wheatgrass, green needlegrass and other native grass and forb species. A small portion of the property (< 100 acres) had be previously broken and planted into non-native tame pasture grasses. A large percentage of the property consists of badlands and cliff habitats found along the border between the riparian and upland habitats. Table 1 provides a rough estimate of the acreages of each habitat type based on GAP land cover data.

Table 1. Land cover of MRWMA based on GAP analysis

Northwestern Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairie	1010
Western Great Plains Badland	627
Northwestern Great Plains Floodplain	445
Inter-Mountain Basins Greasewood Flat	401
Open Water	255
Introduced Upland Vegetation – Forbland	123
Northern Rocky Mountain Lower Montane, Foothill and Valley Grassland	32
Northwestern Great Plains Riparian	29
Western Great Plains Cliff and Outcrop	27
Northwestern Great Plains Shrubland	26
Western Great Plains Sand Prairie	12
Western Great Plains Wooded Draw and Ravine	4
Western Great Plains Closed Depression Wetland	2
Western Great Plains Open Freshwater Depression Wetland	2

Wildlife

The wildlife resource value of the MRWMA is high and would provide substantial opportunities for hunting, wildlife viewing, trapping, and other wildlife-based recreational opportunities. Mule deer, elk, white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge, waterfowl, bobcats, mountain lions, and beaver are all found on the ranch in harvestable numbers. The variety of native habitats would also provide habitat for numerous nongame species of birds, small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. The proximity between this property and large tracts of protected native habitat in Canada including the Onefour Heritage Rangeland Natural Area, Kennedy Coulee Ecological Preserve, and the Milk River Natural Area, signify that this property may be important for wildlife migration and connectivity between meta-populations found on both sides of the border.

Fish

The Milk River along the MRWMA and directly downstream is known to provide habitat and fishing opportunity for a variety of fish species. The primary game fish species found along this stretch of the Milk River are burbot, sauger, walleye, yellow perch and northern pike. Nongame species would include fathead chub, black bullhead, silvery minnow, lake chub, longnose sucker, spottail shiner, stonecat and white sucker.

Cultural, Historical and Paleontological Resources

The current landowner has indicated the property contains substantial cultural, historical, and paleontological resources. Paleontologists from the University of Notre Dame have previously worked on the property and identified significant paleontological resources present. The ranch lies within the fossil rich Judith River Geologic Formation. The landowner reports that a fur trading post was one located along the Milk River on the ranch. The ranch also has been identified by the Montana-Wyoming Tribal Councils as having tepee rings, burial site, buffalo jumps and other culturally important sites.

Recreational Resources

The abundant wildlife habitats and populations found on the property provide ample opportunities for a variety of outdoor based recreational activities including wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing. The property would also provide a river access point and would expand opportunities for canoeing, floating, and fishing on the Milk River. This WMA would be 17 miles northwest of the Fresno WMA. The proximity of these two properties along the Milk River would increase overall recreational use of the area. A herd of 20-200 elk are intermittently present on the property and would provide good hunting opportunity. Mule deer, white-tailed deer, pronghorn, upland birds would all provide hunting opportunities on the ranch.

Improvement and Developments

This property is relatively undeveloped. There are no permanent residences on the property. There is a barn and several smaller outbuildings on the ranch. There are approximately 7.5 miles of fencing on the property. A smaller (1-acre) gravel pit is located on the property. There is a USGS water gauging station and weather station located on the property.

Natural Resources

The Milk River ranch would be managed primarily for the conservation and enhancement of fish, wildlife, and native plant communities found on the ranch. Tier I native riparian and grassland habitats will be a primary focus due to their high value in MFWP's Conservation Strategy.

AREA MANAGMENT

Vegetation Management

Goals: Promote the conservation of healthy, diverse native plant communities existing on the ranch. Contain and control the spread of existing noxious weeds and eradicate and new weed invasions before species can become established. Provide food and habitat for wildlife species found on the ranch.

Management strategies

1. Baseline vegetation monitoring
   - Conduct vegetation monitoring to evaluate range condition, utilization, and trend.
   - Potential vegetation monitoring techniques: photo plots, browse utilization, cover/composition vegetation transects
2. Grazing Management
   - The property currently is grazed by approximately 150-200 head of yearling cattle. After purchase of the property is completed a range evaluation will be conducted to determine if grazing could be used as a tool to manage the vegetation resources of the ranch.
   - Rest-rotation grazing- If grazing is continued on the MRWMA, a rest-rotation grazing system would be implemented. Additional interior fencing and water development would be necessary for a rest-rotation grazing system to be successful.
   - Coordination with DNRC- Several of the pastures on the ranch are contiguous with DNRC property. Grazing of these pastures would require consultation with DNRC to determine agreeable stocking rates, fencing, timing, water development and other grazing lease stipulations. If grazing were discontinued on the MRWMA, there would be a need to install additional fencing to separate MFWP and DNRC pastures.

3. Vegetation enhancement
    - Non-native grass reclamation- The majority of the ranch is native grassland, but approximately 100 acres of habitat had previously been converted to non-native grasses species. This acreage could be reseeded back to a native grass mixture or to a dense nesting cover seed mix that would be more beneficial to wildlife than the current species composition.
    - Riparian Shrubs- There would be potential for planting additional shrubs or shelterbelts in riparian areas along the Milk River to improve these habitats for many wildlife species. Another practice that could be undertaken to improve riparian tree/shrub cover would be potential fencing of riparian shrub areas to prevent overbrowsing by livestock and/or wildlife.

4. Noxious Weed Management
    - Conduct an inventory and map current weed locations
    - Develop a long-term weed management plan that may include biological, chemical, and mechanical treatment of noxious weeds.
    - Annually monitor roads and trails that are open to vehicles for new weed establishment.
    - Coordinate with Hill County Weed District to identify and control weed infestations

Fish and Wildlife Management

Goals: Protect and enhance wildlife and fisheries habitat to help ensure continued presence of both game and nongame species on the property. To provide public hunting and fishing opportunity to assist in meeting regional population objectives

Management Strategies

1. Identify existing wildlife resources
    - Conduct baseline surveys for important wildlife attributes, which may include raptor nests, bat hibernacula, sharp-tailed grouse leks, and any threatened or endangered species
2. Determine potential for establishing trend surveys on the ranch
    - Big game surveys
    - Lek counts
    - Pheasant crowing counts
    - Fish surveys
3. Sportsmen/Recreation Management
    - Identify existing motorized access routes
    - Minimize off-road vehicle use or use of closed roads through education and signing and minimize disturbance of wildlife and potential dispersal onto neighboring properties
4. Promote connectivity
    - Replace or modify existing fences with wildlife-friendly fence designs.
    - Evaluate and existing barriers to fish movement.
5. Trapping
    - Trapping on the WMA would be allowed, but the trapping would be only with written permission from MFWP and the number of individuals trapping on the WMA would be limited.

6. Hunting
    - Hunting would be allowed in accordance with all current rules and regulations

Recreation Management

Goals: Maximize public recreational use of the property while ensuring compatibility with neighboring private landowners to minimize impacts on adjacent private lands.

Management Strategies

1. Create a Travel Management Plan for the MRWMA
    - Designate roads open for motorized vehicle use.
    - The primary access point for the Ranch is from the south along County Road 145N. There may also be potential access available across state land to the east. Access to these state lands would be dependent upon determination of the legal status (e.g. county roads, section-line roads) of roads accessing these sections.
2. Restrictions
    - MFWP has developed general overall guidelines and restrictions for visitor use of WMA. Some of these restrictions include:
        - No off-road vehicle use
        - Certified weed free hay required
        - No cutting of trees or firewood
        - No organized dog training/field trials
        - Fires are allowed in portable camp stoves, fireplaces and fire rings, unless otherwise prohibited by emergency fire restrictions
        - Weapons discharge allowed only for lawful hunting purposes
        - No commercial use without a commercial use permit
        - No fireworks
        - No littering
        - No removal of natural resources
3. Fishing Access
    - Work with FWP fishing access site coordinator to determine any improvements needed to enhance fishing access on the WMA.
4. Minimize impacts to neighboring landowners
    - Sign primary access points and boundary fences to inform the public of the WMA property boundaries and decrease the potential for trespassing. Cooperate with Montana DNRC to mark the boundaries of contiguous state land boundaries
    - Cooperate with the county road department to address issues with impacts access roads and to minimize any dust problems
    - Provide garbage receptacles to help minimize littering.
    - Provide an MFWP presence on the property to discourage vandalism, littering, poaching, and other violations.

Appendix III

MILK RIVER RANCH

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA
ACQUISITION

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

OCTOBER 2012

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature and encoded in Sections 87-1-241 and 87-1-242, Montana Code Annotated (MCA), established policies and funding for the Habitat Montana program through which Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) acquires interests in land to secure, develop and maintain wildlife habitat. Acquisitions can be by fee title, conservation easement, or lease. In 1989, the Montana legislature passed House Bill 720, requiring that FWP prepare a socioeconomic assessment for Habitat Montana acquisitions. The purpose of the socioeconomic assessment is to evaluate any "significant potential social and economic impacts" of the acquisition on local governments, employment, schools, and local businesses.

FWP proposes to use a Federal funding source referred to as Pittman Robinson funds (PR) which requires a 25% match from Habitat Montana therefore this acquisition still requires a socioeconomic assessment be completed.

This socioeconomic assessment addresses Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' proposed purchase of approximately 2,992 acres in Hill County, to be managed as a Wildlife Management Area.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes the fee title acquisition of a portion of the Milk River Ranch or 2,992 acres. The Milk River Ranch is located 42 miles northwest of Havre along the U.S.-Canadian border in Hill County, Montana. The purchase of the Milk River Ranch is a cooperative acquisition between MFWP and the Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC). The DNRC is proposing to purchase an additional 1513.5+ acres of the Milk River Ranch. The parcels proposed for purchase by the DNRC consist primarily of a mixture of agricultural and grazing land.

The proposed acquisition of 2,992 acres by FWP consists primarily of Milk River riparian habitat and associated uplands. The property includes 10 miles of riverfront habitat along the Milk River.

A detailed description of the property and relevant maps are included in the Environmental Assessment.

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

The property proposed for acquisition is comprised of over 95% intact native habitat. The native habitat consists primarily of Great Plains floodplain vegetation communities which are predominantly silver sagebrush grassland, cottonwood/shrub riparian habitat, greasewood flats and native mixed-grass prairie and badlands habitats.

A detailed description of the habitat and wildlife found on this property is included in the Environmental Assessment.

C. Current Use

The Milk River Ranch is primarily a family owned livestock and small grain operation.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Land Management and Government Services:
The proposed land acquisition of the 2,992 acres would be managed to conserve and enhance the existing native vegetation communities and wildlife populations. There is no crop land on the property that FWP is proposing to purchase and thus no need for reseeding of these properties or other habitat restoration. The vast majority of the acreage proposed for purchase by FWP is native rangeland and these acres would not need any intensive habitat modification. The small portion of the rangeland that has been converted to non-native grass production could be reseeded to more wildlife friendly grass mixes if desired in the future. The possibility of continued grazing on the Milk River Ranch would be evaluated. If grazing is determined to be compatible with the wildlife values and goals of the ranch, a rest-rotation grazing system would be implemented. Additional costs to modify the fencing or water sources of the current grazing systems and conduct other habitat improvements on this property would primarily be funded through FWP's Habitat Montana and Upland Game Bird Enhancement Programs. There may also be potential to secure funding from federal habitat improvement programs or from nongovernmental conservation organizations.

Possible Habitat Improvement Programs on this property are:

1) Implementation of a rest-rotation grazing system
2) Reseeding non-native fields
3) Planting shelterbelts
4) Noxious weed control
5) Installation of wildlife-friendly fence designs.

No change in local government services is anticipated for the property, and there will be no residences or permanent residents. FWP game wardens who patrol the area that include the Milk River Ranch WMA will continue to patrol the acquisitional land and will continue to cooperate with local law enforcement.

FWP is developing a weed management agreement with the Hill County Weed District, specifying respective roles in control efforts for noxious weeds on FWP lands in the county. The agreement will address the responsibilities for treatment of noxious weeds along roads and paths to reduce the spread of weeds off-site and to stop new infestations before they spread. Weed infestations in the interior of the WMA will also be treated by joint efforts from the County Weed District and FWP, depending on the severity of infestation, weed district time and personnel constraints, and accessibility for equipment. The acquisitional lands to be acquired for the WMA will be subject to this agreement.

Economic Activity:
The financial impacts to local businesses (i.e., income and employment) are addressed by looking at the change in expenditures associated with the activities this property currently provides, compared to the activities that would occur under FWP's proposed land acquisition.

FWP acquisition of these 2,992 acres will make this currently private land available for public recreation, thus increasing opportunities for hunting, wildlife viewing, and (depending on management direction) river floating/camping. These uses can be expected to provide a minor boost to regional economic activity (such as food/lodging and sporting equipment sales) associated with hunting, floating and other outdoor recreation.

In sum, FWP ownership of the property could have a minimally positive impact on local economic activity through improved public recreational opportunities and the resulting effect on local businesses that provide related goods and services. The proposed acquisition will require no additional public services, except some additional weed control efforts consistent with the existing agreement.

Property Taxes:
The sale of the fee title land and subsequent title transfer to FWP will not change the tax revenue that Hill County currently collects on this property because, under Section 87-1-603, MCA, FWP is required to pay "to the county a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen." Current property taxes on the 2,992 acres that MFWP proposes to acquire are approximately $5,510 annually, and FWP will continue to make these payments based on the assessment provided by Hill County.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' fee title acquisition of approximately 2,992 acres will provide long term protection of wildlife habitat, maintain the rural open space integrity of the area, and provide additional opportunities for public recreation.

Overall, the acquisition will not have any "significant potential social and economic impacts." Rather, FWP ownership of the property is expected to have a minimally positive impact on local economic activity through improved public hunting opportunities. Placing this land in FWP ownership will not require any additional local government services. The land acquisition will not cause a reduction in county tax revenues on this property.