Hodges Property Acquisition
Prepared by Region One, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
May 29, 2008

DECISION NOTICE AND FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

FUNDING PARTNERS

OVERALL PROPOSAL

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to complete the fee-title acquisition of the 50-acre Hodges property near Thompson Falls. The cost for the property is approximately $450,000, with major funding coming from the Montana's Bighorn Sheep Auction Fund. This proposal represents an exciting collaborative bighorn sheep conservation project between Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Flathead Wildlife, Inc., Montana Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, the Five Valleys Chapter of Safari Club International, and a private individual. The Plains Junior High School collected 409,000 pennies to contribute to this bighorn sheep habitat conservation project during a "penny drive." Support has been voiced from Sanders County Commissioners, local legislators, hunters, wildlife watchers, and neighbors (see attachments). The Hodges project will conserve winter range and lambing habitat for the migratory Thompson Falls bighorn sheep herd in FWP Bighorn Hunting District 121. In addition to bighorn sheep, this property would be managed as a wildlife management area (WMA) to conserve and enhance habitat for a diversity of wildlife species in the lower Clark Fork region east of Thompson Falls, Montana. The acquired land would become the Bighorn Viewing Site WMA and be managed to provide a public recreation resource associated with the local wildlife populations, especially bighorn sheep.

SELECTED ALTERNATIVE

FWP recommends that the FWP Commission approve Alternative A, the proposed action in the draft EA. FWP would acquire the 50-acre Hodges property located in Sanders County, east of Thompson Falls. Through fee-title ownership, FWP would have the opportunity to protect this area from development and maintain its natural qualities. FWP would manage weeds and provide public access.

Alternative A compliments FWP's management of the Thompson Falls bighorn sheep herd and helps to maintain and manage habitat for a variety of wildlife and for a variety of compatible public uses.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

FWP received considerable public support for this proposal during project exploration and development. The draft EA was made available to interested individuals, groups, and agencies, and a public hearing at the Sanders County Courthouse in Thompson Falls was held on Monday, May 12, 2008, to discuss the proposal and receive public comment. All thirteen attendants spoke positively for the project. In addition, five written comments were received by FWP. Again, all were in favor of the proposal.

There was a 30-day public review, from April 28 through May 28, 2008. FWP has received all positive comments from the public regarding this project.

NEED FOR EIS and FINAL EA

After issuing the draft EA and completing public review, FWP does not believe this proposed action would significantly impact the social or physical environment and therefore believes this project does not need an environmental impact statement. FWP adopts the draft EA as the final EA.

THE DECISION

The Department proposes to complete the Hodges property acquisition as described in this decision document.

The final environmental assessment may be viewed at or obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region One, 490 N. Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901. Please direct comments/ questions to Bruce Sterling, FWP Area Biologist, (406) 827-4389 or e-mail to bsterling@mt.gov, or Jim Williams, FWP Wildlife Program Manager, (406) 752-5501 or e-mail to jiwilliams@mt.gov.

_____ _____

James R. Satterfield, Jr., Ph.D. Date
Regional Supervisor

Keeping in Touch

by Representative Pat Ingraham

Support sheep habitat project

During 2007, in accordance with House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks proposed, and successfully provided for several new or improved public accesses, for recreational purposes within Sanders County. They now are proposing another project for Sanders County, known as the "Hodges Habitat Conservation Project."

The proposed project is located in Sanders County in Section 15, Township 21 North, Range 28 West, and is located approximately 8 miles east of Thompson Falls on the north side of Montana Highway 200. The project area is approximately a 52 acre parcel. The land provides excellent fall, winter and spring habitat for bighorn sheep and some mule deer and includes the Bighorn Sheep Viewing Area, a popular tourist attraction maintained by the Lolo National Forest. The steep cliffs in this area provide the critical lambing areas for the bighorn sheep.

Fish, Wildlife and Parks, if the proposed project becomes a reality, will have the opportunity to maintain the habitat quality of the area and provide recreational opportunities as well as public access areas for the public.

The project will be funded with money from the Sheep Auction Fund, which derives money from the auction of a single bighorn sheep permit annually. Additional funding for this project is being provided by: Mr. Les Carpenter of Plains, Montana; Flathead Wildlife, Inc.; a Flathead Valley Rod and Gun Club; Five Valleys Chapter of Safari Club International; and, the Montana Chapter of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep.

There will be a public hearing on this proposed project Monday, May 12, 2008, at 7:00 p.m. in the County Courthouse at 1111 Main Street, Thompson Falls, MT. Additionally, there is a public comment period from April 28 through May 28 for those wishing to have their voice heard regarding the proposed "Hodges Habitat Conservation Project". For further information, or to submit your comments, please contact either Bruce Sterling, Area Wildlife Biologist, PO Box 35, Thompson Falls, MT 59873, telephone (406) 827-4380 and email at bsterling@mt.gov , or Jim Williams, Wildlife Program Manager, 490 North Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901, telephone (406) 752-5501 and email at jiwilliams@mt.gov.

For all of us who enjoy watching our Bighorn Sheep along Highway 200, remember to drive carefully, with a watchful eye, in order to keep you, your car and our Bighorn Sheep safe. They eagerly are grazing on our spring grass.

Now it's your turn to "Keep in Touch" by contacting me regarding your questions, concerns or comments. I can be reached via e-mail at pathd13@blackfoot.net, or call me at 827-4652 or mail me at P.O. Box 1151, Thompson Falls, Montana 59873.

MONTANA STATE SENATE

SENATOR JIM ELLIOTT

COMMITTEES:

TAXATION: CHAIRMAN
COMMITTEE ON COMMITTEES: CHAIRMAN
REVENUE AND TRANSPORTATION
RULES: VICE-CHAIRMAN
EDUCATION
WATER POLICY COMMITTEE: CHAIRMAN

May 13, 2008

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Commission
FWP Director Jeff Hagener
Box 200701
Helena, MT 59620

Dear Commissioners;

I'm writing to express my strong support for the Hodges Land Acquisition Habitat Conservation Project. In Sanders County we are lucky enough to have people like Ms Hodges who care so deeply about our heritage and wildlife that they are willing to make an economic sacrifice to protect them. Since I first became involved in public service I have had the good fortune to stand in support of the Calvin Wilson WMA acquisition and the Bud Cole Bighorn Sheep Habitat Conservation Project both in close proximity to the Hodges parcel.

For those of us in Sanders County purchase of the Hodges property will bring at least two bonuses; habitat for Bighorn Sheep and 52 acres of land that will remain open and not be developed. The difference between the appraised value that will be the purchase price to the Department and the value that the land could be sold for to developers is the substantial economic in-kind contribution that Ms Hodges is making.

The Department has everything to gain and nothing to lose by purchasing the property, and Montana will be the better for it, thanks to Ms Hodges and her father, the late Les Hodges, whose dream this was.

Sincerely,

Jim Elliott

Cc: Dee Dee Hodges
FWP Wildlife Biologist Bruce Sterling
FWP Region One Supervisor James R. Satterfield
Commissioner Victor Workman—District 1
Commissioner Dan Vermillion—District 2
Commissioner Steve Doherty—Chairman, District 3
Commissioner Willie Doll— District 4
Commissioner Shane Colton—Vice Chairman, District 5

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the Sanders County Ledger

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Thursday, May 8, 2008 · THOMPSON FALLS, MT

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The WEATHER

DATE	MAX.	MIN.	Record	PC.
Apr.	29	51	40	91/1987	.14
Apr.	30	50	30	85/1981	.05
May	1	54	33	85/1981	.00
May	2	67	28	86/1966	.00
May	3	65	32	87/1966	.00
May	4	74	33	89/1966	.00
May	5	70	37	92/1966	.00

Precip. 2008 to date 8.08. April precip. 1.25. T. Falls river flow 20,380 cfs; Plains river flow 19,300, Noxon River Flow 20,000; Thompson River - 1340.

State eyes sheep site acquisition

DeDe Hodges recalls 45 years ago Mother's Day when her dad took the family to look at an odd piece of land located about eight miles east of Thompson Falls.

The parcel was mostly mountain, but had a small field, an old orchard and she recalled, lots of junk vehicles and old buildings. There wasn't much wildlife on the place, but a story of a grizzly bear in the area showed animals were in the area. There weren't any bighorn sheep.

Little did the family know that 45 years later the site would become one of the best known sheep habitats and sheep viewing areas in Montana.

And now, says DeDe, her family's dream of having the public be able to more fully enjoy the property, is coming closer to reality.

A public hearing will be held Monday at 7 p.m. in the courthouse to gauge community support for a land acquisition proposal to aid bighorn sheep. The hearing looks at the purchase of 52 acres of the Hodges property

According to local state biologist Bruce Sterling, the land was identified as critical habitat and fell under a state program that looks at purchases of habitat for the protection of wildlife. Under a ranking system for habitat acquisition proposals, this project ranked first in region 1 and second in Montana, Sterling said. And thanks to a complication to the number one project, the Hodges acquisition is now the top ranked project in the state and slated for realization.

The property to be acquired includes about 52 acres of prime habitat along Highway 200 and the Clark Fork River and extending up the rocky slopes of the mountains to the east, is well known for the frequent occurrence of sheep at the site.

According to the draft environmental assessment for the project, the land offers exceptional habitat for bighorn sheep during the fall, winter and spring months. During those months, when feed is less plentiful on the higher slopes of the valley where the sheep would normally be found, the animals frequent the valley for food and water and then, more increasingly, the salt from magnesium chloride used to melt ice on the road.

The steep cliffs provide critical lambing habitat while the valley bottom provides grazing and

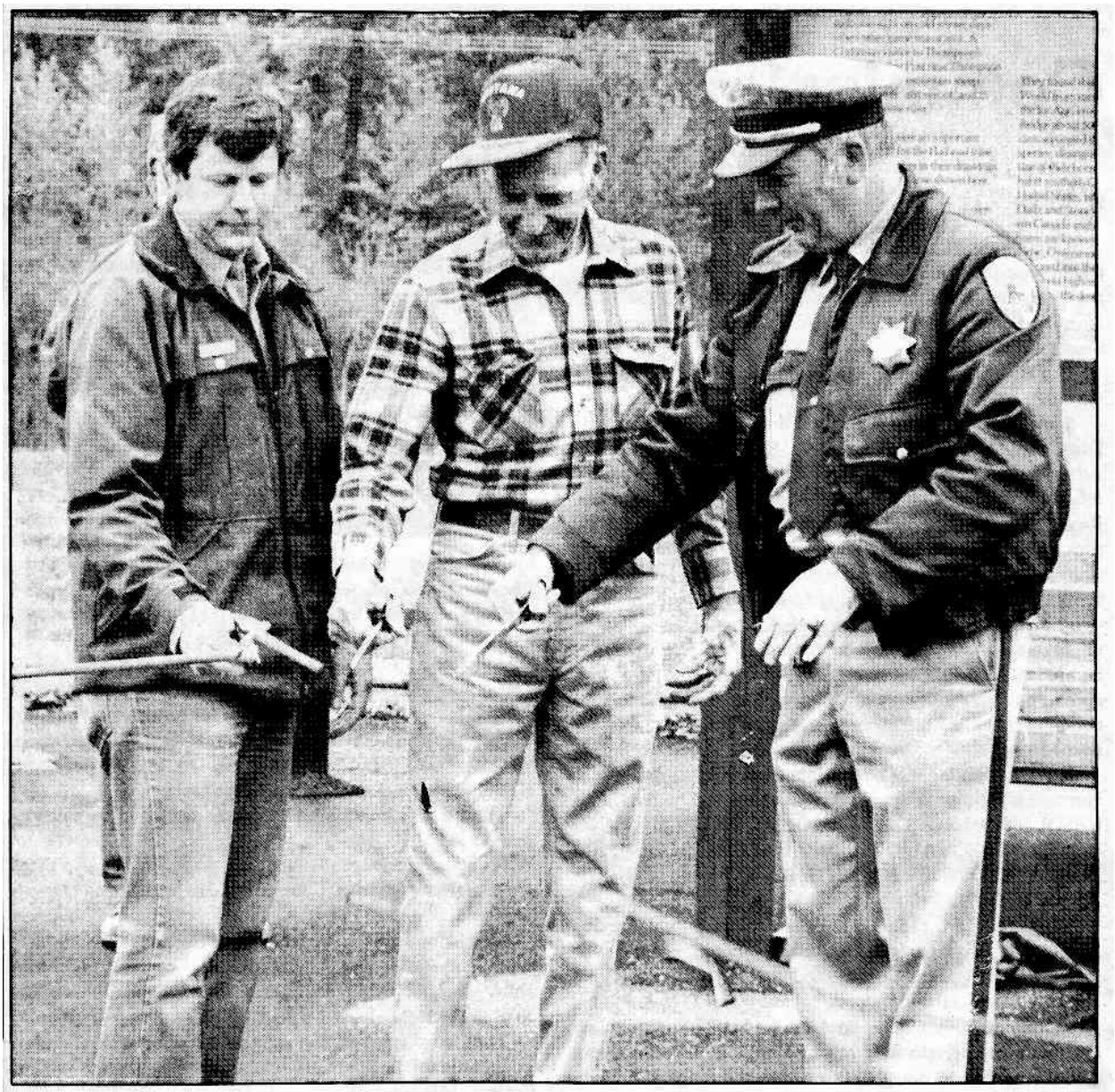
"It's a great project," Sterling told the Ledger. "It's great for wildlife, for the land owner, for the public and it will increase access to public lands."

Money for the acquisition will come from the proceeds the state receives from auctioning

Please turn to School votes page 12

Ledger photo

POPULAR AND IMPORTANT sheep viewing site along Highway 200 east of Thompson Falls is eyed as a wildlife management area purchase by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.



Ledger photo

DEDICATION of the sheep viewing site east of Thompson Falls last week included a formal ribbon cutting ceremony. Doing the honors were Bruce Sterling of the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; landowner Les Hodges and project organizer Harold Savik of Thompson Falls.

Twenty years ago, Bruce Sterling, Les Hodges, and Highway Patrolman Howard Savik celebrate the creation of the Bighorn Sheep Viewing and Interpretive Area on the Hodges property. In part, the viewing area was created to keep bighorn sheep watchers from parking on the highway and creating a safety hazard. Bighorn sheep viewing remains very popular to this day at this site.