



Region 2 Headquarters
3201 Spurgin Road
Missoula, MT 59804-3101
406-542-5500
January 20, 2010

Dear Interested Citizen:

Enclosed you will find for your review the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposal to acquire a 34,000-acre Wildlife Management Area and a 6,900-acre State Park in the Fish Creek drainage (approximate acreages), west of Alberton, in Mineral County. The purpose of this proposal is to secure critical fish and wildlife habitat and to enhance compatible recreational opportunities and access for the public.

FWP will hold a public hearing in Superior on February 2 (Tuesday) at 6:30 p.m. at the High School (multi-purpose room) to discuss the proposed acquisition and take public comment.

The EA may also be obtained by mail from Region 2 FWP, 3201 Spurgin Rd., Missoula 59804; by phoning 406-542-5540; by emailing shrose@mt.gov; or by viewing FWP's Internet website <http://fwp.mt.gov> ("Recent Public Notices," beginning January 21).

Comments should be directed by: mail to FWP Region 2, Attn: Fish Creek EA, 3201 Spurgin Road, Missoula 59804; phone to 406-542-5540; or email to FishCreek@mt.gov. Comments must be received by FWP no later than 5 p.m. on February 19, 2010.

As part of the decision making process under MEPA, I expect to issue the Decision Notice for this EA very soon after the end of the comment period. The Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission has the final decision-making authority for FWP land acquisition proposals, and the Commission will be asked to render its decision on this proposal at its March 11th meeting in Helena. Approval will also be necessary from the Montana Board of Land Commissioners.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mack Long". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping "M" and "L".

Mack Long
Regional Supervisor

ML/sr

DRAFT Environmental Assessment

Proposed Land Acquisition – R-2

Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area and Fish Creek State Park



January 2010



***Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks***

Table of Contents

1.0 Purpose of and Need for Action	4
1.1 Proposed Action and Need	4
1.2 Objectives of the Proposed Action	4
1.3 Location	5
1.4 Application to FWP Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Management Strategy	7
1.5 Authority	9
2.0 Alternatives	10
2.1 Alternative A – Proposed Action	10
2.2 Alternative B – No Action	11
2.3 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Further Analysis – Conservation Easement	11
2.4 Alternatives Considered but Eliminated from Further Analysis – Purchasing Only Portions	11
3.0 Affected Environment & Environmental Consequences	12
3.1 Land Use	12
3.2 Vegetation	13
3.3 Wildlife Species	15
3.4 Fisheries Species and Water Resources	18
3.5 Recreation Opportunities	20
3.6 Cumulative Effects	22
4.0 Resource Issues Considered but Eliminated from Detailed Analysis	22
4.1 Air Quality	22
4.2 Noise and Electrical Effects	23
4.3 Risk and Health Hazards	23
4.4 Public Services, Taxes, and Utilities	23
4.5 Cultural and Historic Resources	23
5.0 Need for an Environmental Impact Statement	24
6.0 Public Participation	24
6.1 Public Involvement	24
6.2 Offices/Programs Contributing to the Document	24
6.3 Duration of Comment Period	25
7.0 EA Preparation	25
References	25

Appendices

A – Draft Fish Creek State Park and Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area Map	A-1
B – FWP Fish Creek Project Interim Management Plan (separate attachment)	B-1
C – Map of Road Status (closed, open, gated, stored) (separate attachment)	C-1
D – Detailed Map of 2003 and 2005 Wildfires in Project Area	D-1
E – FWP Socio-Economic Report (separate attachment)	E-1
F – Mineral County Letter of Support	F-1

1.0 PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1. Proposed Action and Need

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) propose to purchase via fee title 40,945 acres from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in the Bitterroot Mountains south of Tarkio, Montana, which is part of the Middle Clark Fork River watershed.

The Fish Creek Project includes important upland and riparian habitats that FWP and the public have long recognized as having exceptional wildlife, fish, and recreation values. The following are highlights of the resource values FWP wants to protect:

- From a wildlife perspective, the proposed project would protect critical winter range for ungulates, as well as a very important linkage zone for forest carnivores (i.e. Canada lynx, grizzly bear, wolverine) between the Ninemile Divide and Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness (American Wildlands, 2008; Servheen et.al., 2003). The drainage also supports diverse populations of predators, furbearers, and upland game birds, as well as 31 terrestrial vertebrate species of concern that have been verified or are potentially found within the Fish Creek Project area (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2009).
- From a fisheries perspective, the proposed acquisition of these acres would ensure the protection of Fish Creek and its tributaries that supports important native fish populations, key trout spawning and rearing habitat, and an outstanding fishery. Additionally, the Fish Creek drainage is a FWP aquatic restoration priority, both past and ongoing.
- From a recreation perspective, the purchase of the TNC property would provide public ownership of an area that is already heavily used for recreation activities such as hunting, hiking, angling, sightseeing, motorized use, wildlife viewing, and camping. Portions of the property are adjacent to the Alberton Gorge, an FWP owned and managed section of the Clark Fork River that is popular for whitewater boating. Acquisition of these properties was prioritized in the 2007 Alberton Gorge Conceptual Plan (FWP, 2007) and would enhance the resource values and recreation experience of the Alberton Gorge. Acquisition of the property would also have potential for expanding recreation opportunities in the area and could include a developed campground, trail system(s), a fire lookout rental, and an equestrian campground.

1.2 Objectives of the Proposed Action

- To permanently protect portions of the Middle Clark Fork watershed.
- To maintain critical habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout.
- To protect and enhance critical winter range and other seasonal habitats for a diversity of wildlife.
- To preserve an important forest carnivore linkage zone between the Ninemile Divide and Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness.

- To designate a large acreage state park in western Montana. State Park.
- Creates a natural recreation linkage with the Alberton Gorge.
- To provide enhanced access and recreation opportunities for hunting, hiking, angling, sightseeing, wildlife viewing, floating, trail use, and camping

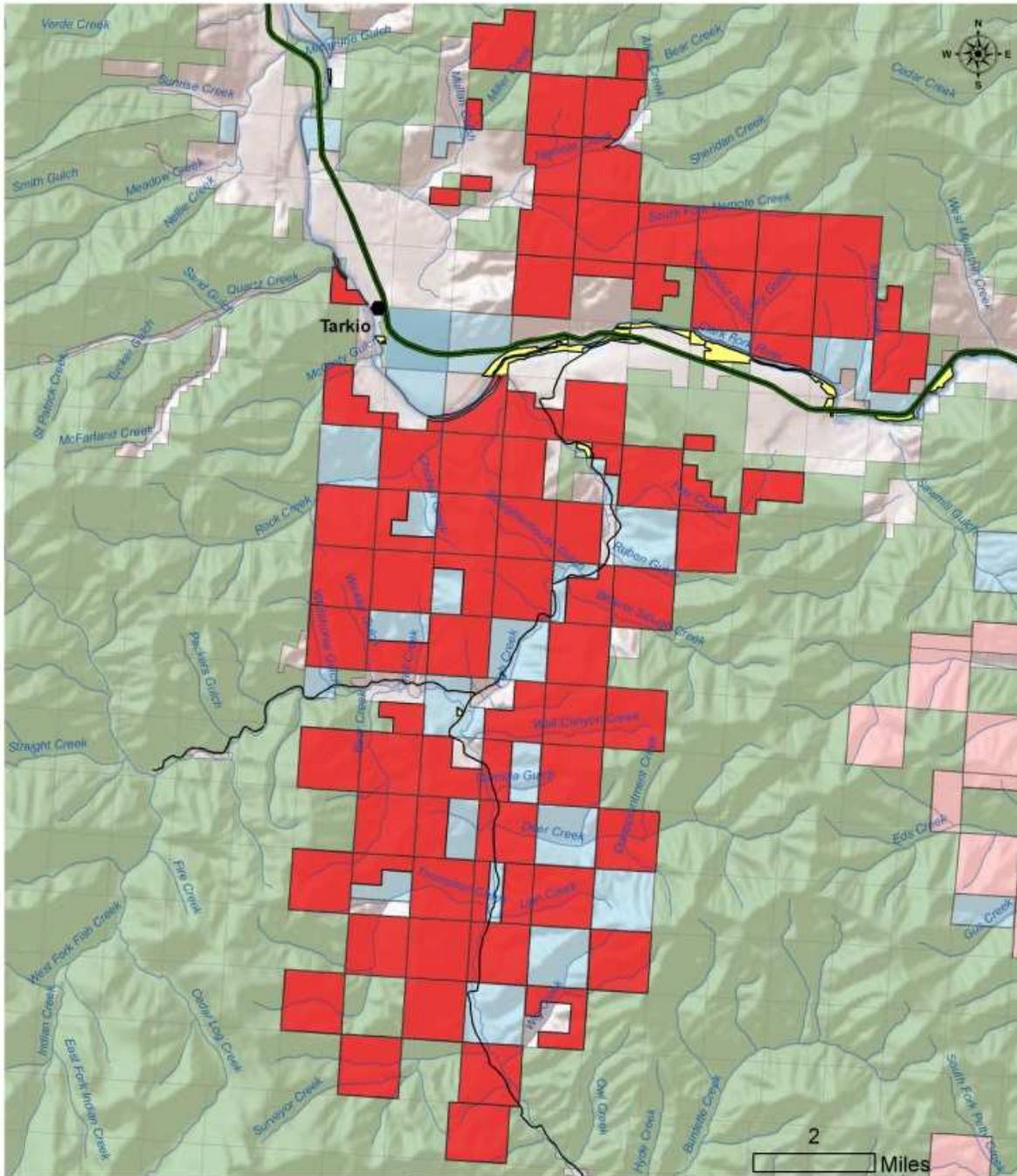
1.3. Location

Located approximately 41 miles west of Missoula, Montana near the town of Tarkio along Interstate 90. Portions of the property lay both north and south of the interstate. The property FWP is considering purchasing is marked in red on the following map.

Township & Range of the Property in general terms:

- 12N, 25W: All of Section 1.
- 13N, 24W: Portions of Sections 6, 18, and 29.
All of Sections 5, 7, 9, 17, 19, 21, and 31.
- 13N, 25W: Portions of 1, 12 and 14.
All of Sections 2, 3, 11, 13, 15, 23, 24, 25, 27, and 35
- 14N, 24W: Portions of Section 3, 6, 8, 10, 11, 17, 20, and 31.
All of Sections 5, 7, 9, 15, 18, 19, 21, 29, 32, and 33.
- 14N, 25W: Portions of Sections 1, 2, 3, 14, 24, 26, and 35.
All of Sections 11, 12, 13, 15, 22, 23, 25, and 27.
- 15N, 23W: Portions of Sections 30 and 31.
- 15N, 24W: Portions of 5, 8, 17, 18, 19, 28, 29, and 35.
All of Sections 7, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, and 30.
- 15N, 25W: Portions of Sections 1, 12, 13, 23, and 27.

Fish Creek Land Ownership



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

December 23, 2009
Data from: MFWP, TNC

Legend

- Main Fish Creek Roads
- The Nature Conservancy - Fish Creek
- The Nature Conservancy
- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Montana State Trust Lands
- US Forest Service
- Other Private

1.4 Application to FWP Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Management Strategy

There are two community types within the property that have been identified in the Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Management Strategy (CFWMS, FWP 2005), as Community Types of Greatest Conservation Need. Riparian/wetlands are a terrestrial community type and mountain streams are an aquatic community type of greatest conservation need.

Riparian and wetland communities support the highest concentration of plants and animals in Montana, including the highest density and diversity of breeding birds relative to other habitats. This property contains approximately 66 miles of high quality riparian habitat along Fish Creek and its tributaries bordered by dogwood, alder, and willows. Conifers, with a streamside understory of broadleaf shrubs, and scattered cottonwood and aspen, dominate most of the riparian habitat in the project area.

The table below lists the Species of Concern (SOC) with CFWMS Tier1 noted in blue that are predicted to occur within or in the vicinity of the property.

Species	Status	Habitat	Status in Fish Creek & Vicinity
SPECIES OF CONCERN			
Bull Trout <i>(Salvelinus confluentus)</i>	Threatened	Coldwater streams	Verified
Westslope Cutthroat Trout <i>(Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi)</i>	SOC	Coldwater streams	Verified in area - abundant
Canada Lynx <i>(Lynx Canadensis)</i>	Threatened	Subalpine conifer forests	Verified
Fisher <i>(Martes pennant)</i>	SOC	Mixed conifer forests	Verified
Fringed Myotis <i>(Myotis thysanodes)</i>	SOC	Riparian & dry mixed conifer forests	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Gray Wolf <i>(Canis lupus)</i>	Delisted, SOC	Generalist	Verified
Grizzly Bear <i>(Ursus arctos)</i>	Threatened	Generalist	Suitable habitat for expansion into the area
Hoary Bat <i>(Lasiurus cinereus)</i>	SOC	Riparian and forest habitats	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Spotted Bat <i>(Euderma maculatum)</i>	SOC	Arid land rock outcrops	Suitable habitat present along Clark Fork River
Townsend's Big-eared Bat <i>(Corynorhinus townsendii)</i>	SOC	Caves and mines	Suitable roost sites possible in or near area, foraging habitat present
Wolverine <i>(Gulo gulo)</i>	SOC	Conifer forests	Verified
Bald Eagle <i>(Haliaeetus leucocephalus)</i>	Delisted, SOC	Riparian forests	Verified. Nesting pair along Clark Fork. Possible nesting pair up Fish Creek.
Black-backed Woodpecker <i>(Picoides arcticus)</i>	SOC	Burned conifer forests	Verified near the area, suitable habitat (recent burns) within area
Boreal Chickadee <i>(Poecile hudsonica)</i>	SOC	Spruce fir forests	Limited suitable habitat, not verified
Brown Creeper <i>(Certhia Americana)</i>	SOC	Mixed conifer forests	Verified on forest service lands around the area, suitable habitat
Cassin's Finch	SOC	Conifer forests	Verified in the area

<i>(Carpodacus cassinii)</i>			
Clark's Nutcracker <i>(Nucifraga Columbiana)</i>	SOC	Conifer forests	Verified in the area
Flammulated Owl <i>(Otus flammeolus)</i>	SOC	Low-mid elevation conifer forests with large trees	Verified in the area
Golden Eagle <i>(Aquila chrysaetos)</i>	SOC	Generalist	Suitable habitat in the area, not verified
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch <i>(Leucosticte tephrocotis)</i>	SOC	Alpine	Limited suitable habitat may be present, needs evaluation
Great Blue Heron <i>(Ardea Herodias)</i>	SOC	Riparian woodlands	Verified in area
Great Gray Owl <i>(Strix nebulosa)</i>	SOC	Conifer forests	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Harlequin Duck <i>(Histrionicus histrionicus)</i>	SOC	Mountain Streams	Verified in South Fork Fish Creek south of area, limited suitable habitat present in the area
Lewis's Woodpecker <i>(Melanerpes lewis)</i>	SOC	Riparian forests	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Northern Goshawk <i>(Accipiter gentilis)</i>	SOC	Mixed conifer forests	Verified near the area, suitable habitat present
Peregrine Falcon <i>(Falco peregrines)</i>	Delisted, SOC	Cliffs near riparian or wetland habitat	Verified in area, nest site along Clark Fork River
Pileated Woodpecker <i>(Dryocopus pileatus)</i>	SOC	Conifer forests with large trees	Verified in area
Veery <i>(Catharus fuscescens)</i>	SOC	Riparian forests/shrubby habitats	Verified in area
Winter Wren <i>(Troglodytes troglodytes)</i>	SOC	Conifer/riparian forests	Verified in area
Northern Alligator Lizard <i>(Elgaria coerulea)</i>	SOC	Talus/rock outcrops	Verified near area, suitable habitat present
Western Skink <i>(Eumeces skiltonianus)</i>	SOC	Open conifer forests/grasslands	Verified near Alberton and Superior, suitable habitat present
Coeur d'Alene Salamander <i>(Plethodon idahoensis)</i>	SOC	Spring/seep, waterfalls, mossy talus	Populations verified in Woodman Creek to east, and Trout Creek to west, some suitable habitat in area
Western Toad <i>(Bufo boreas)</i>	SOC	Wetlands, lakes, floodplain ponds	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Magnum Mantleslug <i>(Magnipelta mycophaga)</i>	SOC	Moist conifer forests	Verified in W. Fork Petty Creek, suitable habitat in area
Rocky Mountain Dusksnail <i>(Colligyrus greggi)</i>	SOC	Cold freshwater streams and springs	Observed in Chicken Creek in 2004, record pending approval by MNHP
Western Pearlshell <i>(Margaritifera falcate)</i>	SOC	Coldwater streams	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Clustered Lady's-Slipper <i>(Cypripedium fasciculatum)</i>	SOC	Montana occurrences are mostly in warm, dry mid-seral montane forest in the Douglas fir/ninebark and grand fir/ninebark habitat types. Elsewhere in its range, it is in western red cedar habitat types.	Verified just west of area in 2000 survey. Timber harvesting has been the primary threat to the species in Montana.
Kelloggia <i>(Kelloggia galioides)</i>	SOC	Open forest in the valley and montane zones	Known in Montana from one 1971 collection in the South Fork Fish Creek valley

Northern Twayblade (<i>Listera borealis</i>)	SOC	Grows in seepy, marshy places along cold-air drainages, often where calcareous	Collected in 1971 in area
Western Joepy-weed (<i>Eupatorium occidentale</i>)	SOC	Rocky outcrops and slopes in the montane and lower subalpine zones	Herbarium specimen from 1975
Potential Species of Concern			
Hoary Marmot (<i>Lasiurus cinereus</i>)	PSOC	Alpine/subalpine meadows/rock outcrops	Limited suitable habitat in SW corner of area, not verified
Silver-haired Bat (<i>Lasionycteris noctivagans</i>)	PSOC	Riparian and forest habitats	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Hooded Merganser (<i>Lophodytes cucullatus</i>)	PSOC	Riparian forests	Limited suitable habitat in area, not verified
Rufous Hummingbird (<i>Selasphorus rufus</i>)	PSOC	Open and brushy forests	Verified in area
Tennessee Warbler (<i>Vermivora peregrine</i>)	PSOC	Mixed conifer forests	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Western Screech-Owl (<i>Megascops kennicottii</i>)	PSOC	Riparian forests	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
An Agapetus Caddisfly (<i>Agapetus montanus</i>)	PSOC	Fast-flowing streams	Verified in Burdette Creek south of the area
Fir Pinwheel (<i>Radiodiscus abietum</i>)	PSOC	Moist, rocky Douglas-fir or western red cedar forests	Verified at the southern edge of the area in Surveyers Creek in 2007
Additional Tier 1 Species			
Olive-sided Flycatcher (<i>Contopus cooperi</i>)	CFWCS Tier 1	Early seral forest/shrub patches, and burned forest	Verified in area

1.5 Authority

FWP has the authority to purchase lands that are suitable for game, bird, fish or fur-bearing animal restoration, propagation or protection; for public hunting, fishing, or trapping areas; and for state parks and outdoor recreation per Montana state statute 87-1-209.

Funding for the proposed acquisition would come from three sources: Access Montana Program, Habitat Montana Program, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Program. FWP has the authority to use each program's funds through the following laws or administrative rules:

- Access Montana: This program was established through House Bill 5 during the 2007 Legislature. Its purpose is for the land acquisitions, land leasing, easement purchase, or development agreement for state parks and fishing access sites.
- Habitat Montana: Under Administrative Rule 12.9.508-512, FWP has the authority to acquire wildlife habitat for a) the conservation of Montana's wildlife populations and natural communities to keep them intact for future generations; maintain wildlife population levels that sustain or enhance current recreation opportunities; and maintain diverse geographic distribution of native wildlife populations and their habitats, b) the conservation of Montana's land and water resources in adequate quantity and quality to sustain ecological systems, and c) the implementation of habitat management systems that are compatible with and minimize conflicts between wildlife values and traditional agricultural, economic, and cultural values.

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Program: Per 87-1-709 Montana Code Annotated (MCA), FWP has the power to acquire lands with federal funds for the one or more of the following purposes: a) protecting or maintaining habitat conditions for fish or wildlife species by placing land under public control or ownership, b) developing or improving habitat conditions to enhance carrying capacity, and/or c) providing public access for the use of fish and wildlife resources.

Per state law, 87-1-201MCA, FWP is required to contribute to a special revenue account called the forest management account to be used to address fire mitigation, pine beetle infestation, and wildlife habitat enhancement giving priority to forested lands in excess of 50 contiguous acres in any state park, fishing access site, or wildlife management area under the department’s jurisdiction.

FWP is also required to establish a maintenance account for property acquisition involving more than 100 acres or \$100,000 in value (87-1-209 and 23-1-127 (2) MCA). Such an account would be used to for weed maintenance, fence installation or repair of existing fences, garbage removal, implementation of safety and health measures required by law to protect public, erosion control, streambank stabilization, erection of barriers to preserve riparian vegetation and habitat, and planting of native trees, grasses, and shrubs for habitat stabilization. Such maintenance activities should be consistent with the good neighbor policy.

Additionally, Montana state statute 23-2-102 provides authority for the proposed purchase. “Montana is uniquely endowed with scenic landscapes and areas rich in recreational value. This outdoor heritage enriches the lives of citizens, attracts new residents and businesses to the state, and is of major significance to the expanding tourist industry. It is the purpose of this part to give authority to the department of fish, wildlife, and parks to plan and develop outdoor recreational resources in the state, which authority shall permit receiving and expending funds including federal grants for this purpose.”

2.0 ALTERNATIVES

2.1. Alternative A – Proposed Action: For FWP to Purchase 40,945 acres from The Nature Conservancy

FWP proposes to purchase via fee title 40,945 acres in the Bitterroot Mountains that includes the Fish Creek, Rock Creek, and Nemote Creek drainages, south and north of Interstate 90 respectively, near Tarkio MT.

This very large property would be divided into two separate management areas. Approximately 6,900 acres south of Interstate 90 adjacent to Fish Creek and the Clark Fork River would be designated as a state park. The remaining acres (~ 34,000) would be designated a wildlife management area. Final boundaries will be described in the Decision Notice. Both portions of the property would be managed separately by the Parks Division and Fish & Wildlife Division of FWP but in cooperation to ensure the objectives of the acquisition are met. See *Appendix A* for a map showing the preliminary state park and wildlife management area boundaries.

For the immediate future, FWP has drafted an interim management plan for the property that is attached as *Appendix B*. The interim management plan would direct FWP management of the state park and WMA components during the 36 months following acquisition that would likely be required to develop a final management plan.

Future recreational development opportunities exist on the properties, particularly on the state park component. Those opportunities could include a developed campground, establishment of a trail system, a fire lookout rental, and equestrian campground.

Both a final management plan and any recreational development will be the result of a public involvement process that includes a public meeting and an environmental assessment process, with opportunity for input and discussions with the public and neighboring property owners.

Expected cost of acquisition is \$14,350,000, subject to adjustments after the property appraisal is completed. Anticipated funding resources to be used and percentage of support are: Access Montana Program (14%), Habitat Montana Program (28%), and federal Pittman-Robertson Program (58%), which are base upon the approximate sizes of the state park and wildlife management area.

Challenges of the proposed acquisition include: the oversight and enforcement of management strategies and existing FWP rules throughout the property for public safety and service, as well as protecting resource values. For the immediate future, no new FWP staff are planned to be hired to manage the property.

2.2 Alternative B – No Action: FWP would not purchase the Fish Creek Project Property

Under the No Action Alternative, FWP would not purchase the Fish Creek lands from The Nature Conservancy (TNC). TNC would likely research other selling options that may jeopardize their ability to protect the entire habitat community as one unit. The possibility would exist that some parcels would be subdivided and developed, and continued public recreational access would be jeopardized.

2.3 Alternative Considered but Eliminated from Additional Analysis: FWP Purchase a Conservation Easement for Property

This alternative was briefly discussed but eliminated from consideration because TNC is only interested in selling the property at this time.

2.4 Alternative Considered but Eliminated from Additional Analysis: FWP Purchase a Portion of the Property

FWP considered whether to purchase only the lands most suitable to be managed as a Wildlife Management Area (WMA), using only the limited funding sources dedicated for that purpose. Similarly, FWP considered whether to purchase only the lands most suitable to be managed as a State Park, using only limited funding sources dedicated for that purpose. FWP also briefly considered other configurations of prospective WMA and Park lands that would leave some of the subject parcels in TNC ownership. This alternative was eliminated from further

consideration in developing this proposal because the acreage in its entirety uniquely matches FWP program objectives, and potential future fragmentation of any parcels excluded from this proposal would compromise the benefits of the project.

3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENT CONSEQUENCES

EXISTING AND ONGOING ACTIVITIES ON THE PROPERTY

Under TNC ownership in 2009, The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited collaboratively improved stream connectivity and stream crossing conditions, planted and stored (ripped and reseeded) closed roads, and began weed control efforts in many drainages within the proposed acquisition. Accomplishments from 2009 include approximately 37 miles of road storage, removal of approximately 43 culverts and cross drains, weed treatment along open and closed road systems, and revegetation of more than 3,500 feet of streambank along the main stem Fish Creek and South Fork Fish Creek corridor where Fish Creek Road encroaches on the stream. Work will continue in 2010 as Trout Unlimited and S&K Environmental Restoration have received grant funding to carry on similar work, with a focus in areas impacted by wildfires in 2003 and 2005.

3.1 LAND USE

The Fish Creek project property has long been used for forest resource (timber) production, although no active timber harvest is currently in progress. Timber management was administered by Plum Creek Timber Company (PCT) and its predecessor, Champion International. It was during this latter phase that heavy removal of forest canopy was done and the dense network of access roads was constructed into every part of the property south of the Clark Fork River. Parcels north of the river have also been heavily logged by PCT.

There is a total 521 miles of road within this property, the majority lie behind locked gates and are not open to public motor vehicle access. The vast majority of roads are abandoned logging roads with approximately 115 miles (22 %) open to the motoring public. The remaining roads are either blocked by metal gates or impassible due to downed trees or poor road conditions. The following chart is a summary of the road status as of July 2009, with these roads mapped in *Appendix C*.

Status	Miles
Open – Year Round	115
Closed - Gated	348
Closed - Barrier	10
Seasonal - Gated	10
Stored *	38
Total:	521

* Road ripped and reseeded

Proposed Action:

The ownership of the roads with the Fish Creek Project property is a mix of private and public, with none owned or maintained by Mineral County, with the exception of the access road that connects Rock Creek and the community of Rivulet. The Forest Service owns main arterial roads in the area. A complete inventory of road ownership will be completed by FWP to ensure roads are maintained by the appropriate party to ensure public safety and signed accordingly to direct public access.

Timber harvest is not an immediate need on this property. After acquisition, FWP would develop a vegetation management plan, with the view that fires and logging may have benefited wildlife by setting back forest succession and increasing the production of herbaceous and woody forage for big game. Emphasis would be placed on the control of existing weed occurrences, and the prevention of new introductions. Replanting of trees may be appropriate to enhance riparian areas. Existing forest stands would be inventoried for management opportunities to promote the recruitment of large trees in multi-storied stands to benefit wildlife. Commercial firewood cutting would be prohibited, and private wood gathering would be very limited, if allowed.

Any mineral interests owned by TNC attached to the parcels would be transferred to FWP. Final determination of those interests is pending. Water rights attached to the project property would also be transferred to FWP.

There are no active grazing leases on the property and FWP would not anticipate introducing livestock.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, there is a high degree of likelihood that TNC would attempt to find another buyer for this property. It is TNC's preference to sell the property as a single unit in order to preserve the aquatic and terrestrial habitats and its associated values. However if one cannot be found, TNC may consider selling the property in smaller parcels, which would increase the likelihood that one or more homes would be built in each parcel. This would increase the probability that habitat function would be compromised and would decrease the likelihood of public access to these lands to continue for current land uses.

3.2 Vegetation

Plant community distribution primarily is dependent on elevation, aspect, moisture regimes, and fire history. Elevation throughout the Fish Creek Project area varies from approximately 3,150 feet along the main stem of Fish Creek, to 6,110 feet at the headwaters of Wig Creek in the southeastern portion of the Project area. The vegetation patterns and habitat types within the subject area were shaped by large-scale fire events in 1910, 1917, 2003, and 2005, as well as subsequent, intensive logging. Approximately 22% of the project area (9,208 acres) was subjected to wildfires in 2003 and 2005 (USFS, 2009). (See *Appendix D* for a map identifying the zones impacted.) In those locations, re-vegetation of timber has been limited, but shrubs, forbs, and grasses are re-establishing the landscape. In areas outside of the 2003 and 2005 fire perimeter, commercial logging occurred throughout the property, leaving a mosaic pattern of timber regeneration.

Lower montane and foothill forest comprise approximately 22,000 acres of the Project area and are dominated by mesic (Douglas fir [*Pseudotsuga menziesii*], ponderosa pine [*Pinus ponderosa*], western larch [*Larix occidentalis*]) and dry-mesic (Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine) mixed conifer forest types (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2009). Vegetation on winter range slopes is comprised primarily of habitat types of the Douglas-fir climax series (Pfister et al. 1977), with ponderosa pine/bluebunch wheatgrass (*Agropyron spicatum*) dominating xeric, southerly exposures at lower elevations (Murphy, 1983). Lowland grassland and shrubs cover 7,683 acres of the Project area (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2009) and include bluebunch wheatgrass, ninebark (*Physocarpus valvaceus*), and snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*).

Cool and moist, to moderately dry subalpine habitat types dominate the upper elevations of many of the tributaries. Common conifers in these areas include lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta*), subalpine fir (*Abies lasiocarpa*), Engelmann spruce (*Picea engelmannii*), and Douglas Fir.

Within the riparian areas, western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) habitat types occupy warm and moist sites in drainages on the west side of Fish Creek that have not been exposed and compromised by extensive timber harvest. Seral black cottonwood (*Populus trichocarpa*)-ponderosa pine communities occur along Fish Creek and in some of the side drainages on the east side of the main stem.

The presence of invasive weed species pervades along both active and abandoned roadways, and all other sites that have been disturbed by human activities. Exotic weed species include spotted knapweed (*Centaurea maculosa*), St. Johnswort (*Hypericum perforatum*), sulphur cinquefoil (*Potentilla recta*), and cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*). In lesser quantities, there is dalmatian toadflax (*Linaria dalmatica*), leafy spurge (*Euphorbia esula*), common hound's-tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*), and meadowhawk weed (*Hieracium pretense*). Since taking ownership in 2008, The Nature Conservancy has implemented large-scale weed spraying throughout the drainage. These efforts are expected to continue in 2010.

Proposed Action: Before the completion of the acquisition, FWP would complete a weed inspection per 7-22-2154(1) MCA, which requires nonfederal government agencies to obtain a weed inspection by the county weed district and requires the development of a weed management plan to ensure compliance with district noxious weed management programs. Through the implementation of FWP's 2008 Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan (Available at <http://fwp.mt.gov/content/getItem.aspx?id=32626>), FWP would comply with district programs. There would be a decrease in noxious weeds over time on the property after the plan's implementation and overall habitat health would improve.

No Action: By not purchasing the property, FWP would not protect important aquatic habitat for bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout, crucial winter range for elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer, and moose, and an important forest carnivore linkage zone connecting the Ninemile Divide with the Bitterroot Mountains and Wilderness. In addition, FWP would not be able to provide hunting, fishing and other recreational opportunities associated with the project area. If TNC retained the property and sold it to another buyer, the exact level of this risk is unknown

since the future impacts to resources and public access would be dependent on the desires of the property's new owner(s).

3.3 Wildlife Species

The Fish Creek drainage is a very high priority forest carnivore linkage zone (American Wildlands, 2009; Servheen et. al., 2003), with important upland and riparian habitats that provide seasonal and year-round use by a variety of species, especially wintering ungulates. There is a minimum of 182 wildlife species (57 mammals, 115 birds, 5 amphibians, and 5 reptiles) that biologists have either verified on or near the property, or are likely to be found within the drainage. Of those, 31 terrestrial vertebrate species of concern (SOC) have been verified or are potentially found within the Fish Creek Project area, with 12 of those identified as Tier 1 species (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2009; FWP, 2005). Also, there are six potential species of concern (including one Tier 1 species), and one additional Tier 1 species, which was recently removed from the SOC list. All of these numbers represent a minimum estimate, as wildlife biologists have not extensively surveyed the property for wildlife. With all the above-mentioned wildlife resource values, the Fish Creek Project area also provides exceptional hunting, trapping, and wildlife viewing opportunities, as well as access to adjacent roadless areas and the Proposed Great Burn Wilderness.

The Fish Creek land acquisition by FWP will help protect the wildlife linkage area from Cyr, west to Tarkio, but especially the linkage zone on the northwest portion of the project area. As one of the highest wildlife priorities for protection in the Fish Creek Project, the most intact portion of the identified linkage zone is included within the WMA and incorporates the South Fork of Nemote and Martel Mountain on the north side of I-90, crossing just east of Tarkio and including Rock Creek to Rivulet on the south side of the Clark Fork River (Servheen et. al., 2003). This linkage zone provides broad-scale landscape connectivity for forest carnivores (grizzly bear [*Ursus arctos*], Canada lynx [*Lynx Canadensis*], wolverine [*Gulo gulo*], and others) from the Mission and Rattlesnake Wilderness areas, through the Ninemile Divide, to the Selway-Bitterroot Mountains and Wilderness. Providing connectivity among ecosystems is essential for maintaining viable populations and recovering forest carnivores that are threatened, endangered, or SOC.

Grizzly bear, Canada lynx, and wolverine activity has occurred within the Fish Creek drainage or on its adjacent lands, but there still is much to learn about their overall utilization of these habitats. Grizzly bear activity has been documented to the northeast of Fish Creek in the Ninemile drainage, to the east in portions of Petty Creek, and to the southwest in Kelly Creek, Idaho. With grizzlies continuing to expand their range, biologists expect the subject property to be an important connection to-and-from the Northern Continental Divide, the Selway-Bitterroot, and the Cabinet-Purcell ecosystems.

The same holds true for Canada lynx and wolverine. Lynx historically were in the Fish Creek drainage, but a decline in their populations, as well as timber harvest practices has limited their use of the area. FWP furbearer harvest data revealed that a lynx was harvested in Fish Creek in 1985, but since the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the species as threatened on March 24, 2000, trappers are no longer permitted to harvest these animals. Based upon the U.S. Forest Service's delineation of Lynx Analysis Units, the upper reaches of Bear, Thompson, Surveyor,

and Wall Canyon creeks continue to provide suitable lynx habitat within the Fish Creek Project area (USFS, 2009). Wolverine may use these drainages and other habitats in Fish Creek as well, to travel to-and-from an important movement corridor to the west and south of Fish Creek along the Montana/Idaho state line. Recent genetic analysis of wolverine and spring snow pack data revealed that the Fish Creek drainage may be a stepping stone to this major movement corridor (Schwartz et al., In Press).

The Fish Creek drainage also provides significant winter range and other seasonal habitats for elk (*Cervus elaphus*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) and moose (*Alces alces*). It also supports diverse populations of predators, furbearers and upland game birds, including black bear (*Ursus americanus*), mountain lion (*Puma concolor*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), mountain grouse and wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*). The intact, productive riparian corridors of Fish Creek and its tributaries have exceptional habitat for white-tailed deer and moose, while the drier upland slopes provide forage and browse for mule deer. White-tailed deer and mule deer are abundant throughout the year. Moose also are observed quite often, and are occasionally harvested within the subject property.

The subject property provides nearly 34,000 acres of winter range for approximately 500 elk. Compared to previous years, these elk numbers are lower than average, especially for the Burdette elk herd. The Burdette elk herd once was considered one of the more significant elk populations in western Montana and was the subject of three graduate studies (Lemke, 1975; Zahn, 1974; Bohne 1972). Those studies, which included neck-banded and radio-collared elk, described population demographics, seasonal movements and habitat use of the population. Although the Burdette Creek drainage is to the southeast of the project area, a portion of those elk winter in Wig Creek, Feather Gulch and Lion Creek. Also, the majority of these elk migrate through Cache, Surveyor, and Thompson creeks to their summer ranges in the Proposed Great Burn Wilderness and into portions of Idaho. Other critical elk winter range within the project area include lands just east of Lion Point, the main stem of Fish Creek, Whitehorse Gulch, Winkler Gulch, the lower portion of Trail Creek and lands to the east, Camilla Gulch, Wall Canyon, Hay Creek, lands just south of the Clark Fork River, Round Hill, Martel Mountain, and the lower portions of the South Fork of Nemote Creek.

Black bear, wolf, and mountain lion populations in the Fish Creek drainage provide the public with numerous wildlife viewing and hunting opportunities. Black bear populations are doing well because of late season precipitation in the spring and summers of 2008 and 2009, resulting in exceptional berry crops and other forage. Accordingly, black bear productivity and recruitment is expected to be high in 2010.

Wolves have been present in Fish Creek since the early 1990s. The first known pack was the Kelly Creek Pack, which used Kelly Creek (ID) and the South Fork of Fish Creek for several years beginning in 1991. Biologists speculate that this pack broke off into three separate packs – one of which is now the Fish Creek pack. Currently, four known wolf packs (Cache Creek, Fish Creek, Bitterroot Range, and Big Hole) use the Fish Creek drainage to some extent. FWP had its first wolf-hunting season in 2010, but no wolves were harvested in the Fish Creek drainage.

Mountain lion hunting is popular during the winter season, with approximately 90 lions harvested within the Project area and on its adjacent lands over the last 30-years. From 1979-1982, a graduate student studied hunting pressure and mountain lion populations in the Fish Creek drainage (Murphy, 1983). The study revealed average lion densities of 7.1 lions/100km². Lion densities fluctuate with the availability of prey species, competition with other lions and other predators, hunting pressure, and environmental conditions. Since 2008, FWP has managed lions on a permit system in hunting districts (HD) 201, 202 and 203.

Upland game birds can be found on the subject property and include ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*), dusky grouse (*Dendragapus obscurus*), spruce grouse (*Falcapennis canadensis*), and wild turkey. Merriam turkeys are present in the northern portion of Fish Creek as a result of FWP translocating 34 (14 jakes and 20 hens) in January 2007. As per the initial translocation environmental assessment, two to three follow-up transplants may occur over a 10-year period. Additional transplants would improve genetic diversity within the population, as well as increase hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities.

There have been numerous non-game species surveys within the project area or adjacent to the property. The Fish Creek Breeding Bird Survey (BBS) Route, which runs along upper Fish Creek and the West Fork of Fish Creek, recorded 76 bird species between 1995 and 2008. Many of the most common species recorded on the BBS route were species primarily found in riparian habitats, including willow flycatcher, yellow warbler, MacGillivray's warbler, and song sparrow. Cottonwood riparian and wetland areas on the property are limited, yet they support the highest diversity and density of songbird species, relative to other habitats on the property. Riparian and wetland habitats provide breeding sites and travel corridors for amphibians, support the highest density and diversity of small rodents and shrews, and are the most important foraging habitat for most bat species. One-third of the species listed on the SOC or PSOC list are either dependent on riparian habitat or use it as one of their primary habitats.

The Avian Science Center surveyed birds in forested areas in and adjacent to the subject property, including harvested areas and burns and riparian areas. The most common species recorded were Swainson's thrush, American robin, chipping sparrow, and dark-eyed junco. These species are typical of second-growth forests in western Montana. They also detected several Species of Concern, including Cassin's finch, pileated woodpecker, calliope hummingbird, Clark's nutcracker, and winter wren.

Remnant stands of mature forest on the property are especially important for species such as northern goshawk, brown creeper, fox sparrow, golden-crowned kinglet, ruby-crowned kinglet, gray jay, Hammond's flycatcher, hermit thrush, Nashville warbler, pileated woodpecker, pine grosbeak, Townsend's warbler, varied thrush, boreal chickadee (if present), winter wren, hoary bat, and silver-haired bat.

The property supports several areas of burned forest that was not salvage-logged. Burned forest provides very important habitat for a variety of wildlife species, when the dead trees are left standing. Species most common in (or in some cases, dependent on) post-fire areas include black-backed woodpecker, American three-toed woodpecker, lazuli bunting, hairy woodpecker, and olive-sided flycatcher. Secondary cavity nesting birds, such as mountain bluebird, are often

more common in burned forest as they respond to the higher supply of nesting cavities left by higher woodpecker populations.

Low-elevation ponderosa pine (especially mature forest) is especially important for Cassin's finch, Clark's nutcracker, Hammond's flycatcher, western tanager, and flammulated owl. Mature low-elevation ponderosa pine is relatively rare in western Montana, as this was the most accessible forest to commercial timber harvest.

Large diameter snags at mid-to lower elevations are especially valuable as roosting sites for maternity colonies of silver-haired bats, long-legged myotis, fringed myotis, California myotis, and long-eared myotis. Pileated woodpeckers, flammulated owls, bald eagles, golden eagles, and great blue herons depend upon large-diameter trees (live or snags) for nesting.

There are active bald eagle and peregrine falcon territories on the Clark Fork River in or adjacent to the property. The rocky outcrops along the river provide nesting and roosting habitat for birds of prey, and potentially support several species of bats, reptiles, songbirds, and mammals. Talus slopes on the property provide roosting habitat for several species of bats, and those with large rocks may support pikas. Full inventory and monitoring efforts have yet to be undertaken to confirm the presence of these and other potentially unidentified species.

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, FWP would protect and enhance the entirety of the wildlife linkage area (in the northwest portion of the Project Area), and significant winter range under the full funding and management authority of its Habitat Montana Program and the Pittman-Robertson Act by including these lands within the WMA. The Fish Creek land acquisition would secure protection of the forest carnivore linkage zone in the project area, providing important habitat connectivity to-and-from the Northern Continental Divide, the Selway-Bitterroot, and the Cabinet-Purcell ecosystems. It would also protect and enhance wildlife movement corridors along riparian habitats, which would also benefit migratory songbirds, small mammals, amphibians, and fish (fish species are described in Section 3.4). In addition, FWP would maintain hunting, trapping, and wildlife viewing opportunities.

No Action: If no action were taken, FWP would not protect crucial winter range for elk, white-tailed deer, mule deer and moose, as well as an important forest carnivore linkage zone that provides important habitat connectivity to-and-from the Northern Continental Divide, the Selway-Bitterroot, and the Cabinet-Purcell ecosystems. Consequently, the persistence of connected wildlife populations in the Lower Clark Fork watershed would be placed in greater long-term risk. In addition, FWP would not be able to provide hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities associated with the project area. If TNC retained the property and sold it to another buyer, the exact level of this risk is unknown since the future impacts to resources and public access would be dependent on the desires of the new property owner(s).

3.4 Fisheries Species and Water Resources

Fish Creek is the largest tributary basin within the middle Clark Fork River drainage. It is a wild and productive watershed with unusually high fisheries and aquatic value. Fish Creek supports some of the best remaining native fish populations in the area, provides a major source of salmonid recruitment for the Clark Fork River, and offers an excellent trout fishery throughout

most of its reaches. Most tributaries within the watershed offer high quality spawning and rearing habitat for trout. Intact tributary habitat, excellent water quality, consistent instream flows and good connectivity among stream and river reaches have made Fish Creek a stronghold for migratory (fluvial) bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*) in western Montana. Fish Creek currently supports more fluvial bull trout redds than all other middle Clark Fork tributaries combined and the drainage contains numerous (>20) westslope cutthroat trout populations, many of which are genetically non-introgressed. Other fish species present include mountain whitefish (*Prosopium williamsoni*) and sculpins (*Cottus* spp.), as well as introduced brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*), brown trout (*Salmo trutta*) and rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*). The main stem and primary forks provide a popular trout fishery that supports > 2,000 days of angler pressure annually.

Lands proposed for acquisition by FWP include portions of many tributary streams and key sections of the Fish Creek main stem and South Fork. Parcels in Bear Creek, Deer Creek, Thompson Creek, Surveyor Creek and other tributaries represent important spawning and nursery areas for native trout, as well as key sources of recruitment for the Clark Fork River. Parcels along the main stem and South Fork provide public access for anglers and make up the migratory corridor that connects the upper watershed with the Clark Fork River. Lower reaches (including the mouth) also offer an invaluable thermal refuge for Clark Fork River fish during the summer as water temperatures are typically 8-12° F cooler in Fish Creek.

The proposed land acquisition includes portions of several other, smaller tributary drainages that lie outside of Fish Creek. Two of these, Rock Creek (just west of Fish Creek) and Nemote Creek (north of the Clark Fork River), exhibit perennial flows in upper reaches and support fish. Both of these streams contain non-introgressed westslope cutthroat trout populations in headwater reaches, but neither stream is readily accessible to fish from the Clark Fork River for spawning due to anthropogenic migration barriers (primarily transportation crossings).

Aquatic Restoration in Fish Creek

Because of its high aquatic value and native fish populations, the Fish Creek drainage has been a focus area for fisheries enhancement and watershed restoration for the past decade. Public agencies and private conservation groups have partnered to improve connectivity among stream and river reaches, restore riparian areas and, most recently, to mitigate impacts of intensive forest road construction and timber management. Cumulatively, these efforts have significantly improved the probability of long-term sustainability for fish and other aquatic populations.

Ensuring aquatic connectivity between stream and river reaches has been a priority in Fish Creek. The upper watershed contains > 50 miles of roadless and intact stream habitat that provides outstanding spawning and rearing environments for trout and other species. In many instances, movement among these habitats was limited by undersized or poorly installed road crossings. From 1999-2003, FWP and Lolo National Forest personnel catalogued and prioritized locations that were limiting fish migration and movement. Many of these problems were located on parcels in the proposed acquisition, but nearly all of them have been corrected over the past five years.

The Lolo National Forest and other land managers have also been working to enhance overall watershed health by improving forest road conditions. Many miles of non-essential forest roads have been stored and reclaimed in the past decade. This work includes removal of undersized culverts and crossings that represent sources of sediment and long-term failure risk. Recent fires in Fish Creek have expedited much of this watershed restoration work, including major projects in Deer Creek, Bear Creek, and other tributaries.

The most recent major restoration effort in Fish Creek was initiated and led by The Nature Conservancy (TNC) when they purchased the remaining parcels owned by Plum Creek Timber Company. In 2008 and 2009, TNC and Trout Unlimited collaboratively worked to improve watershed conditions on TNC lands (now proposed for acquisition by FWP). This work included correction of several of the priority fish passage barriers previously identified, storage of > 37 miles of closed forest roads (including removal of numerous culverts), large-scale weed spraying and replanting of native vegetation. This work will continue at a much larger scale within the project area in 2010 (led by Trout Unlimited), with a focus on fire rehabilitation and restoration of key tributary watersheds such as Surveyor Creek, Thompson Creek, Deer Creek and Bear Creek

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, water resources within the target property would be maintained or enhanced by protecting riparian areas. There are no proposed changes that would result in increased discharge, changes in drainage patterns, alteration of the creeks’ course (including flooding), changes in the quality or quantity of groundwater, and/or changes in water rights or other water users. Protection of existing cold, clean, complex, and connected native salmonid habitat critical to bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout would be maintained. Furthermore, FWP would have the ability to continue its habitat restoration projects for the benefit of imperiled aquatic species.

No Action Alternative: If FWP decides not to exercise its right to purchase the property, it is unknown if any of the water resources (riparian areas, wetlands) would be affected by another buyer’s plans if TNC sold the property in the future.

3.5 Recreation Opportunities

Current recreation opportunities consist of hunting, hiking, fishing, sightseeing, motorized use, whitewater boating, wildlife viewing, and camping.

All of the Fish Creek Project property lies within hunting districts 201, 202 and 203. The area is highly valued and heavily used by Montana hunters each fall. TNC has maintained Plum Creek Timber’s previous open access policy and currently manages the property for unrestricted “walk-in” hunting. Below is a summary of hunter usage of the hunting districts in 2008.

	Deer	Elk
HD 201	16,956	13,803
HD 202	10,954	8,485
HD 203	9,710	9,700
Total Hunter Days:	37,620	31,988

Currently, TNC has permitted one outfitter access to the property south of I-90 for hunting activities and there is one fishing outfitter reporting use of Fish Creek (personal communication with Montana Board of Outfitters, January 2010).

FWP manages two fishing access sites (FAS) within the target property south of Interstate 90, Big Pine along Fish Creek and Forks on the West Fork of Fish Creek. These sites are very popular for camping and facilities at each site include a latrine and five campsites. During the peak season (May – September) usage levels for Big Pine were estimated at 9,643 visitors.

Additionally, the Alberton Gorge, a 20-mile section of the Clark Fork River, flows through the property. The Gorge is known regionally for its class III/IV whitewater and beautiful scenery. Due to its location near Missoula and easy access via Interstate 90, the Alberton Gorge sees a high number of visitors, with summer use estimated to be nearly 24,000 user days annually (FWP, RMU Research Summary No. 5, 2001).

In 2004, FWP acquired roughly 300 acres of property along the Alberton Gorge to conserve recreation and wildlife resource values. FWP has since prioritized remaining land parcels for future acquisition that would expand conservation of the Alberton Gorge. The Fish Creek property contains some of these parcels, including the mouth of Fish Creek, a popular stopping point for many floaters through the Alberton Gorge.

Proposed Action: Public ownership of approximately 41,000 acres of private land with an “open access” management policy, will preserve opportunities for recreational activities at the property such as: hunting, hiking, angling, motorized use on open routes, floating, trapping (otter, bobcat, muskrat, beaver, and mink), and camping. Recreation would be managed in accordance with applicable FWP rules and regulations.

With the large size of this property and limited resources, there will likely be challenges associated with managing recreation on the property. These challenges could be related to: resource inventory, enforcement coverage, vandalism, maintenance, visitor service, facility development, etc. For the immediate future, existing FWP staff will have to manage the property.

The FWP Commercial Use Rules govern commercial use of FWP owned and managed lands. Commercial uses such as hunting and fishing, mountain bike concession or other public private partnerships could be permitted on the state park component in accordance with FWP commercial use rules. Commercial fishing and hunting outfitting would not be permitted on any portions of the wildlife management area.

No Action: If FWP decides not to exercise its right to purchase the property, TNC would likely continue their current open access policy and allow recreation activities to continue until another buyer(s) is discovered. Future access for public recreation opportunities under different ownership would be difficult to analyze since it is unknown what a new owner(s) might have planned for such a diverse property. However, there would be a high likelihood that the public's access to free hunting and other recreational opportunities would be seriously restricted, if

granted at all, if this property were sold to a private party, and other public agencies such as DNRC have already declined to purchase this property.

3.6 Cumulative Impacts

Proposed Action -- The proposed purchase would contribute to the conservation of wide-ranging wildlife such as wolverine, lynx, grizzly bear, and other species for which a functional connection of the Cabinet-Purcell, Northern Continental Divide, and Bitterroot Ecosystems is essential for recovering threatened, endangered, and sensitive species and maintaining viability of numerous other wide-ranging species such as elk, black bear, and mountain lion. Similarly, the protection of Fish Creek and its tributaries would contribute to the perpetuation of native trout populations in the larger Clark Fork watershed. Continuing public access to the subject lands would contribute to recreational opportunities that require larger landscapes of mixed ownership, such as public hunting and river rafting. In turn, local and regional economies and lifestyles tied to the unique presence of expansive fish, wildlife, and recreation resources would be maintained and likely enhanced.

No Action-- If no action were taken, the perpetuation of critical habitat suitable for maintaining fish and wildlife metapopulations in the Lower Clark Fork watershed would not be assured. Maintaining crucial winter range for ungulate populations may be compromised under no action, and a cumulative loss of threatened, endangered, and sensitive fish and wildlife species would be risked as well. The potential loss of public access to the Fish Creek lands would contribute to a cumulative loss of public access to corporate timberlands regionally, as significant parcels have been sold and subdivided in recent years. The opportunity for an economy to be maintained and expanded on the basis of unique fish, wildlife and recreation resources would be compromised.

4.0 RESOURCE ISSUES CONSIDERED BUT ELIMINATED FROM DETAILED ANALYSIS

The Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) provides for the identification and elimination from detailed study of issues, which are not significant or which have been covered by a prior environmental review, narrowing the discussion of these issues to a brief presentation of why they will not have a significant effect on the physical or human environment or providing a reference to their coverage elsewhere (ARM 12.2.434(d)). While these resources are important, they were either unaffected or mildly affected by the proposed action, or the effects could be adequately mitigated.

A few issues were found not to be significant to the decision and were eliminated from further detailed analysis.

4.1 Air Quality

Under either alternative, there are likely to be no changes to the ambient air quality since neither FWP nor TNC plan any construction or development activities that could affect particulate levels and air quality.

4.2 Noise and Electrical Effects

Since TNC has been managing the property as open for public recreation activities, and FWP will likely have a similar management approach, the potential for changes in noise levels is expected to be minimal. The potential for changes in noise levels will depend on FWP approaches to managing type, timing and location of recreation activities.

Existing electrical structures to private in-holdings and easements would not be affected by either alternative.

4.3 Risk and Health Hazards

As part of FWP's due diligence, the Department would complete a hazardous materials survey prior to the property's acquisition. Flyover survey was completed and another survey is planned by ground-truthing the flyover data and investigation of historical materials of the area.

4.4 Public Services, Taxes & Utilities

The Fish Creek property fee title purchase by FWP will provide long term protection for wildlife habitat in these watersheds, maintain the open space integrity of the land, enhance public recreation opportunities and improve the overall management on the property. This purchase will not reduce the tax revenues that Mineral County collects on this property under Montana Code 97-1-603. FWP is required by Montana Code 87-1-603 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 taxes on this land are approximately \$50,000 per year based on the current assessment.

The financial impacts to local businesses from this purchase will be neutral to positive given that recreational opportunities will not be negatively impacted and FWP will be working to address weed issues, etc. (See *Appendix E*, FWP Socio-Economic Report)

In conjunction with any acquisition, except that portion of acquisitions made with funds provided under 87-1-242(1), FWP is required to include 20% of the amount of purchase price or \$300,000, whichever is less, to be used for maintenance of the property, consistent with the good neighbor policy (87-1-209 MCA).

4.5 Cultural & Historical Resources

The Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) completed a cultural resource file search for the Fish Creek Project parcels and reported that there are a few previously recorded sites within the project area. Most of the sites are associated with the historic Mullan Road, Milwaukee Railroad, and stage services along the Clark Fork River corridor. A fire lookout tower is also present on the property.

FWP's proposed acquisition would have a positive affect on any cultural or historical resources by securing and managing them in public ownership. By Montana law (22-3-433 MCA), all state agencies are required to consult with the State Historic Preservation Office on the identification and location of heritage properties on lands owned by the state that may be adversely impacted by a proposed action or development project. It is uncertain if unrecorded historic sites would be affected by the activities of an owner other than FWP.

5.0 NEED FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? No. Based upon the above assessment, which has identified a very limited number of minor impacts from the proposed action, an EIS is not required and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

6.0 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

6.1 Public Involvement

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- One statewide press release;
- Two legal notices in each of these papers: Helena's *Independent Record*, *Missoulian* and *Mineral Independent*;
- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners and interested parties;
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>

Copies of this EA will be available for public review at FWP Region Headquarters in Missoula and Helena and on the FWP web site.

A public meeting will be held on February 2nd from 6:30 - 8:00 p.m. in the Superior High School in the multi-purpose room to provide the public a venue to submit comments and have questions answered by FWP staff. This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having few limited physical and human impacts.

FWP has also met with the Mineral County Commission and local resources groups (i.e. Fish Creek Working Group) regarding the potential acquisition. (See *Appendix F*, Mineral County Letter of Support.)

6.2 Offices/Programs contacted or contributing to this document:

Mineral County Commission

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

Fisheries Bureau, Missoula

Lands Bureau, Helena

Legal Bureau, Helena

Parks Division, Missoula

Wildlife Bureau, Missoula

Montana Natural Heritage Program, Helena MT

Montana State Historic Preservation Office, Helena MT

The Nature Conservancy, Missoula MT

U.S.D.A Natural Resources Conservation Service, Soil Survey Database

6.3 Duration of Comment Period

The public comment period will extend for (30) thirty days beginning January 21st. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., February 19, 2010 and can be mailed to the address below:

Fish Creek Project
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 2 Headquarters
3201 Spurgin Rd.
Missoula, MT 59804 or email comments to: FishCreek@mt.gov

7.0 EA PREPARATION

Rebecca Cooper, MEPA Coordinator, Helena, MT
Lee Bastian, FWP Regional Parks Manager, Missoula, MT
Mike Thompson, FWP R-2 Wildlife Manager, Missoula, MT
Chet Crowser, FWP River Recreation Manager, Missoula, MT
Vickie Edwards, FWP Wildlife Biologist, Missoula, MT
Kristi DuBois, FWP Non-game Wildlife Biologist, Missoula, MT
Ladd Knotek, FWP Fisheries Biologist, Missoula, MT

REFERENCES

American Wildlands. 2008. Priority Linkage Assessment Reports.
<http://www.wildlands.org/programs/corridors/pla>

Bohne, J.R. 1974. Food habits, seasonal distribution, and habitat utilization of elk in the South Fork of Fish Creek, Lolo National Forest, Montana. Master's Thesis, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana. 187pp.

Lemke, T. 1975. Movement and seasonal ranges of the Burdette Creek elk herd, and an investigation of sport hunting. Master's Thesis, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana. 127pp.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2005. Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Management Strategy.
<http://fwp.mt.gov/specieshabitat/strategy/default.html>

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2001. Responsive Management Unit Research Summary No. 5.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2007. Alberton Gorge Conceptual Plan.

Montana Natural Heritage Program. 2009. Montana Animal Species of Concern, July 2009.

Montana Natural Heritage Program (MTNHP). 2009. Montana Land Cover/Land Use Theme. Based on classifications originally developed by the University of Idaho, Sanborn and MTNHP for the Pacific Northwest ReGAP project. Helena, Montana.

Murphy, K.M. 1983. Relationship between a mountain lion population and hunting pressure in Western Montana. Master's Thesis, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana. 48pp.

Pfister, R. D., B. L. Kovalchik, S. F. Arno, and R. C. Presby. 1977. Forest habitat types of Montana. U.S. Dep. Agric., For. Serv., (Ogden, Utah), Gen. Tech. Rep. INT- 34.

Schwartz M.K., J.P. Copeland, N.J. Anderson, J. R. Squires, R.M. Inman, K.S. McKelvey, K.L. Pilgrim, L.P. Waits and S.A. Cushman. (In Press). Wolverine gene flow across a narrow climatic niche. 11pp.

Servheen, C. R., R. Shoemaker, and L. Lawrence. 2003. Wildlife Use in Relation to Structure Variables for a Sampling of Bridges and Culverts Under I-90 between Alberton and St. Regis, Montana. *In* Proceedings from the Conference of Wildlife Ecology and Transportation, 2003.

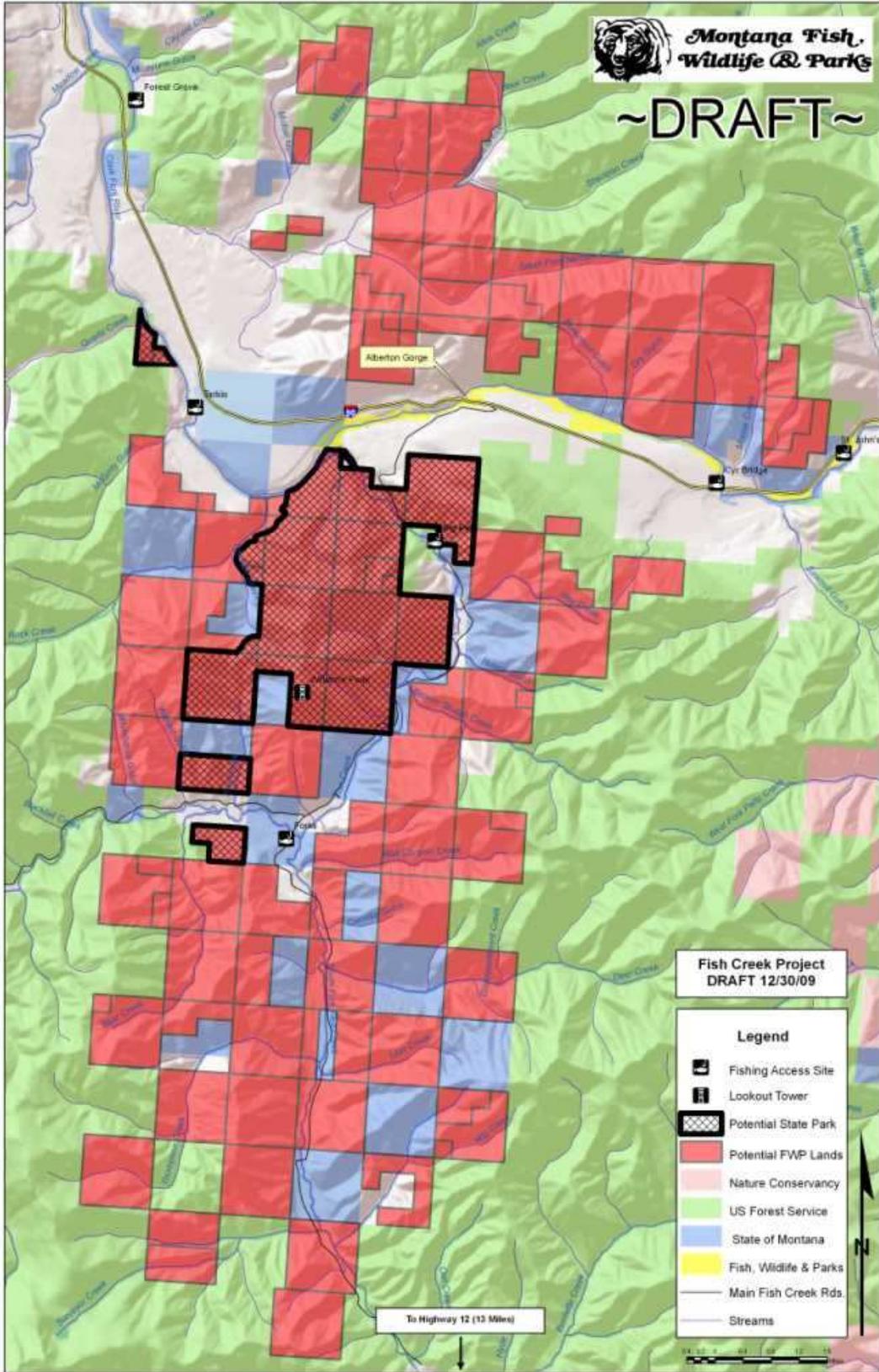
U.S. Forest Service. 2009. Geospatial data for Lynx Analysis Units, Fire History Polygons (1980-04/02/08) and Lolo Fire History (1870-1980) obtained on December 12, 2009 from http://fs.usda.gov/wps/portal/fsinternet!/ut/p/c5/04_SB8K8xLLM9MSSzPy8xBz9CP0os3gjAwhwtDDw9_AI8zPwhQoY6IeDdGCqCPOBqwDLG-AAjgb6fh75uan6BdnZaY6OiooA1tkqlQ!!/dl3/d3/L2dJQSEvUUt3QS9ZQnZ3LzZfME80MEkxVkFCOTBFMktTNVVJNDawMDawMDA!/?navtype=BROWSEBYSUBJECT&cid=stelprdb5068292&navid=1301400000000000&pnavid=1300000000000000&ss=110116&position=Not%20Yet%20Determined.Html&ttype=detailfull&pname=Lolo%20National%20Forest-%20Geospatial%20Data

Zahn, H.M. 1974 Seasonal movements of the Burdette Creek Elk Herd. Master's Thesis. University of Montana, Missoula, Montana. 71pp.

APPENDICES

- A – Fish Creek Project Property Map: State Park and Wildlife Management Area Portions Identified
- B – FWP Fish Creek Project Interim Management Plan (separate attachment)
- C – Map of Road Status (closed, open, gated, and stored)
- D – Detailed Map of 2003 and 2005 Wildfires in Project Area
- E – Socio-Economic Report (separate attachment)
- F – Mineral County Commission Letter of Support

APPENDIX A



Appendix B – Fish Creek Project Draft EA



*Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks*

**FISH CREEK
WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA
AND
FISH CREEK STATE PARK**

*~DRAFT PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT
PLAN~*

December 2009

**FISH CREEK WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA AND
FISH CREEK STATE PARK**
DRAFT PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN

PART 1.0 – INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 – Location
- 1.2 – Site Designation & Administration
- 1.3 – Management Responsibilities

PART 2.0 – VISION STATEMENT

PART 3.0 – PURPOSE & SCOPE OF THE PLAN

PART 4.0 – RESOURCE VALUES

- 4.1 – Fisheries & Aquatic Resources
- 4.2 – Wildlife Resources
- 4.3 – Vegetation
- 4.4 – Heritage Resources
- 4.5 – Geological Resources
- 4.6 – Recreation Resources
- 4.7 – Aesthetic Resources
- 4.8 – Neighboring Properties

PART 5.0 – NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

- 5.1 – Fisheries & Aquatic Resource Management
- 5.2 – Wildlife Resource Management
- 5.3 – Vegetation Management
- 5.2 – Noxious Weed Management

PART 6.0 – HERITAGE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

PART 7.0 – RECREATION RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

- 7.1 – Public Access
- 7.2 – Public Use Regulations
- 7.3 – Marketing
- 7.4 – Camping
- 7.5 – Williams Peak Lookout
- 7.6 – River Recreation
- 7.7 – Trails
- 7.8 – Hunting
- 7.9 – Angling
- 7.10 – Education and Interpretation
- 7.11 – Commercial Use
- 7.12 – Public Safety

PART 8.0 – ADMINISTRATION, OPERATIONS, & MAINTENANCE

PART 9.0 – CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

APPENDICES

PART 1.0 – INTRODUCTION

1.1 Location

The Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and Fish Creek State Park are located approximately 41 miles west of Missoula, Montana between Alberton and Tarkio along Interstate 90. Portions of the property lay both north and south of the Interstate and Clark Fork River in the Nemote Creek and Fish Creek drainages, respectively. The property borders the Lolo National Forest (~ 140,000 acres), Department of Natural Resources Conservation lands (~ 6,000 acres), and some private lands (< 2% of the drainage). Most of the upper basin of the drainage is roadless and proposed Wilderness (Great Burn).

1.2 Site Designation & Administration

The Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park encompass 40,945 acres of important upland and riparian habitats with exceptional wildlife, fisheries and recreation resource values. To protect and enhance these resource values, the Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park would be established in 2010 and jointly administered and managed by the Region 2 Fish & Wildlife and Parks Divisions of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP).

This is a preliminary management plan that MFWP will use in the interim until a final management plan can be developed over the next 36 months. A final management plan will be the result of a public involvement process that includes an environmental assessment, public meetings, opportunity for public input, and discussions with neighboring property owners.

1.3 Management Responsibilities

The Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park would be managed as two distinct areas. Approximately 6,900 acres south of the Clark Fork River adjacent to Fish Creek would be designated as a State Park and managed by the Parks Division. The remaining acres (~ 34,000) would be designated as a Wildlife Management Area and managed by the Fish & Wildlife Division (See map in Appendix A). The Fish & Wildlife and Parks Divisions will adhere to a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in managing overlapping resource values of the WMA and State Park (See Appendix B).

PART 2.0 – VISION STATEMENT

The Fish Creek Project represents a unique approach to providing for the public interest in the fish, wildlife and recreation resources of an entire watershed. It recognizes and builds upon the interconnection between public resources and the public's enjoyment of those resources. It not only acknowledges the public's place alongside fish and wildlife on the Fish Creek landscape, as has "always" been, but also applies recreation management alongside habitat management as a tool for the perpetual conservation of the fish and wildlife resources upon which such recreation depends. The Fish Creek Project is one model for bringing multiple funding sources and constituencies together to achieve conservation at a scale that cannot be accomplished parcel by parcel.

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

The Fish Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) would be dedicated to the protection and perpetuation of fish and wildlife resources first. The WMA would constitute the largest portion of the Fish Creek Project area, which corresponds with the large and connected landscapes needed to support wild, intact fish and wildlife populations. The WMA would remain in its primitive condition to maximize wildlife use on the land, and to perpetuate the long tradition of hunting, fishing, and other recreation tied to undeveloped expanses. Recreationists on the WMA would be self reliant, and should expect to find few if any amenities beyond a system of open and closed roads on existing roadbeds.

The Fish Creek State Park, along with the adjacent Alberton Gorge, would provide a large landscape State Park in western Montana with a diverse array of recreational opportunities. Infrastructure and amenities would be developed to accomplish State Park goals, provide for site stewardship, protect natural and cultural resources, and support an enjoyable, safe, comfortable, and educational visitor experience. A developed State Park footprint and developed facilities would appropriately accommodate recreationists and could minimize potential impacts to riparian and other sensitive sites within the WMA as well as keep human-human and human-wildlife encounters on the WMA at low levels. Potential future opportunities would attract new users/user-groups providing potential economic benefit to Mineral County and could include trail systems, hut-to-hut hiking, biking and cross-country skiing, a fire lookout rental, equestrian campground, and expanded camping opportunities to meet increasing demand in the Alberton Gorge and Fish Creek areas.

PART 3.0 – PURPOSE & SCOPE OF THE PLAN

The purpose of this plan, in conjunction with the MOU provided in Appendix B, is to provide management direction for the Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park for an interim time period (~36 months) until a final management plan can be developed.

PART 4.0 – RESOURCE VALUES

4.1 Fisheries & Aquatic Resources

Fish Creek is the largest tributary basin within the middle Clark Fork River drainage. It is a wild and productive watershed with unusually high fisheries and aquatic value. Fish Creek supports some of the best remaining native fish populations in the area, provides a major source of salmonid recruitment for the Clark Fork River, and offers an excellent trout fishery throughout most of its reaches. Lower reaches (including the mouth) also offer an invaluable thermal refuge for Clark Fork River fish during the summer as water temperatures are typically 8-12° F cooler in Fish Creek. Most tributaries within the watershed offer high quality spawning and rearing habitat for trout. Intact tributary habitat, excellent water quality, consistent instream flows and good connectivity among stream and river reaches have made Fish Creek a stronghold for migratory (fluvial) bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout in western Montana. Fish Creek currently supports more fluvial bull trout redds than all other middle Clark Fork

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

tributaries combined and the drainage contains numerous (>20) westslope cutthroat trout populations, many of which are genetically non-introgressed. Other fish species present include mountain whitefish and sculpin species, as well as introduced brook trout, brown trout and rainbow trout. The main stem and primary forks provide a popular trout fishery that supports > 1,000 days of angler pressure annually.

The Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park include portions of several other, smaller tributary drainages that lies outside of Fish Creek. Two of these, Rock Creek (just west of Fish Creek) and Nemote Creek (north of the Clark Fork River), exhibit perennial flows in upper reaches and support fish. Both of these streams contain non-introgressed westslope cutthroat trout populations in headwater reaches, but neither stream is readily accessible to fish from the Clark Fork River for spawning due to anthropogenic migration barriers (primarily transportation crossings).

4.2 Wildlife Resources

The landscapes within and surrounding the Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park have a suite of incredibly high wildlife resource values. There is a minimum of 182 wildlife species (57 mammals, 115 birds, 5 amphibians, and 5 reptiles) that biologists have either verified on or near the property, or are likely to be found within the drainage (See Appendix C). Of those, 31 terrestrial vertebrate species of concern (SOC) have been verified or are potentially found within the Fish Creek Project area, with 12 of those identified as Tier 1 species (See Appendix D). Also, there are six potential species of concern (including one Tier 1 species), and one additional Tier 1 species, which was recently removed from the SOC list. During the first 2-years of this Preliminary Management Plan, MFWP would conduct a wildlife inventory (discussed in more detail in section 5.2) on the subject property that should result in additional species added to Appendices C and D.

The Fish Creek drainage is a very high priority forest carnivore linkage zone. This linkage zone provides broad-scale landscape connectivity for forest carnivores (grizzly bear, Canada lynx, wolverine, and others) from the Mission and Rattlesnake Wilderness areas, through the Ninemile Divide, to the Selway-Bitterroot Mountains and Wilderness. Providing connectivity among ecosystems is essential for maintaining viable populations and recovering forest carnivores that are threatened, endangered, or species of concern. Grizzly bear, Canada lynx, and wolverine activity have occurred within the Fish Creek drainage or on its adjacent lands, but there still is much to learn about their overall utilization of these habitats.

The Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park provides significant winter range and other seasonal habitats for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer and moose. The property also supports diverse populations of large carnivores, furbearers and upland game birds, including black bear, mountain lion, wolf, mountain grouse and wild turkey. The subject property contains nearly 34,000 acres of winter range for approximately 500 elk. The intact, productive riparian corridors of Fish Creek and its tributaries have exceptional habitat for white-tailed deer and moose, while the drier upland slopes provide forage and browse for mule deer. Riparian and wetland habitats within the drainage also

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

support the richest diversity and density of birds, small rodents and shrews. These habitat types also provide breeding sites and travel corridors for amphibians, and are the most important foraging habitat for most bat species.

With all of the above-mentioned wildlife resource values, the Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park provide exceptional hunting, trapping, and wildlife viewing opportunities, as well as access to adjacent roadless areas and the Proposed Great Burn Wilderness.

4.3 Vegetation

Plant community distribution within the Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park is primarily dependent on elevation, aspect, moisture regimes and fire history. Elevation throughout the Fish Creek Project area varies from approximately 3,150 feet along the main stem of Fish Creek, to 6,110 feet at the headwaters of Wig Creek in the southeastern portion of the property. Large-scale fire events in 1910, 1917, 2003, and 2005, as well as subsequent, intensive logging shaped the vegetation patterns and habitat types. In those locations, re-vegetation of timber has been limited, but shrubs, forbs, and grasses are re-establishing the landscape. Past commercial logging activities throughout the property have left a mosaic pattern of timber regeneration.

Lower montane and foothill forest comprise approximately 22,000 acres of the property and are dominated by mesic (Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, western larch) and dry-mesic (Douglas-fir and ponderosa pine) mixed conifer forest types. Lowland grassland and shrubs cover 7,683 acres of the Project area and include bluebunch wheatgrass, ninebark, and snowberry.

Cool and moist, to moderately dry subalpine habitat types dominate the upper elevations of many of the tributaries. Common conifers in these areas include lodgepole pine, subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce, and Douglas-fir.

Within the riparian areas, western red cedar habitat types occupy warm and moist sites in drainages on the west side of Fish Creek that have not been exposed and compromised by extensive timber harvest. Seral black cottonwood-ponderosa pine communities occur along Fish Creek and in some of the side drainages on the east side of the main stem.

The presence of noxious weed species pervades along both active and abandoned roadways, and all other sites that have been disturbed by human activities. Exotic weed species include spotted knapweed, St. Johnswort, sulphur cinquefoil, and cheatgrass. In lesser quantities, there is dalmatian toadflax, leafy spurge, common hound's-tongue and meadow hawkweed.

4.4 Heritage Resources

The Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) completed a cultural resource file search for the Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park properties and reported the existence of a few previously recorded sites. Most of the sites are associated with

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

the historic Mullan Road, Milwaukee Railroad and stage services along the Clark Fork River corridor.

Additionally, an unstaffed fire lookout tower originally established in 1934 and subsequently replaced with the existing tower in 1977, is present on Williams Peak. The specific type and extent of additional cultural resources and artifacts are unknown at present, but it is highly likely that the property has a rich assemblage of cultural resources.

4.5 Geological Resources

There is a strong possibility that the property contains geological resources of scientific and educational importance. MFWP would locate, identify and interpret these resources.

4.6 Recreation Resources

MFWP has long valued the landscape comprised of the proposed Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park as a regionally important destination for hunting and fishing. The adjoining Alberton Gorge Recreation Area draws visitors from across the Northern Rockies and Inland Northwest to pursue whitewater boating. In addition, Fish Creek and the Gorge currently offer a limited amount of developed and primitive camping, wildlife viewing, sightseeing and motorized use on open routes.

Property assets for expanded recreation include the Williams Peak fire lookout, which could be managed as an overnight rental. An extensive road prism provides the option of trail development on or connecting existing closed roads. Suitable sites exist to support new developed campgrounds.

4.7 Aesthetic Resources

The site provides a strong sense of place with many aesthetic values important to the spiritual and mental health, welfare and morale of Montanans and their visitors. Specific attributes include but are not limited to the beauty of the Clark Fork River and its tributaries, open space, wildlife, scenic viewsheds, natural quiet, clean air and historic landscape.

4.8 Neighboring Properties

The property borders the Lolo National Forest (~ 140,000 acres), Department of Natural Resources Conservation lands (~ 6,000 acres), and some private lands (< 2% of the drainage). MFWP will work with neighbors and the communities near the property to keep undesirable effects to a minimum and to enhance positive benefits to all.

PART 5.0 – NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

5.1 Fisheries & Aquatic Resource Management

Desired Conditions: To maintain and improve native fish populations, aquatic habitat, and quality recreational fishing for current and future generations.

Management Strategies:

- a) Protect and enhance bull trout, westslope cutthroat trout and other native aquatic populations
 - Continue monitoring fish relative abundance, genetic composition, and aquatic species distribution in the main stem and tributaries.
 - Evaluate effectiveness of fishing regulations in protecting native trout.
 - Ensure connectivity among aquatic populations.
 - Evaluate impacts and management options for nonnative fish.

- b) Implement watershed restoration projects to mitigate large-scale habitat degradation, improve water quality, promote natural stream integrity, and facilitate connectivity of aquatic habitats
 - Protect and restore riparian corridors.
 - Correct unnatural impediments to fish movement.
 - Remove or repair sub-standard stream crossings.
 - Identify and evaluate opportunities to stabilize and revegetate closed roads.
 - Protect instream flows.
 - Identify and evaluate opportunities for instream habitat enhancement.

- c) Maintain and enhance fishery quality on lower Fish Creek
 - Evaluate effectiveness of fishing regulations.
 - Monitor whirling disease as necessary.
 - Enhance westslope cutthroat trout contribution to fishery.

5.2 Wildlife Management

Desired Conditions: MFWP would maintain and enhance habitat to sustain healthy wildlife populations for the use and enjoyment by the public for current and future generations. This would include managing for maximum, sustainable utilization of winter range by elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose. A major area of emphasis would be to maintain landscape connectivity and enhance habitats for wide-ranging and sensitive species.

Management Strategies:

- a.) During the first two years of ownership, MFWP would conduct a Wildlife Assessment of the subject property. This includes the following:

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

- Continuing with current trend surveys, including aerial trend surveys for elk and spring recruitment ground surveys for white-tailed deer.
- Establishing and conducting additional trend surveys for big game, furbearers, upland game birds, and non-game species, including:
 - Ground surveys for upland game birds.
 - Snow track surveys for furbearers following the State's track survey protocol.
 - Conducting beaver cache counts.
 - Implementing raptor surveys.
 - Implementing songbird counts, and possibly banding operations.
 - Implementing bat surveys.
 - Implementing small mammal surveys.
 - Surveying riparian and wetland areas for breeding amphibians.
 - Conducting targeted surveys for Species of Concern and Tier 1 species that are not easily detected by standard multi-species survey efforts.

b.) Providing intact, high quality, secure winter range is important for wintering elk and deer. Recreational activities and other human disturbance during the winter and spring displace elk and other wildlife (Naylor et al., 2009; Joslin et. al., 1999), resulting in an expenditure of energy that can affect survival, especially for young of the year. Nutritional deficiencies during the winter and spring result in cow elk losing weight, subsequently decreasing the odds of fetal survival, as well as normal calf birth weight, growth, and survival (Raithel et. al., 2005). Accordingly, management of human disturbance during the critical winter period is an important component of securing winter range for wildlife and is discussed in more detail in Section 7.1.

Habitat Montana and Pittman Robertson funding stipulations require that wildlife be the number one priority for the purchase and management of the WMA. For the first 3-years, MFWP would close the area delineated in Appendix F from December 1st through May 14th to all public access to provide security for wintering wildlife. (The boundary is contingent on a cooperative agreement with DNRC.) During the interim 36-months, FWP would further evaluate the need for any additional winter area-closures to enhance big game winter range, and would incorporate these (with the benefit of public involvement) within the final management plan. Motorized travel would be restricted to the open-road system (Appendix E) to limit human disturbance.

- c.) Over the next 3-years, MFWP's objective is to increase elk and deer populations in Fish and Nemote creeks, while continuing with current hunting opportunity on the subject property. Strategies to increase these populations include the following:
- Maintain and enhance open grasslands and shrubfields.
 - Contain and control noxious weeds.

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

- Provide secure areas for wildlife with no human disturbance from December 1st through May 14th annually (See Appendix F).
- Continue with mountain lion hunting on the subject property, except within the closed area delineated in Appendix F.
- Recommend hunting season regulations that balance predator and prey relationships.

LITERATURE CITED

Joslin, G., and H. Youmans, Coordinators. 1999. Effects of recreation on Rocky Mountain wildlife: A Review for Montana. Committee on Effects of Recreation on Wildlife, Montana Chapter of the Wildlife Society. 307pp.

Naylor, Leslie M., Michael J. Wisdom and Robert G. Anthony. 2009. Behavioral responses of North American Elk to Recreational Activity, *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 73(3), Pgs. 328-338.

Raithel, J.D. (2005). Impact of Calf Survival on Elk Population Dynamics in West-Central Montana. Thesis, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana. 105pp.

5.3 Vegetation Management

Desired Conditions: Vegetation would be managed to maintain and enhance open grasslands and shrubfields to produce forage for elk and deer on south-facing winter ranges, and to allow natural forest succession to advance on burned and logged north-facing slopes. Forested stands generally would be multistoried, with a goal of recruiting large trees and snags. Riparian habitats would be managed to maintain and enhance native plant composition for the benefit of terrestrial and aquatic species.

Management Strategies:

- a) Within the 3-year lifespan of the Preliminary Management Plan, MFWP would begin working on a vegetation management plan that would entail surveying and mapping habitat types on the subject property. The process would include ground-truthing the GIS ReGAP habitat layer and utilizing GIS to analyze canopy cover, slope, elevation, and soil composition.
- b) Forest management during the interim 3-year period would not include timber harvesting.
- c) Extensive logging in the burned areas of the subject property infringed upon portions of riparian habitat in Deer Creek, Thompson Creek and the South Fork of Fish Creek. MFWP would consider enhancing these riparian areas by revegetating with native trees and shrubs, and reseeding with native grasses and forbs.

5.4 Noxious Weed Management

Desired Conditions: To keep noxious weeds contained and controlled to prevent loss of native species and subsequent declines in plant community productivity.

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

Management Strategies:

- a) Implement chemical, biological and mechanical control measures in keeping with the MFWP Statewide Weed Management Plan. In calendar year 2010, FWP would budget \$50,000 for the direct control of noxious weeds on the WMA, focusing first on chemical control along roadsides and other primary travel corridors. A containment strategy for weed occurrences in the uplands would be further ground-truthed and implementation begun, also in 2010.
- b) Identify and map all noxious weeds on the subject lands in MFWP's first 36 months of ownership.
- c) Coordinate routinely with the Mineral County weed district.
- d) Work with neighboring landowners on control efforts across property boundaries.

PART 6.0 – HERITAGE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

6.1 Heritage Resource Protection

Desired Conditions: Heritage resources would be protected and interpreted as an integral part of the Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park landscape.

Management Strategies:

- a) Conduct a compliance level inventory of heritage resources located on the property.
- b) Consult with the State Historic Preservation office for all undertakings with potential to disturb heritage resources.
- c) Educate the public about the importance of leaving heritage resources for future generations.
- d) Interpret cultural resources through sensitive and appropriate displays, programs and information.

PART 7.0 – RECREATION RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

7.1 Public Access

Desired Conditions: Public access via motorized and non-motorized means will be provided at appropriate and strategic locations with a system of existing roads maintained as open to motorized travel for delivering recreationists to points of departure for fishing, hunting, hiking, horseback riding, and other recreation. The Park would potentially serve as the hub for any expanded forms of motorized or non-motorized recreation, including an equestrian campground. On the WMA and in the Park, public access would be fostered in late spring, summer and fall, and not encouraged or promoted in winter to protect wintering wildlife.

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

Management Strategies:

- a) Conduct an inventory and assessment of existing roads, condition, and maintenance needs and costs.
- b) Begin the process (with public involvement) of designing a public access plan that supports an array of recreational opportunities consistent with fish, wildlife and recreation management objectives.
- c) In the interim 36 months, restrict motorized travel to open routes as depicted in Appendix E, and to parking areas and developed recreation sites.
- d) Provide secure areas for wildlife with no human disturbance from December 1st through May 14th annually (See Appendix F).
- e) Delineate property boundaries as necessary and as funds become available.

7.2 Public Use Regulations

Desired Conditions: Public use regulations would be established, posted and enforced in a manner that protects public safety and prevents damage or degradation to natural, cultural or recreational resources.

Management Strategies:

- a) Public use would be regulated according to existing ARM Rules pertinent to Wildlife Management Areas and State Parks.
- b) Discharge of firearms and weapons will be restricted to lawful hunting only within the State Park. Recreational shooting will be prohibited within the State Park (ARM 12.8.202).
- c) Pets must be under the control of their owner (ARM 12.8.203).
- d) Recreational livestock such as pack and saddle animals will be restricted to designated trails and areas only on the State Park. Horse riders must accompany horses at all times. Horse grazing will be prohibited. Weed seed-free feed required (ARM 12.8.203).
- e) Restrict motorized travel to open roads (Appendix E), parking areas, and developed recreation sites (ARM 12.8.204).
- f) Camping will only be permitted in designated sites and/or areas. (ARM 12.8.205).
- g) Campfires will only be permitted in designated locations (ARM 12.8.206).
- h) Gathering or cutting firewood for off-site use will be prohibited. (ARM 12.8.207)
- i) Removal of natural, geological, historical or archeological property will be prohibited except for flowers, berries, cones, fallen dead wood or lawfully taken fish and game (ARM 12.8.207).
- j) Commercial use will require a permit in accordance with the Statewide Commercial Use Rules (ARM 12.14.101-170). No commercial hunting or angling outfitting is permitted on the WMA.
- k) Permits are required for groups of over 30 people (ARM 12.8.205).

7.3 Marketing

Desired Conditions: The site would be promoted as a unique public resource and integral part of Montana's Wildlife Management Area and State Park systems.

Management Strategies:

- a) MFWP would begin the process (with public involvement) of developing a marketing plan appropriate to the opportunities and facilities afforded in the final management plan.
- b) In the interim, FWP would post site information on existing FWP websites and update brochures.

7.4 Camping

Desired Conditions: Overnight camping opportunities would be available in both front-country and backcountry recreational settings where appropriate.

Management Strategies: Begin developing (with public involvement) a final management plan, which would provide for the following:

- a) An appropriate number and distribution of front-country and backcountry campsites and/or areas.
- b) A vehicle accessible front-country fee campground in the northern portion of the Fish Creek drainage.
- c) A vehicle accessible front-country fee equestrian campground near the confluence area of the South and West Forks of Fish Creek.

In the interim 36 months, camping would continue to be provided at Forks and Big Pine fishing access sites. Additional camping opportunities would be evaluated based upon compatibility with natural resource values. Pioneered sites that are incompatible with natural resource values (such as, but not limited to, stream banks and riparian vegetation) could be closed to camping to avoid further damage.

7.5 Williams Peak Lookout

Desired Conditions: The Williams Peak Lookout would be a safe and unique overnight rental experience.

Management Strategies:

- a) Assess the structural stability of the tower and cab, as well as the feasibility of addressing any potential structural shortcomings.
- b) Complete any required maintenance of the tower and cab to ensure public safety and a high quality recreation experience.
- c) Develop and implement a program to provide the lookout as an overnight rental opportunity.

7.6 River Recreation

Desired Conditions: Outstanding opportunities for floating on the Alberton Gorge section of the Clark Fork River would be available to the public.

Management Strategies:

- a) Continue the existing Alberton Gorge river recreation management program.
- b) Consider this Preliminary Management Plan and the MOU (Appendix B) when developing a specific river recreation program implementation plan, including identification of a river recreation carrying capacity and establishment of indicators and standards for high quality social and resource conditions related to river recreation.

7.7 Trails

Desired Conditions: Trail systems would be developed for public use if suitable locations and trail alignments can be found that do not adversely impact soils, natural features, wildlife, fisheries and cultural resources.

Management Strategies:

- a) Begin developing, with public involvement and with consideration of the MOU (Appendix B), plans for a trail system. Thereafter, develop and implement trail maintenance and signing standards.
 - Evaluate potential trail locations, alignments, routes and use designations.
 - Evaluate the options/potential for a hut-to-hut/ yurt-to-yurt system.
- b) In the interim 36 months of this Preliminary Management Plan, allow yearlong non-motorized access on existing open roads, closed roads, and trails with the exception of the winter closure on the WMA (See Appendix F).
- c) In the interim 36 months, restrict motorized travel to open routes as depicted in Appendix E, and to parking areas and developed recreation sites.

7.8 Hunting

Desired Conditions: Opportunities for hunting will continue to be available to the public in accordance with existing hunting districts and regulations and those regulations adopted in the future.

Management Strategies:

- a) Manage hunting in accordance with current districts and regulations.
- b) Within the State Park, implement a hunting access system that allows MFWP to monitor and regulate hunting activity and establish conditions that allow hunters and non-hunters to safely share recreational resources.

7.9 Angling

Desired Conditions: Opportunities for angling would be available in accordance with existing creel limits and fishing regulations.

Management Strategies:

- a) Manage fishing in accordance with current creel limits and fishing regulations.
- b) Promote appropriate fishing etiquette and catch and release techniques.
- c) Facilitate access to fishing waters where appropriate.

7.10 Education and Interpretation

Desired Conditions: Educational and interpretive media and services would be developed to tell the story of the area's natural, cultural and recreational resources.

Management Strategies:

- a) Develop appropriate educational and interpretive themes consistent with the areas values and resources.
- b) Install a standard State Park informational kiosk at primary entrances to the site.
- c) Begin developing a final management plan, which could include the following:
 - On-site park naturalist interpretive hikes and programs.
 - Detailed information regarding the area's natural, cultural, geological and recreational resources on the FWP homepage.
- d) Explore social media opportunities such as Facebook and Twitter, to communicate with the public.

7.11 Commercial Use

Desired Conditions: Commercial use would be approved if compatible with existing FWP policies, rules or regulations and deemed a necessary and appropriate service for the public.

Management Strategies:

- a) Develop a commercial use plan with criteria for evaluating commercial use requests.
- b) Permit approved commercial use requests in accordance with the FWP Commercial Use Rule and Commercial Use Fee Rule (ARM 12.14.101-170).
- c) No commercial hunting or angling outfitting is permitted on the WMA (ARM 12.14.115).

7.12 Public Safety

Desired Conditions: The Fish Creek WMA and Fish Creek State Park encompass substantial acreages of wild and primitive lands, which FWP generally strives to protect and maintain in its native condition. Visitors will be required to prepare as they would to

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

enjoy most recreational experiences on most Forest Service or other public lands in Montana.

Management Strategies:

- a) For areas of high and concentrated public use in the State Park, such as the equestrian campground, develop and provide the following:
 - An Emergency Operations and Response Plan that promotes a proactive approach to public safety.
 - An adequate law enforcement patrol and response presence on the site through the use of Game Wardens and Ex-officio Wardens.
 - Appropriate information, regulatory postings, and educational messages related to public safety.

PART 8.0 – ADMINISTRATION, OPERATIONS & MAINTENANCE

Desired Conditions: Funding and staffing would be secured to properly support site administration, operations, maintenance and stewardship.

Management Strategies:

- a) Develop a strategy to provide an interim site presence capable of providing basic site stewardship while funding and FTE to administer the site are being pursued.
- b) Pursue long-term operations funding and FTE for a Park site manager and park ranger to provide adequate site stewardship, administration and visitor use management.

PART 9.0 – CAPITAL IMPROVEMENTS

Desired Conditions: MFWP would strive to secure capital funding for public facilities and amenities that enhance the visitor experience in the State Park. No capital improvements are anticipated on the WMA during the lifespan of the Preliminary Management Plan.

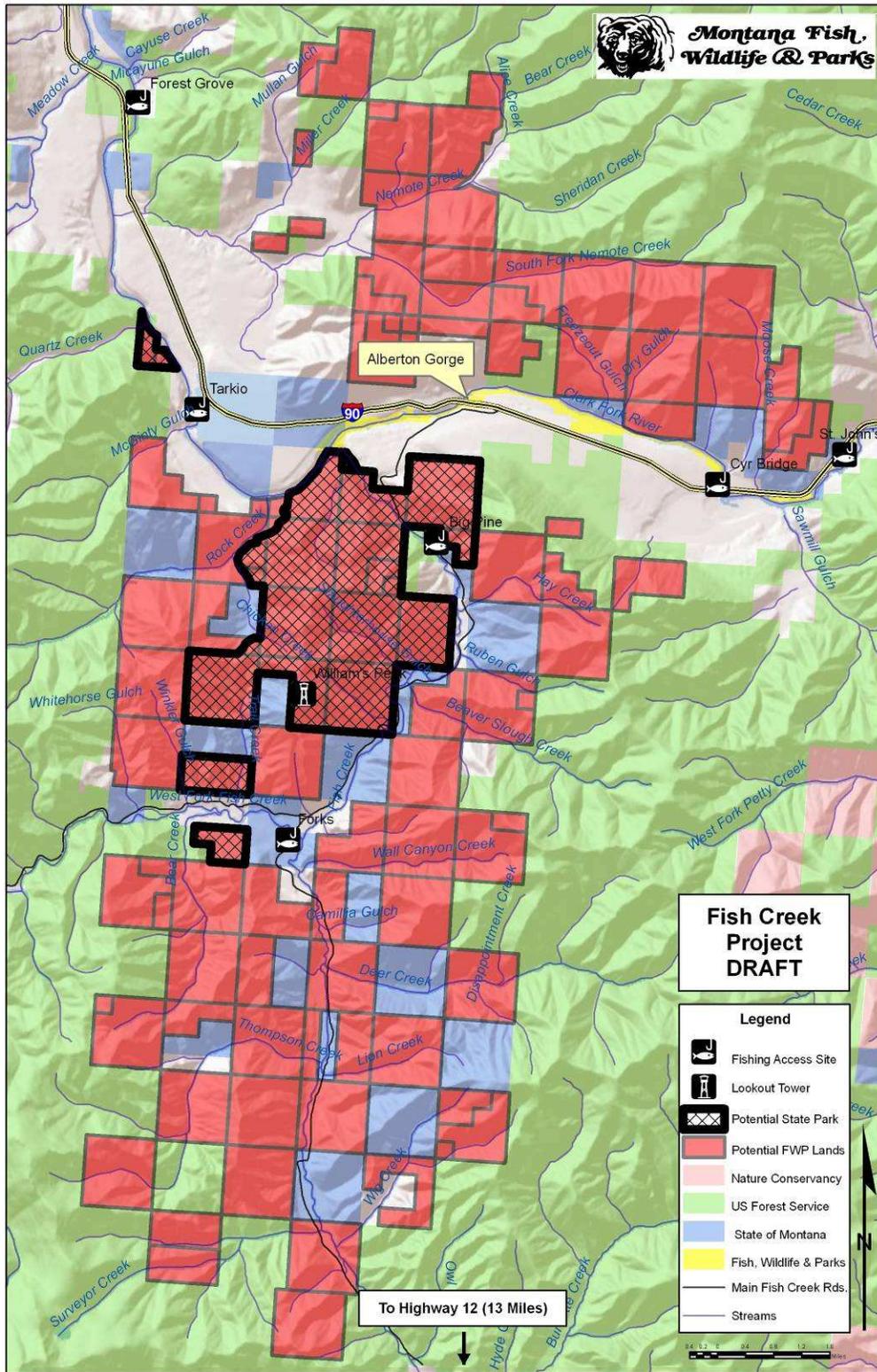
Management Strategies:

- a) With public involvement, begin developing a final management plan, which will include the following:
 - A concept plan for proposed park facilities, including access roads parking areas, signs exhibits, comfort stations, front country campsites and/or areas, backcountry campsites and/or areas, developed campground, equestrian campground, trails, yurt/hut locations, and primary visitor contact station.
 - Priorities for the phased development of facilities and amenities.

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

- b) FWP would implement a Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) compliance process for all major actions including ground disturbing construction or capital improvement projects.

APPENDIX A – MAP OF FISH CREEK WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA AND FISH CREEK STATE PARK



**APPENDIX B – MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MOU)
BETWEEN THE FISH & WILDLIFE DIVISION AND PARKS DIVISION
FOR MANAGEMENT OF THE FISH CREEK
WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA AND STATE PARK**

Multiple Resource Values

The Fish Creek Project includes 40,945 acres of important upland and riparian habitats with high wildlife, fisheries and recreation resource values. Broken into individual program areas, those values include the following:

Wildlife

- Fish Creek is a very high priority forest carnivore linkage zone, providing habitat connectivity between the Ninemile Divide and the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness (American Wildlands, 2009; Servheen et. al., 2003).
- The drainage provides crucial winter range and other seasonal habitats for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer and moose. It also supports diverse populations of predators, furbearers and upland game birds, including black bear, mountain lion, wolf, beaver, fisher, pine marten, mountain grouse and turkey.
- There are 32 terrestrial vertebrate species of concern that have been verified or are potentially found within the Fish Creek Project area, with 12 of those identified as Tier 1 species (Montana Natural Heritage Program, 2009; MFWP, 2005). Also, there are 6 potential species of concern (including one Tier 1 species), and 1 additional Tier 1 species, which was recently removed from the SOC list.
- Within the drainage, there are exceptional hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities, as well as access to adjacent roadless and proposed wilderness areas.
- Additional wildlife enhancement opportunities include translocating bighorn sheep to the drainage.

Fisheries

- Fish Creek and its tributaries supports the strongest runs of bull trout and westslope cutthroat trout within the 120-mile reach of the Middle Clark Fork watershed, with many of its streams also supporting genetically pure, resident westslope cutthroat trout.
- The Middle Clark Fork River is an Aquatic Focus Area for MFWP (MFWP, 2005).
- The Fish Creek drainage is an aquatic restoration priority – past and ongoing.
- It is an outstanding fishery and major source of recruitment for the Clark Fork River fishery.
- Fish Creek averages about 2,000 angler days annually.

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

Recreation

- The Fish Creek Project includes priority acquisition parcels within and adjacent to the Alberton Gorge (MFWP, 2007).
- The mouth of Fish Creek is an essential component of the Alberton Gorge float experience.
- Fish Creek is heavily used area for camping, sightseeing, hunting, wildlife viewing, angling, and OHV use.
- MFWP currently manages two fishing access sites (FAS) in the drainage. These FASs (Big Pine and Forks) each have five campsites.
- Additional recreational opportunities could include development of a trail system(s), a developed campground (50-75 sites), Williams Peak lookout rental, and a developed equestrian campground (~25 sites).

Proposed Acquisition and Management Boundaries

Regional staff from each program area have worked collaboratively to propose Potential Wildlife Management Area and Potential State Park boundaries (See Map). This effort has focused on inventorying and mapping resource values in order to prioritize lands for acquisition. The process also identified areas where there are overlapping land acquisition priorities based upon the existence of overlapping resource values.

Overlapping land acquisition priorities occur in the northern portion of the Fish Creek drainage and are focused primarily on conflicting wildlife and recreation resource values. Numerous studies and reports have shown that recreational activities and development can negatively affect wildlife (Naylor et; al., 2009; Joslin and Youmans, 1999). However, thorough discussions regarding placement of management boundaries and implementation of management strategies can avoid or mitigate negative impacts.

Most of the proposed 6,864 acre Potential State Park boundary follows existing property lines, with the exception of the western boundary. This boundary, which includes road 341, was delineated to address recreation management concerns and avoid or mitigate potential wildlife impacts.

Strategies to Address Concerns of Overlapping Wildlife, Fisheries & Recreation Resource Values

The following list identifies management concerns related to overlapping acquisition priorities and proposed management strategies to avoid negative wildlife and fisheries impacts, while providing for recreational opportunities and a natural view-shed. MFWP could implement the following strategies to address these concerns.

1. Wildlife Linkage Zone from Rock Creek to Tarkio
 - a. As one of the highest priorities for protection in the Fish Creek Project, the most intact portion of the identified linkage zone should be included within the WMA.
 - b. MFWP should close the cutoff road (unnamed) between Rock Creek (USFS Road 7764) and Chicken Creek (Road 341).

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

- c. Dispersed camping should not be permitted within the linkage zone along the Clark Fork River and at its confluence with Rock Creek.
 - d. Dispersed camping should not be permitted within the riparian areas of Rock Creek.
 - e. MFWP should continue the existing management approach of a natural view-shed within the Alberton Gorge to enhance both wildlife and recreation resource values.
2. Riparian Habitat and the Wildlife Movement Corridor from the Confluence of Fish Creek and the Clark Fork River to Forks FAS
- a. MFWP should continue to manage the mouth of Fish Creek as a “day-use only” site.
 - b. MFWP should protect riparian habitat by implementing the following:
 - i. Avoiding recreation site development between the mouth of Fish Creek and Big Pine FAS. (Note: the canyon-like nature of the creek in much of this stretch does not present likely development opportunities. In addition, the majority of the lands along Fish Creek are owned by private landowners and the DNRC.)
 - ii. Pursuing proactive Leave No Trace information and education campaigns that emphasize minimizing riparian habitat degradation and wildlife impacts. Interpretive signs may be used to help develop these educational opportunities.
 - iii. Pursuing proactive information and education campaigns, including using kiosks that are aimed at the importance of riparian habitat and associated buffers to protect and enhance wildlife, fisheries and recreation resource values.
 - iv. Discouraging dispersed camping within the riparian areas of Fish Creek, particularly between the confluence of the Clark Fork River and Fish Creek to the Forks FAS.
 - c. MFWP should continue to coordinate with landowners along Fish Creek to improve the wildlife, fisheries and recreation resource values.
3. State Park Campground Development and Big Game Winter Range
- a. In Township 14N, Range 24W, Section 6, MFWP could establish a developed campground, which should be located and managed in a way that allows for continued intact winter range and protection of riparian habitat along Fish Creek and the Clark Fork River. (Note: the canyon-like nature of the creek in much of this stretch does not present likely development opportunities.)
 - b. MFWP should install and maintain bear-resistant food and garbage containers within the developed campground.
 - c. MFWP will coordinate appropriate campground schedules of operation for compatible wildlife needs. This coordination would occur between the Parks Division and Wildlife Division as needed.

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

4. Dispersed Camping Along WMA/State Park Boundaries
 - a. Dispersed camping should not be permitted within the linkage zone along the Clark Fork River and at its confluence with Rock Creek. Also, dispersed camping should not be permitted within the riparian areas of Rock Creek.
 - b. MFWP should define buffers along WMA/State Park boundaries where dispersed camping is not permitted.
5. Equestrian Campground Development
 - a. In Township 14N, Range 25W, Section 35, MFWP could establish a developed equestrian campground. This campground would provide facilities and trail access catering specifically to visitors with horses.
 - b. Stock users should be required to use weed-free hay and feed.
 - c. Commercial use should be in compliance with MFWP commercial use rules and funding requirements.
 - d. MFWP should install and maintain bear-resistant garbage and feed storage containers.
6. Trail System Development within the State Park and Portions of the WMA
 - a. MFWP should coordinate planning and development of trail systems to enhance compatibility of trail opportunities and wildlife needs.
 - b. MFWP should base trail use designations on the compatibility of use with resource values.
 - c. MFWP could establish a non-motorized trail yurt/hut system. On the WMA, yurt/hut establishment would be in compliance with funding requirements and compatible with fish and wildlife management objectives.
 - d. On WMA properties, trail systems, as opposed to open road systems, will be limited to non-motorized travel in compliance with funding requirements and agency guidance and secondly, consistent with emphasizing stock use associated with the equestrian campground.
 - e. OHV trail use occurring on the State Park unit could tie into open-roads on the WMA.
7. Cultural and Historic Resources
 - a. Wildlife and Parks staff should coordinate their efforts to preserve the cultural and historic resources (e.g., Mullan Trail).
8. Hunting Opportunities in the State Park and the WMA
 - a. Developed State Park campgrounds should remain open each year to accommodate hunters and other fall recreationists.
 - b. Hunting should be permitted within the State Park, with safety zones established around developed recreation areas such as campgrounds and the Williams Peak Lookout.
 - c. Hunting should be permitted on the WMA.

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

9. Enhance Existing Wildlife Viewing Opportunities

- a. Wildlife and Parks staff should coordinate their efforts to enhance current and future wildlife viewing opportunities, including translocating bighorn sheep into HDs 201 and 202.

10. Road Management

- a. Road management should consider aquatic values and impacts such as sediment delivery, riparian encroachment and failure risks/fish passage at road crossings. Management includes road use, road restrictions and road storage or decommissioning.

Future recreational development within the State Park or the WMA will go through the appropriate public involvement process.

Literature Cited

American Wildlands. 2008. Priority Linkage Assessment, The Cabinet-Purcell Conservation Area. American Wildlands, Helena, Montana. 153pp.

Joslin, G., and H. Youmans, Coordinators. 1999. Effects of recreation on Rocky Mountain wildlife: A Review for Montana. Committee on Effects of Recreation on Wildlife, Montana Chapter of the Wildlife Society. 307pp.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. 2007. Alberton Gorge: Conceptual Plan. Headwaters Policy/Planning Partnership, LLP.

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. 2005. Montana's Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Conservation Strategy, Executive Summary. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 1420 East Sixth Avenue, Helena, MT 59620.

Montana Natural Heritage Program. 2009. Montana Animal Species of Concern, July 2009.

Naylor, Leslie M., Michael J. Wisdom and Robert G. Anthony. 2009. Behavioral responses of North American Elk to Recreational Activity, *The Journal of Wildlife Management* 73(3), Pgs. 328-338.

Servheen, Christopher, John Waller and Per Sandstrom. 2003. Identification and management of linkage zones for wildlife between the large blocks of public land in the Northern Rocky Mountains. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the University of Montana, Missoula, Montana. 82pp.

Trails and Wildlife Task Force, Colorado State Parks, and Hellmund Associates. 1998. Planning Trails with Wildlife in Mind – A Handbook for Trail Planners. Colorado State Parks.

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

APPENDIX C – Fish Creek Vertebrate Species List (verified and potential species)

Common Name	Scientific Name	SOC	Comments
Coeur d'Alene Salamander	<i>Plethodon idahoensis</i>	SOC	Populations verified in Woodman Creek to east, and Trout Creek to west, some suitable habitat in area
Long-toed Salamander	<i>Ambystoma macrodactylum</i>		
Rocky Mountain Tailed Frog	<i>Ascaphus montanus</i>		
Western Toad	<i>Bufo boreas</i>	SOC	
Columbia Spotted Frog	<i>Rana luteiventris</i>		
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>	SOC	
Green-winged Teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>		Clark Fork River
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		
Harlequin Duck	<i>Histrionicus histrionicus</i>	SOC	Nesting confirmed south of area in Fish Creek, below Cache Cr.
Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>		Clark Fork River
Turkey Vulture	<i>Cathartes aura</i>		Observed 5 miles west of area in similar habitats
Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>		Nests along Clark Fork River
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>	SOC	Nests along Clark Fork River
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>		Observed 5 miles west of area in similar habitats
Cooper's Hawk	<i>Accipiter cooperii</i>		Observed 5 miles west of area in similar habitats
Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>	SOC	Nesting records on nearby FS lands
Red-tailed Hawk	<i>Buteo jamaicensis</i>		
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	SOC	Observed on FS lands 10 miles to north, likely to be found in area
American Kestrel	<i>Falco sparverius</i>		
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>	SOC	Nests along Clark Fork River in cliffs
Spruce Grouse	<i>Falcapennis canadensis</i>		Observed near Schley Mountain west of area
Dusky (Blue) Grouse	<i>Dendragapus obscurus</i>		Observed on FS lands 4 miles west of area
Ruffed Grouse	<i>Bonasa umbellus</i>		
Wild Turkey	<i>Meleagris gallopavo</i>		
Killdeer	<i>Charadrius vociferus</i>		Fish Creek BBS route
Spotted Sandpiper	<i>Actitis macularius</i>		
Wilson's Snipe	<i>Gallinago delicata</i>		Fish Creek BBS Route
Mourning Dove	<i>Zenaid macroura</i>		
Flammulated Owl	<i>Otus flammeolus</i>	SOC	Detected on flammulated owl survey route at western edge of area
Western Screech-owl	<i>Megascops kennicottii</i>	PSOC	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Great Horned Owl	<i>Bubo virginianus</i>		

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

Common Name	Scientific Name	SOC	Comments
Northern Pygmy-Owl	<i>Glaucidium gnoma</i>		Observed on FS lands nearby
Great Gray Owl	<i>Strix nebulosa</i>	SOC	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Barred Owl	<i>Strix varia</i>		
Northern Saw-whet Owl	<i>Aegolius acadicus</i>		Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Common Nighthawk	<i>Chordeiles minor</i>		
Vaux's Swift	<i>Chaetura vauxi</i>		
Calliope Hummingbird	<i>Stellula calliope</i>		
Rufous Hummingbird	<i>Selasphorus rufus</i>		
Belted Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle alcyon</i>		
Lewis's Woodpecker	<i>Melanerpes lewis</i>	SOC	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Williamson's Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus thyroideus</i>		
Red-naped Sapsucker	<i>Sphyrapicus nuchalis</i>		
Downy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides pubescens</i>		
Hairy Woodpecker	<i>Picoides villosus</i>		
Black-backed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides arcticus</i>	SOC	Nesting confirmed in Fish Creek burn
American Three-toed Woodpecker	<i>Picoides dorsalis</i>		1 detected on Fish Creek BBS route in 2002
Northern Flicker	<i>Colaptes auratus</i>		
Pileated Woodpecker	<i>Dryocopus pileatus</i>	SOC	
Olive-sided Flycatcher	<i>Contopus cooperi</i>		Recently removed from SOC list
Western Wood-Pewee	<i>Contopus sordidulus</i>		2 detected on Fish Creek BBS route
Willow Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax traillii</i>		
Least Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax minimus</i>		Fish Creek BBS route
Hammond's Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax hammondii</i>		
Dusky Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax oberholseri</i>		
Cordilleran Flycatcher	<i>Empidonax occidentalis</i>		N.F. Fish Creek on FS lands
Tree Swallow	<i>Tachycineta bicolor</i>		
Violet-green Swallow	<i>Tachycineta thalassina</i>		
Northern Rough-winged Swallow	<i>Stelgidopteryx serripennis</i>		
Cliff Swallow	<i>Petrochelidon pyrrhonota</i>		Private lands adjacent to area
Gray Jay	<i>Perisoreus canadensis</i>		
Steller's Jay	<i>Cyanocitta stelleri</i>		
Clark's Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga columbiana</i>	SOC	
Black-billed Magpie	<i>Pica hudsonia</i>		
American Crow	<i>Corvus brachyrhynchos</i>		
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>		
Black-capped Chickadee	<i>Poecile atricapillus</i>		
Mountain Chickadee	<i>Poecile gambeli</i>		
Boreal Chickadee	<i>Poecile hudsonica</i>	SOC	Limited suitable habitat, not verified

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

Common Name	Scientific Name	SOC	Comments
Red-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta canadensis</i>		
White-breasted Nuthatch	<i>Sitta carolinensis</i>		
Brown Creeper	<i>Certhia americana</i>	SOC	FS lands 2 miles from area
Rock Wren	<i>Salpinctes obsoletus</i>		
House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>		
Winter Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>	SOC	
American Dipper	<i>Cinclus mexicanus</i>		Nesting confirmed in Cache Creek south of area
Golden-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus satrapa</i>		
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus calendula</i>		
Western Bluebird	<i>Sialia mexicana</i>		Observations in Fish Creek pending approval by MNHP
Mountain Bluebird	<i>Sialia currucoides</i>		
Townsend's Solitaire	<i>Myadestes townsendi</i>		
Veery	<i>Catharus fuscescens</i>	SOC	Verified in area
Swainson's Thrush	<i>Catharus ustulatus</i>		
American Robin	<i>Turdus migratorius</i>		
Varied Thrush	<i>Ixoreus naevius</i>		
Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>		
Cedar Waxwing	<i>Bombycilla cedrorum</i>		
Warbling Vireo	<i>Vireo gilvus</i>		
Red-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>		
Cassin's Vireo	<i>Vireo cassinii</i>		
Tennessee Warbler	<i>Vermivora peregrine</i>	PSOC	Possibly suitable habitat in area, not verified
Orange-crowned Warbler	<i>Vermivora celata</i>		
Nashville Warbler	<i>Vermivora ruficapilla</i>		
Yellow Warbler	<i>Dendroica petechia</i>		
Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Dendroica coronata</i>		
Townsend's Warbler	<i>Dendroica townsendi</i>		
American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>		Fish Creek BBS Route
Northern Waterthrush	<i>Seiurus noveboracensis</i>		
MacGillivray's Warbler	<i>Oporornis tolmiei</i>		
Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>		
Wilson's Warbler	<i>Wilsonia pusilla</i>		
Western Tanager	<i>Piranga ludoviciana</i>		
Black-headed Grosbeak	<i>Pheucticus melanocephalus</i>		
Lazuli Bunting	<i>Passerina amoena</i>		
Spotted Towhee	<i>Pipilo maculatus</i>		
Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>		

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

Common Name	Scientific Name	SOC	Comments
Vesper Sparrow	<i>Pooecetes gramineus</i>		Found in grasslands adjacent to area
Savannah Sparrow	<i>Passerculus sandwichensis</i>		Found in grasslands adjacent to area
Fox Sparrow	<i>Passerella iliaca</i>		
Song Sparrow	<i>Melospiza melodia</i>		
Lincoln's Sparrow	<i>Melospiza lincolni</i>		
White-crowned Sparrow	<i>Zonotrichia leucophrys</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Dark-eyed Junco	<i>Junco hyemalis</i>		
Western Meadowlark	<i>Sturnella neglecta</i>		Found in grasslands adjacent to area
Brown-headed Cowbird	<i>Molothrus ater</i>		
Pine Grosbeak	<i>Pinicola enucleator</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Cassin's Finch	<i>Carpodacus cassinii</i>	SOC	Verified in area
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>		
Pine Siskin	<i>Carduelis pinus</i>		
Evening Grosbeak	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>		
Westslope Cutthroat Trout	<i>Oncorhynchus clarkii lewisi</i>	SOC	
Rainbow Trout	<i>Oncorhynchus mykiss</i>		
Mountain Whitefish	<i>Prosopium williamsoni</i>		
Brown Trout	<i>Salmo trutta</i>		
Bull Trout	<i>Salvelinus confluentus</i>	SOC	
Brook Trout	<i>Salvelinus fontinalis</i>		
Northern Pikeminnow	<i>Ptychocheilus oregonensis</i>		
Longnose Dace	<i>Rhinichthys cataractae</i>		
Redside Shiner	<i>Richardsonius balteatus</i>		
Largescale Sucker	<i>Catostomus macrocheilus</i>		
Masked Shrew	<i>Sorex cinereus</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Vagrant Shrew	<i>Sorex vagrans</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Dusky or Montane Shrew	<i>Sorex monticolus</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Water Shrew	<i>Sorex palustris</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Little Brown Myotis	<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Long-eared Myotis	<i>Myotis evotis</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Fringed Myotis	<i>Myotis thysanodes</i>	SOC	Suitable habitat, not verified
Long-legged Myotis	<i>Myotis volans</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
California Myotis	<i>Myotis californicus</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Western Small-footed Myotis	<i>Myotis ciliolabrum</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Silver-haired Bat	<i>Lasionycteris noctivagans</i>	PSOC	Suitable habitat, not verified
Big Brown Bat	<i>Eptesicus fuscus</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Hoary Bat	<i>Lasiurus cinereus</i>	SOC	Suitable habitat, not verified
Spotted Bat	<i>Euderma maculata</i>	SOC	Suitable habitat, not verified
Townsend's Big-eared Bat	<i>Corynorhinus townsendii</i>	SOC	Suitable foraging habitat, not verified
Pika	<i>Ochotona princeps</i>		Observed near area, not verified

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

Common Name	Scientific Name	SOC	Comments
Mountain Cottontail	<i>Sylvilagus nuttallii</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Snowshoe Hare	<i>Lepus americanus</i>		
Yellow-pine Chipmunk	<i>Tamias amoenus</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Red-tailed Chipmunk	<i>Tamias ruficaudus</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Yellow-bellied Marmot	<i>Marmota flaviventris</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Hoary Marmot	<i>Marmota caligata</i>	SOC	Possible suitable habitat in SW corner of area, not verified
Columbian Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus columbianus</i>		
Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel	<i>Spermophilus lateralis</i>		
Red Squirrel	<i>Tamiasciurus hudsonicus</i>		
Northern Flying Squirrel	<i>Glaucomys sabrinus</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Northern Pocket Gopher	<i>Thomomys idahoensis</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
American Beaver	<i>Castor canadensis</i>		
Deer Mouse	<i>Peromyscus maniculatus</i>		
Bushy-tailed Woodrat	<i>Neotoma cinerea</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Southern Red-backed Vole	<i>Clethrionomys gapperi</i>		
Heather Vole	<i>Phenacomys intermedius</i>		
Meadow Vole	<i>Microtus pennsylvanicus</i>		
Montane Vole	<i>Microtus montanus</i>		
Long-tailed Vole	<i>Microtus longicaudus</i>		
Water Vole	<i>Microtus richardsoni</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Western Jumping Mouse	<i>Zapus princeps</i>		Suitable habitat, not verified
Porcupine	<i>Erethizon dorsatum</i>		
Coyote	<i>Canis latrans</i>		
Gray Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	SOC	
Black Bear	<i>Ursus americanus</i>		
Brown (Grizzly) Bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>	SOC	Suitable habitat for re-occupation as population expands
American Marten	<i>Martes americana</i>		
Fisher	<i>Martes pennanti</i>	SOC	
Ermine	<i>Mustela erminea</i>		
Mink	<i>Mustela vison</i>		
North American Wolverine	<i>Gulo gulo luscus</i>	SOC	
Northern River Otter	<i>Lontra canadensis</i>		
Canada Lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i>	SOC	
Bobcat	<i>Lynx rufus</i>		
Mountain Lion	<i>Puma concolor</i>		
Elk or Wapiti	<i>Cervus canadensis</i>		
Mule Deer	<i>Odocoileus hemionus</i>		

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

Common Name	Scientific Name	SOC	Comments
White-tailed Deer	<i>Odocoileus virginianus</i>		
Moose	<i>Alces alces</i>		
Mountain Goat	<i>Oreamnos americanus</i>		
Bighorn Sheep	<i>Ovis canadensis</i>		
Northern Alligator Lizard	<i>Elgaria coerulea</i>	SOC	Verified along Clark Fork River
Western Skink	<i>Eumeces skiltonianus</i>	SOC	Suitable habitat, not verified
Rubber Boa	<i>Charina bottae</i>		
Terrestrial Gartersnake	<i>Thamnophis elegans</i>		
Common Gartersnake	<i>Thamnophis sirtalis</i>		

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

APPENDIX D - The table below lists the Species of Concern with CFWCS Tier1 noted in blue that are predicted to occur within or in the vicinity of the property.

Species	Status	Habitat	Status in Fish Creek & Vicinity
Species of Concern			
Bull Trout	Threatened	Coldwater streams	Verified
Westslope Cutthroat Trout	SOC	Coldwater Streams	Verified in area - abundant
Canada Lynx	Threatened	Subalpine conifer forests	Verified
Fisher	SOC	Mixed conifer forests	Verified
Fringed Myotis	SOC	Riparian & dry mixed conifer forests	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Gray Wolf	Delisted, SOC	Generalist	Verified
Grizzly Bear	Threatened	Generalist	Suitable habitat for expansion into the area
Hoary Bat	SOC	Riparian and forest habitats	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Spotted Bat	SOC	Arid land rock outcrops	Suitable habitat present along Clark Fork River
Townsend's Big-eared Bat	SOC	Caves and mines	Suitable roost sites possible in or near area, foraging habitat present
Wolverine	SOC	Conifer forests	Verified
Bald Eagle	Delisted, SOC	Riparian forests	Verified. Nesting pair along Clark Fork. Possible nesting pair up Fish Creek.
Black-backed Woodpecker	SOC	Burned conifer forests	Verified near the area, suitable habitat (recent burns) within area
Boreal Chickadee	SOC	Spruce fir forests	Limited suitable habitat, not verified
Brown Creeper	SOC	Mixed conifer forests	Verified on forest service lands around the area, suitable habitat
Cassin's Finch	SOC	Conifer forests	Verified in the area
Clark's Nutcracker	SOC	Conifer forests	Verified in the area
Flammulated Owl	SOC	Low-mid elevation conifer forests with large trees	Verified in the area
Golden Eagle	SOC	Generalist	Suitable habitat in the area, not verified
Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch	SOC	Alpine	Limited suitable habitat may be present, needs evaluation
Great Blue Heron	SOC	Riparian woodlands	Verified in area
Great Gray Owl	SOC	Conifer forests	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Harlequin Duck	SOC	Mountain Streams	Verified in South Fork Fish Creek south of area, limited suitable habitat present in the area
Lewis's Woodpecker	SOC	Riparian forests	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Northern Goshawk	SOC	Mixed conifer forests	Verified near the area, suitable habitat present
Peregrine Falcon	Delisted,	Cliffs near riparian or wetland	Verified in area, nest site along

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

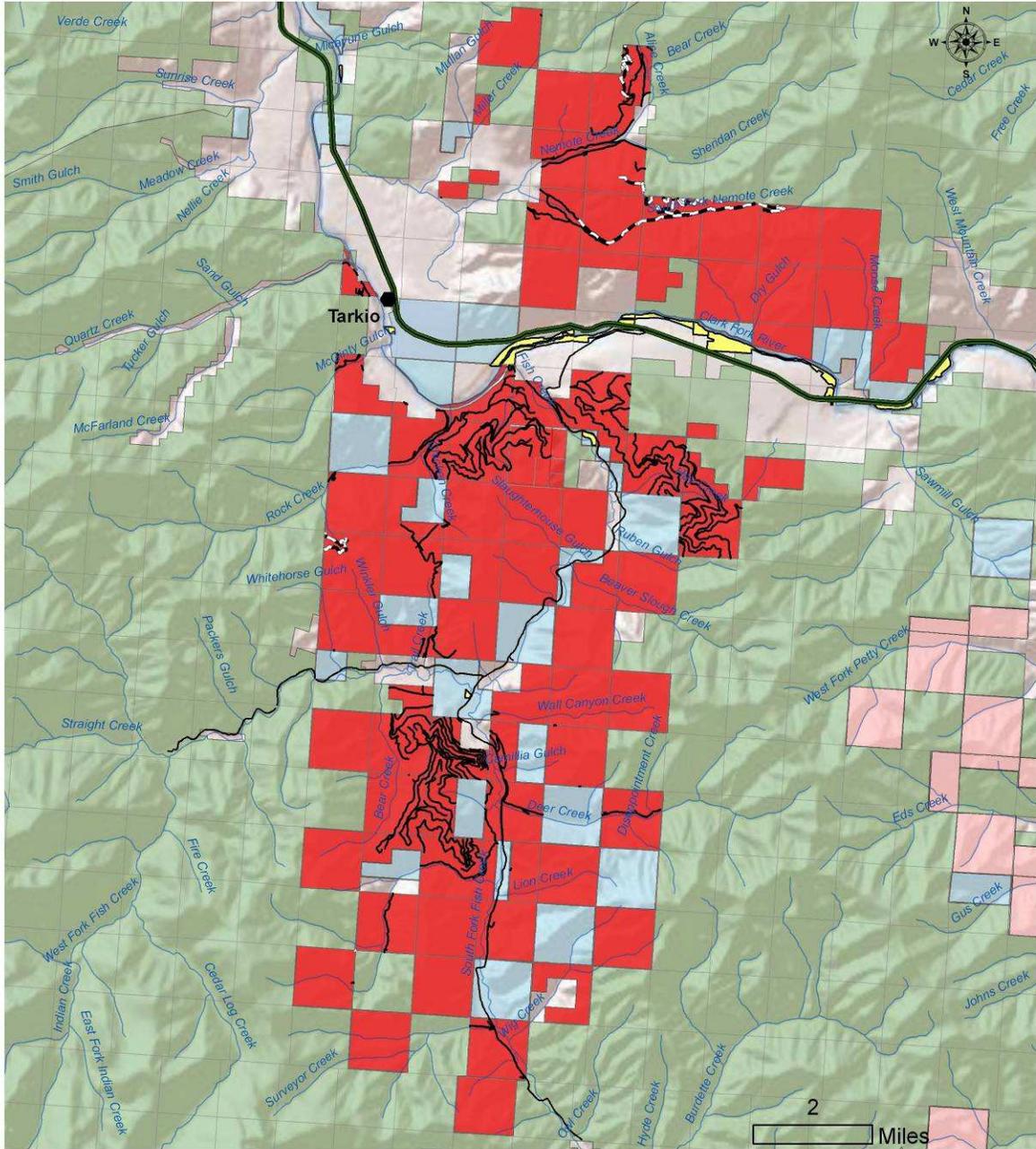
	SOC	habitat	Clark Fork River
Pileated Woodpecker	SOC	Conifer forests with large trees	Verified in area
Veery	SOC	Riparian forests/shrubby habitats	Verified in area
Winter Wren	SOC	Conifer/riparian forests	Verified in area
Northern Alligator Lizard	SOC	Talus/rock outcrops	Verified near area, suitable habitat present
Western Skink	SOC	Open conifer forests/grasslands	Verified near Alberton and Superior, suitable habitat present
Coeur d'Alene Salamander	SOC	Spring/seep, waterfalls, mossy talus	Populations verified in Woodman Creek to east, and Trout Creek to west, some suitable habitat in area
Western Toad	SOC	Wetlands, lakes, floodplain ponds	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Magnum Mantleslug (<i>Magnipelta mycophaga</i>)	SOC	Moist conifer forests	Verified in W. Fork Petty Creek, suitable habitat in area
Rocky Mountain Dusksnail (<i>Colligyrus greggi</i>)	SOC	Cold freshwater streams and springs	A few populations nearby, not verified in area
Western Pearlshell	SOC	Coldwater streams	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Clustered Lady's-Slipper (<i>Cypripedium fasciculatum</i>)	SOC	Montana occurrences are mostly in warm, dry mid-seral montane forest in the Douglas fir/ninebark and grand fir/ninebark habitat types. Elsewhere in its range, it is in western red cedar habitat types.	Verified just west of area in 2000 survey. Timber harvesting has been the primary threat to the species in Montana.
Kelloggia (<i>Kelloggia galioides</i>)	SOC	Open forest in the valley and montane zones	Known in Montana from one 1971 collection in the South Fork Fish Creek valley
Northern Twayblade (<i>Listera borealis</i>)	SOC	Grows in seepy, marshy places along cold-air drainages, often where calcareous	Collected in 1971 in area
Western Joepyeweed (<i>Eupatorium occidentale</i>)	SOC	Rocky outcrops and slopes in the montane and lower subalpine zones	Herbarium specimen from 1975
Potential Species of Concern			
Hoary Marmot	PSOC	Alpine/subalpine meadows/rock outcrops	Limited suitable habitat in SW corner of area, not verified
Silver-haired Bat	PSOC	Riparian and forest habitats	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Hooded Merganser	PSOC	Riparian forests	Limited suitable habitat in area, not verified
Rufous Hummingbird	PSOC	Open and brushy forests	Verified in area
Tennessee Warbler	PSOC	Mixed conifer forests	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
Western Screech-Owl	PSOC	Riparian forests	Suitable habitat in area, not verified
An Agapetus Caddisfly (<i>Agapetus montanus</i>)	PSOC	Fast-flowing streams	Verified in Burdette Creek
Fir Pinwheel (<i>Radiodiscus abietum</i>)	PSOC	Moist, rocky Douglas-fir or western red cedar forests	Some suitable habitat in area

DRAFT Preliminary Management Plan

<i>Additional Tier 1 Species</i>			
Olive-sided Flycatcher	CFWCS Tier 1	Early seral forest/shrub patches, and burned forest	Verified in area

APPENDIX E

Year-round & Seasonally Open Roads TNC Lands in Fish Creek



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

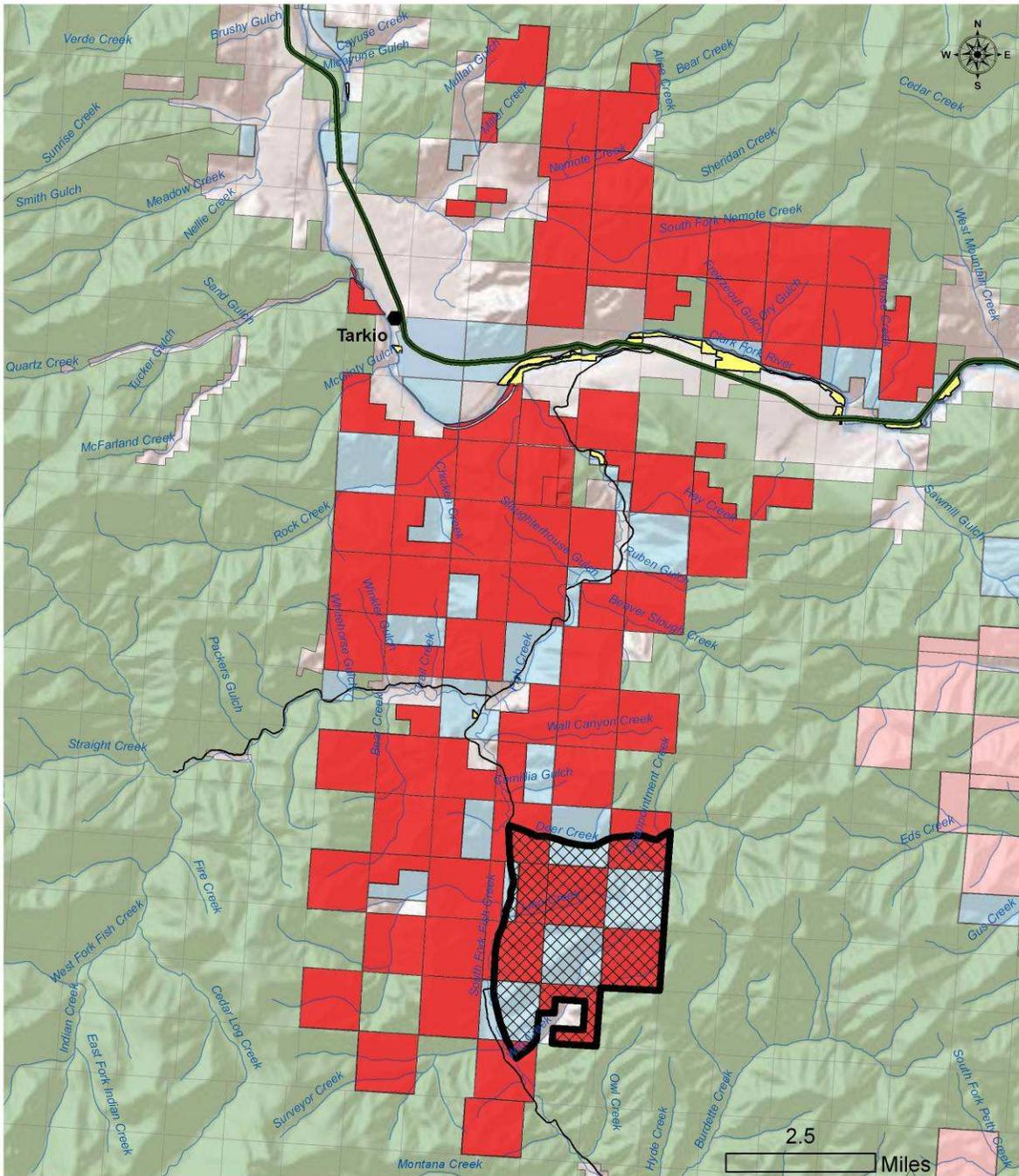
December 28, 2009
Data from: MFWP, TNC

Legend

- Main Fish Creek Roads Open Year-round
- The Nature Conservancy - Fish Creek
- The Nature Conservancy
- Fish Creek Roads on TNC Lands
- Gated Seasonally
- Open Year-round
- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Montana State Trust Lands
- US Forest Service
- Other Private

APPENDIX F

Fish Creek WMA Seasonal Closure* (12/1 - 4/14)



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

December 28, 2009
Data from: MFWP, TNC

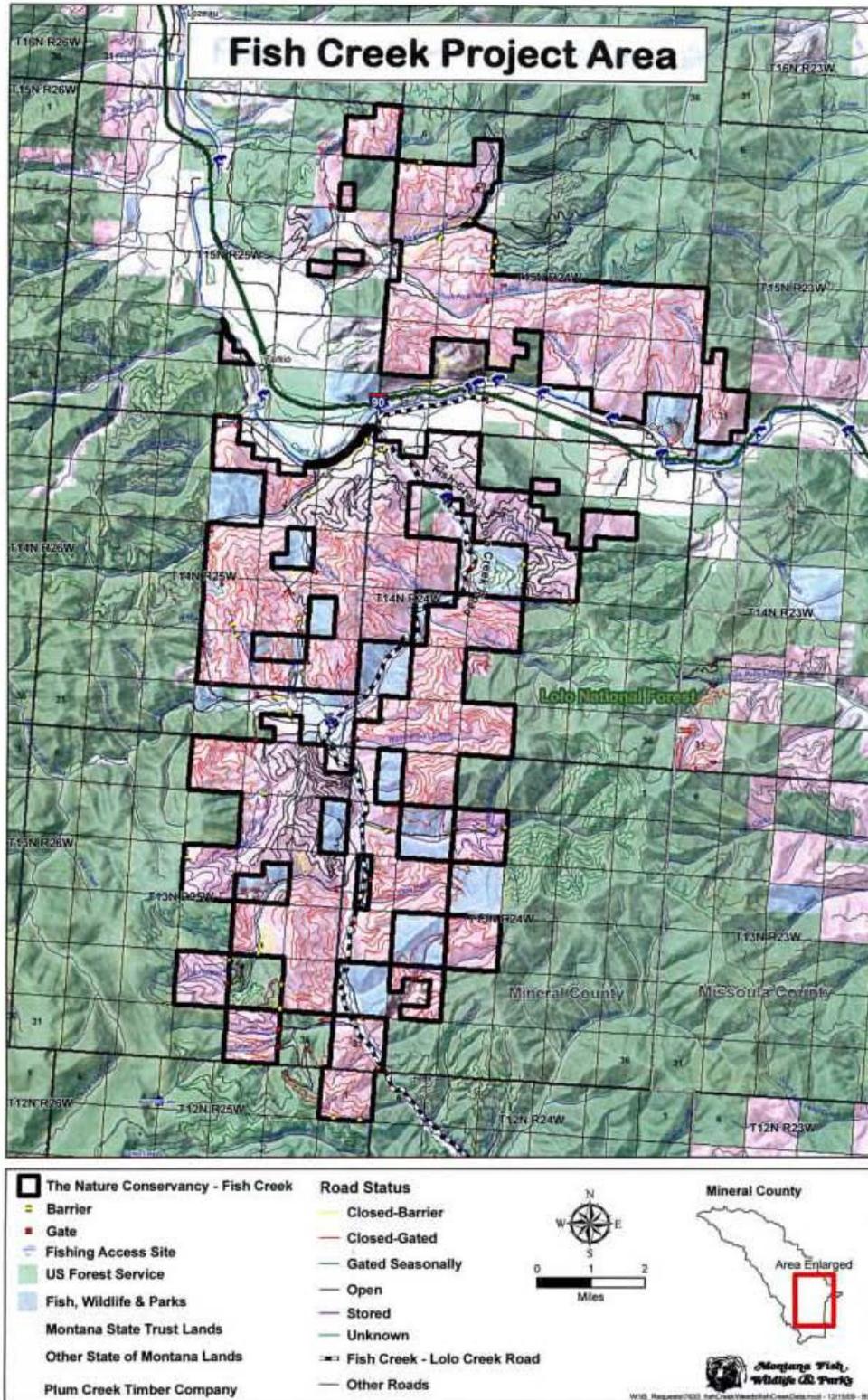
Legend

- Closed Portion of WMA
- Main Fish Creek Roads
- The Nature Conservancy - Fish Creek
- The Nature Conservancy
- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Montana State Trust Lands
- US Forest Service
- Other Private

* Boundary contingent on cooperative agreement with DNRC

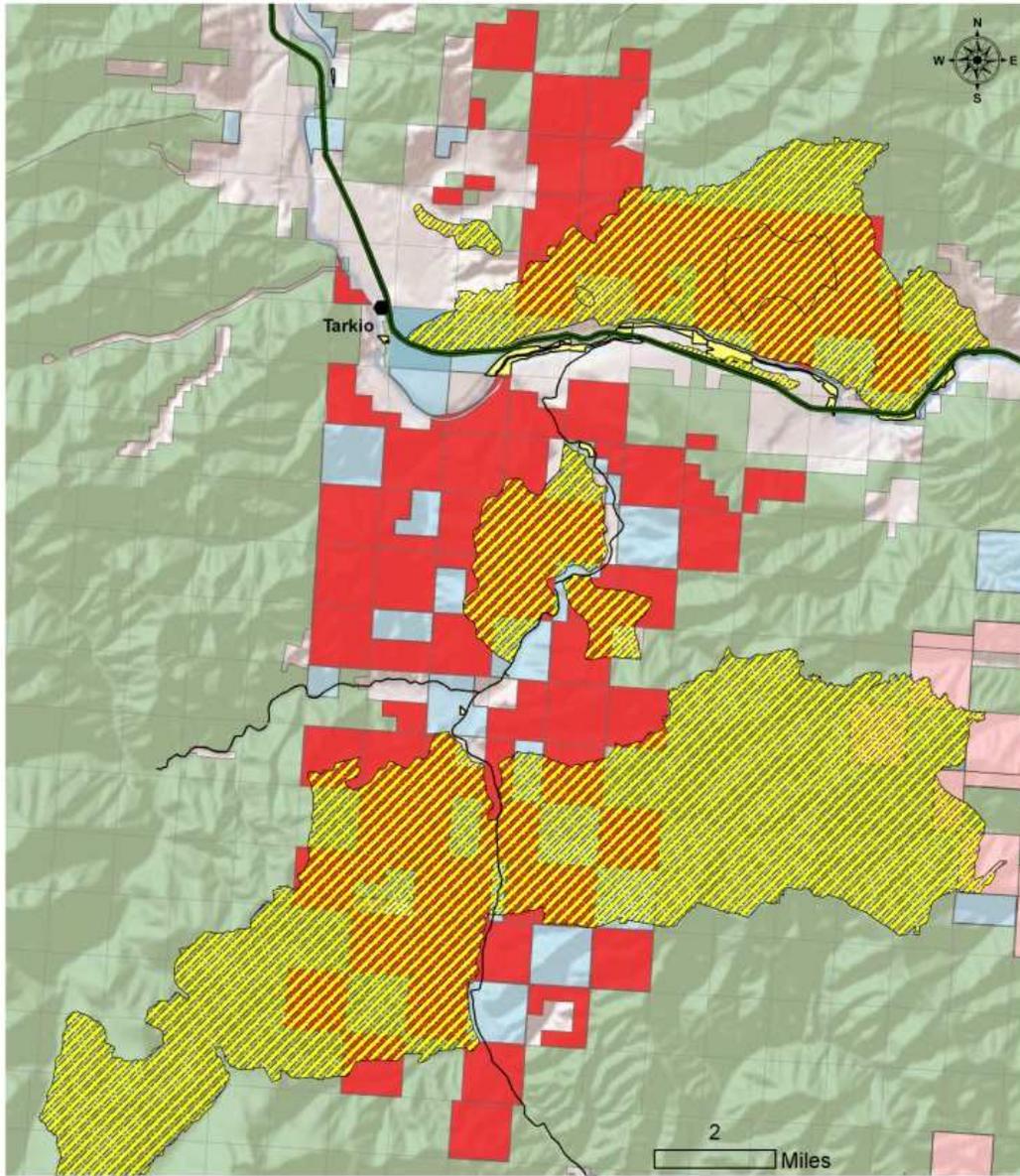
APPENDIX C

Map of Road Status (closed, open, gated, and stored)



APPENDIX D

2003 and 2005 Fish Creek/Tarkio Fires - 49,902 Acres Burned



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

December 23, 2009
Data from: MFWP, TNC

Legend

- Main Fish Creek Roads
- The Nature Conservancy - Fish Creek
- The Nature Conservancy
- 2003 & 2005 Forest Fires
- Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
- Montana State Trust Lands
- US Forest Service
- Other Private

Appendix E – Fish Creek Project Draft EA

FISH CREEK PROJECT
FEE TITLE ACQUISITION
SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

Prepared by:
Rob Brooks
December, 2009

I. INTRODUCTION

Funding for the proposed acquisition would come from three sources: Access Montana Program, Habitat Montana Program, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Program. FWP has the authority to use each program's funds through the following laws or administrative rules:

- Access Montana: This program was established through House Bill 5 during the 2007 Legislature. Its purpose is for the land acquisitions, land leasing, easement purchase, or development agreement for state parks and fishing access sites.
- Habitat Montana: Under Administrative Rule 12.9.508-512, FWP has the authority to acquire wildlife habitat for a) the conservation of Montana's wildlife populations and natural communities to keep them intact for future generations; maintain wildlife population levels that sustain or enhance current recreation opportunities; and maintain diverse geographic distribution of native wildlife populations and their habitats, b) the conservation of Montana's land and water resources in adequate quantity and quality to sustain ecological systems, and c) the implementation of habitat management systems that are compatible with and minimize conflicts between wildlife values and traditional agricultural, economic, and cultural values.
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Program: Per 87-1-709, FWP has the power to acquire lands with federal funds for the one or more of the following purposes: a) protecting or maintaining habitat conditions for fish or wildlife species by placing land under public control or ownership, b) developing or improving habitat conditions to enhance carrying capacity, and/or c) providing public access for the use of fish and wildlife resources.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the fee title purchase of property presently owned by The Nature Conservancy (TNC). The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed fee title acquisition.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description

The TNC property is located near Tarkio, Mt. in Mineral County. The property that MFWP would acquire lies to the north and south of Interstate 90 about 41 miles west of Missoula and encompasses 40,945 acres of Fish Creek and Nemote Creek. A detailed description of this property is included in the environmental assessment (EA).

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

This property contains two habitats that are identified by FWP as Community Types of Greatest Conservation Need. They are the riparian/wetland, a terrestrial community type, and mountain streams, an aquatic community type. The Fish Creek property contains over 25 miles of riparian

habitat.

The Fish Creek project property has long been used for forest resource (timber) production, although no active timber harvest is currently in progress. Timber management was administered by Plum Creek Timber Company (PCT) and its predecessor, Champion International. It was during this latter phase that heavy removal of forest canopy was done and the dense network of access roads was constructed into every part of the property south of the Clark Fork River. Parcels north of the river have also been heavily logged by PCT and the 2005 Tarkio fire affected some areas as well.

Fish Creek supports some of the best remaining native fish populations in the area, provides a major source of salmonid recruitment for the Clark Fork River, and offers an excellent trout fishery throughout most of its reaches. Most tributaries within the watershed offer high quality spawning and rearing habitat for trout. Intact tributary habitat, excellent water quality, consistent instream flows and good connectivity among stream and river reaches have made Fish Creek a stronghold for migratory (fluvial) bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) and westslope cutthroat trout (*Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*) in western Montana. Fish Creek currently supports more fluvial bull trout redds than all other middle Clark Fork tributaries combined and the drainage contains numerous (>20) westslope cutthroat trout populations, many of which are genetically non-introgressed. Other fish species present include mountain whitefish (*Prosopium williamsoni*) and sculpins (*Cottus* spp.), as well as introduced brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*), brown trout (*Salmo trutta*) and rainbow trout (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*).

The wildlife this property supports either year-round or on a seasonal basis is extensive. There are a number of Species of Concern (SOC) including grizzly bears, bull trout, lynx, and western toads that use the property. The Fish Creek drainage also provides significant winter range and other seasonal habitats for elk (*Cervus elaphus*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) and moose (*Alces alces*). It also supports diverse populations of large carnivores, furbearers and upland game birds, including black bear (*Ursus americanus*), mountain lion (*Puma concolor*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), mountain grouse and wild turkey (*Meleagris gallopavo*). For a complete list of species, see the Environmental Assessment.

C. Current Use

Currently the property is owned and managed by TNC. Their goal is to protect the resources values of the lands while improving the habitat. TNC has also continued allowing access for recreational uses such as hunting, fishing, etc.

Under TNC ownership in 2009, The Nature Conservancy and Trout Unlimited collaboratively improved stream connectivity and stream crossing conditions, planted and stored closed roads, and began weed control efforts in many drainages within the proposed acquisition. Accomplishments from 2009 include approximately fifty miles of road storage, decommissioning and/or maintenance, removal of approximately forty culverts and cross drains, weed treatment along open and closed road systems, and revegetation of more than 3,500 feet of streambank along the main stem Fish Creek and South Fork Fish Creek corridor where Fish Creek Road

encroaches on the stream.

D. Purchase Alternatives

- Purchase the property fee title.
- No fee title purchase

The purchase of a conservation easement was also discussed but dropped from consideration given they want to sell the property.

MFWP Fee Title Purchase

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks plans to designate two distinct management areas for this property. The first is a wildlife management area that will encompass approximately 34,000 acres and be managed by the agency's Fish and Wildlife Division. The goal is to protect and enhance the fisheries and wildlife habitat and provide recreational opportunities that meet the management plan. The second management area, approximately 6,900 acres, will be designated a state park and managed by the agency's Parks Division. While the state park concept has been identified, there are no development plans at this time.

No Purchase Alternative

The no purchase alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what TNC does with the property.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Section II identified the management alternatives this report addresses. The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection of important wildlife and fisheries habitat and provide for public access to the land. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the fee title purchase.

The financial impacts address the cost of the fee title acquisition by MFWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e. income and employment).

A. Financial Impacts

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay \$14,350,000 for fee title on this property. The funding will come from Access Montana (14% of the purchase price), the Habitat Montana Program (28% of the purchase price), and the federal aid Pittman-Robertson Program (58% of the purchase price). In addition, Senate Bill 164 passed by the 2009 legislature directs that MFWP establish a maintenance account to address maintenance requirements defined in the bill. With regard to this proposed purchase the maintenance account would amount to \$300,000.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the fee title purchase. The sale of this land by The Nature Conservancy and subsequent title transfer to MFWP will not change the tax revenues that Mineral County currently collects on these lands. MFWP is required by Montana Code 87-1-603 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 taxes on this land are approximately \$50,000 per year based on the current assessment.

B. Economic Impacts

There will not be any significant financial impacts to local businesses associated with the fee title purchase of this land by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Recreation access is an important component of MFWP management plans for the property and local businesses that provide services will not be negatively impacted.

The Nature Conservancy has allowed one commercial outfitter to utilize the property. However, under MFWP management outfitted hunting will not be allowed although other activities such as guided hiking, biking, horseback riding, etc. are allowed during the months the proposed WMA is open for public use. The amount of hunting use by the outfitter on the lands that FWP is proposing to purchase is unknown, however the commercial hunting restriction will have some financial impact to this operation and a negligible impact to local businesses.

The maintenance and enhancement work that will be needed in Fish Creek will provide opportunities for local businesses and these work efforts will provide some positive economic activity.

The potential development of a state park on 6900 acres of this property would also provide a positive financial impact to surrounding communities that provide goods and services to park visitors.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The Fish Creek property fee title purchase by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks will provide long term protection for wildlife habitat in these watersheds, maintain the open space integrity of the land, enhance public recreation opportunities and improve the overall management on the property.

This purchase will not reduce the tax revenues that Mineral County collects on this property under Montana Code 97-1-603.

The financial impacts to local businesses from this purchase will be neutral to positive given that recreational opportunities will not be negatively impacted and FWP will be working to address weed issues, etc.

APPENDIX F



MINERAL COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

PO Box 550
300 River Street
Superior, MT 59872
Phone (406) 822.3577
Fax (406) 822.3552
commissioners@co.mineral.mt.us

Mack H. Long
Region 2 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
3201 Spurgin Rd
Missoula, MT 59804

RE: Fish Creek Land Acquisition

Dear Supervisor Long:

Thank you for meeting with us on 12/23/2009 regarding the potential acquisition of the 41,000 acres of former Plum Creek land currently owned by The Nature Conservancy. This large expanse located in Mineral County has long been open to our constituency, and access for fishing, hunting, hiking, berry-picking, etc., was always freely granted by Plum Creek, and that continued access has been assured by TNC. However, we cannot be assured of continued ownership by TNC due to their financial obligations.

Rather than face the potential sale of some or all of this land, that has been traditionally open to our public, to private parties that might exclude this traditional access, we would prefer it to be transferred to public ownership. Because we are not in favor of additional federal ownership in Mineral County, we are unanimously in favor of your proposal as it would continue to provide the access so important to all of us, provide state agency management of important fish and wildlife habitat, and continue to provide substantial property tax revenue to Mineral County.

We look forward to the culmination of this proposal, and look forward to being an active partner in future management decisions related to this area. Once again, thank you for your efforts to move this forward.

Sincerely,

Mineral County Commissioners

Clark Conrow, Chairman

B. J. McComb, Member

Duane Simons, Member