DECISION NOTICE
COTTONWOOD BEND CONSERVATION EASEMENT

Prepared by Region 6, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
July 19, 2010

PROPOSAL

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) is proposing to purchase a perpetual conservation easement on the Cottonwood Bend property. The proposed easement involves approximately 159 deeded acres owned by Donna Christensen and located about 2 miles north of Hinsdale along the Milk River. It is located directly across the Milk River from FWP's Hinsdale WMA, and is directly adjacent to the Bernie Hart Conservation Easement. The purchase price for the conservation easement will be 40% of the appraised fee value of the property. Based on preliminary appraisal results (which will be finalized by the end of July), the purchase price for the conservation easement will be in the range of $175,000 - $195,000.

The easement is being proposed to protect, enhance and preserve the overall integrity of riparian habitat associated along the Milk River for present and future generations. The Milk River riparian corridor is key to maintaining stable and diverse wildlife populations, primarily because of the habitat quality for all seasonal habitats. Most of the surrounding uplands lack an effective winter cover component, making this project very important. The terms of the easement are directed at conserving river bottom riparian and shrub grassland habitats. The easement also assures that general public hunting will continue to be the tool used to manage game populations.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) PROCESS

The proposal has been outlined in an Environmental Assessment (EA) to satisfy the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). FWP is required to assess the impacts of the proposed action to the human and natural environment as directed by MEPA.

Under the MEPA process a 30-day public comment period ran from June 3 through July 2, 2010. During this period, a public hearing was held at the County Courthouse in Glasgow the evening of June 17, 2010.

ISSUES RAISED IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA)

No issues were raised in the public comment period. The Valley County Commissioners indicated they support conservations easements if public use is still allowed on the property. The State Historic Preservation Office determined that since no new ground disturbances and no disturbances or alterations to structures over fifty years of age would occur under the proposed easement, cultural resource inventories to determine eligibility for listing on the National Register of Historic Places was not warranted.

GENERAL SUMMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

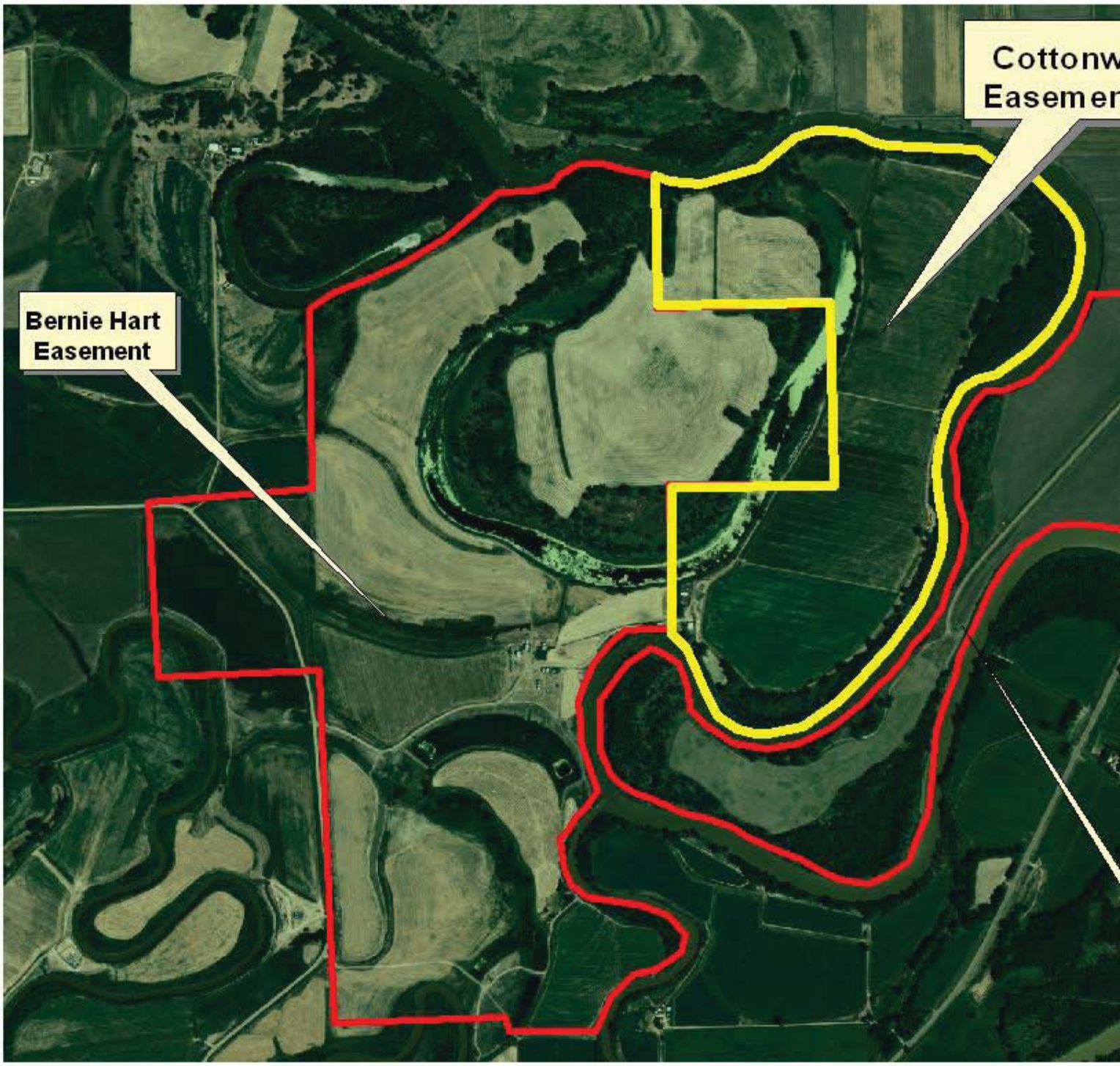
The public hearing was conducted on June 17, 2010, and no verbal comments were taken at that time. There was one verbal and four written comments submitted which supported FWP acquiring a conservation easement on the Cottonwood Bend property.

DECISION

FWP fully supports the concept of conservation easements to protect diverse wildlife and agricultural values from development, subdivision and human encroachment. Approximately 75 % of the Milk River Valley and associated riparian and shrub grassland habitats have been developed for agriculture and livestock production purposes. Recently, interests have started buying up land associated with the Milk River for recreational purposes. This often results in termination of public access and heightened game damage problems on neighboring farms and ranches. Unless actions are taken to preserve the remaining undeveloped or moderately developed areas along the Milk River through conservation easements much of the private land that presently provides habitat, scenic values and public access will be lost.

After review of this proposal and corresponding public support, it is my recommendation to purchase the conservation easement on the Cottonwood Bend property, subject to approval by the FWP Commission.

Patrick Gunderson
Region 6 Supervisor
Glasgow, Montana
July 19, 2010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