

***Dahm Land Acquisition Habitat Conservation Project
Draft Environmental Assessment***

Fee Title Addition to Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area

July 2007



**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, Montana 59901
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Dahm Habitat Conservation Project

Draft Environmental Assessment

Public Comment Period: Monday, July 16, through Monday, August 6, 2007

Public Hearing: Tuesday, July 31, 2007
7:00 - 8:00 p.m.
Lincoln Electric Meeting Room
500 Osloski Road
Eureka, Montana

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INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase in fee title approximately 17 acres of land adjoining the Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area (WMA) north of Eureka. This property is surrounded on 3 sides by the WMA (Fig. 1).

The project area contains important habitat for bighorn sheep, mule deer, and elk. The property contains a combination of forested and grassland habitats and topography that varies from gentle to very steep. Currently, no structures exist on the property, with the exception of a historic lime kiln. The property, like others in the vicinity, is under pressure of development and possibly subdivision.

FWP, under an agreement with Martha Dahm, has been managing this property as though it were a part of the WMA for many years. She recently expressed a desire to sell the property and would like to see it remain an undeveloped part of the WMA.

The project proposal received tentative approval from the FWP Commission during their May 2007 meeting. The project would be funded with money from the Sheep Auction Fund. This fund is derived from the auction of a single bighorn sheep permit annually and may generate several hundred thousand dollars. The acquired land would become part of the Woods Ranch WMA and would be managed to provide public recreation associated with the local wildlife resource.

The adjacent Woods Ranch WMA was acquired in 1978 by the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers as partial mitigation for habitat losses resulting from the construction of Libby Dam and the creation of Lake Koocanusa. It consists of 1,457 acres and provides important wintering habitat for bighorn sheep, mule deer, and elk. Other species known to use the WMA include white-tailed deer, moose, black bears, grizzly bears, and mountain lions, not to mention turkeys and several species of grouse.

This parcel and the adjoining WMA receives heavy use by bighorn sheep, primarily during the winter and spring months. Up to 100 sheep have been observed on the WMA and directly adjacent to this property. The sheep utilizing this area are native sheep and are referred to professionally as "Trench sheep," a unique genotype that extends from Lake Koocanusa northward to Golden, B.C. The sheep occupying the Woods Ranch and nearby Ten Lakes area is the only remaining viable herd of this genotype in NW Montana.

The sale of this property to another entity and the construction of several homes would negatively impact FWP management of this section of the WMA and could potentially severely impact the use of this area by bighorn sheep and other wildlife. This parcel contains important escape cover for bighorn sheep and is instrumental to their overall use of the WMA, especially along the western boundary.

Another concern relative to the sale of this property to another entity is the possible introduction of domestic sheep, whether as a hobby or for commercial purposes. Domestic sheep commonly carry a Pasteurella bacterium that is harmless to them. However, through simple nose-to-nose contact with wild sheep, this bacterium can be easily transmitted to wild herds with devastating effects. Entire herds have been pushed to the brink of extinction because of innocuous encounters such as this.

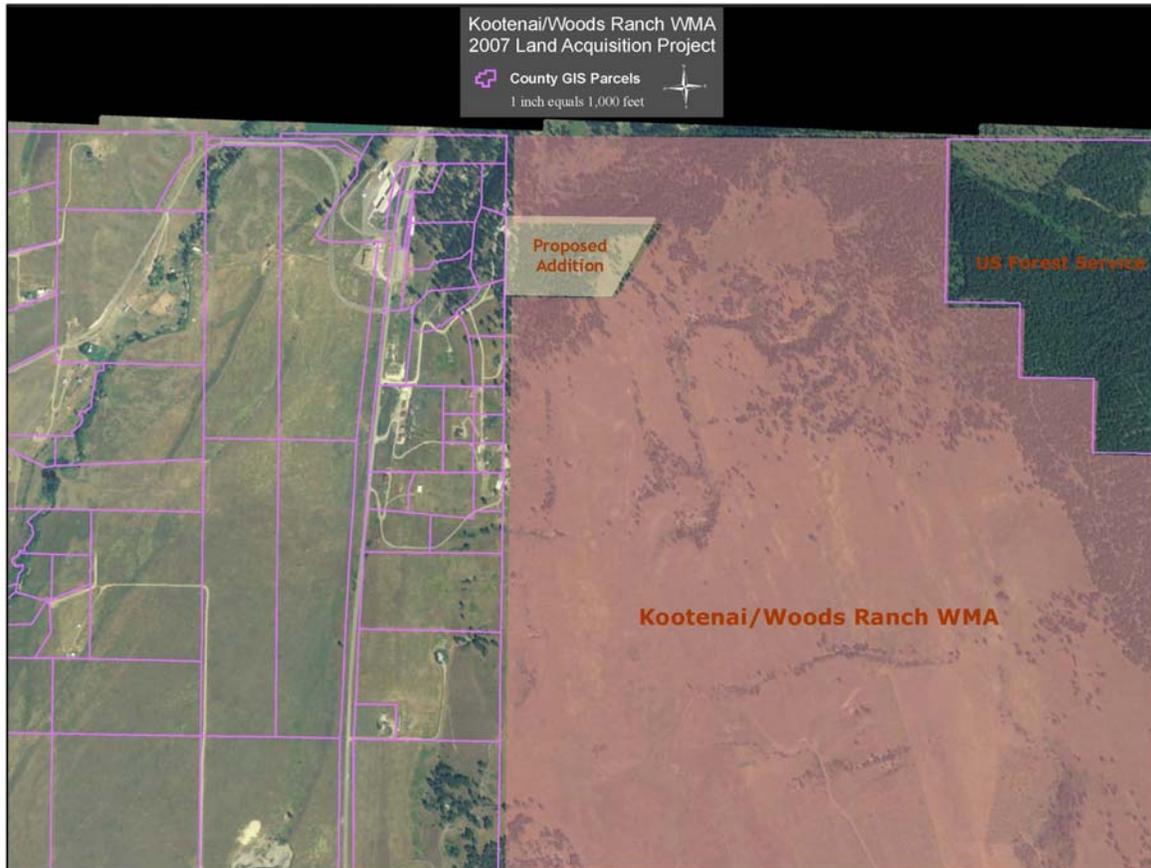


Figure 1. Map of Dahm property (top/center - Proposed Addition).

Project Proximity to Existing WMA

The 17-acre project area is bordered on the north, east, and west by the Woods Ranch WMA and is located in the WMA's northwest corner. It would be managed as part of the WMA upon final acquisition. Under an informal agreement with the present owner, it has been managed as though it were part of the WMA for many years.

DETAILED PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

Habitat/Recreation Values:

The Woods Ranch WMA provides important wintering habitat for large numbers of elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep, which migrate to this area from a much broader area. In addition, it is a very popular area for hunters in the fall who are pursuing these and other species. Other recreationists visit the WMA to view and photograph wildlife, hike, watch birds, and enjoy the panoramic view of the Tobacco Valley. The WMA is available for public use from May 15 to December 1. The majority of the WMA is closed the remainder of the year to allow wildlife an opportunity to use the area undisturbed. The Dahm property will augment the WMA with many of the same experiences. In addition, a historic limekiln is located on the Dahm property, which may be the only one of its type in Lincoln County. Visitors will be able to visit and photograph this kiln first-hand.



Figure 2. Bighorn sheep on the WMA directly adjacent to Dahm property. Photo by Vic Workman.

Location/Ownership:

The project is located in Lincoln County in the east half of Section 1, Township 37 North, Range 27 West. It is located approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ mile east of U.S. Customs at the Roosville Port of Entry and several hundred yards south of the B.C./U.S. border. On

wildlife lands, FWP, by statute, will pay to the county in which the land resides “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.” (84-1-603)

Costs/Funding Sources:

The FWP Commission approved this project on a tentative basis at its May Commission meeting. Funding for acquisition would come from the Sheep Auction Fund. This fund is derived from the auction of a single Montana bighorn sheep permit annually and may generate several hundred thousand dollars. The cost for acquiring the 17-acre Dahm property is approximately \$145,000. Costs for future management of the area are expected to be minimal and will probably average less than \$100 per year.

Bighorn Sheep:

Most herds of sheep in northwest Montana are the result of transplants from the Sun River herd. Examples include sheep on Wild Horse Island, near Thompson Falls, Saint Regis, and Plains, the Kootenai Falls herd, and the Cabinet Mountains herd. However, the sheep that winter on the Woods Ranch WMA and summer in the Ten Lakes area and northward are native sheep that are referred to professionally as “Trench sheep.” This bloodline extends northward to Golden, British Columbia. Trench sheep are a little smaller and darker than sheep from Sun River. The Ten Lakes herd has been increasing steadily the last several years and now numbers over 100. This herd is shared with Canada and freely crosses the border. In Canada, they are referred to as the “Phillips Creek herd.”

Along the west shore of Kooconusa is another herd of sheep referred to as the “Ural-Tweed herd.” It is also a native herd and is of the KootenayTrench sheep genotype. However, its numbers have dwindled to only 25-35 animals. Efforts to augment this population with sheep from the Woods Ranch have been largely unsuccessful, with only 2 sheep moved in 2006. Efforts to preserve a pure Trench genotype within the Ural-Tweed herd has been further stymied by the establishment of a new herd near Libby dam, that most likely has its origins from Kootenai Falls. In the last 2 years, these sheep have been observed on both sides of Libby Dam and several miles northward along Hwy. 37. If they have not yet mingled with the Ural-Tweed herd, it is probably only a matter of time before they do so. While the mingling of these 2 genotypes may improve genetic vigor and result in enhanced reproduction for the Ural-Tweed herd, ultimately it will result in the loss of the Trench genotype for this population.

Proposed Management Plan:

The Dahm property will become part of the Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area and managed similarly to the rest of the WMA to provide and protect habitat for a diversity of wildlife species. Little is expected to change from the current management of this area. Weeds will continue to be monitored and will be sprayed if necessary. The emphasis will be on maintaining the quality of the area for sheep. While most of the

WMA is on a 3-pasture rest-rotation grazing plan, the Dahm property lies just outside the area that is grazed. The intent of the grazing plan that utilizes cattle on the WMA is to maintain grasses in a more palatable state for wild ungulates. The majority of the WMA is divided into 3 main pastures. Grazing is rotated between these pastures, with each pasture receiving complete rest every third year.

At some point in the future, a small amount of thinning may be proposed on the Dahm property to maintain tree vigor and health, although this is not expected for some time. A short length of fence in the western portion of the property will be removed. No new fence construction is necessary. Any efforts that are necessary to preserve the historic limekiln from unnatural degradation will be taken.



Figure 3. Photo of historic limekiln located on Dahm property.

DISCUSSION OF ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A – Proposed Action: Complete Fee Title Acquisition

FWP would acquire the 17-acre Dahm property located adjacent to the Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area. Through fee-title ownership, FWP would have the opportunity maintain the habitat quality of the area and minimize the potential for future conflicts, should the area be subdivided. Recreational opportunities for the public would also be maximized. FWP would manage weeds and provide public access areas. Alternative A compliments FWP's management efforts at Woods Ranch WMA to produce and maintain habitats for a variety of wildlife and for a variety of compatible public uses.

Alternative B – No Action

FWP would not acquire the Dahm property. This would likely result in the property being sold and developed, possibly with several new residences. Wildlife use would likely decrease substantially and potential conflicts with wildlife and WMA management would increase. The public would likely not have an opportunity to use and enjoy the area and visit the kiln.

Description of Area Related to Indirect or Cumulative Effects

The proposed project is bordered on 3 sides by the Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area and is located only a few hundred yards south of the U.S./Canada international border. It provides important winter range for a variety of species (primarily bighorn sheep) that migrate to the area from a broad area including Canada. This project would compliment the WMA and other habitat conservation efforts (e.g., Dancing Prairie Preserve) that are currently present in the Tobacco Valley.

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

This section of the environmental assessment presents an evaluation of the impacts of the alternatives, including secondary and cumulative impacts on the physical and human environment.

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Land Resources:

Alternative A: The area would continue to provide important habitat for a variety of species. Soils would remain undisturbed.

Alternative B: Under the no-action alternative the property could be subdivided and/or developed for residential or commercial uses. Roads would have to be constructed to

access the property, which could lead to significant runoff, soil disturbance, and the introduction of noxious weeds.

Air Quality:

Alternative A: Under the proposed action, land use would be the protection of native habitat and would help insure pristine air quality. No activities would occur that could negatively affect future long-term air quality of this area.

Alternative B: No action would allow for land uses other than habitat protection and wildlife management. Negative impacts to current air quality in the project area could occur, especially if the area is developed for commercial purposes.

Water:

Alternative A: Under the proposed action, water quality would receive the highest level of protection imaginable, with the possible exception of the infrequent spraying of weeds that might occur, should they become a problem

Alternative B: Under the no-action alternative, the quality and quantity of water could be impacted by residential or commercial development due to runoff, leaching from septic systems, fertilizers and pesticides applied to lawns, etc.

Vegetation:

Alternative A: The proposed alternative would maintain the diversity, quantity, and quality of native vegetation in the project area.

Alternative B: Under the no-action alternative, residential or commercial use of the land could drastically alter or eliminate current vegetative communities.

Fish and Wildlife:

Alternative A: Acquisition of the property by FWP will result in the continued maintenance and protection of habitat that is already being used by a wide variety of species, especially bighorn sheep.

Alternative B: The no-action alternative could allow future residential or commercial development. If that occurred, development activities could severely impact the habitat with potentially significant and far-reaching effects. One example would be the introduction of domestic sheep to this parcel. Simple nose-to-nose contact with wild sheep could result in the transmission of a Pasteurella bacterium that could devastate the entire Ten Lakes herd that occupies both Montana and British Columbia. While most domestic sheep carry this bacterium and are resistant to its effects, wild sheep are highly susceptible.

HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Noise/Electrical Effects:

Alternative A: This proposed project would not have any effect on noise or cause any electrical disturbance.

Alternative B: No action would mean that current noise or electrical levels could drastically change in the future.

Land Use:

Alternative A: Acquisition of this property by FWP would result in no change from the current land use, which is largely a pristine environment.

Alternative B: No action would mean that current land uses could change drastically in the future.

Risk/Health Hazards:

Alternative A: The proposed action includes the potential for the occasional use of chemicals for noxious weed control. Herbicides would only be applied by a licensed applicator following label instructions and taking all precautions to prevent an accidental discharge or misuse.

Alternative B: No action would result in whatever health risks commensurate with development of the site.

Community Impact:

Alternative A: The proposed action will maintain critical wildlife habitat on 17 acres in Lincoln County. It will also help to preserve an important historic relic. The public will have full access to the area 6½ months each year for hunting, wildlife viewing, visits to the lime kiln, etc. People in Lincoln County view wildlife, especially bighorn sheep, as an important public resource. Maintaining this area in its natural state will help preserve important scenic values in the northern part of the valley. These benefits are difficult to quantify, but are undoubtedly important to the area's increasing tourism industry. The benefits of open lands will increase as residential development encompasses more and more rural lands. See the attached Socio-Economic Review (Appendix A) for further detail.

Alternative B: The no-action alternative would allow the area to be developed. While this would undoubtedly provide some revenue to the county and community in the form

of new home construction and taxes, it would also result in increased costs to the county for police and fire protection, road maintenance, etc.

Public Services:

Alternative A: The purchase of the property includes a requirement by the state to pay in-lieu-of taxes on the land equal to previous tax values. On wildlife lands, FWP will pay to the county in which the land resides “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.” (84-1-603) The state will not require any new services.

Alternative B: No action means that the land could be developed, resulting in increased public service requirements.

Aesthetics/Recreation:

Alternative A: Purchase of the 17 acres by FWP would preserve the aesthetic beauty of the area and maintain or increase existing public recreational opportunities. Existing open space available to the public would be maintained.

Alternative B: No action means that the current aesthetic and recreational values of the property would likely decrease in the future.

Cultural/Historic Resources:

Alternative A: The project area contains a historic limekiln that was built in 1905, over 100 years ago. This is the only known kiln in Lincoln County. It was once owned by both Bill Marston and Arthur Stahl, early Tobacco Valley residents for whom Mount Marston and Stahl Peak were named. Mortar from the kiln was used to build many of the brick buildings in early Eureka and was used to construct buildings as far away as Spokane. Purchase of this property by FWP will help preserve this unique and significant structure.

Alternative B: No action means that there could be a higher level of risk to the kiln if the area is developed.

Summary Evaluation of Significance:

Based upon evaluation of potential impacts related to the proposal, a determination has been made that an EIS is not required. The EA is an appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action because: 1) no endangered or threatened plant or animal species will be significantly affected, 2) there are no long-term or irretrievable impacts to the physical environment, and 3) there are no negative impacts to the human environment.

List of Agencies Consulted During Preparation of the EA:

State Historic Preservation Office
Lincoln County Weed District

Public Involvement:

The Region and FWP have received considerable support for the proposal during project exploration and development. There will be a 21-day public comment period, from July 16 through August 6, 2007. The Region will make the EA available to interested individuals, groups, and agencies, and will facilitate a public hearing at Lincoln Electric, 500 Osloski Road in Eureka on Tuesday, July 31, 2007, from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m. to discuss the proposal and receive public comment. Please direct comments/questions to Tim Thier, FWP Area Wildlife Biologist, (406) 882-4697 or e-mail to tthier@interbel.net, or Jim Williams, FWP Wildlife Program Manager, (406) 752-5501 or e-mail to jiwilliams@mt.gov.

Cost:

The negotiated price of the 17-acre property is \$145,000.

DAHM PROPERTY
FEE TITLE ACQUISITION
SOCIOECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

Prepared by:
Rob Brooks
July 2007

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) to acquire an interest in land for the purpose of protecting and improving wildlife habitat. These acquisitions can be through fee title, conservation easements, or leasing. In 1989, the Montana legislature passed House Bill 720 requiring that a socioeconomic assessment be completed when wildlife habitat is acquired using Habitat Montana monies. These assessments evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and impacts on local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the fee title transfer of the Dahm property to FWP using funding provided by the Sheep Auction Fund. 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 Dahm property is located in Lincoln County just south of the US/BC border near the Roosville Port of Entry. This 17 acre property is surrounded on three sides by the Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area. A detailed description of this property is included in the environmental assessment (EA).

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

The property is a mixture of grasslands and forest habitat and varies from gentle-to-steep topography. This property provides important habitat for a large number of wildlife species both seasonally and year-round. The bighorn sheep that utilize this area are native and represent a unique genotype that is only found in this area and north into Canada. The EA provides a list of the species that utilize this property.

C. Current Use

The property has been managed as part of the wildlife management area for many years under an agreement with Martha Dahm.

D. Management Alternatives

- 1) Purchase the property fee title
- 2) No purchase

MFWP Fee Title Purchase

The intent of the Dahm land purchase is to protect the wildlife habitats found here as well as protect the integrity of the Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area.

No Purchase Alternative

The no purchase alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what future owners decide to do with the property. There is potential for subdivision of these acres, which would most likely impact the use patterns of the wildlife, especially the bighorn sheep since they use the area for escape cover.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Section II identifies the management alternatives this report addresses. The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat and consistent management of this land. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the two management alternatives following two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the fee title transfer to 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 has agreed to purchase fee title to this property for \$145,000 with funding provided by the Sheep Auction Fund. These lands will be managed as part of the Woods Ranch WMA, and the management costs are estimated to be approximately \$100 per year.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the fee title purchase. The sale of this land and subsequent title transfer to MFWP will not change the tax revenues that Lincoln County currently collects on this property. 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 amount to approximately \$48 per year.

B. Economic Impacts

There will not be any significant financial impacts to local businesses associated with the fee title purchase of this land and subsequent ownership by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. The agency does not plan to change management on these acres except for providing protection, as necessary, to the historic limekiln located on the property. In the future, the agency may develop a tree thinning plan to ensure the health of the tree species found on the property.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The fee title purchase and title transfer to Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide long term protection for the habitat and wildlife, maintain the open space integrity of the land, and enhance public recreational opportunities on the Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area. The fee title purchase and title transfer to MFWP will not cause a reduction in tax revenues on this property from their current levels to Lincoln County under Montana Code 87-1-603. Overall financial impacts to local business will be minimal in terms of the agricultural and timber activities