



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405

January 15, 2009

To Whom It May Concern:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) is proposing to purchase in fee title 3,278 acres from Lloyd and Danielle Neal (Neal Ranch). The proposed purchase by MFWP is contingent upon available funds. The property lies approximately 9 miles west of Augusta in Lewis and Clark County and is situated east of and adjacent to the Sun River Wildlife Management Area.

The purchase is being proposed to conserve parts of important elk winter range as well as other native wildlife habitats linked to intermountain grassland habitat. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks would like to purchase and integrate the property into existing management practices of the Sun River Wildlife Management Area.

Acquisition terms are generalized in the enclosed Environmental Assessment. A Socio-Economic Report and Management Plan have also been provided for your review. The comment period will be open through February 15, 2009.

Please send any written comments to the following address:

Neal Ranch Acquisition
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Region 4 Headquarters
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405

Or email comments to: blonner@mt.gov

A public hearing on this proposed acquisition will be held at the Augusta School Gymnasium on Tuesday, January 27, 2009 at 7:00 p.m.

Sincerely,

Graham Taylor
Acting Regional Supervisor
Great Falls, MT

Environmental Assessment

Neal Ranch Acquisition Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 4 Habitat Montana proposed project



January 2009

1.0. PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

1.1. Proposed Action and Need

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) proposes the acquisition of approximately 3,278 acres in fee title of important wildlife habitat adjacent to the Sun River Wildlife Management Area (SRWMA). The property would be purchased with MFWP Habitat Montana Program Funds and federal Wildlife Restoration dollars. The acquisition of this property is contingent upon available funds within MFWP. The Conservation Fund will purchase the property from Lloyd Neal, then sell the property to the Department. The Fund offers to sell the property to Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks for less than appraised value at approximately \$5.5 million. This will be a Bargain Sale to the State of Montana thanks to charitable dollars that have been raised by The Conservation Fund to advance private lands conservation along the Rocky Mountain Front. The entire Neal ranch is comprised of approximately 5,560 acres, however, the portion of the Neal Ranch proposed within this acquisition is that area immediately adjacent to the SRWMA (Figures 1 & 2).

Very few larger properties are available for conservation protection along the Rocky Mountain Front. The proposed acquisition is comprised of primarily native prairie mountain-foothill grassland habitat with some riparian/wetland habitat communities, all of which support an abundance of game and non-game species. This tract offers good opportunities for hunting recreation, especially for antelope, elk, mule deer, waterfowl and upland game birds.

Perhaps one of the most beneficial attributes of acquiring such land would be to attain additional winter range habitat for the Sun River elk herd, among other wildlife. The SRWMA was initially purchased in 1948 with the intent of securing winter range habitat for the Sun River elk herd. Even today, the latter continues to be the primary purpose of this Wildlife Management Area (WMA). In recent times, the SRWMA provides winter range habitat for up to 2,500 elk. However, because of recent drought years, an overabundance of elk and thus, over-utilization of winter range forage (e.g., too much elk use), the current status of certain important vegetative species on the WMA is poor. Acquiring additional adjacent acreage to the SRWMA should help to alleviate some of the winter grazing pressure.

Note: Overall population objectives for the Sun River elk herd call for the entire elk herd to be within 10% of 2,500 elk as seen during winter surveys and observations. The limiting factor of available winter range habitat is commonly one management tool upon which overall population objectives are based. By adding acreage to the SRWMA, there is no intent to increase overall elk herd number objectives, but rather, to manage current herd numbers to more closely reflect habitat capacity and forage health.

If MFWP acquired this property, recreational uses would primarily be related to hunting, hiking, wildlife viewing, fishing as well as other possible compatible uses. Imminent threat exists to this mountain foothill area because of the property's scenic location enveloping land adjacent to the SRWMA and pristine views of the Rocky Mountain Front; accordingly this ranch has caught the attention of developers and private investors.

If the latter individuals purchased the property for development of exclusive private use, not only could public access and recreational activities be excluded, but perhaps more importantly, the long-term health and quality of one of Montana’s historic elk herds could be jeopardized.

1.2 Objectives

In proposing to acquire the Neal Ranch, MFWP seeks to meet the following needs:

- Protect and enhance native prairie and mountain-foothill grassland and riparian habitat communities;
- Provide additional winter range habitat for the Sun River elk herd;
- Manage wildlife and fisheries habitat in a sustainable manner to support priority fish and wildlife species;
- Provide public access to over 3,200 acres of continuous habitat that is currently inaccessible for recreational uses;
- Provide opportunity and access for public hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, hiking, and opportunity for other public recreational users;
- Protect wildlife habitat and fisheries resource from incompatible land uses or development and potential loss of public access to those resources;

1.3 Location

Located approximately 9 miles west of Augusta and 52 miles west of Great Falls in Lewis and Clark County, the Neal Ranch property falls within MFWP administrative Region 4. See Figure 1 for an overview of the property and surrounding area, Figure 2 for an aerial photo showing the property boundary and adjacent public lands, and Figure 3 for an overview topographic map of this property.

1.4 Landownership

The property consists of 3,278 deeded contiguous acres to include 1 ½ miles of common boundary with the SRWMA (See Figures 1-3). The proposed acquisition is bordered on the north and east by an additional 1,800 acres of contiguous State School Trust and BLM lands (Figure 2).

The Neal Ranch will also retain access to and use of an irrigation ditch located on the southeastern portion of the property (Figures 2 & 3).

1.5 Legal Descriptions

Lewis and Clark County		
Township, Range	Section	Legal Description
T21N, R7W	17	S1/2, S1/2 of NE1/4, SW1/4 of NW1/4
T21N, R7W	18	S1/2
T21N, R7W	19	Entire section
T21N, R7W	20	W1/2, W1/2 of NE1/4, W1/2 of SE1/4, SE1/4 of SE1/4
T21N, R7W	29	W1/2, W1/2 of SE1/4, NE1/4
T21N, R7W	30	NE1/4, NE1/4 of NW1/4, E1/2 of SE1/4, NW1/4 of SE1/4
T21N, R7W	32	N1/2 (Neal ranch retains access to irrigation ditch), SE1/4, E1/2 of SW1/4, portion of W1/2 of SW1/2

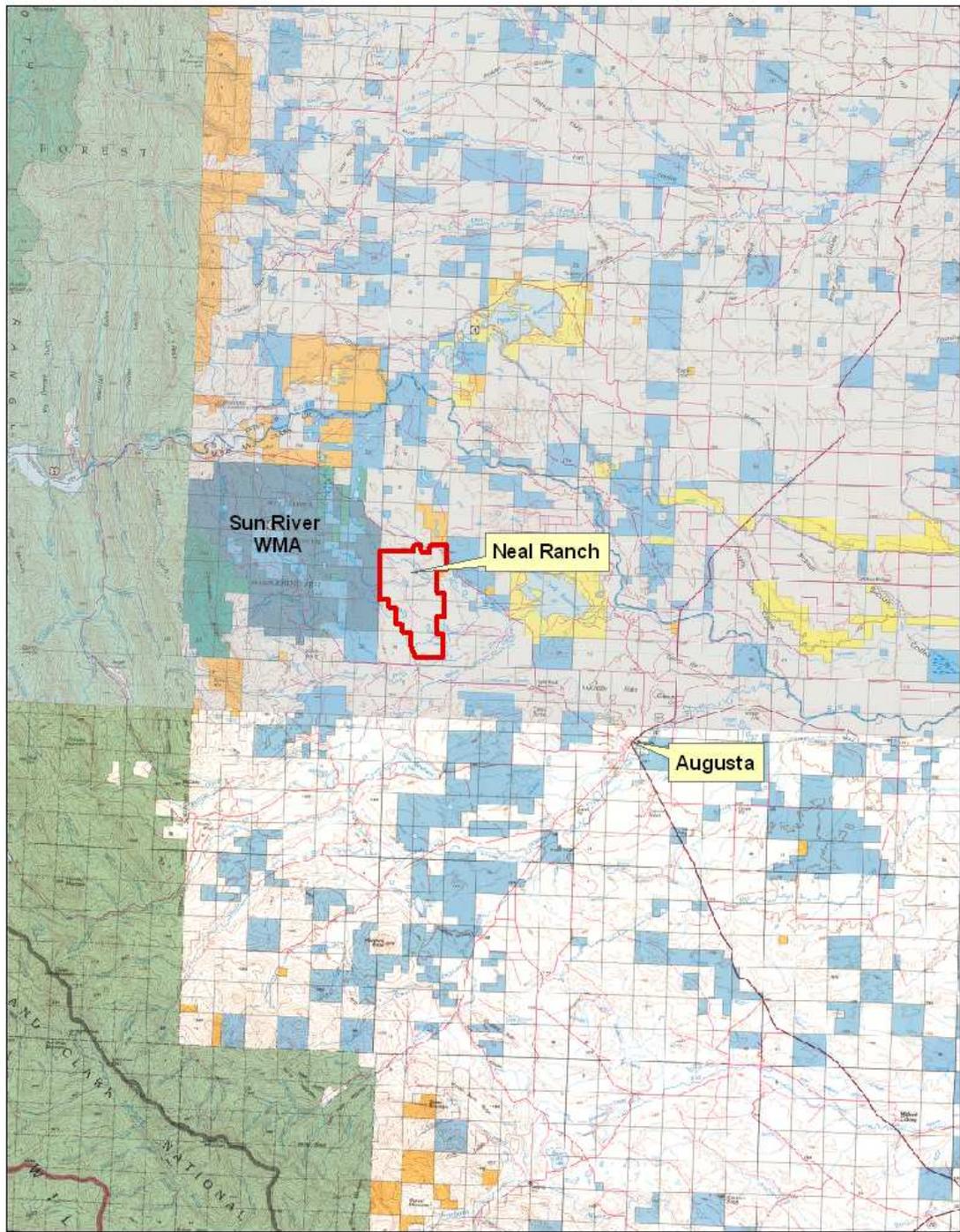


Figure 1. Overview map of property boundary and area.

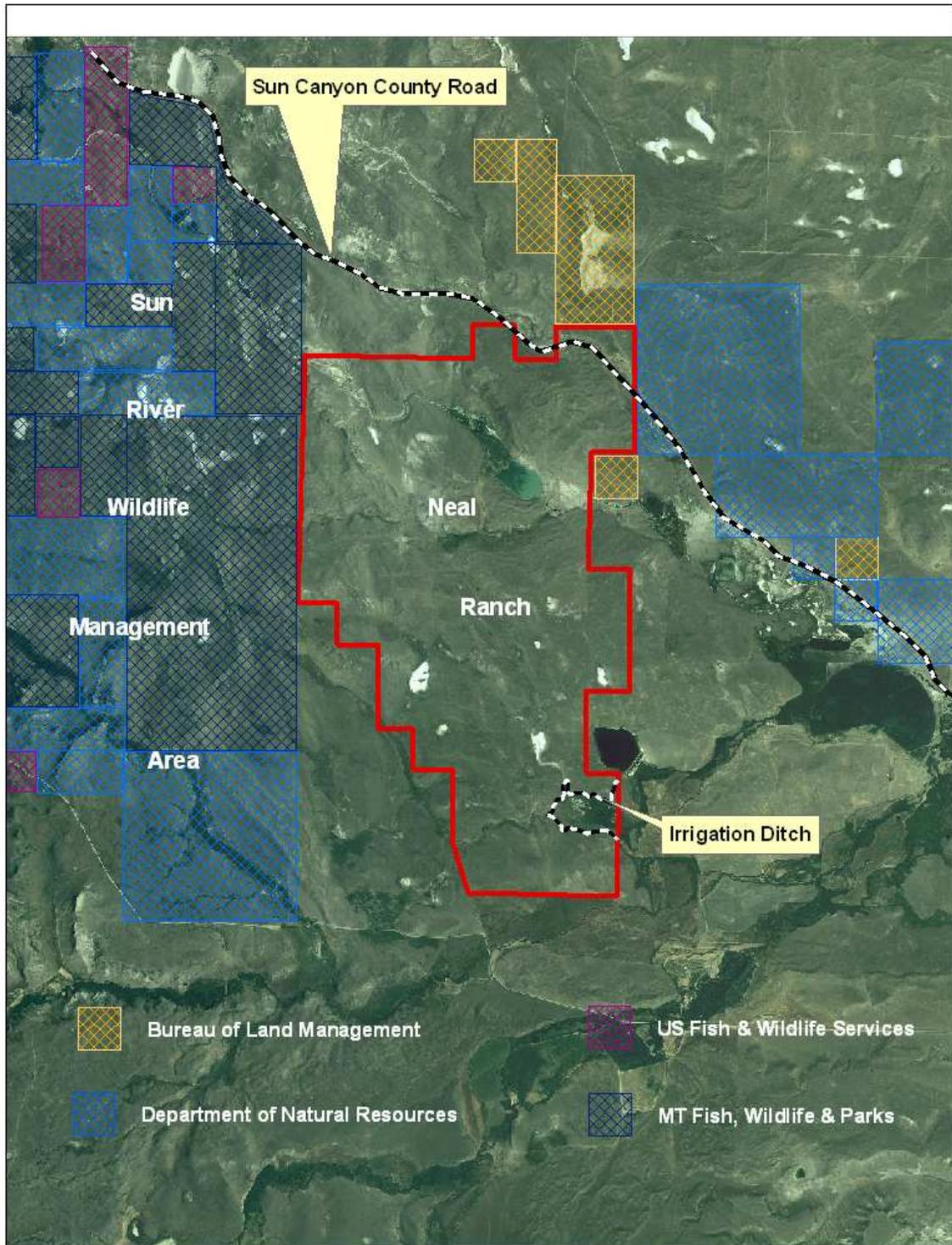


Figure 2. Aerial photo of portion of Neal Ranch under consideration in relation to surrounding public lands.

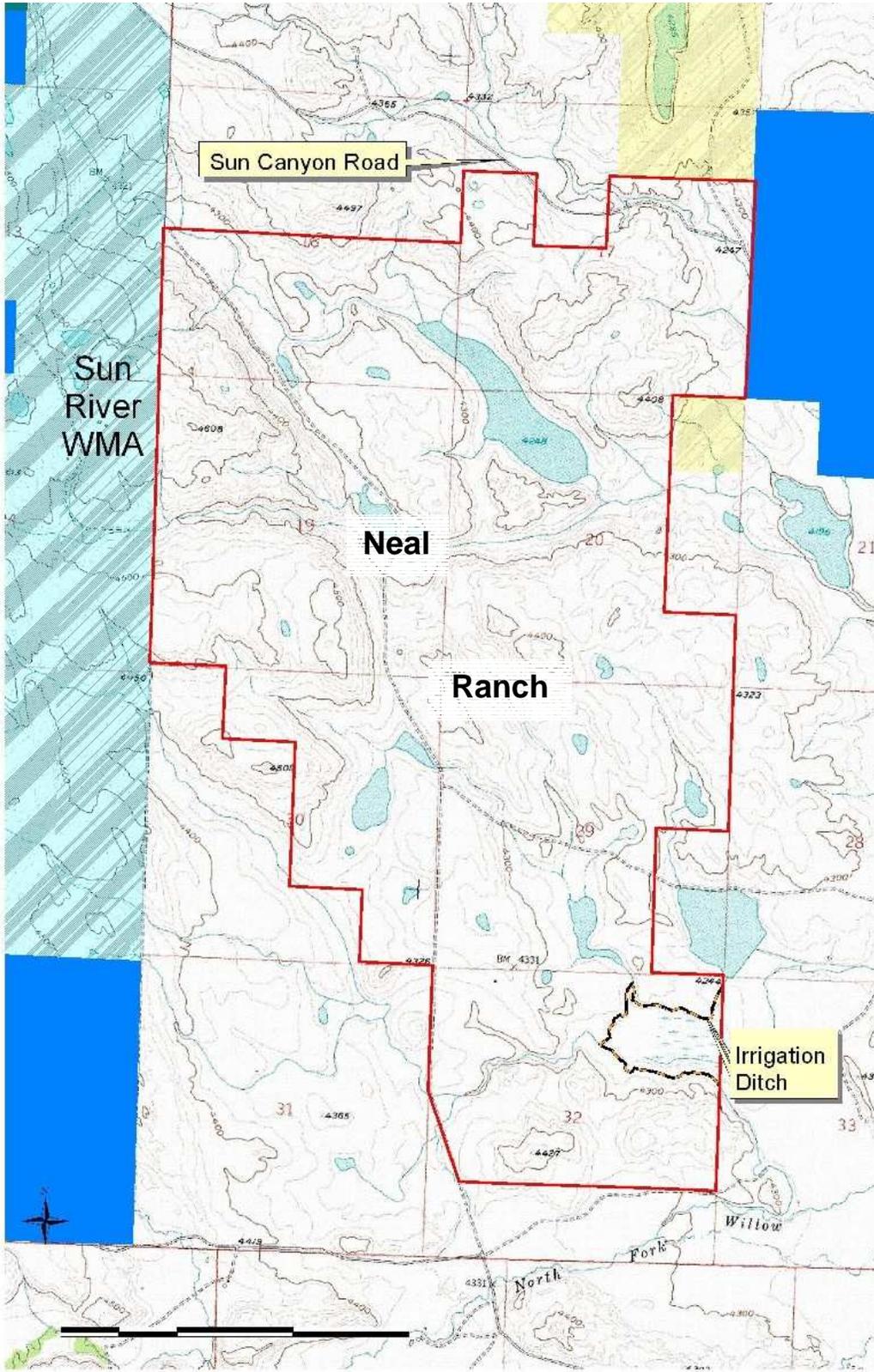


Figure 3. Topographic photo of portion of Neal Ranch under consideration in relation to public lands.

1.6 Application to the Habitat Montana Program

Habitat Montana is the Wildlife Division Program created by the 1987 Montana Legislature (HB526) to provide means to protect and enhance important ecological and wildlife habitats throughout Montana. It features 3 important habitat types identified as those in greatest need of protection. They include intermountain foothill, sagebrush-grassland and riparian habitat types. The Neal Ranch clearly offers exceptional opportunity to protect and enhance an important intermountain foothill grassland community. Significant funding for this project will be derived from the Habitat Montana Program and Pittman-Robertson funds (this proposal will need to have Fish and Wildlife Service approval in addition to the standard approvals required by Habitat Montana Program proposals).

1.7 Application to FWP Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Management Strategy

The property is part of the Rocky Mountain Front Intermountain Grassland and Foothill ecotype that is identified in the Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Management Strategy as a Focus Area of Greatest Conservation Need (CFWCS, MFWP 2005). This highly diverse habitat where the mountains meet the prairie is comprised of the following associated habitats: limber pine, mixed broadleaf forest, agricultural lands, mixed mesic shrublands, grasslands, and wetland/riparian areas. There are two Tier 1 habitat types identified within the Rocky Mountain Front focus area that are associated with this property: intermountain foothill grasslands (distinguished by the presence of rough fescue and Idaho fescue communities), which envelops the majority of this property; and wetland/riparian habitat.

Threats to this Focus Area include habitat fragmentation due to agricultural conversion and energy development, and invasive or exotic species. Conservation strategies include changing policy to encourage conservation, developing county ordinances to guide development, identify important wildlife habitat, eradicating or reducing invasive plants, and as described in this proposal, efforts to conserve the ecological processes on public lands.

Wetland and riparian habitats provide breeding and nesting areas for at least 134 (55%) of Montana's 245 species of breeding birds, as well as much-needed food and resting areas for migrating birds (Ellis, 2008). There are 17 Tier I Species of Greatest Conservation Need that rely on riparian and wetland habitat for breeding and/or survival (MFWP 2005). This importance is highlighted in the identification of riparian areas as a Community Type of Greatest Conservation Need in the Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Management Strategy (CFWCS, MFWP 2005), and as a priority in the 5-year Implementation Plan for the CFWCS. Wetland habitats like those contained within the Neal Acquisition can provide important habitat for species such as the Trumpeter swan.

There are over 350 vertebrate species found within the grasslands community type throughout Montana. Tier I Species of Greatest Conservation Need that may be found in grassland communities include Trumpeter swan, long-billed curlew, and grizzly bear (MFWP 2005).

The table below identifies the Species of Greatest Conservation Need (Tier I) that are associated with the Rocky Mountain Front or Species of Concern as per NHP/MFWP (2008) and for which we have records within the vicinity or on the Neal Acquisition.

Common Name	Genus Species
1 Bald eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i>
2 Common loon	<i>Gavia immer</i>
3 Long-billed curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>
4 Olive-sided flycatcher	<i>Contopus cooperi</i>
5 Trumpeter swan	<i>Cygnus buccinator</i>
6 Canada lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i>
7 Gray wolf	<i>Canis lupis</i>
8 Grizzly bear	<i>Ursus arctos</i>
9 American white pelican	<i>Pelecanus erythrorhynchos</i>
10 Baird's sparrow	<i>Ammodramus bairdii</i>
11 Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>
12 McCown's longspur	<i>Calcarius mccownii</i>
13 Swift fox	<i>Vulpes velox</i>
14 Wolverine	<i>Gulo gulo</i>
15 Plains spadefoot	<i>Spea bombifrons</i>

Table 1. Species of Greatest Conservation need (Tier 1) that are associated with the Neal ranch.

1.9 Authority

The following laws and rules are applicable to the proposed action: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks undertakes this action by authority of MCA 23-1-102, defining MFWP powers and duties regarding the acquisition of lands by fee or donation as state historical sites and recreation areas.

The Habitat Montana Program (12.9.509 ARM) seeks to acquire properties in order to conserve land, water and wildlife, to contribute to hunting and fishing opportunities, to contribute to nonhunting recreation, to protect open space and scenic areas, and to maintain the local tax base through payments in lieu.

Fish, Wildlife and Parks has the authority to purchase lands (MCA 87.1.209) 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.

1.10 Management Considerations

The wildlife division of MFWP will incorporate the property into the present management plans, goals and priorities of the existing SRWMA (see management plan) and is providing the funds for the proposed acquisition.

2.0 ALTERNATIVES

2.1 Alternative A – Proposed Action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks proposes to acquire 3,278 acres in fee title from the Neal Ranch. This project would conserve an important wildlife habitat area that includes intermountain foothill and grassland and riparian habitat community types.

2.2 Alternative B – No Action:

Under the No Action Alternative, MFWP would not take advantage of an opportunity to acquire fee title of the 3,278 acres under consideration from the Neal Ranch. The Neal Ranch would then either continue to use the property as a working cattle ranch/hay operation or sell the property to likely either a private investor or developer.

2.3 Alternatives C – Third Party Purchase w/ MFWP conservation easement:

Other private parties have expressed interest in this property. If fee title purchase by MFWP is not completed, the opportunity exists for other private investors or developers to acquire this property. If the latter were to occur, MFWP would likely investigate the possibility of purchasing a conservation easement with the new owners provided interests and the financial means of both parties could be met. At this time, the Neal Ranch is not interested in a conservation easement.

3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

3.1 Habitat

The two focus habitat types on this property are riparian/wetland and intermountain grassland, especially those grassland communities containing rough fescue. The property is best described as a mix of intermountain and plains grassland habitat with riparian habitat located along irrigation canal/creek bottoms and lake/pond edges. The riparian/wetland habitat is primarily made up of a one larger natural pond and a few smaller pothole ponds (some of which hold water only seasonally depending on local precipitation) along with some irrigation canal/creek edge habitat. The area can provide quality nesting, breeding, brood rearing and foraging habitat for multiple species of wildlife.

The grassland community is made up of native grasses such as rough fescue, Idaho fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass, and needlegrass. Additional shrub species on the property include horizontal juniper and shrubby cinquefoil. The mixture of native prairie grassland benches and coulees is extensive and good quality. Managed cattle grazing has resulted in range conditions that are fair to good. There is good habitat and escape terrain for multiple wildlife species to include sharp-tail grouse, mule deer, antelope and elk.

There is one freshwater pond/lake (approximately 70 acres) within the property, which can provide a waterfowl breeding and brood rearing area. Additionally, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Wetland Database notes the property encompasses approximately 90 acres of freshwater emergent wetland. The status of the fish species located within the wetland areas is unknown.

Current Condition of Habitat: Upland habitat is currently in fair to good condition. Some portions of the property do show the effects of long-term and continuous cattle grazing practices. Boundary fences are in fair condition and will require attention to address the exclusion of adjacent livestock grazing and boundary marker for the SRWMA. Interior fences are minimal. The condition of invasive weeds on the property is unknown, but is believed to be limited. Drier upland sites and travel corridors may host spotted knapweed in localized situations. Other noxious weeds have yet to be identified and mapped.

3.2 Terrestrial Species

Currently, the property provides habitat for wintering elk (although limited due to existing livestock operations), antelope, mule deer, sharp-tailed grouse and hungarian partridge. The riparian vegetation community may provide nesting, resting, and foraging habitat for up to 134 native species of birds. There are as many as 15 Tier 1 Species of Greatest Conservation Need including long-billed curlew, trumpeter swan, and common loon (see Table 1). Full inventory and monitoring efforts have yet to be undertaken to identify the presence of other potentially unidentified species.

3.3 Aquatic Species

The existing knowledge of aquatic species on the property is not known, although numbers and variety is likely to be limited given the small amount of aquatic habitat available. There is likely a seasonal shorebird presence around the aquatic and wetland areas, but species composition is unknown.

3.4 Current Recreation Opportunities

Current public recreation opportunities are essentially nonexistent. The property is currently a working cattle ranch/hay operation. Public hunting access is permitted with permission, but is limited.

3.5 Public Access

Currently, the only public access to this property is via the Sun Canyon county road. If acquired, the public could access the property via other public lands, the existing SRWMA or the Sun Canyon county road.

3.6 Buildings and Utilities

There are no buildings or utilities on the property.

4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The following environmental analysis is limited to Alternative A (Preferred Action) and Alternative B (No Action). Fish, Wildlife and Parks does not know if the ranch would be sold to another private entity or retained by the family. Additionally, if the ranch were to be sold to another party, we do not know who the new owner would be (single purchaser vs. developer), what their plans for the property would be, and if they would be interested in entering into a conservation easement. Attempting to assess the anticipated environmental impacts for Alternative C without additional information would be extremely difficult.

4.1 Physical Environment

4.1.1 Land Resources

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, there would be localized changes to the land resources (soils, geologic features, etc.) within the property. With increased public access to an area that historically allowed minimal public use, the indirect consequences of MFWP obtaining the property could be a rise in soil disturbing activities by those visiting the site (e.g., pioneering new trails). Fish, Wildlife & Parks will attempt to discourage such actions through identification of authorized recreation activities with informational signs. Fish, Wildlife & Parks, under a management plan would identify and develop potential defined access areas and parking areas for hunting, fishing and other recreational users. Vegetative enhancements planned under the proposed action may decrease potential erosion.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, there is some degree of likelihood that this property will be sold to a buyer that plans to either subdivide the acreage or maintain it solely for private recreational and other land based activities. Either of those plans would likely include soil-disturbing activities for construction of residences and/or new roads.

4.1.2 Air Quality

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, there would be no direct changes to the ambient air quality.

No Action: Under the No Action Alternative, a potential new owner could allow for land uses that could have negative effects to air quality, including construction of additional roads or the cultivation of new agricultural areas.

4.1.3 Water Resources

Proposed Action: Under the Proposed Action, water resources on or adjacent to this parcel will 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 creek or irrigation canal courses (including flooding), development in the floodplain, and changes in the quality or quantity of groundwater. Existing water rights would be evaluated and if changes in water rights were proposed, a change process that protects other water users from adverse effects would be a required process to complete.

No Action: If MFWP did not acquire the property, it is unknown if any of the water resources (ponds, riparian areas) would be detrimentally affected by the current owner or another buyer's plans.

4.1.4 Vegetation

Proposed Action: If MFWP were to attain the portion of the Neal Ranch proposed for sale, direct impacts to the current vegetation would be limited. The changes would focus primarily upon the control of noxious weeds. Currently noxious weed presence is believed to be limited, although further surveys are needed. Fish, Wildlife & Parks would implement its regional weed management plan to reduce the distribution and spread of noxious weeds by use of chemical, biological (e.g., insects), and mechanical means. Fish, Wildlife & Parks would work with county weed district managers to initiate

any weed control processes. By state law, MFWP is required to manage noxious weeds on its properties. As a result of these measures, the quantity and quality of native vegetation on the land parcel is expected to improve.

The property will be folded into the SRWMA vegetation-monitoring program. A MFWP statewide plant specialist maintains this program. Specific vegetative sites and exclosures are routinely measured and monitored in order to better understand the impacts of wildlife use (primarily wintering elk) in relation to population size/distribution and weather patterns. The ultimate goal is to manage SRWMA vegetation to have a positive effect on wildlife health and distribution.

Indirect impacts of the proposed action could be the spread of noxious weeds into additional areas by recreationists using the property, as well as the disturbance of native vegetation when visitors pioneer trails into the property's interior or in wetland/riparian areas.

No Action: By not acquiring the property, MFWP could put an important habitat community at risk of development that could negatively impact the vegetative resources on the ranch. The exact level of this risk is unknown since the future impacts to resources would be dependent on the desires of the potential property's new owner. The level of noxious weed control by the current owner would likely stay the same, however a new owner's efforts would be unknown.

4.1.5 Fish & Wildlife Resources

Proposed Action: If FWP were to acquire the Neal ranch, management of the property would be for the benefit of its permanent and transient terrestrial and aquatic species. Direct impacts to species are expected to be minimal since MFWP does not plan to implement any immediate changes to wetland, shrub or grassland habitats that would change the diversity of wildlife. However, long-term improvements in habitat and management actions could increase the carrying capacity of wildlife species. Historically, hunting was allowed on the property on a limited basis. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will continue to permit these practices in a fashion identical to those practiced on the Sun River WMA and consistent with MFWP Commission established hunting regulations. Fish, Wildlife & Parks could also investigate the reintroduction of native fish species currently absent from the properties ponds/streams. Fishing will be permitted on the property.

Fish, Wildlife and Parks will repair and build fencing to conform to wildlife friendly design. As part of its management plan for the property, MFWP would encourage community-based groups to stay informed about management goals and practices on the WMA.

No Action: If another buyer were to acquire this property, the likelihood of development of this land parcel, aquatic and wildlife resources may be negatively impacted, but at what level is unknown.

4.2 Human Environment

4.2.1 Noise and Electrical Effects

Proposed Action: The proposed acquisition may result in more people visiting the site, thus increasing the noise level within a localized area since the majority of the property will be inaccessible by motorized vehicle. The proposed action will not create electrostatic effects that could be detrimental to human health or interfere with radio or television reception.

No Action: The potential for another buyer purchasing the property could result in development of the property, which could increase noise and electrical effects in the area.

4.2.2 Land Use

Proposed Action: Past and present, the Neal Ranch is an operating ranch for livestock production with some hay production. Under the Proposed Action, the area will be maintained as a natural area with increased public access. Land use changes will reflect wildlife habitat enhancement and protection and diverse public recreational uses. Development may include small parking areas located primarily on the property perimeter such as the Sun Canyon county road. Wildlife areas may incorporate weed control to reduce impacts to native plant species, riparian habitat enhancement and limited hunter access corridors, which may include parking areas. The proposed acquisition could potentially impact land uses (livestock pasture) of neighboring properties due to winter and early spring elk presence. Recreational use of the adjacent BLM and State School Trust Lands (DNRC) would increase as a result of the acquisition by MFWP providing access to those lands.

No Action: If another buyer other than MFWP were to acquire the ranch, the land use may change into a more developed area with potentially multiple private residences or new areas under cultivation. These activities could pose threats to wildlife and native vegetative resources, but at what level those threats would occur are unknown.

4.2.3 Risk and Health Hazards

Proposed Action: Under MFWP management, pesticides could be used to reduce or eradicate noxious weeds on the property, as per the Region 4 Weed Management Plan. Trained, licensed professionals would conduct any weed treatment and storage/use of chemicals in accordance with proper operating procedures and label instructions to minimize potential unintended consequences to wildlife, vegetation, and visitors to the property.

As common practice, MFWP would carry out a hazardous materials survey before completing the purchase of the property to identify any unseen public safety or wildlife hazards present on the property.

No Action: If MFWP did not purchase the property, it is unknown if any new risk or health hazards might occur.

4.2.4 Aesthetics, Community Impact & Recreation

Proposed Action: Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks acquisition of the proposed portion of the Neal ranch will protect the open space and viewshed of this important portion of the Rocky Mountain Front.

Initially, it is expected that there would be minimal direct impacts to nearby communities (e.g., Augusta). New access to nearly 3,300 acres of public lands will increase the potential for recreational activities on the property. For the immediate future, MFWP would likely authorize the following recreational activities on a regulated basis on the property: hiking, angling, horseback trail rides on designated trails, photography, wildlife viewing, hunting, and trapping. Trapping and hunting actions would follow MFWP established rules and regulations.

No Action: There is the potential for a small, short-term economic benefit through housing construction and real estate sales if the property was sold to a developer for ranchettes. Changes in ownership may result in changes to the natural areas.

4.2.5 Public Services, Taxes & Utilities

Proposed Action: There would be no changes or need for increased public services if MFWP purchased the proposed property. Mineral rights for oil and gas would remain with owners that have the subsurface rights. Fish, Wildlife & Parks would make property tax payments to Lewis and Clark County for fee title lands that are designated as a Wildlife Management Area.

Increased public recreational activities on the property could result in occasional need for emergency services such as search and rescue, emergency medical services, local law enforcement, and fire control and suppression.

No Action: If another buyer purchased the Neal Ranch under a possible subdivision development scenario, Lewis and Clark County may receive increased tax revenues in exchange for increased public services to new residences and new utility services. These services may be of some detriment to some wildlife species. However, the exact public service and utility needs of another buyer is unknown.

4.2.6 Cultural & Historical Resources

Proposed Action: If the sale of the property to MFWP were completed, there would be no direct affects to cultural or historic resources on the property. A file search at the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) found there are recorded historic sites within the proposed property. Those sites will remain protected and undisturbed.

Indirect influences to cultural and historic sites within the property could encompass unauthorized artifact extractions and vandalism. Fish, Wildlife & Parks would attempt to discourage such activities by signage and community-based monitoring of the property.

No Action: It is uncertain if recorded and possible unrecorded historic sites would be affected by the activities of another owner other than MFWP.

4.3 Potential Long-Term Impacts

If FWP were successful in purchasing a portion of the Neal Ranch, potential long-term impacts may include maintenance roads (two-track roads) as well as possible public road(s) parking area(s) for visitor/recreational use. Such formal improvements would likely impact some of the natural areas of the property. However since MFWP's goals for the property are to maintain as much of the natural habitats and features as possible while providing the public access to it, MFWP will strive to minimize any feasible negative impacts to wildlife and plant communities as well as geologic, cultural, and paleontological features and resources.

The Neal Ranch property encompasses nearly 3,300 acres and would be added to the 21,000 acre SRWMA. It is anticipated that only occasional MFWP staffing will be required for site management. This property will be incorporated into existing SRWMA management goals, plans and objectives.

5.0 NEED FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? **No.**

If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action. 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 manner to comment on this EA, the proposed action, and alternatives:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: *Great Falls Tribune*; *The Choteau Acantha*; *The Fairfield Sun Times*; and *Helena Independent Record*
- One statewide press release;
- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners and interested parties;
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.
- A public meeting to receive comment will be held.

Copies of this EA will be available for public review at FWP Region 4 Headquarters in Great Falls, at the FWP office in Fairfield and on the FWP web site.

A public meeting will be scheduled during the public comment period 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.

6.2 Duration of Comment Period

The public comment period will extend for thirty (30) days beginning January 15, 2009. A public meeting will be held January 27 in the Augusta School Gymnasium at 7:00 pm. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., February 15, 2009 and can be mailed to the address below:

Neal Ranch Acquisition
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 4 Headquarters
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

Or email comments to: blonner@mt.gov

Offices/Programs contacted or contributing to this document:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: Wildlife Division and Lands Bureau
Montana Natural Heritage Program
State Historical Preservation Office

7.0 EA PREPARATION

Gary Bertellotti, MFWP R-4 Supervisor, Great Falls
Brent Lonner, MFWP Wildlife Biologist, Fairfield, MT
Graham Taylor, MFWP Regional Wildlife Manager, Great Falls, MT

8.0 LITERATURE CITED

Ellis, J.H. 2008. Scientific Recommendations on the Size of Stream Vegetated Buffers Needed to Protect Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat, Part Three, The Need for Stream Vegetated Buggers: What Does the Science Say? Report to Montana Department of Environmental Quality, EPA/DEQ Wetland Development Grant. Montana Audubon, Helena, MT. 24 pp.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 2005. Sun River WMA 2005 Small Mammal Trapping and Species Inventory Report. July 22-27, 2005. Helena, MT.

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

Montana Natural Heritage Program and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks. 2008. Montana Animal Species of Concern. Helena, MT: Montana Natural Heritage Program and Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks. 17 p.

PRELIMINARY MANAGEMENT PLAN
for the
NEAL RANCH as an addition to the Sun River Wildlife Management Area

INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) proposes to acquire and then incorporate approximately 3,278 acres in fee title of important wildlife habitat into the Sun River Wildlife Management Area (SRWMA). The property would be purchased with MFWP Habitat Montana Program Funds. The Neal Ranch is a working cattle ranch and neighbors the SRWMA on its east boundary

Because of the 1987 Wildlife Habitat Acquisition Act (House Bill 526) the Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission adopted rules that specify a Preliminary Management Plan be written before any final action shall be taken on newly acquired lands. This Preliminary Management Plan is intended to give an immediate general analysis and to provide the basis for public comment. It is proposed that MFWP purchase in fee title the property and incorporate as part of the adjacent SRWMA, thereby incorporating all current rules and management practices into the addition.

The Preliminary Management Plan identifies MFWP's management goals for the property. More specific work activities will be formulated for the final Management Plan after proper inventories have been made, compliance requirements met, and after public comments have been reviewed. Once a final Management Plan is in place, it will be reviewed periodically and necessary adjustments incorporated.

The SRWMA was initially purchased in 1948 to secure important winter range habitat for the Sun River elk herd. Even today, this remains the primary purpose of the Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The SRWMA is managed primarily as winter range habitat for the Sun River elk herd but also contributes significant and high quality habitat for other game and non-game species. Recreational uses of the area include hunting, fishing, hiking, wildlife viewing, and camping. Acquisition of the Neal Property will dovetail well with existing management activities and the overall purpose of the SRWMA.

AREA DESCRIPTION

Location and Physiographic Characteristics:

Located approximately 9 miles west of Augusta and 52 miles west of Great Falls in Lewis and Clark County, the Neal Ranch property falls within MFWP administrative Region 4 (See Appendix 1). The property consists of 3,278 deeded contiguous acres to include 1½ miles of common boundary with the SRWMA (See Appendix 2). The proposed acquisition is bordered on the north and east by an additional 1,800 acres of contiguous State School Trust and BLM lands (Appendix 2). Combined with the existing SRWMA (21,023 acres), the total acreage will equal 24,301.

The SRWMA is situated along the foothills of the Rocky Mountain Front. The eastern portion of the WMA consists primarily of grassland rolling hills, benches and coulees. The western portion is comprised of a mixture of limber pine, Douglas fir and aspen stands with smaller mixed grass, forb and shrub meadows. The extreme western portion of the WMA is delineated by Sawtooth Ridge, a tall, rocky mountain face with sheer cliffs and talus slopes. There are three primary creeks that drain the WMA: Rose Creek to the south, Barr Creek to the southeast and Buttolph Creek to the north. The Neal Ranch property will be added to the eastern perimeter of the existing SRWMA and is best described as a mix of intermountain and plains grassland habitat with riparian habitat located along irrigation canal/creek bottoms and lake/pond edges.

Elevations of the Neal property range from 4,215 to 4,608 feet. Soils are generally moderately shallow to moderately deep with abundant carbonate rock fragments with drainage areas having more gravelly soils with a sandy matrix. Annual precipitation averages about 15 inches a year. The mean temperature in January is 23 degrees Fahrenheit and 65 degrees in July. This area also receives significant wind because of weather patterns that form near and around the Rocky Mountain Front. During winter, both the strength and warmth of “Chinook” winds contribute to quick removal of snow from the open grasslands exposing forage for wildlife.

Legal description of the proposed project property:

Lewis & Clark County

Township, Range	Section	Legal Description
T21N, R7W	17	S1/2, S1/2 of NE1/4, SW1/4 of NW1/4
T21N, R7W	18	S1/2
T21N, R7W	19	Entire section
T21N, R7W	20	W1/2, W1/2 of NE1/4, W1/2 of SE1/4, SE1/4 of SE1/4
T21N, R7W	29	W1/2, W1/2 of SE1/4, NE1/4
T21N, R7W	30	NE1/4, NE1/4 of NW1/4, E1/2 of SE1/4, NW1/4 of SE1/4
T21N, R7W	32	N1/2 (Neal ranch retains access to irrigation ditch), SE1/4, E1/2 of SW1/4, portion of W1/2 of SW1/2

Total Deeded = 3,278 acres

Accompanying maps (Appendices 1 & 2) display the lands affected by the proposal. The project’s exterior boundary shares 1½ miles of common boundary with the existing SRWMA and would provide nearly 1 mile of additional public access via the Sun Canyon county road on the property’s NE boundary. Four different private landowners control property bordering the WMA around the Neal Ranch addition. There are no state or federal lands encumbered or leased in conjunction with this property, however, there are state and federal lands located immediately adjacent to the property. The Neal Ranch will also retain an access easement to an irrigation ditch located on the southeastern portion of the property (Appendix 2).

Vegetation

Present

The SRWMA is described as mountain foothill habitat, consisting of three major vegetative types. The Limber Pine / Douglas fir-juniper type occurs on the more western moist aspects of ridges and coulees. A grassland type occupies the drier benches and coulees and is dominated by rough fescue, bluebunch wheatgrass, Idaho fescue and needlegrass. Most of the riparian zones consist of small aspen / willow stands with understory vegetation comprised of western snowberry, Wood's rose, chokecherry, and serviceberry.

The Neal Ranch property is primarily intermountain and prairie grassland habitat, consisting of two major vegetative types. A shrub-grassland type comprises the majority of property, although some riparian communities are found adjacent to irrigation canal/creek bottoms and lake/pond edges. The shrub-grassland component is best described as low/moderate grassland type with some horizontal juniper and shrubby cinquefoil intermixed.

These vegetative types and their associated topographic features make the combined properties year-round habitat for elk, antelope, sharp-tail grouse, Hungarian partridge, and mule and white-tailed deer. Elk attempt to make use of the grassy upland benches and coulees during winter periods on the existing Neal Ranch property, although competition with cattle grazing and active human deterrence makes this difficult. Other notable species observed on the property include bald eagles, trumpeter swans and grizzly and black bears. All of the vegetative types are utilized by a diverse group of small mammals and resident and migratory birds.

The Neal Ranch is currently managed as a working cattle ranch with some hay production. Current stocking rates are low, but have varied depending on the year in years past. The ranch has been managed in a standard grazing rotational pattern. The ranch typically tries to leave at least one pasture ungrazed each year, but this is contingent upon cattle numbers and range conditions. Detailed range trend and condition investigations have not been accomplished.

Future

Due to the importance of this property as additional winter wildlife (elk) habitat, livestock grazing practices will likely be limited and if utilized, will be as part of an established rest rotation pasture system. It is the intent of MFWP that by incorporating the Neal Ranch and any associated grazing systems into existing WMA plans, goals and objectives, better vegetation management and production will result. Maintenance, to include noxious weed management, fence repair/replacement, minimal road and parking area development, etc. will be the responsibility of MFWP.

Travel Plan

Present

Public motor vehicle access on the existing SRWMA is by means of one graveled county road that gives way to two entrances on the southern border. From here, MFWP maintained roads continue to the northern and western side of the WMA. There are currently approximately 20 miles of maintained roads within the boundaries of the SRWMA. Older vehicular trails exist on the WMA, but are now used strictly for administrative purposes or have been permanently closed.

Future

Any public motorized vehicle activity within the new property will be minimal. An additional parking area/access route may be developed on the northeastern boundary (via the Sun Canyon county road), but further developed motorized road access into the area will be minimized. Currently, unmaintained two-track roads exist on the property. They will be used for maintenance and other administrative purposes only. Motorized vehicles will not be allowed off of designated roads except for administrative use. As an expanded portion of the SRWMA, the December 1 – May 15 seasonal closure to public use will be adopted.

Camping is allowed on the SRWMA in any designated parking/camping area. Camping rules comply with MFWP Administrative Rule 12-8-205, which limits camping in designated camping areas to 14 days and prohibits camps from being left unattended for more than 48 hours. Primitive overnight camping is allowed outside of designated parking/camping areas. Primitive camps are allowed for a duration of 1 night and must be packed in by foot, horseback or other nonmotorized means. All of the latter rules will also apply to the Neal Ranch addition.

Physical Developments

Present

Existing physical developments on the SRWMA include external boundary fences (fair to good condition), internal pasture fences (good condition), 1 small older barn (fair condition), 1 garage (good condition), 1 small shed (good condition), a set of corrals (good condition), 1 developed spring (good condition), 1 cabin (good condition), 1 well associated with the cabin, and several vegetation exclosures used for vegetation condition monitoring (all in good condition). There is an additional power line that feeds electricity to the barn/garage/shed complex. An irrigation canal (Willow Creek feeder canal) maintained and controlled by the Greenfields Irrigation District (GID) runs through the northeastern portion of the WMA

There are no known significant physical developments located on the Neal property. Unmaintained two-track roads as well as an irrigation ditch in the southeastern corner of the Property will be retained. The Neal Ranch, by purchase agreement, will retain access rights to the irrigation ditch

located on the southeastern portion of the property.

All water rights connected with the Property will be conveyed upon purchase.

Future

The only foreseeable physical developments planned on the property will be related to the removal or maintenance of internal pasture fences and construction of new border fences. Development of an additional parking/access area adjacent to the Sun Canyon county road on the property border is also likely. The Willow creek irrigation canal controlled by GID that runs through the northern and northeastern portion of the existing WMA continues through the northern portion of the Neal Ranch. Greenfields Irrigation District will continue to have access to this canal for maintenance, weed control and other activities associated with maintaining this canal. No other physical developments are planned.

Wildlife

Present

Current wildlife use of the SRWMA includes the following animals (and/or groups of animals) and their present levels of use:

Primary big game species are antelope, elk, mule and white-tailed deer. Antelope occupy the majority of the grassland coulees and benches yearlong. Antelope numbers vary, but average 30-50 animals. Similar to antelope, elk occupy the majority of the grassland coulees and benches, but also utilize the hills and trees on the western portion of the WMA for thermal cover and as wind breaks. In recent years during winter periods, elk numbers on and around the existing SRWMA have reached 2,500 elk. Mule and white-tailed deer numbers on the property fluctuate within and between years. Highest numbers are found during the fall to spring seasons. Actual numbers are unknown, but based on hunter harvest likely number around 100-150 animals during the fall season for each species. Both deer species typically occupy lower elevation broken timbered and riparian zones, especially in the WMA's northwest corner. Wolf and bear (grizzly and black) routinely utilize multiple habitats on the area. Mountain lions make frequent use of the area while coyote, fox, badger and skunk are more commonly observed.

Addition of the Neal Ranch Property will continue the involvement of sharp-tailed grouse in future management plans. They are primarily found on grassland benches and coulees of the property. Hungarian partridge are present as well, but to a lesser extent. A variety of songbirds, raptors, migratory birds and small mammals use the area in undetermined numbers on a seasonal or yearlong basis.

Future

Upon acquisition of the Property, habitat management strategies will be directed towards improving the vegetative condition and hence, carrying capacity for elk and to a lesser degree antelope, mule and white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and other ground nesting species. Other wildlife species adapted to native grassland habitats will also likely benefit. Predator species associated with prey that prefer such habitats could increase in number.

AREA MANAGEMENT

Management Goals

The primary goal for management of the SRWMA, including addition of the Neal Ranch acres, will be to improve the condition of all vegetative plant communities for the benefit of wildlife. Implicit in this goal is a focus to maximize the productivity of the land base while minimizing maintenance and management requirements/involvement. Increased carrying capacities for elk (among other wildlife) are expected as grazing utilization patterns become more dispersed and less concentrated, thus improving forage conditions, especially during key seasonal periods (e.g., winter and spring). This should reduce elk use of adjacent landowner's crops and pasture lands. The improvement of the habitat for elk and other big game species will also benefit other game and nongame wildlife species. Addition of the Neal Ranch acres will eliminate any future need for elk herding/deterrence on the part of MFWP personnel on this property.

A second and equally important goal will be to provide public access to the property for sport hunting and other recreational pursuits.

Management Actions

The most essential and important components of a wildlife management area are soil and vegetation. Every management action on the Area will be aimed at maintaining or improving the condition of vegetation and soils. Vegetative manipulations to improve habitat for wildlife may include a rest rotation pasture system for livestock grazing, complete rest from livestock grazing, chemical and mechanical treatment of weeds, prescribed burning, and/or other common land management practices.

A change from present grazing practices to either no livestock grazing or implementation of a rest rotation pasture system can be expected. Initial efforts will focus on quantifying the condition and trend of existing vegetation and establishing long-term monitoring efforts, similar to other efforts that already exist on the SRWMA.

Biological, chemical, and mechanical treatments may be employed to reduce the occurrence of noxious weeds, to establish stands of woody vegetation, and/or to stimulate rangeland vegetation. All MFWP actions to control noxious weeds will be in accordance with the Department's weed

management policy.

The use of fire may be prescribed to manipulate plant communities. An example would be to modify plant successional stages to increase the occurrence of desired shrub or grass species. Any such effort would be made in coordination with adjacent landowners and state and county officials.

Public use and access to the property will be managed consistent with MFWP's state and regional management objectives for WMA's. Recreation on the SRWMA and hunter harvest of game species will be maintained or improved. Public use of the area will be consistent with resource protection goals (i.e., vegetation and soil stability). A winter use closure to all unauthorized activities will be maintained to address wildlife energetic needs (i.e., minimize the energy loss for elk during demanding/critical periods). This winter closure concept is in effect on all wildlife management areas within MFWP's Region 4 that emphasize protection of big game winter range. Other regulations as they specifically relate to this and other WMA's will also apply. These include permit and license-only fur trapping and hunting activities and a closure to mountain lion hunting after November 30.

Fish, Wildlife and Parks will coordinate with adjacent landowners in maintaining or developing certain land management plans/practices. These may include, but are not limited to: cooperative grazing systems (if necessary), developing land trades, conservation easements, herding agreements, and/or additional land acquisition. All practices will be considered first to conform to the intent of the SRWMA. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will promote its block management and hunting access programs with adjacent landowners affected by the acquisition of the SRWMA and subsequently, the Neal Ranch property. Public entities such as the Bureau of Land Management, Farm Services Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Lewis and Clark County Conservation District, Lewis and Clark County Extension Service, and the Lewis and Clark County Commissioners will be consulted and advised as requested and needed.

An annual "in lieu of taxes" payment will be made by MFWP to Lewis and Clark County in 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 (MCA 87-1-603).

Management Objectives

Manipulating vegetative plant communities on the SRWMA is expected to increase yearlong usage by antelope, mule and white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge as well as seasonal use by elk. The elk population objective is to have no more than 2,000 elk wintering (November-May) on the entire SRWMA at any given time. Mule and white-tailed deer population objectives are to have not more than 150 deer of each species on the WMA during fall periods. The population objective for antelope is to have not more than 100 resident and/or seasonally migrating antelope on the WMA. The population objective for sharp-tailed grouse is to increase total numbers by 2X.

Fish, Wildlife and Parks will continue its aggressive approach to weed management on the SRWMA. Noxious weeds will be identified, mapped, and controlled in a manner consistent with MFWP's Region 4 Weed Management Plan. There are two objectives for weed management on the SRWMA: (1) stop the spread of noxious weeds, and (2) reduce the occurrence of noxious weeds on the SRWMA. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will use its own personnel and/or private contractors, and coordinate with adjacent landowners and county weed boards for weed control. Greenfields Irrigation District will continue to be responsible for weed management on the Willow Creek feeder canal.

Impacts

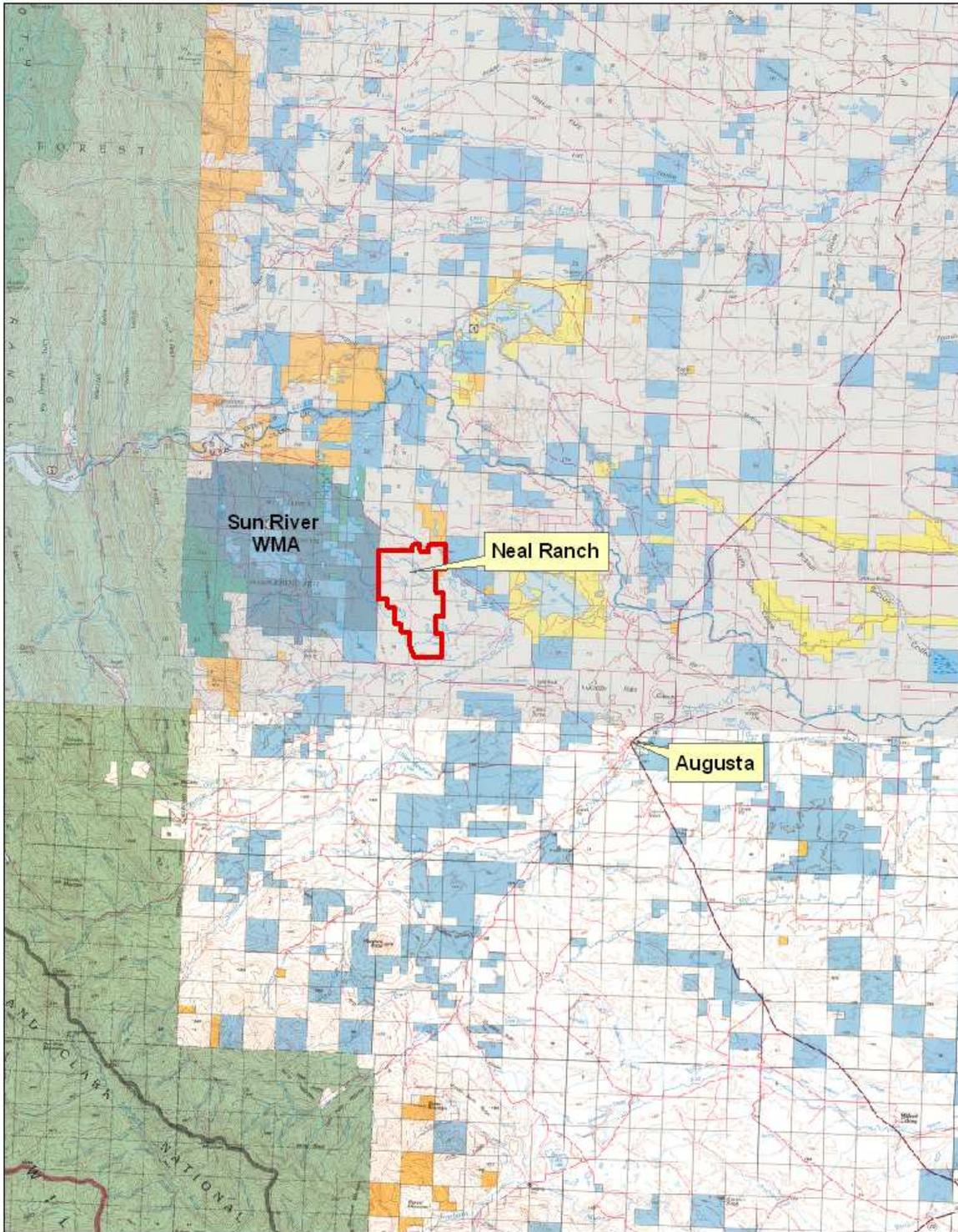
Proposed changes in management direction for the SRWMA -- adjustments to some land use practices (e.g., no cattle grazing or a rest rotation pasture grazing system) -- will benefit wildlife currently using the area. Improving habitat quality and quantity will assist in alleviating potential elk problems on adjacent private lands. Should game depredation occur, one or more of the following methods will be implemented: scare guns; elk herding tactics; temporary panels for haystacks; materials for permanent haystack yards; kill permits; and special hunting seasons. A combination of the above methods would be used as necessary to resolve problems that might occur.

Public use of the property will be guaranteed from May15 through November 30. Use during this period will be consistent with the established management/travel plan.

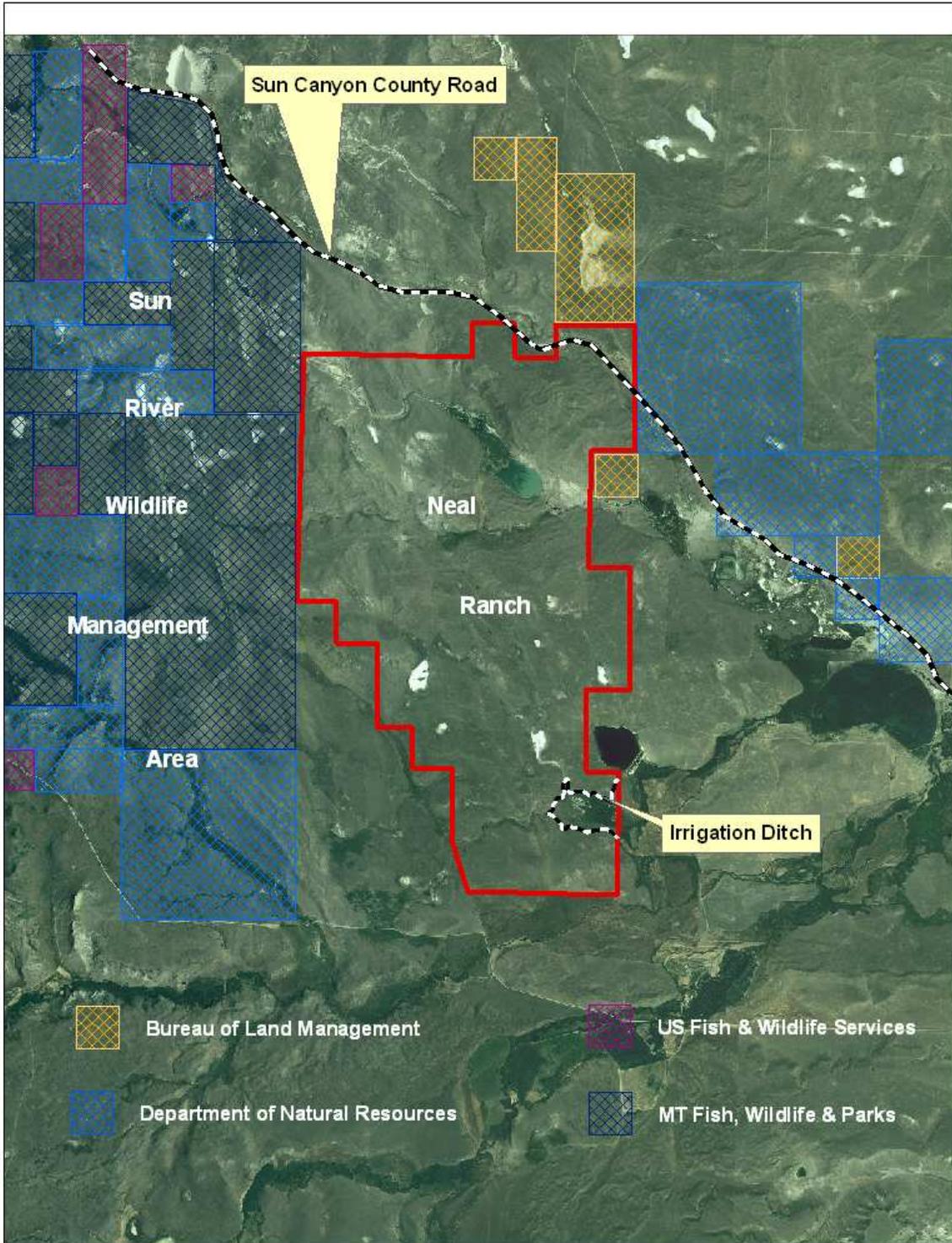
Management Activities

Aerial and ground surveys and inventories of wildlife use of the area will be conducted. The area will be used on occasion for capturing and individually marking wildlife as research needs arise. Changes in numbers and patterns of use by elk and other big game and wildlife species will be documented. Vegetation sampling and evaluation will be conducted on a regular basis in conjunction with existing SRWMA vegetation monitoring guidelines. Other land management specialists and agencies will be contacted as needed for technical assistance in order to implement specified management actions. Physical developments will be evaluated relative to management goals and objectives. Historic and cultural values and a final management plan will dictate the extent of physical development and activity that's needed. Entrance and boundary signs will be erected to facilitate public use and to inform the public of the benefits and opportunities in the area.

Appendix 1. Neal Ranch and its geographic relation to the Sun River WMA.



Appendix 2. Neal Ranch proposed acquisition of 3,278 acres.



NEAL RANCH
FEE TITLE ACQUISITION
SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

Prepared by:
Rob Brooks
January, 12 2009

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) 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 FWP Habitat Montana and federal Wildlife restoration dollars. 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 possible acquisition of land owned by the Neal Ranch through fee title. The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed fee title acquisition, funding being provided by Habitat Montana Program.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description

The Neal Ranch is located about 9 miles west of Augusta, MT. in Lewis and Clark County. The proposed acquisition is 3,278 acres in size. A portion of the western boundary is adjacent to the existing Sun River Wildlife Management Area while the north and east border is next to State School Trust and BLM land. A detailed description of the proposed property and maps are included in the Environmental Assessment.

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

The Neal Ranch property is a combination of intermountain and plains grassland habitat with riparian habitat located along the creek bottoms and lake/ponds. This land provides habitat for a variety of wildlife including elk, deer, antelope, upland game birds, and a host of non-game species that are adapted to the native grassland habitat. A detailed description of the habitat and wildlife found on this property is included in the Environmental Assessment.

C. Current Use

The Neal Ranch was a large scale working cattle ranch, but has more recently become much smaller in scale with more emphasis on hay production. Grazing on the property was a standard rotational system where one pasture was typically left un-grazed each year. The owners have sold the majority of their cows and currently only have a few calves on the ranch. While there are no year-round residences on the land proposed for fee title purchase, there are a number of other buildings including a garage, a small shed, an old barn, a cabin and corrals.

D. Management Alternatives

1) No purchase

MFWP Fee Title Purchase

This alternative was the purchase option that both parties agreed upon. The Neal family was not interested in a conservation easement on the proposed acquisition.

No Purchase Alternative

The no purchase alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what current or future owners decide to do if MFWP does not purchase the property. There is potential for subdivision of this land that would impact the habitat, wildlife and access opportunities for the public.

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 habitat and consistent management of this land. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of this management alternative following two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

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

The financial impacts to local businesses (i.e. income and employment) are addressed by looking at the change in expenditures associated with the activities this property currently provides compared to the activities that would occur under MFWP's ownership.

A. Financial Impacts

The funding for the project is from the Habitat Montana Program and amounts to approximately \$5,500,000.

The property will become part of the Sun River WMA. Depending on the need, there may be limited grazing allowed, weed control will follow the Department's weed management policy, and access will be managed under the state and regional policies for management areas. The management cost associated with this acquisition has not been estimated at this time.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the fee title purchase by FWP. The sale of the fee title land and subsequent title transfer to

MFWP will not change the tax revenues that Lewis and Clark County currently collects on this property. Fish, Wildlife and Parks 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 the fee title lands amount to \$3,296. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks will continue to pay taxes based on the assessment provided by Lewis and Clark County.

B. Economic Impacts

There will not be any significant financial impacts to local businesses associated with the fee title purchase of this land. The fee title lands will be managed as part of the Sun River WMA.

The development of a parking area for public access, weed control, potential grazing agreements with adjacent landowners, and improved hunting opportunities will have a positive impact to local businesses that provide goods and services in these areas.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The fee title acquisition of 3,278 acres of land owned by Neal Ranch in Lewis and Clark County will provide long-term protection of the wildlife habitat of this land and the adjacent Sun River WMA, maintain the rural open space integrity of the area, and protect the public recreation opportunities that these lands have provided.

The conservation easement and fee title acquisitions and title transfer to MFWP will not cause a reduction in tax revenues on this property from their current levels to Lewis and Clark County under Montana Code 97-1-603.

Overall, the financial impacts to local business will be slightly positive in terms of the management activities and recreational opportunities that will continue to be provided on these lands.