



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

July 30, 2010

To Whom It May Concern:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) invites the public to comment on a proposal to purchase a perpetual conservation easement on the 850 acres of Riverdale Ranch located approximately 5 miles south of Ulm, along the Missouri River. The purpose of the proposed easement is to protect significant conservation values that exist on the Ranch, which include farm and ranch lands, native riparian wildlife habitats, scenic open space, historic sites and recreational opportunities.

A Socio-Economic Report and Management Plan have also been provided for your review. Enclosed are the Riverdale Ranch Draft Management Plan, and Socio-Economic Assessment. Public comment is welcome and will be received through September 10, 2010. If you have questions, need additional copies of the draft EA or choose to provide written comments, please contact us at the following address:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Attn: Riverdale CE
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59404

Or electronic comments to: fwprg42@mt.gov
Attn: Riverdale Ranch CE

A public hearing on this proposed easement will be held at the Ulm School, August 24th at 7:00 pm.

Thank you for your interest,

Gary Bertellotti
FWP Region 4 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 5940

Riverdale Ranch Conservation Easement Project Proposal

- Proposal Date: February 25, 2008
- Submitted By: Cory Loecker, Region 4 Wildlife Division
- Landowners: Voegele's Inc. - Great Falls, MT
- Location: 5 miles south of Ulm, 8 miles north of Cascade (Exhibit A)
- Cascade County, FWP Region 4
- Legal Description: T19N, R01E, Portions of Sections 24, 25, 26, 34, 35
T18N, R01E, Portion of Section 3
- Landownership: 850 acres (240 acres of riparian habitat, 410 acres dryland cropland and 200 acres of native rangeland/shrub grassland). See Exhibits A, B, C and D.
- Project Need: The Riverdale Ranch includes 850 contiguous acres along the Missouri River between Ulm and Cascade. Approximately 240 acres (28%) is native riparian habitat including mature cottonwood and green ash stands, having a native shrub grassland understory comprised of snowberry, willow, chokecherry and buffaloberry. The property incorporates of 5 miles of Missouri River frontage. A change in ownership would likely result in the loss of FWP's ability to positively impact the habitat on this property. Management options include a conservation easement with covenants, winter grazing management, retiring and converting select dryland crop acreage to dense nesting cover and/or native shrub grassland, maintaining dryland stubble height and precluding additional conversion of riparian vegetation to agriculture. NRCS and FSA Federal habitat programs may also provide habitat enhancement opportunities. FWP's Future Fisheries Program may also have opportunities for stream bank restoration and enhancement on the project area. Similar property along the Missouri River in Cascade County is undergoing constant pressures for subdivision and recreational purposes over agricultural values. This heightened interest makes riparian habitat along the Missouri River critical. The NRCS - Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP) may be an excellent CE funding partner as approximately 500 acres of the Ranch's soils fit within the defined FRPP conservation easement guidelines. FRPP program funding is dependent on the 2008 Farm Bill. FRPP provides up to 50% of the fair market easement value of the conservation easement on those acres having soils that fit FRPP criteria, but the program requires a non-federal match (FWP and partners)
- Habitats:
 - Level I Criteria:
 - Missouri River Bottom with associated native riparian habitats and uplands.
 - Level II Criteria:
 - *Resource Values:*
The majority of riparian and shrub grassland habitats along the Missouri River have been converted to grain and/or domestic hay production, along with ever increasing housing development. Much of this remaining native vegetation is heavily utilized by winter livestock grazing. The Riverdale Ranch also provides habitat for white-tailed deer, Merriam's turkey, pheasant, Hungarian partridge

and numerous waterfowl species. The ranch provides year round habitat not only for game species, but a variety of non-game bird and small mammal species. Existing wildlife population data for the area is limited to songbirds, pheasants, bald eagles and waterfowl. Currently, no white-tailed deer surveys occur on the Missouri River in this area, although it is estimated that 200-400 whitetails inhabit the ranch. A pheasant crow count survey is conducted in the nearby Smith River area, finding an average of 15-20 crows/stop the past few years. Annual mid-winter waterfowl surveys on the Missouri River from Great Falls to Craig reveal approximately 5,000 ducks and 20,000 Canada geese in recent years. In January 2008, 49 Merriam's turkeys were released on the ranch in an attempt to start a viable population of wild turkeys in this area of the Missouri River. This was a cooperative effort by FWP, NWTF, SCI, Riverdale Ranch and neighboring landowners. Another release site is approximately 5 miles upstream, which 45 birds were released. A documented Bald Eagle nest occurs in one of the cottonwood stands on the property. The Missouri River in this area is currently saturated with Bald Eagle nesting territories. Sandhill cranes stage for fall migration on and around the Ranch. The American Bird Conservancy identified at least 55 different bird species on the neighboring Bird Creek Ranch during a 2001 survey. For the past 20 years, an Avian Productivity Survivorship survey has been conducted near Ulm on the Missouri River. The University of Montana Avian Science Center also conducts point count surveys on the Missouri in the area. **Species including burbot, northern leopard frog, trumpeter swan, bald eagle, black tern, Townsend's big eared bat inhabit the ranch and/or neighboring habitats. These species are identified in Montana's Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Conservation Strategy as species in greatest need of conservation.** Opportunities exist to improve the habitat on the ranch by implementing habitat enhancements listed as management options in the Project Need section of the proposal.

- *Threat Status:*
IMMINENT- Current landowners are considering selling the parcel, which could cause irreversible impacts through increased farming practices or most likely subdivision. They are not as interested in maximizing production from the property, as they are interested in improving wildlife habitat while continuing an agricultural operation. After having numerous conversations with the landowners, at this time Riverdale Ranch has decided to offer FWP an opportunity to partner with them on a conservation easement project.
PROBABLE- Trends along the Missouri River have been shifting towards increased agricultural production and non-agricultural practices such as development and recreational property sales. Public hunting and recreation is diminishing with these landscape changes, along with habitat management and enhancement opportunities.
POSSIBLE- The property could be sold in the near future, which could result in negative land uses such as subdivision and loss of public hunting and recreational opportunities.
- *Degree of Protection:*
The Riverdale Ranch is not adjacent to any private land that is currently permanently protected or that is likely to be protected in the foreseeable future.

To the north of the ranch lies the Dunes Subdivision, which continues to expand. The project area is located about 3 miles downstream from the 2,292 acre FWP / Bird Creek Ranch Conservation Easement which was completed in 2007. The Bird Creek Ranch CE includes approximately 4 miles of Missouri River frontage, riparian habitat and uplands. The Riverdale Ranch Conservation Easement proposal would protect an additional 5 miles of Missouri River frontage and associated riparian habitats through a perpetual easement. The Dugas Farms CE proposal also lies 2 miles downstream from Riverdale Ranch CE proposal (proposed at same time as Riverdale Ranch CE). The Dugas Farms CE proposal and the Riverdale Farm CE proposals could combine to protect 9 miles of Missouri River frontage into perpetuity. Across the Missouri river from the property lies 820 acres of DNRC school trust land, which is publicly accessible via county road and Missouri River. The Riverdale Ranch is of sufficient size that its conservation values will remain intact even if adjacent land has incompatible uses.

- *Geographic Description/Location:*
The 850 acre Riverdale Ranch, located 5 miles south of Ulm along the Missouri River, consists of 240 acres of riparian habitat, 410 acres dryland cropland and 200 acres of native rangeland/shrub grassland.
- Level III Criteria:
 - *Conserve and Enhance Land, Water and Wildlife:*
The proposed Riverdale Ranch conservation easement would perpetually protect 850 acres, including 240 acres of native riparian habitats, 200 acres of native range/shrubland and 5 miles of river frontage. **Riparian & Wetland Habitat** is identified as one of the Montana Comprehensive Fish & Wildlife Conservation Strategy's "Community Types of Greatest Conservation Need". One of this document's strategies to conserve these habitats is to "**support strategic conservation easements by conservation organizations and public agencies**". This 850 acre parcel precisely fits within program guidelines and within Habitat Montana guidelines.
 - *Contribute to Hunting and Fishing Opportunity:*
Landowners currently allow public hunting, wildlife viewing and recreational opportunities. Through the proposed conservation easement, public hunting and recreational opportunities will be perpetuated on these acres. This proposed conservation easement would also ultimately require a Management Plan, including a recreational access plan and a habitat management plan. Fishing access sites located near the property include the Little Muddy Creek FAS 2 miles upstream, Dunes FAS approximately 5 miles downstream and Wing Dam FAS located 8 miles upstream and the Cascade Community FAS located upstream 10 miles.
 - *Provide Incentives for Habitat Conservation on Private Land:*
Application of conservation easement covenants and implementing habitat enhancements will be sufficient to protect and enhance the property's habitat and recreational values. Terms related specific to upland game birds, native bird and mammal species and big game habitats will be addressed in the easement.

Covenants will be implemented affecting housing development, grazing, cultivation of native vegetation, use of insecticides/herbicides and maintaining grain stubble height. Also, the easement will address the potential of additional habitat improvements including conversion of dryland farm acres to DNC and/or native shrub grassland.

- *Contribute to Non-Hunting Recreation:*
The riparian, wetland and shrub grassland habitats on this property provide excellent opportunities for wildlife viewing, hiking, fishing, photography and nature study.
- *Protect Open Space and Scenic Areas:*
The Missouri River has an exceptionally well-developed riparian corridor, providing habitat for many species of resident and migratory wildlife. Riparian areas in general provide habitat for more species and higher numbers than adjacent uplands. The conversion of these native habitats to development is more prevalent towards the towns of Ulm and Cascade and much more so towards Great Falls and Helena. The Ranch is currently in good condition, but habitat improvements could greatly increase its wildlife productivity and habitat availability.
- *Promote Habitat-Friendly Agriculture:*
The wildlife habitat objectives of the application of conservation easement covenants will promote agricultural practices that are wildlife friendly. At the same time these will demonstrate that productive agriculture can co-exist with good, productive wildlife habitat.
- *Maintain Local Tax Base, While Demonstrating that Productive Wildlife Habitat is Compatible with Agriculture and other Land Uses:*
A conservation easement on this property would ensure the property remains a privately owned agricultural operation. The level of use by wildlife demonstrates the habitat quality as it is currently managed. Implementation of the conservation easement covenants and management practices mentioned earlier in this document will further enhance existing habitats. Since the property will remain in private ownership, this conservation easement will have little impact on the tax base.

Current habitat conditions are fair to good. There is a healthy shrub component within riparian areas and, even after winter grazing at the present stocking rate, there remains fairly good nesting/security cover for upland game birds. The riparian habitat remains mostly intact with dense stands of cottonwood, green ash, chokecherry, willow, buffaloberry and snowberry.

➤ **Other Management Considerations:** This project should not increase game damage in the vicinity of the Riverdale Ranch. If anything, it will reduce game damage by allowing more hunting and perpetuating hunting opportunities. The project will require some redirection of the Great Falls area biologist's time to implement conservation easement covenants, on-the-ground management applications and habitat enhancements. Day to day farm and ranch management will continue to be the responsibility of the landowner.

The Missouri River corridor is key to maintaining stable white-tailed deer, pheasant, turkey, furbearer and native species populations. Most of the surrounding uplands lack effective winter cover components, but can be enhanced over time. These riparian habitats are also very important to many non-game species, both migratory and resident. This property could change hands in the next few years. New types of use will likely not be as beneficial to wildlife as current management. Cropland may be expanded, brush and timber cleared and/or grazed more intensively. There is also increased interest along the Missouri River for recreational acquisitions by out-of-state buyers and sub-dividers. Any or all of these scenarios would have significant impacts to the value of this property for wildlife production and public use. The access presently enjoyed by the public on this ranch would likely be barred by future landowners, as is happening in much of Montana.

➤ **Project Activities:** The property will continue to be a privately owned and managed ranch as in the past, while maintaining and/or increasing wildlife habitat throughout. FWP will hold and monitor the perpetual conservation easement on the ranch. Wildlife friendly habitat management practices will be implemented upon completion of the conservation easement as described in the **Project Need** section of this document. The property is currently not enrolled in FWP's Block Management Program, although the landowners do allow public hunting. With the proposed conservation easement comes a public access requirement. With or without the use of the Block Management Program, the landowner will be required to continue to allow reasonable public access to the property. The extent of public access will later be defined in the CE Management Plan.

➤ **Possible Partnerships (CE funding and habitat enhancement):** This project fits within both the FWP Habitat Montana Program and the FWP Upland Game Bird Program guidelines. This project also provides an excellent opportunity for FWP to partner with other agencies and conservation organizations including:

- **NRCS - Farm and Ranchland Protection Program (FRPP)** may be an excellent **CE funding partner** as approximately 500 acres of the Ranch's soils fit within the defined FRPP conservation easement guidelines. FRPP program funding is dependent on the 2008 Farm Bill. FRPP provides up to 50% of the fair market easement value of the conservation easement on those acres having soils that fit FRPP criteria, but the program requires a non-federal match (FWP and partners)
- **Montana Fish and Wildlife Conservation Trust (CE funding)**
- **PPL Montana (CE funding)**
- **Great Falls Chapter Safari Club International (CE funding and habitat enhancement funding)**
- **Great Falls Chapter Pheasants Forever (CE funding and habitat enhancement funding)**
- **Great Falls Chapter National Wild Turkey Federation (CE funding and habitat enhancement funding)**
- **NRCS - WHIP and EQUIP (Habitat enhancement funding)**
- **FWP Future Fisheries Program (Habitat enhancement funding)**

The project has been discussed with some of these potential partners and has received very positive feedback for both conservation easement funding and possible habitat enhancement funding.

- Project Proposed By:
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- FWP Region 4 approval for submission:
Graham Taylor

Region 4 Wildlife Manager

Gary Bertellotti

Region 4 Supervisor

Exhibit A. Riverdale Ranch CE Proposal Project Area.

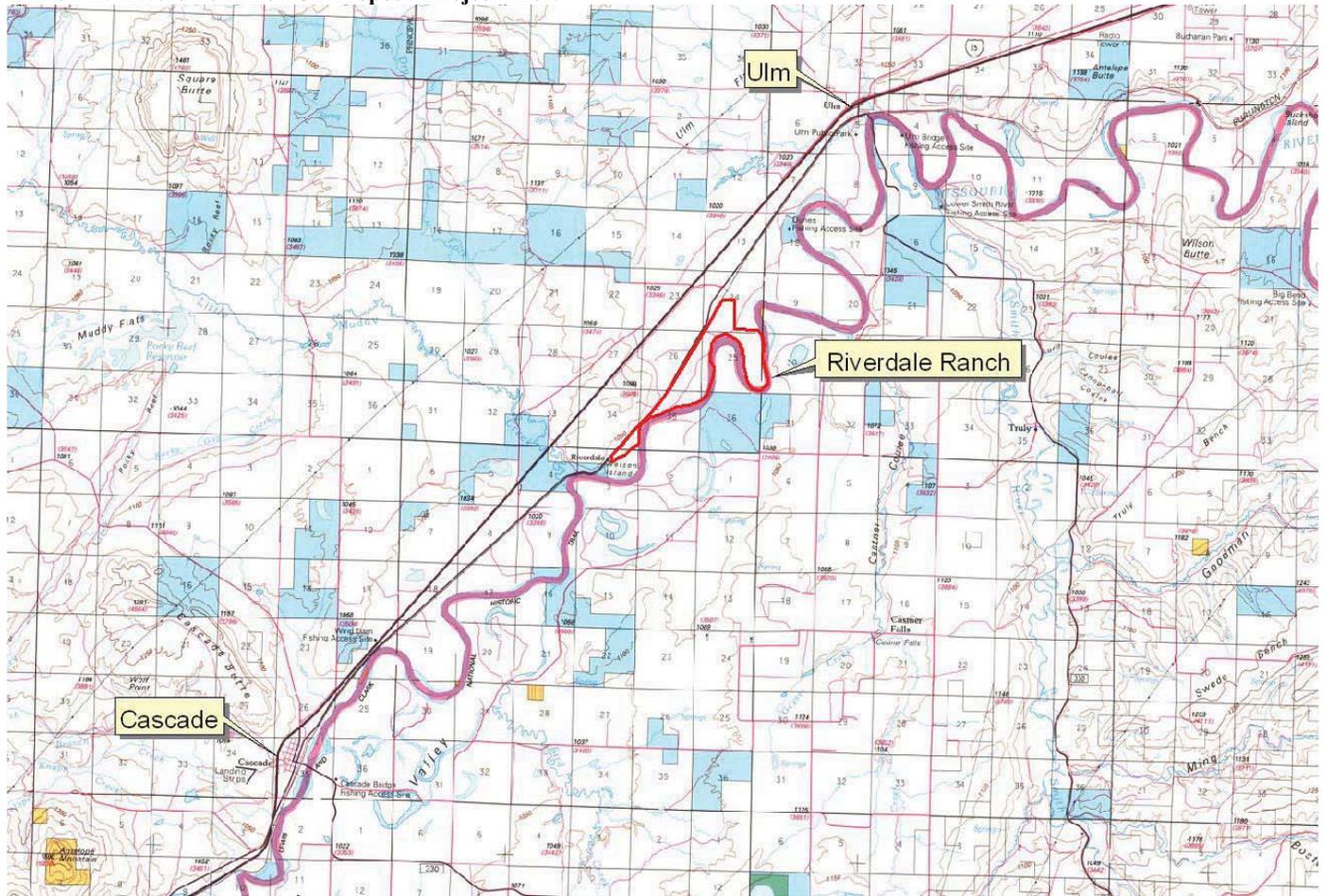


Exhibit B. Riverdale Ranch CE Proposal Project Area (Aerial).

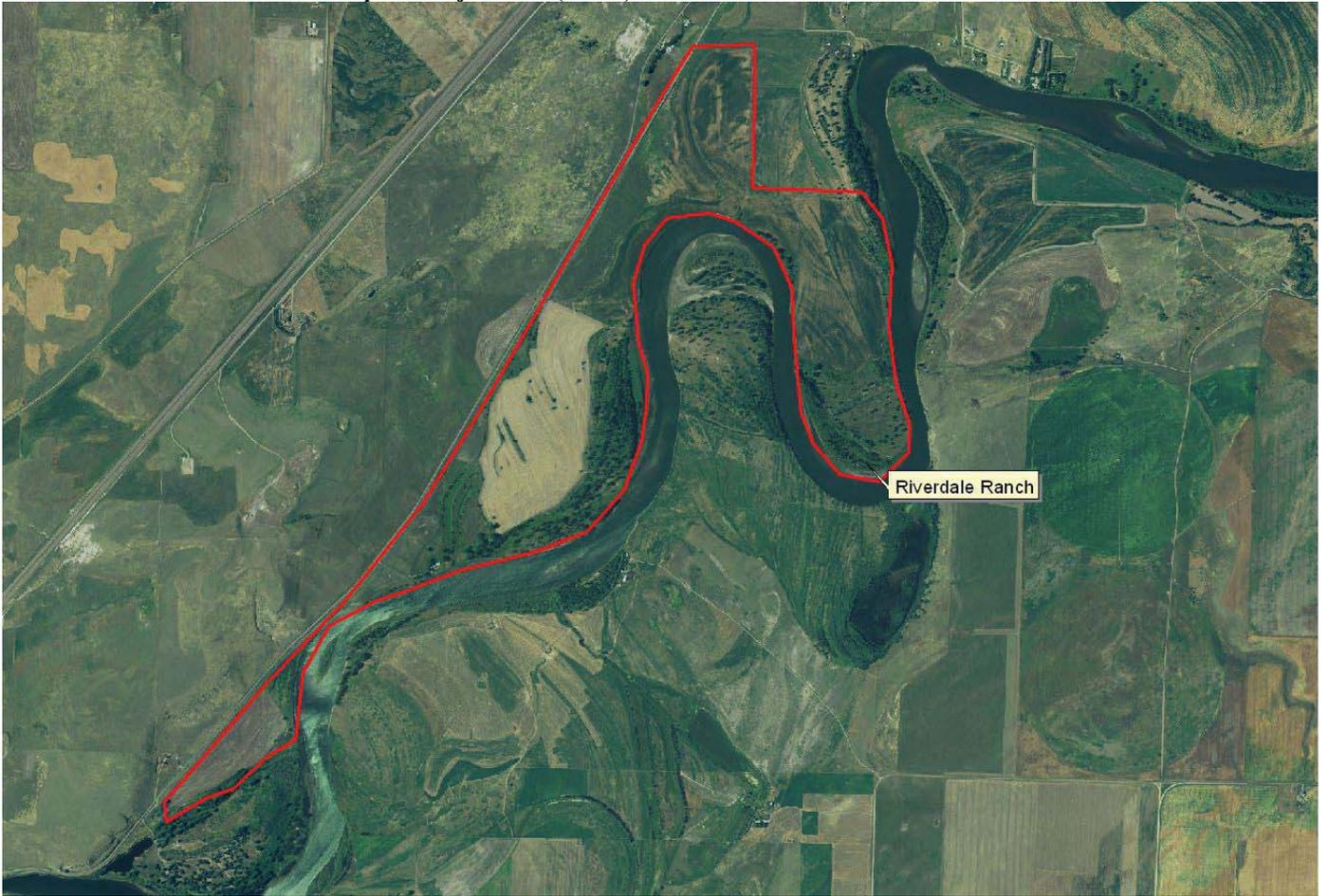


Exhibit C. Riverdale Ranch CE Proposal Project Area / Dugas CE Proposal Project Area/ Bird Creek Ranch CE

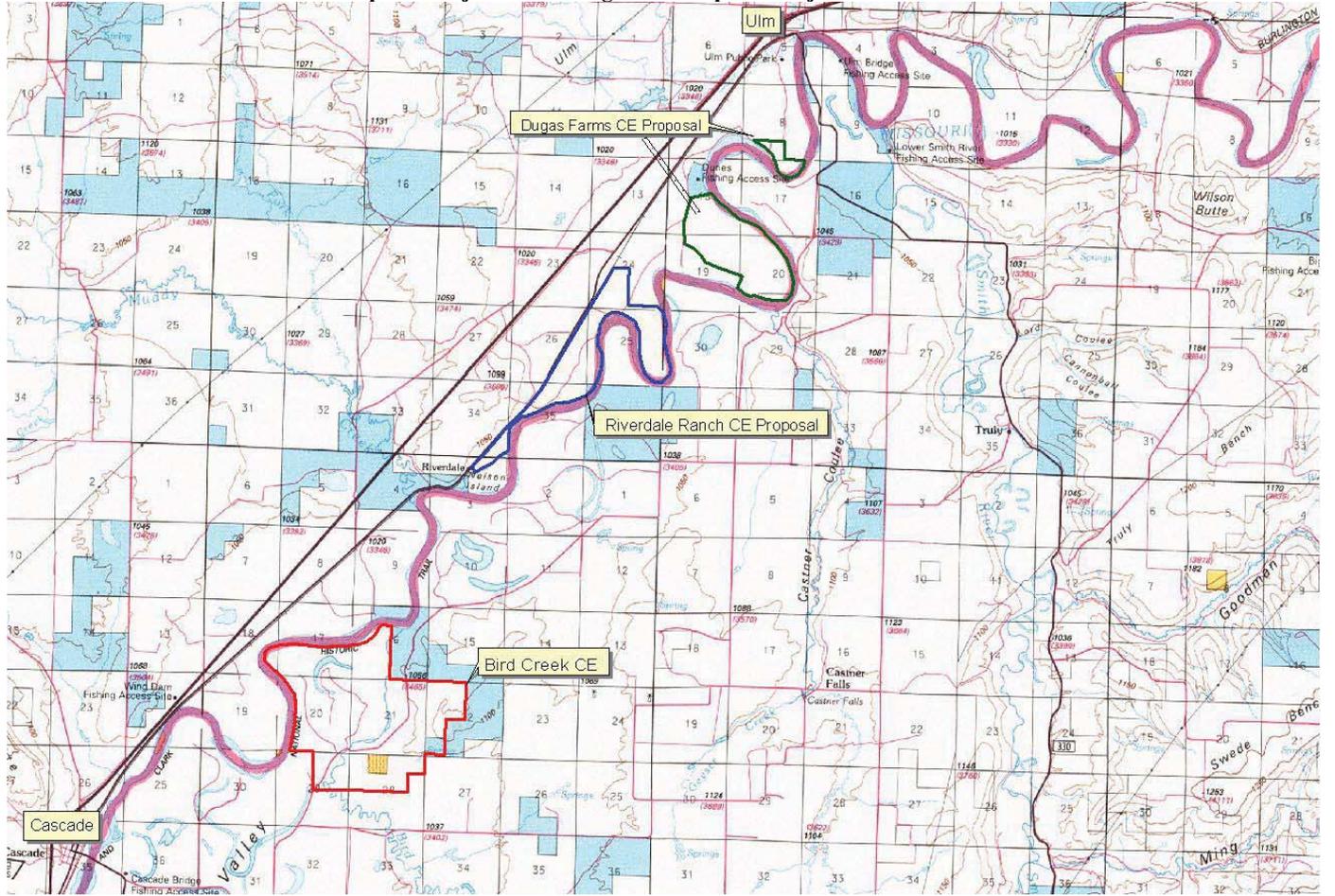


Exhibit D. Riverdale Ranch CE Proposal Project Area / Dugas CE Proposal Project Area/ Bird Creek Ranch CE

