



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

FWP Region 6
54078 Hwy 2 W
Glasgow, MT 59230

October 17, 2012

Governor's Office – Sheena Wilson
Montana State Library, Helena
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Director's
Office

Fish and Wildlife Division
Parks Division
Lands Section
Communication & Education Bureau
Commission Secretary
Legal Unit

Montana DNRC, Northeastern Land Office
Environmental Quality Council
MT Environ. Information Center
State Historic Preservation Office
Choteau County Commissioners

Choteau County Planner
MFWP Commissioner, A. T. Stafne
Representative Roy Hollandsworth

Senator Llew Jones
Bradley Dugdale, Attorney at Law
Harold Brende
Ronnie Briese
Roger Debruyker
Humphrey Limited Partnership
K & E Brothers
Lazy B M LTD Partnership
Georgia Reichelt
Virgelle Ventures Inc
Dianna Webster

Dear Interested Party:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks is proposing to accept the donation of 1,050 acres of property located approximately 13 miles southwest of Big Sandy. The property is found along Spring Coulee and also contains riverfront property along the Missouri River.

The primary purpose of this proposal is to conserve and enhance native areas that provide important habitat for game and nongame species. The property would be managed as a Wildlife Management Area to protect fish and wildlife resources and to provide additional recreational opportunities to the general public. Protecting and enhancing the existing habitat is expected to increase use by game animals, including mule deer, antelope, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge, and mourning doves along with a variety of native species of birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals.

The Draft Environmental Assessment can be found on the on the FWP website at <http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/>. Additional details regarding this proposal are also included in the Draft Management Plan and Socio-Economic Assessment. The comment period for this proposal will be from October 17th through 5:00 pm on November 9th. A hard copy of the proposal can be requested by calling 406-228-3700.

A public meeting will be held at the Hill County Electric Hospitality Room in Havre on October 30th at 7:00 pm to discuss the proposed acquisition and take public comment.

Please send all written comments to the following address:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Attn: Spring Coulee WMA Acquisition Proposal
2165 Hwy 2 East
Havre, MT 59501

Comments can also be emailed to: shemmer@mt.gov

Thank you for your consideration of this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Pat Gunderson", with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Pat Gunderson
Region 6 Supervisor
Montana, Fish Wildlife & Parks

Draft
Environmental Assessment
Spring Coulee Wildlife Management Area
Acquisition



October 17, 2012



Draft Environmental Assessment

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

- 1. Type of proposed state action:** Accept the donation of approximately 1,050 acres of native rangeland in the Missouri Breaks in Chouteau County. The land, which would be managed for wildlife habitat and public recreational access, would become the Spring Coulee Wildlife Management Area.
- 2. Agency authority for the proposed action:** Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) has the authority under state law (§ 87-1-201, Montana Code Annotated (MCA)) to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit and to acquire land for this purpose (§ 87-1-209, MCA).
- 3. Anticipated Schedule:** Acquisition is proposed to be completed by December 31, 2012.
- 4. Location affected by proposed action:** The property is located along the Missouri River, 13 miles southwest of Big Sandy. A map and legal description of the property are presented in Appendix A
- 5. Project size -- estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:**

<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>	
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>4</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
Industrial	<u>0</u>	Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/	<u>671</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
Recreation		Forestry	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian	<u>12</u>	Rangeland	<u>362</u>
Areas		Other	<u>0</u>

6. Permits, Funding & Overlapping Jurisdiction.

No permits are required, and no funding will be involved in this proposed land donation by a private landowner to FWP. There is no overlapping jurisdiction by other public agencies, although the property borders land parcels owned and managed by the federal Bureau of Land Management and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

7. Narrative summary of the proposed action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to accept the donation of approximately 1,050 acres of rangeland in Chouteau County. The property is located 13 miles southwest of Big Sandy along the Missouri River, and three miles west of the Virgelle Ferry and the Coal Banks Recreation Area. It is contiguous with 360 acres of State School Trust land and 115 acres of Bureau of Land Management owned land.

This property is largely undeveloped. There are no buildings or other structures located on the property. There are some fences on the property although many are in disrepair since the property has not been actively grazed by livestock in recent years. There are no known power or gas lines crossing the property. There is an approximately 250 meters old railroad right-of-way along the southern end of the property. The property is not currently open to the public for hunting and other recreational access.

The parcel is entirely native habitat, and much of this habitat is classified as one of three Tier I habitats (mixed grass prairie, shrub-grassland, and riparian habitat) identified as conservation priorities by FWP. Spring Coulee and several smaller coulees traverse the property. The bottoms of these coulees are largely silver sagebrush dominated grasslands with smaller patches of wetland habitat interspersed throughout. The sides of these coulees are rugged badlands habitats typical of the Missouri River Breaks. These breaks transition into flat benches that are primarily mixed-grass prairie dominated by western wheatgrass. There are also some smaller patches of Wyoming big sagebrush found on these benches as well. Spring Coulee widens as it opens into the riparian habitat of the Missouri River floodplain. An estimate of the acres of each habitat type based on GAP land cover analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Land cover types based on GAP data analysis.

Land Cover Type	Acres
Western Great Plains Badland	634
Northwestern Great Plains Mixed-grass Prairie	286
Inter-Mountain Basins Greasewood Flat	76
Western Great Plains Cliff and Outcrop	37
Northwestern Great Plains Riparian	9
Northwestern Great Plains Floodplain	4
Western Great Plains Wooded Draw and Ravine	2

The property would provide hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, hiking, and many other recreational opportunities. Initially, public access to the site will be primarily day-use only. Camping on the property may be permitted in the future if it is determined that there is a need for camping at the site and if maintenance of the site were practical based on site access and available regional resources. Public road access to the property has not been documented, so recreational access would originate from along the river corridor. Additionally, FWP is working to secure administrative access by vehicle (for land management, enforcement and other related activities) as part of the property acquisition.

The Upper Missouri River Breaks Visitor Center reports they see an average of 4,000-5,000 registered visitors along the upper Missouri River each year. Since a large number of visitors do not register, this number is an underestimate of the total use. Due to the popularity of this river system, it is likely that this property would see significant public use, even if the only public access was from the Missouri River. There has also been increasing sportsman interest in hunting along the river. As access has become more challenging, more hunters have chosen to float the Missouri River to access the many isolated parcels of public land found along this river. The nearest river watercraft access sites are the Loma Bridge Fishing Access Site, approximately 15 miles upstream of the property, and Coal Banks Recreation Area approximately 6 miles downstream of the property.

The primary hunting opportunities on the property would be for mule deer and sharp-tailed grouse. The nearby food sources and the security cover provided by the rugged coulees combine to create excellent habitat for mule deer. This area also provides crucial winter range for mule deer. There would be secondary hunting opportunities for white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope and Hungarian partridge. The river access provided by this property would provide a landing spot for watercraft and would also provide additional fishing and waterfowl hunting opportunities. The primary sportfish found along this stretch of the Missouri are channel catfish, smallmouth bass, and sauger.

Increased public use of this property would increase the potential for trespassing and other hunting related violations on adjacent landowners. The proposed WMA is a contiguous property, with irregular borders. In order to help educate visitors and decrease trespassing complaints, FWP's management plan calls for signing of the existing boundaries particularly along the river corridor. FWP will also cooperate with the BLM and DNRC in signing adjacent public land. FWP will provide a site map along the river if needed. FWP would also increase patrols of the property, which would help decrease trespassing, littering, poaching, and other potential negative impacts of public use. If trespassing or other recreation management issues arises FWP will work with the neighboring landowners to address their concerns.

The intact nature of the native habitat on this property and the variety of vegetation community types, ranging from riparian habitat along the Missouri River through silver sagebrush coulees, badlands, and mixed shrub and grassland benches, provide valuable habitat for a variety of game and nongame species. There are several springs present in the branches of Spring Coulee. These springs provide moist areas year-round and even some smaller patches of cattail wetlands. Badlands and cliff habitats provide roosting and nesting habitat for a variety of bats, raptors, and other bird species. The native grassland and shrub habitats appear to be in excellent good condition and do not appear to have experienced any livestock use in recent history. These shrub and grassland habitats provide nesting and security cover for an abundance of small mammals, grassland birds, and other species dependent on native prairie and shrub habitat

8. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:

Alternative A: Proposed Action: FWP would accept the donation of approximately 1,050 acres. The property would be managed as a wildlife management area for the conservation and benefit of the native habitats and wildlife. Public recreation primarily along the river corridor would be enhanced.

Initial MFWP management strategies for the new WMA would include the following. Additional details about these strategies can be found in Appendix II, Milk River WMA Draft Management Plan:

1. Conduct a baseline vegetation survey to evaluate existing rangeland conditions, species present, and use that data to establish a vegetation monitoring plan for the property.
2. Evaluate vegetation enhancement options for the enhancement of existing vegetation along Spring Coulee and the Missouri River.
3. Noxious Weed Management
 - a. Conduct an inventory and map current weed locations
 - b. Develop a long-term weed management plan that may include biological, chemical, and mechanical treatment of noxious weeds.
 - c. Develop a noxious weed management plan for the property and coordinate with Chouteau County Weed District to implement weed management controls.
4. Identify and conduct baseline wildlife
5. Determine schedule for on-going wildlife surveys
6. Install appropriate signage for property boundaries and WMA management regulations.
7. Replace or modify existing fences with wildlife-friendly fence designs.
8. Evaluate the potential for trapping opportunities on the WMA based on the outcome of the determination of additional access points to the WMA.
9. Investigate if any public access routes exist to the WMA. If routes are discovered, then a travel management plan would be developed.
10. Define prohibited activities and used on the WMA. Some of these restrictions included are:
 - a. No off-road vehicle use
 - b. Certified weed free hay required
 - c. No cutting of trees or firewood
 - d. No organized dog training/field trials
 - e. Fires are allowed in portable camp stoves, fireplaces and fire rings, unless otherwise prohibited by emergency fire restrictions
 - f. Weapons discharge allowed only for lawful hunting purposes
 - g. No commercial use without a commercial use permit
 - h. No fireworks
 - i. No littering
 - j. No removal of natural resources
11. Coordinate with MFWP staff to improve fishing access on the Milk River
12. Develop steps to minimize impacts to neighboring landowners, such as:
 - a. Install appropriate boundary and regulation signage.
 - b. Collaborate with the county road department to address issues with impacts access roads and to minimize the generation of dust within travel corridors.
 - c. Install garbage receptacles to help minimize littering.

- d. Coordinate with local MFWP Game Wardens and other staff to provide a MFWP presence on the property to discourage vandalism, littering, poaching, and other violations.

Alternative B: No Action: FWP would not accept the property donation. The landowner is currently selling other portions of their ranch, and this property would likely be sold to another party. Open public recreational access to the property under this circumstance would not be improbable.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?		X				
c. Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regulations? (Also see 2a.)		n/a				

3. <u>WATER</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				1
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		n/a				
m. For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		n/a				

1. There are no existing water rights recorded for this property.

4. <u>VEGETATION</u>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in?						
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?		X				
b. Alteration of a plant community?		X				
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			X		X	1
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		n/a				
g. Other:		X				

1. This property would see increased public visitation under FWP management. If access is only available from the river, there would be little to no risk of increased spread of noxious weeds. If it is determined that road access to the property exists, there is a minor risk of increased establishment and spread of noxious weeds. The property would be managed for walk-in only recreation, which would decrease the opportunity for spread of noxious weeds. Any weed impacts could be mitigated through noxious weed control measures, including biological, chemical, and mechanical treatments. FWP would design a weed management plan in coordination with Chouteau County Weed District to establish control measures for the WMA. Some vegetation would be disturbed if portions of the existing fencing need to be replaced in the future.

5. <u>FISH/WILDLIFE</u>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?		X				
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?		X				
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?			X			1
h. For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)		n/a				
i. For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		n/a				

1. Acquisition of this property would increase public use and hunting pressure. The increased public use could result in increased opportunities for illegal harvest and harassment of wildlife species. Visits to the site

by FWP wildlife and law enforcement personnel would decrease the incidences of wildlife violations. Increased hunting opportunity would aid in wildlife population management and may help reduce game damage issues on neighboring properties.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to serve or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				

7. <u>LAND USE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				

The open viewshed of the property would be maintained for the benefit of visitors and floaters enjoying the Missouri River.

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				1
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		n/a				

1- Fires on the property would be subject to immediate suppression upon detection. Fire suppression on the property would be covered by the county under an existing cooperative agreement between Choteau County and the DNRC. Under this agreement the county agrees to provide fire protection in exchange for equipment, planning, and training. The DNRC would also assist and provide funding for fires too large for the county to control. MFWP may institute fire restrictions and temporary, emergency measures to reduce public access if drought conditions and fire danger warrant these measures.

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				

See Appendix II for the Socioeconomic Report.

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:			X			1
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				2
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. Define projected revenue sources*		X				
f. Define projected maintenance costs.*		X				3

1. If land access were available to the property, there could be additional use of county roads in the area. The additional use of county roads to the property could marginally increase need for maintenance of these roads, but these impacts would not be significant in relation to other existing road uses for agriculture and private farmstead access.

2. For properties in its ownership, FWP makes annual payments to county governments equal to the property tax payments that would be due if the land were in private ownership.
3. The primary maintenance cost associated with the property would be for fence maintenance, signing of boundaries, and weed control activities. Estimated maintenance costs are:

Maintenance Activity	Yearly Maintenance Cost
Weed Management	\$500-\$700/Year
Maintaining boundary fences	\$500/Year
Recreation	\$850- first year \$100/year after

11. <u>AESTHETICS/RECREATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?		X				
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				
c. Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		n/a				

The lower portion of the project property is adjacent to a portion of the Missouri River designated as part of Wild and Scenic River System within the United States. The aesthetic values of the property would be maintained if FWP accepted the donation.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		n/a				

FWP's proposed acquisition would have a positive effect on any cultural or historical resources by preserving and managing them in public ownership, because all state agencies are required by Montana law (§ 22-3-433, MCA) to consult with the historic preservation officer (SHPO) for the protection and conservation of heritage properties on lands owned by the state.

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. <u>SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</u> Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		n/a				
g. For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		n/a				

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

The proposed action is acquisition by FWP of an approximately 1,050 acre parcel of land that will be managed as a wildlife management area. This parcel is currently undeveloped, and if acquired will remain undeveloped to be managed for wildlife habitat and dispersed public recreation, consistent with FWP's objectives for wildlife management areas. With this environmental assessment, FWP has found no adverse impacts of the proposed action. Conversely, the no-action alternative could result in adverse impacts to wildlife habitat and recreation due to the potential for the sale of the parcel for private uses, which could include intensive agricultural activities or limited residential development within mule deer wintering range.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public involvement:

Public notification of this Environmental Assessment (EA) and opportunity to comment will be provided through the following means.

- A statewide press release
- Two public notices in each of these papers: Great Falls Tribune and Havre Daily News
- Direct mailing to adjacent landowners and interested parties
- Public notice and posting of the EA on the FWP web page, <http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/>
- A public meeting to receive comment

Copies of the EA will be available for public review at FWP Region 6 Headquarters in Glasgow and at the FWP office in Havre.

There will be an informational meeting and public hearing on this proposal in Havre at the Hill County Electric Hospitality room from 7-9 pm on October 30th 2012

2. Duration of comment period:

The public comment period will extend for 24 days starting October 17. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 pm on November 9th and can be mailed to the address below

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
ATTN: Spring Coulee WMA Acquisition
54078 Hwy 2 West
Glasgow, MT 59230

Or comments can be emailed to

shemmer@mt.gov

PART V. EA PREPARATION

- 1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)? NO**

If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.

The proposed action will not have a measureable adverse impact on the local environment. There were no significant impacts identified during the EA process and the minor impacts that were identified can be mitigated. The property is currently almost all native range and would not require any significant habitat changes or improvement. There are no plans for any significant improvement or developments on the property. The land use of the property would remain largely unchanged, except for increased public use.

- 2. Person responsible for preparing the EA:**

Scott Hemmer
2165 Hwy 2 E
Havre, MT 59501
406-265-6177 x224
shemmer@mt.gov

- 3. List of agencies or offices consulted during preparation of the EA:**

Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks:
Wildlife Division
Lands Unit

Bureau of Land Management
Havre Office
Upper Missouri River Breaks Monument Visitor Center

APPENDIX A. LEGAL DESCRIPTION AND MAPS

LEGAL DESCRIPTION

Township 26 North, Range 11 East, M.P.M.

Section 4: SW¹/₄NW¹/₄, N¹/₂SW¹/₄, E¹/₂SE¹/₄SW¹/₄

Township 26 North, Range 11 East, M.P.M.

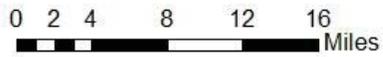
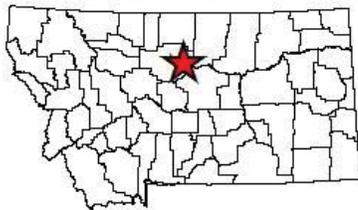
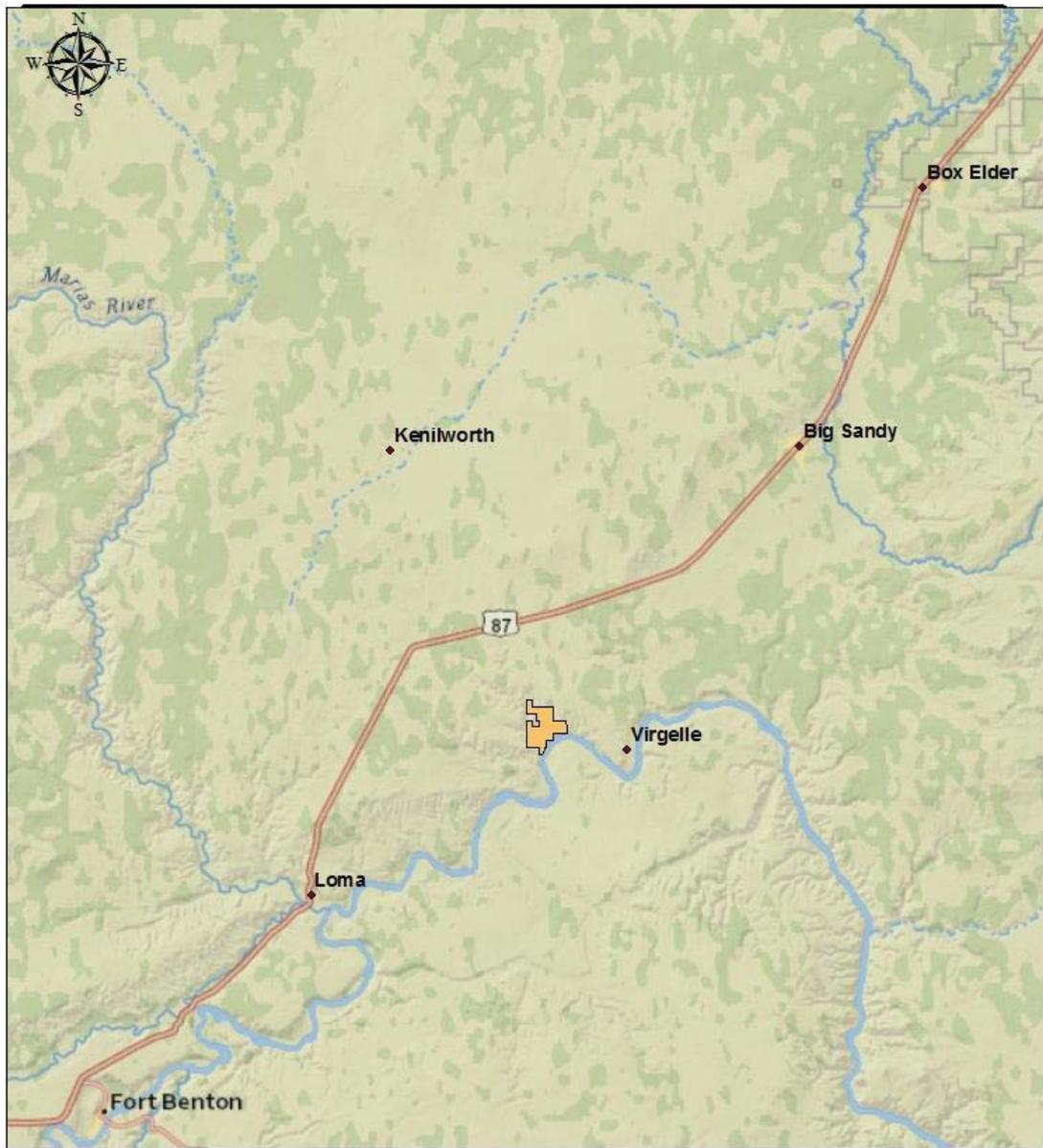
Section 4: SE¹/₄

Section 9: NE¹/₄, W¹/₂NW¹/₄, SE¹/₄NW¹/₄, SW¹/₄, NW¹/₄SE¹/₄, Lots 1, 2

Section 10: NW¹/₄

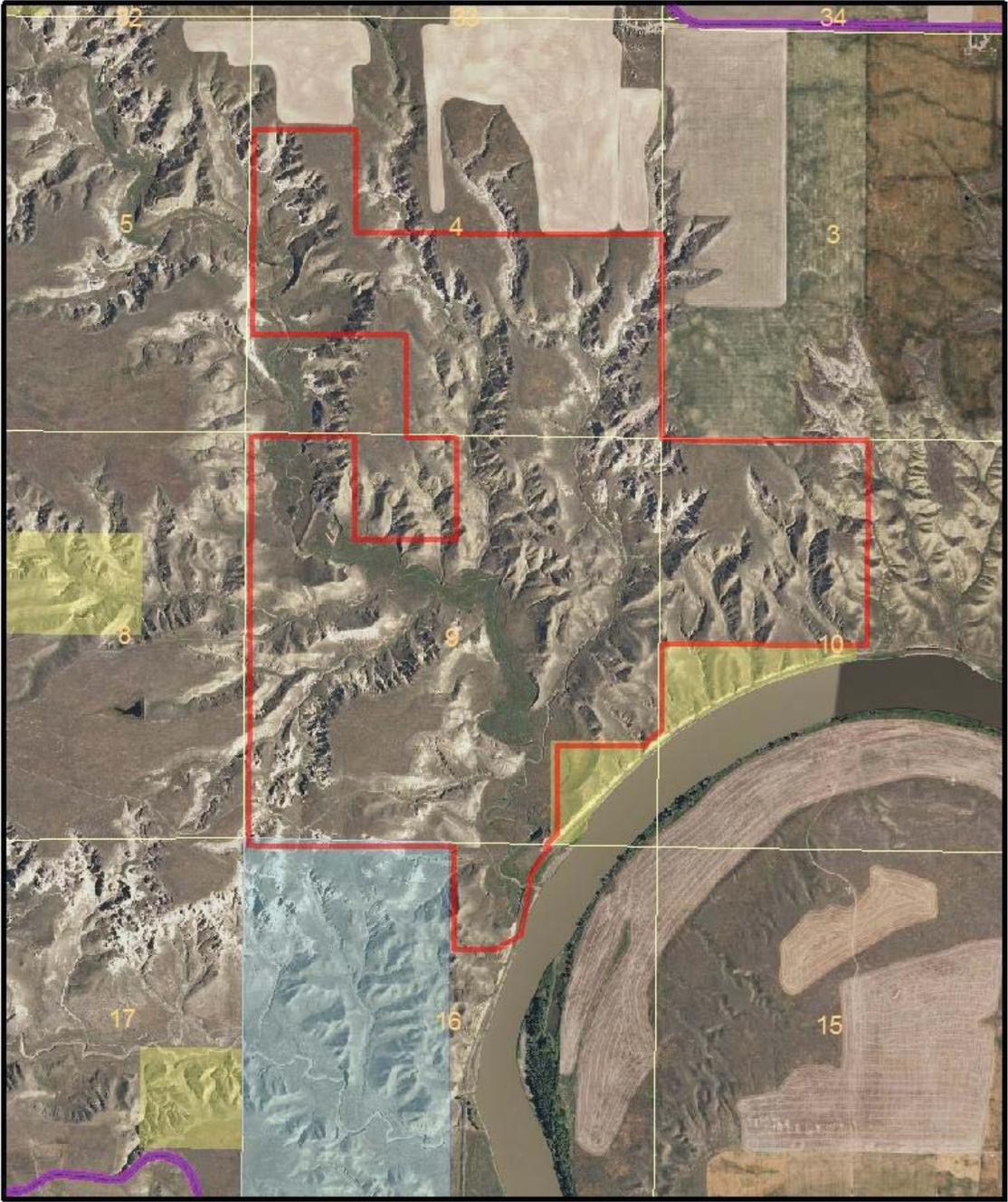
Section 16: Lot 2

Proposed Spring Coulee WMA Location



 Spring Coulee WMA

Proposed Spring Coulee WMA Boundary



Proposed WMA Boundary

Appendix B

Spring Coulee WMA Management Plan

INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes to accept donation of approximately 1050 acres of property to create the Spring Coulee Wildlife Management Area. The property is located along the Missouri River southwest of Big Sandy. The land is primarily unbroken native habitat. Under FWP management of this property, these native habitats would be protected and managed for the benefit of wildlife populations in the area. The property would be also be managed to enhance the hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, canoeing/floating, and other recreational opportunities. This draft management plan is presented as a means of disclosing FWP's management intent for the property for public review.

PROPERTY DESCRIPTION

The proposed Spring Coulee Wildlife Management Area (SCWMA) is located 13 miles southwest of Big Sandy along the Missouri River. It is approximately 3 miles west of the Coal Banks Recreation Area and the Virgelle Ferry. The property is located on a segment of the Wild and Scenic Missouri River and is also along the Lewis and Clark Historic Trail. The legal description for the property is :

Township 26 North, Range 11 East, M.P.M.

Section 4: SW¹/₄NW¹/₄, N¹/₂SW¹/₄, E¹/₂SE¹/₄SW¹/₄

Township 26 North, Range 11 East, M.P.M.

Section 4: SE¹/₄

Section 9: NE¹/₄, W¹/₂NW¹/₄, SE¹/₄NW¹/₄, SW¹/₄, NW¹/₄SE¹/₄, Lots 1, 2

Section 10: NW¹/₄

Section 16: Lot 2

RESOURCE VALUES

Vegetation

The vegetation found on the SCWMA consists almost entirely of native plant communities. Most of the property is composed of mixed grass prairie, shrub-grassland, and riparian habitats which are all classified a vegetation community types in the greatest need of conservation (Tier I). The property is located within an area identified as a priority conservation area (Glaciated Plains Focus Area) by the Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy. Spring Coulee and several smaller coulees traverse the property. The bottoms of these coulees are largely silver sagebrush dominated grasslands with smaller patches of wetland/riparian habitat interspersed within these coulees. The sides of these coulees are rugged badlands habitats typical of the Missouri River Breaks. These breaks transition into flat benches that are primarily mixed-grass prairie dominated by western wheatgrass. There are also some smaller patches of sagebrush-grassland found on these benches as well. Spring Coulee widens as it opens into the riparian habitat of the Missouri River Floodplain. An estimate of the acres of each habitat type based on GAP land cover analysis is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Land cover types based on GAP data analysis

Land Cover Type	Acres
Western Great Plains Badland	634
Northwestern Great Plains Mixed grass Prairie	286
Inter-Mountain Basins Greasewood Flat	76
Western Great Plains Cliff and Outcrop	37
Northwestern Great Plains Riparian	9
Northwestern Great Plains Floodplain	4
Western Great Plains Wooded Draw and Ravine	2

Wildlife

The wildlife resource value of the SCWMA is high and would provide substantial opportunities for hunting, wildlife viewing, canoeing, and other recreational opportunities. The primary game species that would be present on the ranch are mule deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge. There may be incidental opportunities for white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, and waterfowl. The variety of native habitats (riparian, mixed grass prairie, cliffs, and badlands) present suggests that this property would support a variety of nongame species of birds, small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians.

Fish

The stretch of the Missouri River adjacent to the SCWMA provides habitat and fishing opportunity for a variety of fish species. The primary opportunities for sport fishing would be channel catfish, sauger, and smallmouth bass. There are also a variety of game fish species that are present in lower densities and many nongame fish species present that would include: bigmouth buffalo, black crappie, blue sucker, brook stickleback, brown trout, burbot, emerald shiner, fathead minnow, flathead chub, freshwater drum, goldeye, green sunfish, lake chub, largemouth bass, longnose dace, longnose sucker, mottled sculpin, mountain sucker, mountain whitefish, northern pike, paddlefish, pallid sturgeon, rainbow trout, sand shiner, shorthead redhorse, shovelnose sturgeon, smallmouth buffalo, spottail shiner, stonecat, sturgeon chub, walleye, western silvery minnow, white crappie, white sucker, yellow perch.

Cultural, Historical and Paleontological Resources

The cultural and paleontological resources present on this property are largely unknown. If FWP acquires this property a cultural resources file search will be requested for the property from the State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) before any ground disturbing activities occur. The property is located along the Lewis and Clark Historical Trail, but no use of the site by the expedition is known. The badlands habitats found on the ranch may have potential for the presence of fossils, however there are no fossils resources identified on the property

Recreational Resources

This property is located along a stretch of the Missouri River that is very popular for canoeing, floating, and boating. The riverfront property provided by the property would provide a good landing site for the public using the Missouri River for water based recreation. The quality wildlife habitat present would be a draw for the increasing number of sportsman who choose to float the river and hunt adjacent public lands. The wildlife on the property would also provide opportunities for wildlife viewing and fishing for the non-hunting visitors floating the river. If it is determined that there is public road access to the property, there would be walk-in hunting use primarily by mule deer and upland bird hunters.

Improvement and Developments

This property is largely undeveloped. There are no buildings or other structures located on the property. There are some fences on the property although many are in disrepair since the property has not been actively grazed by livestock in recent years. There are no known power or gas lines crossing the property. There is approximately 250 meters old railroad right-of-way along the southern end of the property.

WMA MANAGEMENT

Vegetation Management

Goals: Promote the conservation of healthy, diverse native plant communities existing on the ranch. Contain and control the spread of existing noxious weeds and eradicate any new weed invasions before species can become established. Provide food and cover for wildlife species found on the ranch. Vegetation management will require vehicle administrative access to the property.

Management strategies

1. Baseline vegetation monitoring
 - Conduct vegetation monitoring to evaluate range condition, utilization, and trend.
 - Potential vegetation monitoring techniques: photo plots and cover/composition vegetation transects
2. Grazing Management
 - The property is not currently grazed by livestock. The combination of the smaller size of the property, lack of existing fencing, rugged terrain, and limited water sources make use of a rest-rotation grazing system impractical.
3. Vegetation enhancement
 - The good condition of the vegetation on the property and high percentage of native habitats mean there would no need for intensive vegetation management

- Riparian Shrubs- There would be opportunities for planting additional small clusters of trees or shrubs in the moist bottoms of Spring Coulee. There would also be potential to evaluate planting shrubs or cottonwood seedlings along the Missouri River.
4. Noxious Weed Management
 - Conduct an inventory and map current weed locations
 - Develop a long-term weed management plan that may include biological, chemical, and mechanical treatment of noxious weeds.
 - Coordinate with the Choteau County Weed District to identify and control weed infestations

Fish and Wildlife Management

Goals: Protect and enhance wildlife and fisheries habitat to help ensure continued presence of both game and nongame species on the property. To provide public hunting and fishing opportunity to assist in meeting regional population objectives.

Management Strategies

1. Identify existing wildlife resources
 - Conduct baseline surveys for important wildlife attributes, which may include raptor nests, bat hibernacula, sharp-tailed grouse leks, and any threatened or endangered species
2. Determine the potential for establishing trend surveys on the ranch.
Potential surveys would include:
 - Big game surveys
 - Lek counts
 - Fish surveys
 - Small mammal surveys
 - Songbird surveys
3. Sportsmen/Recreation Management
 - Sign the property boundaries to educate visitors and to reduce the incidences of trespassing on surrounding landowners.
 - Erect signs visible from the river to identify the WMA and to provide information on the rules and restrictions related to the WMA.
4. Fencing
 - Replace existing fences with wildlife-friendly fence designs or remove unused fencing.
5. Trapping
 - Permission of trapping on the WMA would be dependent on determining additional land access points. If additional access routes were identified, trapping would be permitted on a limited basis.
6. Hunting
 - Hunting would be allowed in accordance with all current rules and regulations

Recreation Management

Goals: Maximize public recreational use of the property while ensuring compatibility with neighboring private landowners to minimize impacts on adjacent private lands.

Management Strategies

1. Determine public access routes
 - Determine if any additional legal public access routes exist to the property. If any additional routes are identified a travel management plan would need to be developed. Access would be managed primarily for walk-in recreation. There would be no off-road vehicle use. There may be a need for the creation of parking area(s) to encourage hunters to abide by walk-in hunting restrictions and to decrease wildfire risk.
 - Currently, the primary access point for the property would be from the Missouri River. There would be a need to sign either the boundaries of the property along the river or potential landing sites to help river travelers find the property
2. Restrictions
 - FWP has developed general overall guidelines and restrictions for visitor use of WMAs. Some of these restrictions include:
 - No off-road vehicle use
 - Certified weed free hay required
 - No cutting of trees or firewood
 - No organized dog training/field trials
 - Fires are allowed in portable camp stoves, fireplaces and fire rings, unless otherwise prohibited by emergency fire restrictions
 - Weapons discharge allowed only for lawful hunting purposes
 - No commercial use without a commercial use permit
 - No fireworks
 - No littering
 - No removal of natural resources
3. Fishing Access
 - Work with FWP Fishing Access Site Coordinator to determine any improvements needed to enhance fishing opportunities on the Missouri River.
4. Minimize impacts to neighboring landowners
 - Sign the primary access point(s) and boundary fences to inform the public of the WMA property boundaries and decrease the potential for trespassing. Cooperate with Montana DNRC and BLM to mark the boundaries of contiguous public land boundaries.
 - If any road access to the property is identified cooperate with the county road department to address any needed improvements to or impacts on access roads and to minimize any problems with dust creation from increased visitor traffic.
 - Educate visitors using the site on the importance of litter and waste management. Promote leave no trace principles
 - Provide an FWP presence on the property to discourage vandalism, littering, poaching, and other violations.

APPENDIX C

SPRING COULEE

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

OCTOBER 2012

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature and encoded in Sections 87-1-241 and 87-1-242, Montana Code Annotated (MCA), established policies and funding for the Habitat Montana program through which Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) acquires interests in land to secure, develop and maintain wildlife habitat. Acquisitions can be by fee title, conservation easement, or lease. In 1989, the Montana legislature passed House Bill 720, requiring that FWP prepare a socioeconomic assessment for Habitat Montana acquisitions. The purpose of the socioeconomic assessment is to evaluate any “significant potential social and economic impacts” of the acquisition on local governments, employment, schools, and local businesses.

This socioeconomic assessment addresses Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks’ proposed purchase of approximately 1050 acres in Chouteau County, to be managed as the Spring Coulee Wildlife Management Area.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

Property Description:

The proposed Spring Coulee Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is located about 13 miles southwest of Big Sandy and three miles west of the Virgelle Ferry and the Coal Banks Recreation Area along the Missouri River in Chouteau County. The parcel is entirely native habitat, consisting of mixed grass prairie, shrub-grassland, and riparian habitat.

The property borders private rangeland in the breaks and farmland on top of the benchlands, along with scattered tracts of State and BLM land. A detailed description of the property and relevant maps are included in the Environmental Assessment.

Current Use:

The Spring Coulee property is used for open space at the present time. FWP has not been apprised of any grazing leases on the property, and the landowner has expressed an interest in keeping this land in open space for wildlife habitat and recreation.

Many recreational floaters use this portion of the Missouri River from spring through the fall hunting season. However, this land is under private ownership and, except for the small BLM parcels on the shoreline, there has not been established public access to the Spring Coulee area.

Property improvements consist only of limited fencing, and there are no residences or other buildings on the proposed WMA.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Land Management and Government Services:

The proposed land acquisition will place approximately 1050 acres in ownership of the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. This acreage is currently managed as undeveloped habitat, with no grazing, crop production, fee hunting or other economic return. Under FWP management, this acreage will continue to be managed as open space and habitat. Thus, no change in local government services is anticipated for the property.

FWP will develop a weed management agreement with the Chouteau County Weed District, specifying respective roles in control efforts for noxious weeds on FWP lands in the county. FWP has an active weed control program for its public recreation sites throughout Montana.

Economic Activity:

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 FWP's proposed land acquisition.

FWP acquisition of these 1050 acres will make this currently private land available for public recreation, thus increasing opportunities for hunting, wildlife viewing, and (depending on management direction) camping associated with river floating. These uses can be expected to provide a minor boost to regional economic activity (such as food/lodging and sporting equipment sales) associated with hunting, floating and other outdoor recreation.

The land is not currently used for other economic activity.

In sum, while FWP's open-space management will generally continue the status quo, public ownership of the property could have a minimally positive impact on local economic activity through improved public recreational opportunities and the resulting effect on local businesses that provide related goods and services. The FWP land will require no additional public services, except annual weed control efforts.

Property Taxes:

The sale of the fee title land and subsequent title transfer to FWP will not change the tax revenue that Chouteau County currently collects on this property because, under Section 87-1-603, MCA, FWP is required 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 property taxes on the 1,050 acres are estimated to be about \$1,000 annually, and FWP will continue to make these payments, based on the assessment provided by Chouteau County.

IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks' acceptance of the donation of approximately 1,050 acres for a new Spring Coulee Wildlife Management Area will provide long term protection of wildlife habitat, maintain the rural open space integrity of the area, and provide additional public recreation opportunities. Placing this land in FWP ownership will not require any additional local government services. The land acquisition will not cause a reduction in county tax revenue. The acquisition will not have any "significant potential social and economic impacts."