



54078 US Hwy 2 West  
Glasgow, MT 59230

November 16, 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  
    Lands Section  
    Parks Division  
    Commission Secretary  
    Legal Unit  
Montana DNRC Northeastern Land Office  
Environmental Quality Council  
MT Environmental Information Center  
State Historic Preservation Office  
Hill County Commissioners

Clay Vincent, Hill County Planner  
A.T. Stafne, MFWP Commissioner  
Representative Kris Hansen  
David Aageson  
BFW Land Company  
Donna Greytak  
Arnold Hall  
Healy Family, LP  
James Hirst  
Lee and Roxanne Laeupple  
John Schaller  
Steve and Wanda McIntosh  
Evelyn Wanke  
Trevor Wolery  
Mark Aageson

Dear Interested Party:

You recently received documents relating to the proposed action of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) purchasing 2,992 acres of property for a Wildlife Management Area located approximately 42 miles northwest of Havre. The property is located along the Milk River and consists primarily of Milk River riparian habitats and associated uplands.

The primary purpose of this proposal is to conserve and enhance native areas that provide important habitat for game and nongame species and to provide additional recreational opportunities for the general public. This habitat provides critical winter range for big game species and the Milk River serves as a migratory corridor for many species. Protecting and enhancing the existing habitat is expected to increase use by game animals, including mule deer, elk, white-tailed deer, antelope, pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, and waterfowl along with a variety of native nongame species of birds, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals.

Through the public comment effort that ran from October 17 through November 9, 2012 and the public hearing that was held, written or verbal comments were received from 61 individuals, organizations or agencies. The majority of the comments that were received supported the proposal (33), 27 comments were opposed to the project and one comment was neither for nor against the proposal.

Based on the comments gathered from the public review period, some slight modifications were made to the draft EA document and are found in the Final EA. The Final EA is available upon request by contacting the Havre Area Office at 265-6177 or on the FWP website at <http://fwop.mt.gov/publicNotices>.

Although many potential issues were raised during the comment period, they are all addressed in the Decision Notice with additional explanation. Several concerns were not within the authority of MFWP to address. Based on the quality of fish and wildlife habitat and public access benefits, as well as, a majority of public support for the project, it is my recommendation through the attached Decision Notice to purchase the Milk River Ranch WMA, subject to approval by the MFWP Commission and the State Land Board.

The Commission will be asked to approve the purchase of this easement on a conference call scheduled for 9:00 AM on December 10, 2012. The public will be afforded an opportunity to listen to and provide comment during the conference call at all Regional Headquarters and at the Great Northern Inn in Havre, Montana. If you have any further questions regarding this proposal, please contact Scott Hemmer at the Havre Area Office at 265-6177.

Thank you very much for your interest in this project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Patrick Gunderson", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Patrick Gunderson  
Region Six Supervisor

**Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
Wildlife Division**

**FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT  
MILK RIVER RANCH FEE TITLE PROPOSAL**



November 15, 2012



## **1.0 Purpose and Need for Action**

### **1.1 Proposed action**

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MFWP) proposes the fee title acquisition of a portion of the Milk River Ranch, which consists of approximately 2,992 acres of primarily Milk River riparian habitat and associated uplands. The Milk River Ranch is located 42 miles northwest of Havre along the U.S.-Canadian border. The property includes 10 miles of riverfront habitat along the Milk River. The property proposed for acquisition is comprised of over 95% intact native habitat. The native habitat consists primarily of Great Plains floodplain vegetation communities which are predominantly silver sagebrush grassland, cottonwood/shrub riparian habitat, greasewood flats and native mixed-grass prairie and badlands habitats.

The purchase of the Milk River Ranch is divided into two separate acquisitions. This EA addresses the acquisition of 2,992 acres of primarily native riparian and grassland habitats by MFWP. DNRC is proposing to purchase an additional 1513+ acres of the Milk River Ranch. The parcels proposed for purchase by the DNRC consist primarily of a mixture of agricultural and grazing land.

### **1.2 Need for the Action**

The primary purpose of this action is to conserve and enhance rare native riparian and grassland habitats that provide habitat for a variety of game and non-game species and also help maintain a corridor for connectivity between wildlife populations in Canada and in the United States. This property would become a Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and would be managed with the intent of conserving and enhancing the fish and wildlife resources in the area and providing recreational opportunity. Conserving these native habitats and instituting wildlife friendly management practices and habitat improvements would help preserve and enhance mule deer, pronghorn antelope, white-tailed deer, elk, ring-necked pheasants, Hungarian partridge, waterfowl populations and even more species of grassland and riparian songbirds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fish. The property provides habitat for many species including Tier I species (species of greatest conservation need based on the Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy), species of concern, potential species of concern, and threatened and endangered (T&E) species.

Recent increases in small grain prices and decreases in Conservation Reserve Program enrollment have resulted in increasing loss of wildlife habitat due to conversion to agricultural production. A large percentage of the native habitat in the northern part of Hill County has already been converted to cropland. If this property was purchased by another landowner, there would be potential for conversion of some or all of the native grassland and riparian habitats to agricultural production. The ranch also provides connectivity and a potential migration corridor between large tracts of native habitat in Canada and the narrower strip of native habitat remaining along the Milk River in

Montana. Acquisition of this property would protect these habitats and help maintain the genetic diversity and viability of wildlife metapopulation by preventing potential future subdivision and limit energy development and help maintain genetic diversity and viability of wildlife metapopulations.

A second purpose for this project is to provide access to this property for hunting, fishing, and other recreational activities. Milk River riparian habitats are valued for their abundant wildlife and recreational opportunities in addition to their potential productivity for ranching and agricultural operations. The majority of land along the Milk River in Montana is in private ownership. Recreational opportunities and access for hunters along the Milk River have become more restrictive in recent years. Acquisition of this property would ensure access to the a portion of the Milk River for hunting, fishing, canoeing, bird watching, and wildlife viewing for current and future generations.

Thus, the need for this project is twofold. The first need is to protect valuable wildlife habitats from the threat of development, while the second need is to secure perpetual public use of this land for hunters, fishermen, and other recreationists. Resident and migrating wildlife species would benefit from improved habitat conditions, while hunters, anglers, and other recreationists would gain access to this scenic property and to the adjacent Milk River.

The Milk River Ranch is currently a privately owned property. The purchase price of this property will be based on an independent appraisal commissioned by MFWP. FWP plans to apply for a Pittman-Roberson (PR) grant to fund 75% of this acquisition and the Habitat Montana program will fund the remaining 25%. If PR funding is not available the acquisition would be funded entirely through the Habitat Montana program... The property is currently listed for sale with a land broker. Sale of this property to another private landowner could result in a lost opportunity for habitat protection and improvement by FWP.

### **1.3 Objectives of the Action**

- Protect and enhance native riparian and grassland habitats.
- Protect 10 miles of important Milk River habitat.
- Maintain connectivity between wildlife populations in Montana and Canada.
- Provide permanent access to the Milk River and surrounding property for public hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, hiking, and other recreational activities.
- Provide increased public hunting access to manage wildlife populations in order to prevent potential incidences of agricultural damage.
- Promote increased tourism and benefit local communities by providing increased recreational opportunities.
- Protect and enhance Milk River water resources.

## **1.4 Location**

The Milk River Ranch property is located approximately 42 miles northwest of Havre near the US-Canadian border. The property straddles the Milk River as it flows southeast out of Canada. The property consists of 2,992 acres of predominately native riparian and mixed-grass prairie habitats. The property is located within MFWP Region 6 and all of the property is within hunting district 600. The property is located 17 miles upstream of the Fresno Wildlife Management Area. Maps of the property are included in Appendix I of this document.

## **1.5 Current Land Use**

The Milk River Ranch is currently a family-owned property. The primary use of the property is livestock and agricultural production. The property to be acquired by MFWP is used by the owners primarily for livestock grazing; there is no crop production on this portion of the property. They currently run approximately 150-200 head of cattle primarily during the summer and fall. The current landowners do not live on the property, so there are no residences on the property. The only buildings currently on the property are an older barn, several smaller outbuildings, and a set of corrals. There are approximately 7.5 miles of existing fences on the property. There are no gas or large power lines crossing the property. There is an electrical line servicing the one barn on the property. The primary public access to the property is from the south along County Road 145N. The landowners allow limited free public recreation on the property.

## **1.6 Legal Description**

Township 37 North, Range 9 East, P.M.M., Hill County, Montana.

Section 1: S1/2N1/2, S1/2

Section 2: Government Lots 9, 10, 11, 12, S1/2N1/2, N1/2S1/2

Section 2: SE1/4SE1/4 (Ref Deed Book 97, Page 257, Doc. #391459)

Section 3: Government Lots 9, 10, SE1/4NW1/4, N1/2SE1/4

Township 37 North, Range 10 East, P.M.M., Hill County, Montana

Section 4: SW1/4SW1/4

Section 5: S1/2SE1/4, SE1/4SW1/4

Section 6: Government Lot 5, that part of Government Lots 6 and 7 lying North of Milk River, Government Lots 12, 13, 14 and 15, SE1/4NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, S1/2SE1/4, SE1/4SW1/4, and that part of the S1/2NE1/4 lying North of Milk River and that part of

N1/2SE1/4 lying North of Milk River. (Ref. Deed: Book 109 of Deeds, Page 473, Document No. 414020.)

Section 6: That portion of the S1/2NE1/4 and N1/2SE1/4 lying South of Milk River. (Ref. Deed: Book 117 Deeds, Page 283, Document No. 441040.)

Section 7: N1/2S1/2NE1/4NE1/4, N1/2S1/2NW1/4NE1/4, N1/2N1/2NE1/4, NE1/4NW1/4

Section 8: NE1/4NE1/4, N1/2SE1/4NE1/4, NE1/4NW1/4NE1/4, N1/2NW1/4NW1/4

Section 9: W1/2NW1/4, SE1/4NW1/4, N1/2NW1/4SW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, E1/2SE1/4SW1/4, SE1/4

Section 10: S1/2SE1/4

Section 14: W1/2

Section 15: SE1/4NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, E1/2

### **1.6 Application to Montana's Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy**

MFWP's conservation strategy identifies habitats and species that are in the greatest need of conservation in Montana. The Milk River Ranch is located in the Montana Glaciated Plains Terrestrial Focus Area (CFWCS, 2005). The majority of the property consists of native grasslands and riparian habitats, which are both Tier-I habitat types with high priority for conservation. There are numerous Tier-I species, species of concern, and potential species of concern that have either been documented on the property or are expected to occur on the property.

### **1.7 Authority**

The following laws and rules are applicable to the proposed action:

Montana 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 now and in the future. In addition, §87-1-209 MCA grants the department the authority to purchase land or water suitable for game, bird, fish, or fur-bearing animal restoration, propagation, or protection, for state parks, and for outdoor recreation.

The department also has the authority under state law §87-1-709 MCA to acquire by purchase such lands or other property or interests therein as may be necessary for the purpose of carrying on any wildlife restoration project created and established under the provisions of said Pittman-Robertson Act.

In 1987, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill 526, which earmarked hunting license revenues to secure wildlife habitat through lease, conservation easement, or fee title acquisition (§87-1-241 and §87-1-242, MCA). This is now referred to as the Habitat Montana program. As with other MFWP property acquisition proposals, the MFWP Commission and the State Land Board (for properties greater than 100 acres or \$100,000) must approve any land acquisition proposal by the agency. This Environmental Assessment (EA) is part of that decision making process.

## **2.0 Alternatives**

### **2.1 Alternative A – Proposed Action:**

The proposed action is for MFWP to purchase 2,992 acres of the Milk River Ranch to become the Milk River Wildlife Management Area. The property would be managed to conserve and enhance the existing native vegetation communities and wildlife populations. MFWP would acquire all mineral rights held by the owners including the gravel rights. MFWP is proposing to purchase and thus no need for reclamation of these properties or other habitat restoration. The vast majority of the acreage proposed for purchase by MFWP is native rangeland and these acres would not need any intensive habitat modification. The small portion of the rangeland that has been converted to non-native grass production could be reseeded to more wildlife friendly grass mixes if desired in the future. The possibility of continued grazing on the Milk River Ranch would be evaluated. If grazing is determined to be compatible with the wildlife values and goals of the ranch, a rest-rotation grazing system would be implemented. Additional costs to modify the fencing or water sources of the current grazing systems and conduct other habitat improvements on this property would primarily be funded through MFWP's Habitat Montana and Upland Game Bird Enhancement Programs. There may also be potential to secure funding from federal habitat improvement programs or from nongovernmental conservation organizations.

Possible Habitat Improvement Programs on this property are:

- 1) Implementation of a rest-rotation grazing system
- 2) Reseeding non-native fields
- 3) Smaller planting of trees or shrubs in coulee or riparian areas and potential shelterbelt plantings in non-native habitats.
- 4) Installation of wildlife-friendly fence designs.

## **2.2 No Action Alternative**

Under the no action alternative, the Department does not purchase this land. Due to the fact that the property is currently listed for sale with a land broker, it is likely the property would be sold to another buyer. If sold to another buyer, one scenario is that a percentage of the property would be placed into agricultural production. Due to the scenic nature and river access provided by the property, it is also possible it could be divided into smaller parcels or ranchettes for sale to multiple buyers. A third scenario would be the purchase of this property for its hunting and recreational value. All three scenarios could result in a loss of native wildlife habitat or a loss of recreational opportunity. It is possible that the land could be purchased and there would be no significant development of the property. The high cost of Milk River property may necessitate additional development of this property if sold to another buyer. This purchase of the Milk River Ranch is a cooperative project by MFWP and DNRC. Failure to complete the MFWP portion of this acquisition would likely affect completion of the DNRC portion of this project.

## **2.3 Alternatives Eliminated from further Evaluation**

The potential for purchase of a conservation easement on the property was eliminated from further evaluation. A conservation easement would protect the habitat and wildlife values of the property from development. However, the current landowner has not expressed interest in the sale of a conservation easement to MFWP. It is unknown if a future landowner purchasing the property would be interested in a conservation easement with MFWP.

## **3.0 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT**

### **3.1 Habitat**

The vast majority of this property (>95%) is unbroken native range. The productive soils in this region have historically resulted in high rates of conversion of native range for agricultural production. Very few properties in this region have such a high proportion of intact native vegetation. The wetland/riparian habitat and mixed-grass prairie habitat present are both Tier-I habitats of high wildlife and conservation value based on the Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation strategy (CFWCS). There are two primary drainages, the Milk River and Lost River that traverse the property. The riparian habitat along the Milk River consists largely of silver sagebrush grasslands and associated plains cottonwood bottoms. See Table 1 for a summary of land cover types on the property.

There are also stretches of riparian shrub habitats consisting largely of chokecherry, buffaloberry, Russian olive, and species of willow. The Milk River above Fresno Dam is a relatively naturally functioning river and provides a year-round water source for wildlife and livestock. The Lost River is also within the property's boundary and is an ephemeral river and often active flows end during late summer.

The riparian areas transition through more rugged badlands and cliff habitats into mixed-grass prairie habitat in the uplands. These grassland habitats are a mixture of cool and warm season grasses and generally appear to be in fair to good condition. The grasslands are dominated by fescue, western wheatgrass, slender wheatgrass, and green needlegrass with a variety of other grass, forbs, and shrub species.

A very small portion of the habitat (~100 acres) had been seeded to non-native grasses for hay production. These areas were seeded to a mixture of forbs and pubescent wheatgrass, but have been invaded by crested wheatgrass. These areas would provide some opportunity for habitat improvement or restoration.

Table 1. Land cover of MRWMA based on GAP analysis

Northwestern Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairie	1010
Western Great Plains Badland	627
Northwestern Great Plains Floodplain	445
Inter-Mountain Basins Greasewood Flat	401
Open Water	255
Introduced Upland Vegetation – Forbland	123
Northern Rocky Mountain Lower Montane, Foothill and Valley Grassland	32
Northwestern Great Plains Riparian	29
Western Great Plains Cliff and Outcrop	27
Northwestern Great Plains Shrubland	26
Western Great Plains Sand Prairie	12
Western Great Plains Wooded Draw and Ravine	4
Western Great Plains Closed Depression Wetland	2
Western Great Plains Open Freshwater Depression Wetland	2

The overall potential for wildfire on the property is relatively low. There are no coniferous forest habitat types. The plains cottonwood and silver sagebrush floodplain habitats are wetter areas that can actually serve as a potential fire break. The badlands habitats have sparse vegetation and provide very little fuel for wildfires. The upland grassland habitats are more xeric habitats and have more moderate potential for wildfires.

### 3.2 Wildlife

The variety of productive riparian and grassland areas provide habitat for a diverse number of game and nongame species of wildlife. There are mule deer, white-tailed deer, elk, antelope, pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian Partridge, mourning doves, and a variety of waterfowl species all present in huntable numbers on the ranch. The property is classified as crucial winter range for both mule deer and antelope. The riparian areas provide habitat for a variety of shorebirds, raptors, songbirds, amphibians, reptiles, bats, and other nongame species. The badlands and rocky cliff habitats provide cover for elk, deer, bobcats, and other game species. These breaks-type habitats also provide specialized roosting habitat for bats and nest sites for raptors. The upland

grassland sites provide forage for big games species, nesting cover for upland birds and grassland songbirds, and habitat for a variety of reptiles and amphibians. The one Threatened and Endangered candidate species, as classified by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, that may occur on the property is the Sprague’s pipit. It is unlikely any other Fish and Wildlife Service T&E species (including black-footed ferret and greater sage grouse) would occur on this property. A list of species of concern and potential species of concern that are either known to occur or predicted to occur on the property is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Species of Concern and Potential Species of Concern known to or predicted to occur on the Milk River Ranch.

<b>Common Name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>
Dwarf shrew	<i>Sorex nanus</i>
Merriam's Shrew	<i>Sores merriami</i>
Swift Fox	<i>Vulpes velox</i>
Baird's Sparrow	<i>Ammodramus bairdii</i>
Bobolink	<i>Dolichonyx oryzivorus</i>
Brewer's Sparrow	<i>Spizella breweri</i>
Burrowing Owl	<i>Athene cunicularia</i>
Chestnut-collared Longspur	<i>Calcarius ornatus</i>
Ferruginous Hawk	<i>Buteo regalis</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
Great Blue Heron	<i>Ardea herodias</i>
Loggerhead shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>
Long-billed curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>
McCown's Longspur	<i>Rhunchophanes mccownii</i>
Sharp-tailed grouse	<i>Tympanuchus phasianellus</i>
Sprague's Pipit	<i>Anthus spargueii</i>
Veery	<i>Catharus fuscescens</i>
Greater Short-horned Lizard	<i>Phrynosoma hernandesi</i>
Western Hognose snake	<i>Heterodon nasicus</i>
Great Plains Toad	<i>Anaxyrus cognatus</i>
Northern Leopard Frog	<i>Lithobates pipiens</i>
Plains Spadefoot Toad	<i>Spea bombifrons</i>

### 3.3 Fisheries and Water Resources

The Milk River would be the primary source for fishing opportunity on the property. Water testing conducted by the Milk River Watershed Council Canada upstream of the property classified the water quality in the stretch of the river as “good”. The primary game fish species found along this stretch of the Milk River based on data from the FWP’s MFISH database are burbot, sauger, walleye, yellow perch and northern pike. Nongame species known to occur include fathead chub, black bullhead, silvery minnow,

brassy minnow, lake chub, longnose sucker, mountain sucker, Iowa darter, spottail shiner, stonecat, brook stickleback, longnose dace, northern redbelly dace, and white sucker.

### **3.4 Current Recreational Opportunities**

The current owners of the property do allow restricted access for hunting, fishing, and floating of the Milk River. The level of use by the public is currently significantly below the potential level of recreation this property would provide if managed as a WMA. The WMA would be located in deer and elk hunting district 600. In 2010, there were estimated to be over 2,500 hunters in this hunting district who spent over 12,500 days hunting. The primary access to the ranch is along County Road 145N. The property is contiguous with over 4,200 acres of School Trust Land. These lands lie primarily on the eastern edge of the property. These state lands have traditionally provided walk-in hunting opportunities for the public. Access to the western end of the property, north of the Milk River, would be primarily by foot or horse unless an easement or access agreement could be reached with neighboring landowners or another existing road access route is identified. The Milk River is a shallower river. During drier periods of the year water flows often fall to levels where fishing and water based recreation would be very limited.

### **3.5 Buildings and Developments**

There has been very little development on the property. There are no permanent residences on the property. Currently the only buildings present on the property are a barn, several smaller outbuildings, and a set of corrals. These buildings would not be in suitable condition for public use and may be torn down and removed by the current landowner. These buildings are all located in a 1-acre area near the county road. There is also a gravel pit about an acre in size located on the southeastern portion of the property that is not currently in use. The U.S. Geological Service (USGS) has a water gauging station and weather station located on the property.

### **3.6 Cultural and Historic**

The cultural and historic resources on the property are largely not documented. The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) reports the presence of a burial site and rock cairn on the property. Reports from the landowner indicate that there may also be other cultural sites on the property including teepee rings and buffalo jumps, although these sites have not been formally verified. The landowner reports that at one point there was a fur trading post on the property, but no structures from this post remain. There are no historic buildings identified on the property. Paleontologists from the University of Notre Dame indicate that the property has significant fossil resources and value and other universities have expressed interest in the property's archaeological and paleontological rights

## 4.0 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

This environmental analysis examines the consequences of Alternative A (proposed action) and Alternative B (no action). Alternative C, the purchase of a conservation easement, was removed from further evaluation as this alternative was deemed to be infeasible.

### 4.1 Physical Environment

#### 4.1.1 Land Resources

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action land resources within the property would be protected and managed for fish and wildlife habitat values and recreational use. The majority of the property would be accessed through walk-in recreation. There are no plans for the creation of additional roads on the ranch. The increased public use expected on the property could result in greater use of existing county and section line roads and potential pioneering of new roads. MFWP should be able to minimize these activities through identification of open roads and signing of any unauthorized trails. The purchase of the property would prevent potential sod busting or other soil disturbing activities and would promote protection of soils and geologic features. The property owner would retain the rights to development of archaeological and paleontological resources. Extraction of these resources could have impacts to other land resources. There are conditions limiting development of these resources. Some of these limitations include: the owner cannot disturb greater than 5 acres at one time; the owner must submit a reclamation bond to ensure adequate reclamation of any disturbed sites, the owner must also submit an operating plan for department approval prior to any development, the owner is responsible for noxious weed control relating to these activities.

The Natural Resources and Conservation Service's Soil Survey database identifies the project area as the following under farmland classifications:

	# of acres	% of total
Not prime farmland	1322	43.6%
Farmland of statewide importance	1475	48.6%
Prime farmland if irrigated	116	3.8%
Prime farmland	118	3.9%

The landowner has expressed interest in transferring the archeological and paleontological rights to a university. This could lead to excavations of locations within the WMA. Potential excavation activities could remove some vegetation and disturb soils in a specific area.

No Action: Under this alternative the land may be sold to another buyer and there would be the potential for increased development of the property. If portions of the ranch are converted to agricultural production, this could result in increased erosion. If the land was sold and placed into agricultural production or subdivided there would be a need for additional road development. There would also likely be construction of additional

residences and outbuildings on the property which could have a negative impact on land resources.

#### **4.1.2 Air Resources**

Proposed Action: The county road that would provide the primary means of accessing the property is a gravel road. Increased public visitation to the ranch could result in increased production of dust. The impact of this dust to air quality would likely be negligible. Any impact could be mitigated if necessary by working with the county to apply dust-reducing agents to the road to minimize airborne dust. The residences most likely to be affected by dust are several miles from the property, but near the county road that would be the primary access route for the property.

No Action: If the property was sold or management practices were changed there would be the potential for increased conversion of native rangeland to agricultural production. Conversion of native prairie to agricultural production could result in increased release of dust and particulate matter into the air. Sale of the ranch could result in increased road development and dust production. This option would also allow for potential oil and gas development on the property. Oil and gas development can result in the release of volatile organic compounds and methane which could impact local air quality. This area is currently considered to have low potential for oil and gas development, so the impact of oil and gas development on air resources is unlikely at this time.

#### **4.1.3 Water Resources**

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action, water resources on this parcel would be maintained or enhanced. Riparian areas would be protected and potentially improved by the action. There are no proposed changes that would result in increased discharge, changes in drainage patterns, alteration of river or streams courses, or changes in the quality or quantity of groundwater. Existing water rights are primarily for stock use from the Milk River and Lost River. These water rights would transfer to MFWP upon closing. Modifications to grazing practices on the property would have the potential to improve riparian vegetation and water quality. Changes in the livestock grazing system may require the improvement or development of additional livestock water sources.

No Action: It is likely that there would be no immediate impacts to the water resources on this land. Potential increased agricultural conversion could lead to increases in sediment and nutrient loads in the Milk River and its tributaries.

#### **4.1.4 Vegetation Resources**

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action the vegetation on the property would be protected and may be enhanced. The native vegetation communities currently found on the ranch would be protected from agricultural conversion. A weed management plan is being developed for the ranch in accordance with MFWP's Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan and the Montana County Weed Control Act (7-22-2154, MCA). The

weed management plan would be developed through consultation with the Hill County Weed District. MFWP would also have the ability to evaluate the effects of current livestock grazing on the property and change these practices to improve vegetative diversity and condition.

Based on consultation with the County office the floodplain for this area has not been delineated. Therefore, no determination can be made regarding the acres of this property within a floodplain. The Milk River runs through the property, so a portion of the property could lie within a floodplain. There are currently no plans for construction of any structures on the property other than signs and fences.

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. Assess the use of livestock grazing as a management tool.
3. Evaluate vegetation enhancement options for non-native grass reclamation and the enhancement of existing riparian areas with shrubs or tree plantings or potential establishment of shelterbelts in areas with non-native vegetation communities..
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.
  - Annually monitor roads and trails that are open to vehicles for new weed establishment.
  - Develop a noxious weed management plan for the property and coordinate with Hill County Weed District to implement weed management controls.

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 Hill 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 closures to reduce the risk of human-caused fires if drought conditions and extreme fire danger warrant such measures.

The owner intends to deed the archaeological and paleontological rights to the property to Montana State University. There are conditions limiting development of these resources and the impacts to the vegetation resources. Some of these limitations include: the owner (of those resources) cannot disturb greater than 5 acres at one time; the owner must

submit a reclamation bond to ensure adequate reclamation of any disturbed sites, the owner must also submit an operating plan for department approval prior to any development, and the owner is responsible for noxious weed control relating to these activities.

No Action: If the property is sold and/or management practices on the ranch change it is possible that a portion of the ranch could be developed for agricultural production, energy development, or subdivision. All of these outcomes would result in a loss of native rangeland and a negative impact to vegetative resources.

#### **4.1.5 Fish/Wildlife Resources**

Proposed Action: This action would benefit a variety of wildlife species by conserving, enhancing and protecting wildlife habitats on this parcel. The predominantly native habitats on the property would be preserved. The connectivity between the property and native habitats and wildlife populations to the north would be maintained. In the long-term there would be potential for completion of habitat improvement projects in both riparian and upland habitats. These improvements could result in increased populations of both game and nongame fish and wildlife species. Protection of riparian habitats will also benefit water quality and fish populations found in the Milk River. Hunting, fishing, and other recreational opportunities, which have historically been allowed on the property, would continue to be provided. The designation of this property as a WMA would likely increase the overall recreational use of the property. The protection of Tier-I riparian and grassland habitats would decrease potential fragmentation and benefit many species of concern and the one T&E species likely to be found on the ranch.

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. Identify and conduct baseline wildlife and fisheries surveys
2. Identify and assess existing motorized access points for the WMA. Determine if access points require improvement or closure to meet the management objectives of the WMA.
3. Define off-road vehicle use or use of closed roads through education and signing and minimize disturbance of wildlife and potential dispersal onto neighboring properties.
4. Replace or modify existing fences with wildlife-friendly fence designs.
5. Evaluate existing barriers to fish movement and develop strategies to improve fish passage and habitat.
6. Promote trapping and hunting activities within the WMA per existing MFWP regulations
  - Trapping on the WMA would be allowed, but the trapping would be only with written permission from MFWP and the number of individuals trapping on the WMA would be limited. The primary trapping opportunities would be for coyote, bobcat, swift fox, beaver and muskrat.

No Action: Under this alternative the land could be sold and agricultural or subdivision development could occur. Depending on the extent of development, the loss of native habitats could result in a decline of many game and nongame wildlife species. Development would also further fragment the existing habitat and may further restrict connectivity with wildlife populations north of the border.

## **4.2 Human Environment**

### **4.2.1 Noise and Electrical effects**

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action there would be no significant negative impact to noise levels in the area. There would be increased use of the area by recreationists, but most of this use would be walk-in based recreation and would not impact noise levels. There would be no foreseeable development requiring increased electrical capacity. This action would not create adverse electrostatic or electromagnetic effects. There would be no interference with radio or television reception.

No Action: Noise and electrical impacts to the property are difficult to predict if another party purchases the ranch. If oil and gas or other mineral rights on the ranch were developed, there could be an increase in noise levels in the area. If the property were subdivided there would be a need for additional electrical development for additional residences. The overall electrical and noise impacts would be minor.

### **4.2.2 Land Use**

Proposed Action: Currently this property is primarily a family owned/operated livestock operation. The proposed action for the area would be for the property to be managed primarily for fish and wildlife habitat in perpetuity. Livestock use and impact on the vegetation would be evaluated and opportunities to continue or adjust livestock grazing explored. If livestock grazing on the property is continued, grazing practices (e.g. grazing system, stocking rates) may be modified. There may be a need to fence off riparian areas and develop additional water resources. The property would be open for public use. The increased public use of the property would result in increased traffic on roads accessing the property. Increased public use of the property could result in increased potential for trespassing on neighboring landowners. Signing of the property boundaries would help minimize this potential impact. Increased public use by hunters would aid in management of ungulate populations and decrease potential game damage problems in the area.

No Action: Changes in future landownership and land use could affect habitat quality and current wildlife numbers. There would likely be fewer public recreational opportunities. If public access on the property was restricted, the potential for game damage on surrounding properties would increase.

### **4.2.3 Risk/Health Hazards**

Proposed Action: No significant impact would occur under the proposed action. The seller has stipulated that to the best of their knowledge the property is free from the presence of hazardous waste or materials and no hazardous waste or materials have been generated, stored, released, or disposed of on or within the property. MFWP will conduct a hazardous materials survey prior to the property's acquisition. MFWP Game Wardens would enforce state hunting laws on the new WMA. An evaluation of existing roads and structures on the property would need to be completed to determine any potential safety risks associated with these structures.

No Action: It is unknown if any new risks or health hazards may occur if the property is purchased by another party.

### **4.2.4 Community Impacts**

Proposed Action: The proposed action would eliminate potential agricultural development, subdivision, or future oil and gas development on the property. The increased revenue potential of these activities would be lost or reduced. The increased recreational opportunity providing by creating this WMA would draw more sportsmen and visitors to the area. The creation of a private hunting preserve would be averted. Increased public access to recreation may provide additional outdoor recreation-based revenues for businesses in Hill County. This issue is also addressed in the Socio-Economic Assessment of this acquisition. The acquisition of this ranch would prevent the purchase of the ranch by surrounding landowners interested in expanding their current farm or ranch.

No Action: With this alternative, the land would be sold and could see increased agricultural or energy development or potential subdivision that would provide some monetary benefit to the local community. There would be a loss in recreational opportunities and a decrease in recreation based revenue for the community.

### **4.2.5 Public Services/Taxes/Utilities**

Proposed Action: There would be no changes or need for increased public services in the property area. There would be no impact to Hill County property tax revenue since 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."

No Action: Impacts to public services, taxes, and utilities would be dependent on the type of future development on the property. Subdivision of the property would likely require additional public services and utilities. Subdivision or energy development on the property could result in generation of additional tax revenue for the County.

#### 4.2.6 Aesthetics/Recreation

Proposed Action: The creation of a WMA on this land would result in a positive impact to both aesthetics and recreation in this portion of the Milk River. High quality public hunting and fishing opportunities would be created and maintained in perpetuity. The natural beauty of the Milk River frontage would also be enhanced and preserved. There are no plans for construction of any buildings or structures that would interfere with the scenic views and aesthetics of the property.

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. Create a Travel Management Plan for the new WMA
2. Define prohibited activities and used on the WMA. Some of these restrictions included are:
  - 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. Coordinate with MFWP staff to improve fishing access on the Milk River
4. Develop steps to minimize impacts to neighboring landowners, such as:
  - Install appropriate boundary and regulation signage.
  - Collaborate with the county road department to address issues with impacts access roads and to minimize the generation of dust within travel corridors.
  - Install garbage receptacles to help minimize littering.
  - 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.

No Action: It possible the public recreational opportunities could be significantly reduced if the property were sold to another party. Should energy or agricultural development occur, it would reduce the aesthetic and recreational quality of the area. Subdivision of the property would result in construction of more buildings which could impact the aesthetic value of the property.

#### **4.2.7 Cultural/Historic Resources**

Proposed Action: A cultural resources report for the property was conducted by the Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) to determine if any known cultural resources exist on this site. The report identified a cultural burial site and a rock cairn on the property.

The current landowner has indicated that although no formal inventory of the property has been done that the ranch has high cultural, historical, and paleontological value. The Milk River Ranch was identified by the Montana-Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council as having important cultural significance and supported its protection.

The protection of native habitats from agricultural development or subdivision will help protect the valuable cultural, historical, and paleontological resources on the property from disturbance. Increased recreational use by visitors may increase potential for unauthorized extraction of artifacts or fossils. MFWP could minimize this impact through signing at major access points and additional monitoring of the area.

Under the proposed action, the current owner would retain the rights to the archaeological and paleontological rights (but intends to deed them to Montana State University). Under the proposed purchase agreement, there are conditions limiting development of these resources. Some of these limitations include: the owner cannot disturb greater than 5 acres at one time; the owner must submit a reclamation bond to ensure adequate reclamation of any disturbed sites, the owner must also submit an operating plan for department approval prior to any development.

Any ground disturbing activities conducted by MFWP would require consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office and the owner regarding potential impacts to cultural or paleontological resources.

No Action: The impact to the cultural and historical resources on the property, if sold to another party, would be difficult to quantify. Agricultural conversion of native rangeland would likely have a negative impact on these resources. Subdivision of the property would lead to increased disturbance for the construction of buildings and roads and would have a potential negative impact on these resources.

#### **4.3 Cumulative Impacts**

Proposed Action: Under the proposed action the purchase of the property would result in the creation of a Wildlife Management Area. The native range on the property would be protected and connectivity along the Milk River corridor would be maintained in perpetuity. Wildlife and fisheries populations in the area would benefit from the protection of these habitats. Increased public recreational opportunities on the property would be protected in perpetuity. There are currently no plans for the construction of any buildings or other large structures on the property. There would be positive cumulative impacts if MFWP were to purchase the property and no foreseeable negative long-term or negative cumulative impacts of this action.

The proposed action of the 2,992 acres of the Milk River ranch would eliminate the future exploration and development of subsurface resource in perpetuity but would not limit such development on other nearby properties.

The purchase of the Milk River Ranch is a joint project between MFWP and DNRC. MFWP is primarily purchasing native Milk River riparian habitats and associated uplands. The DNRC purchase consists of native range and both irrigated and non-irrigated cropland. The DNRC manages trust lands to produce revenue for the trust while considering environmental factors and protecting the future income-generating capacity of the land. The combination of purchases by DNRC and MFWP would add an additional 4,500+ acres of land available for public recreation creating a block of almost 10,000 acres of public land when adjacent public lands are included. The two agencies would manage their individual properties, but may work cooperatively on issues such as grazing and recreation management.

No Action: Sale of the property to another party and potential development of this property for either agricultural production or subdivision could have a negative long-term impact to wildlife and fisheries species in the region. The loss of native habitats on the ranch may also impact migration corridors and connectivity between wildlife populations in the U.S and Canada. The level of this risk is unknown because the future impacts to resources and public access would be dependent on the actions of a future property owner(s). Failure of MFWP to acquire this property would likely prevent DNRC from acquiring the property they are considering purchasing.

## **5.0 EVALUATION OF NEED FOR AN EIS**

Based on the above assessment, which has not identified any significant impacts from the proposed action pursuant to ARM 12.2.431, an EIS is not required and an EA is the appropriate level of review. The overall impact from the successful completion of the proposed action would provide substantial long-term benefits to both the physical and human environment.

## **6.0 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

### **6.1 Public Involvement.**

Public notification of this 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>

- There will be an informational meeting and public hearing on this proposal in Havre from 7-9 pm at the Hill County Electric Hospitality Room on 10/30/2012.

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

## **6.2 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 9<sup>th</sup> and can be mailed to the address below

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks  
ATTN: Milk River Ranch Acquisition  
54078 Hwy 2 West  
Glasgow, MT 59230

Or comments can be emailed to

shemmer@mt.gov

## **6.3 Offices/Programs contacted or contributing to this document**

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks  
Lands Bureau, Helena  
Legal Bureau, Helena  
Wildlife and Fisheries Division, Helena  
Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation  
Montana Natural Heritage Program, Helena

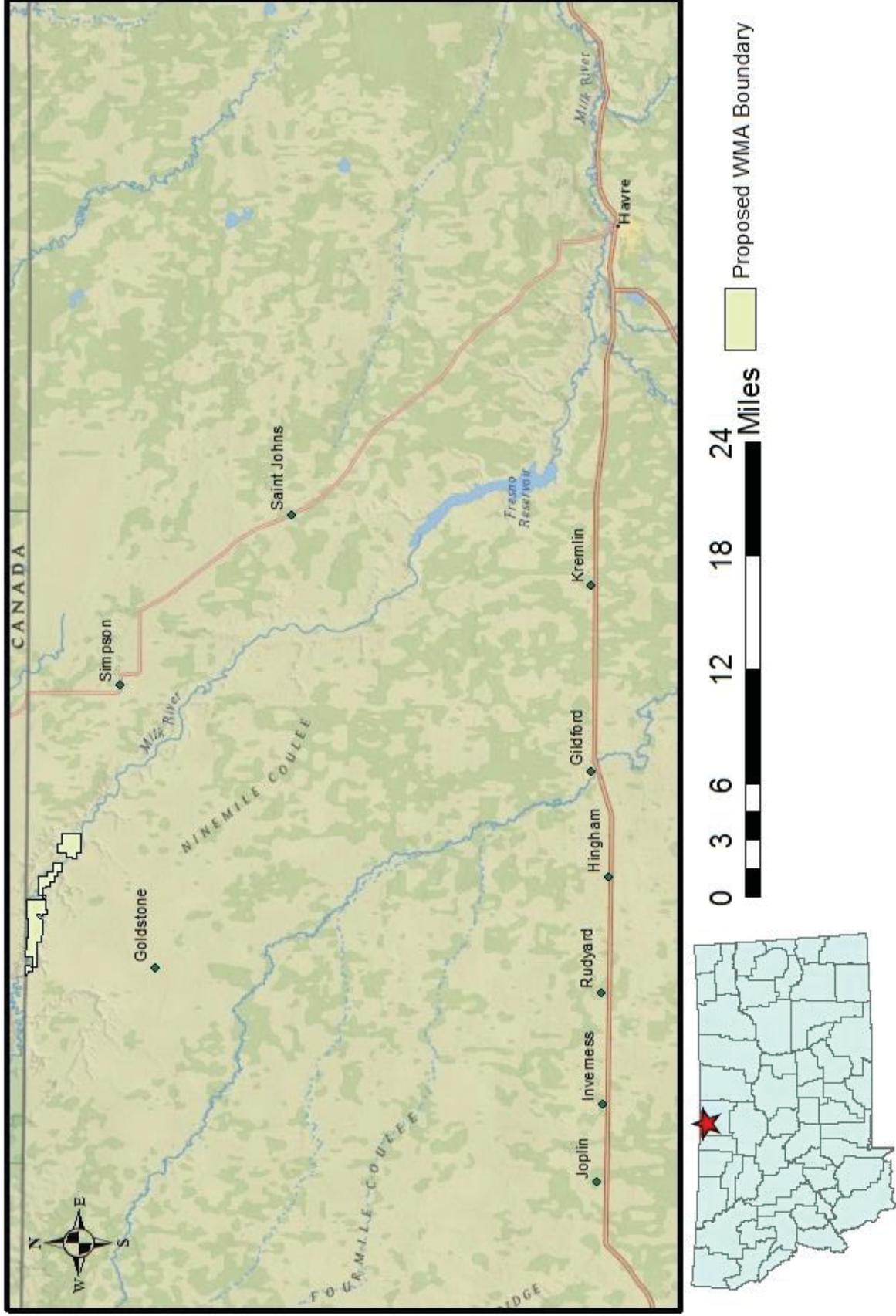
## **6.4 Person Responsible for Preparing the EA**

Scott Hemmer  
Havre Wildlife Biologist  
Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks  
2165 Hwy 2 East  
Havre, MT 59501  
406-265-6177

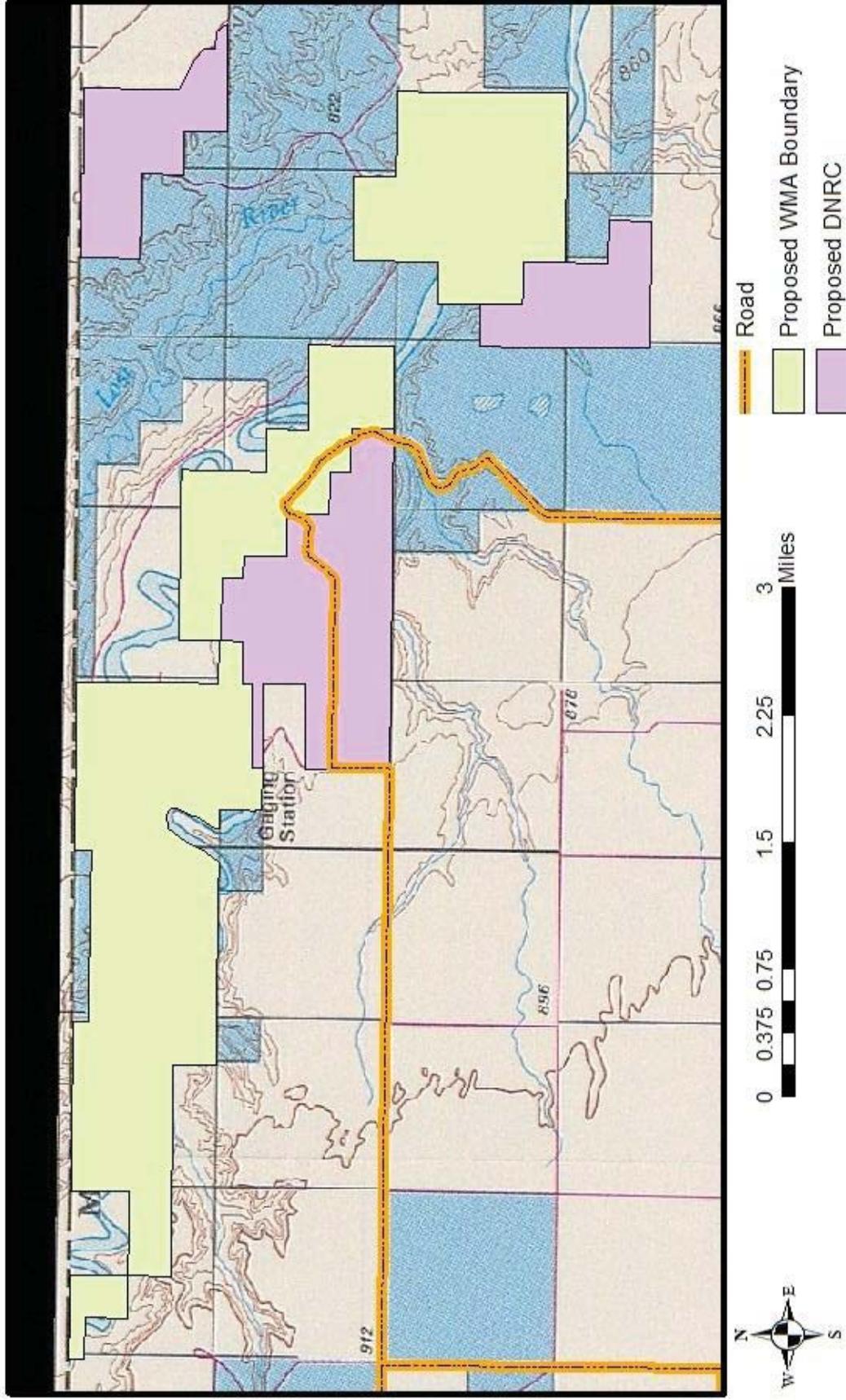
# **APPENDIX I**

## **PROPERTY MAPS**

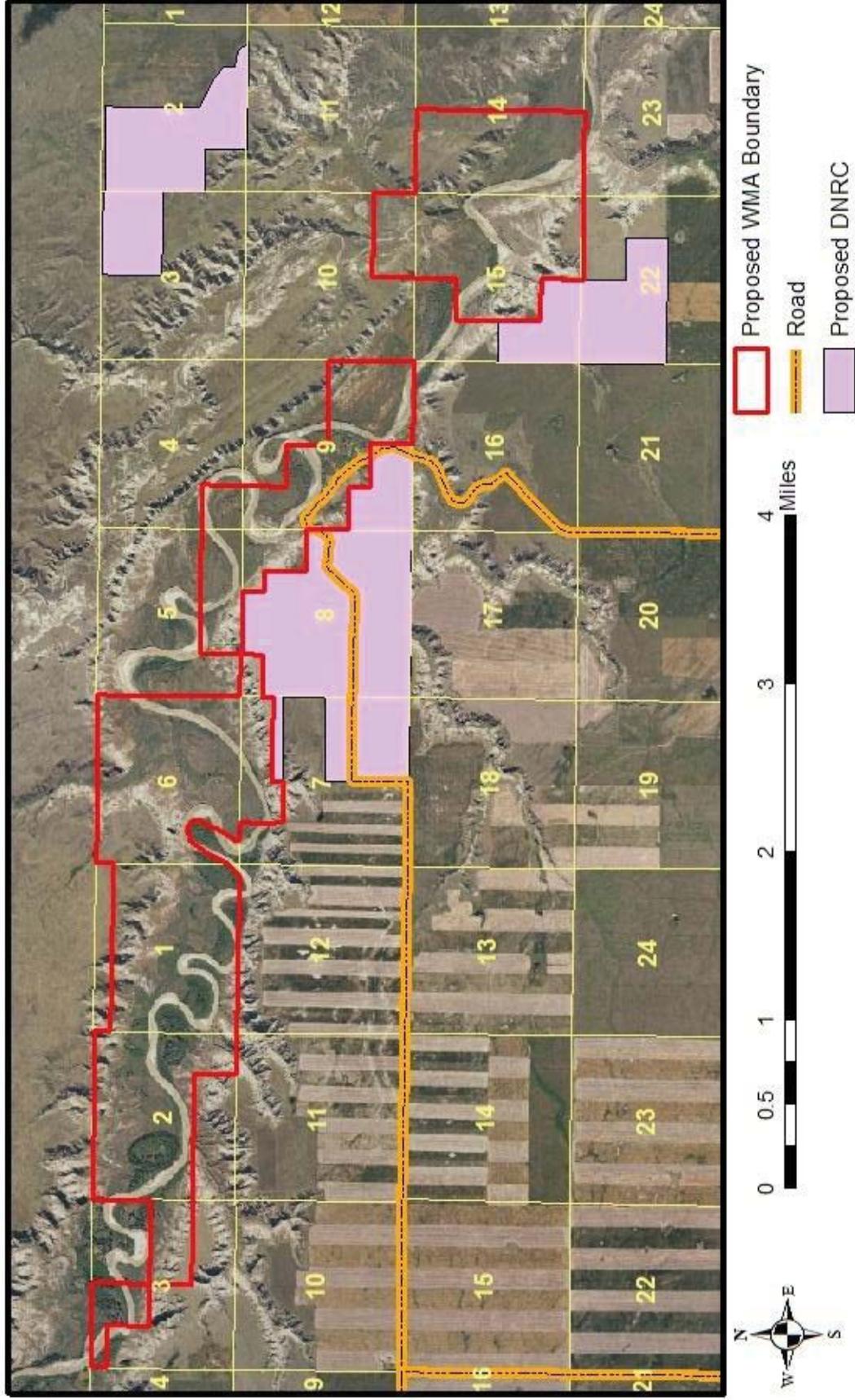
# Milk River Ranch Location



# Milk River Ranch Acquisition



# Proposed Milk River WMA Boundary



# Appendix II

## Milk River Wildlife Management Area Draft Management Plan

### INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (MFWP) proposes to purchase fee-title ownership of 2,992 acres of property along the Milk River to establish the Milk River Wildlife Management Area (MRWMA). The property would consist of 10 miles of riverfront property along the Milk River. The native property on the ranch would be protected and the land would be managed to enhance hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, and other recreational opportunities. This draft management plan is presented as a means of disclosing MFWP's management intent for the public to review.

### PROPERTY DESCRIPTION

The Milk River Ranch is located 42 miles northwest of Havre and 27 miles north of Gildford along the U.S.-Canadian border. The property is located on both sides of the Milk River. The legal description for the property is:

Township 37 North, Range 9 East, P.M.M., Hill County, Montana.

Section 1: S1/2N1/2, S1/2

Section 2: Government Lots 9, 10, 11, 12, S1/2N1/2, N1/2S1/2

Section 2: SE1/4SE1/4 (Ref Deed Book 97, Page 257, Doc. #391459)

Section 3: Government Lots 9, 10, SE1/4NW1/4, N1/2SE1/4

Township 37 North, Range 10 East, P.M.M., Hill County, Montana

Section 4: SW1/4SW1/4

Section 5: S1/2SE1/4, SE1/4SW1/4

Section 6: Government Lot 5, that part of Government Lots 6 and 7 lying North of Milk River, Government Lots 12, 13, 14 and 15, SE1/4NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, S1/2SE1/4, SE1/4SW1/4, and that part of the S1/2NE1/4 lying North of Milk River and that part of N1/2SE1/4 lying North of Milk River. (Ref. Deed: Book 109 of Deeds, Page 473, Document No. 414020.)

Section 6: That portion of the S1/2NE1/4 and N1/2SE1/4 lying South of Milk River. (Ref. Deed: Book 117 Deeds, Page 283, Document No. 441040.)

Section 7: N1/2S1/2NE1/4NE1/4, N1/2S1/2NW1/4NE1/4, N1/2N1/2NE1/4, NE1/4NW1/4

Section 8: NE1/4NE1/4, N1/2SE1/4NE1/4, NE1/4NW1/4NE1/4, N1/2NW1/4NW1/4

Section 9: W1/2NW1/4, SE1/4NW1/4, N1/2NW1/4SW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, E1/2SE1/4SW1/4, SE1/4

Section 10: S1/2SE1/4

Section 14: W1/2

Section 15: SE1/4NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, E1/2

## RESOURCE VALUES

### Vegetation

The MRWMA consists primarily of native vegetation. The majority of the native vegetation types are riparian habitats and mixed-grass prairie. The habitat along the Milk River floodplain consists primarily of shrub-grassland communities dominated by silver sagebrush. In addition, there are smaller patches of cottonwood galleries and riparian shrub habitats interspersed along the river corridor. The prairie grassland habitats consist of a variety of warm and cool season grasses including fescue, western wheatgrass, green needlegrass and other native grass and forb species. A small portion of the property (< 100 acres) had be previously broken and planted into non-native tame pasture grasses. A large percentage of the property consists of badlands and cliff habitats found along the border between the riparian and upland habitats. Table 1 provides a rough estimate of the acreages of each habitat type based on GAP land cover data.

Table 1. Land cover of MRWMA based on GAP analysis

Northwestern Great Plains Mixedgrass Prairie	1010
Western Great Plains Badland	627
Northwestern Great Plains Floodplain	445
Inter-Mountain Basins Greasewood Flat	401
Open Water	255
Introduced Upland Vegetation – Forbland	123
Northern Rocky Mountain Lower Montane, Foothill and Valley Grassland	32
Northwestern Great Plains Riparian	29
Western Great Plains Cliff and Outcrop	27
Northwestern Great Plains Shrubland	26
Western Great Plains Sand Prairie	12
Western Great Plains Wooded Draw and Ravine	4
Western Great Plains Closed Depression Wetland	2
Western Great Plains Open Freshwater Depression Wetland	2

## **Wildlife**

The wildlife resource value of the MRWMA is high and would provide substantial opportunities for hunting, wildlife viewing, trapping, and other wildlife-based recreational opportunities. Mule deer, elk, white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge, waterfowl, bobcats, mountain lions, and beaver are all found on the ranch in harvestable numbers. The variety of native habitats would also provide habitat for numerous nongame species of birds, small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. The proximity between this property and large tracts of protected native habitat in Canada including the Onefour Heritage Rangeland Natural Area, Kennedy Coulee Ecological Preserve, and the Milk River Natural Area, signify that this property may be important for wildlife migration and connectivity between meta-populations found on both sides of the border.

## **Fish**

The Milk River along the MRWMA and directly downstream is known to provide habitat and fishing opportunity for a variety of fish species. The primary game fish species found along this stretch of the Milk River are burbot, sauger, walleye, yellow perch and northern pike. Nongame species would include fathead chub, black bullhead, silvery minnow, lake chub, longnose sucker, spottail shiner, stonecat and white sucker.

## **Cultural, Historical and Paleontological Resources**

The current landowner has indicated the property contains substantial cultural, historical, and paleontological resources. Paleontologists from the University of Notre Dame have previously worked on the property and identified significant paleontological resources present. The ranch lies within the fossil rich Judith River Geologic Formation. The landowner reports that a fur trading post was one located along the Milk River on the ranch. The ranch also has been identified by the Montana-Wyoming Tribal Councils as having tepee rings, burial site, buffalo jumps and other culturally important sites.

## **Recreational Resources**

The abundant wildlife habitats and populations found on the property provide ample opportunities for a variety of outdoor based recreational activities including wildlife viewing, hunting, and fishing. The property would also provide a river access point and would expand opportunities for canoeing, floating, and fishing on the Milk River. This WMA would be 17 miles northwest of the Fresno WMA. The proximity of these two properties along the Milk River would increase overall recreational use of the area. A herd of 20-200 elk are intermittently present on the property and would provide good hunting opportunity. Mule deer, white-tailed deer, pronghorn, upland birds would all provide hunting opportunities on the ranch.

## **Improvement and Developments**

This property is relatively undeveloped. There are no permanent residences on the property. There is a barn and several smaller outbuildings on the ranch. There are approximately 7.5 miles of fencing on the property. A smaller (1-acre) gravel pit is located on the property. There is a USGS water gauging station and weather station located on the property.

## **Natural Resources**

The Milk River ranch would be managed primarily for the conservation and enhancement of fish, wildlife, and native plant communities found on the ranch. Tier I native riparian and grassland habitats will be a primary focus due to their high value in MFWP's Conservation Strategy.

## **AREA MANAGMENT**

### **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 and new weed invasions before species can become established. Provide food and habitat for wildlife species found on the ranch.

Management strategies

1. Baseline vegetation monitoring
  - Conduct vegetation monitoring to evaluate range condition, utilization, and trend.
  - Potential vegetation monitoring techniques: photo plots, browse utilization, cover/composition vegetation transects
2. Grazing Management
  - The property currently is grazed by approximately 150-200 head of yearling cattle. After purchase of the property is completed a range evaluation will be conducted to determine if grazing could be used as a tool to manage the vegetation resources of the ranch.
  - Rest-rotation grazing- If grazing is continued on the MRWMA, a rest-rotation grazing system would be implemented. Additional interior fencing and water development would be necessary for a rest-rotation grazing system to be successful.
  - Coordination with DNRC- Several of the pastures on the ranch are contiguous with DNRC property. Grazing of these pastures would require consultation with DNRC to determine agreeable stocking rates, fencing, timing, water development and other grazing lease stipulations. If grazing were discontinued on the MRWMA, there would be a need to install additional fencing to separate MFWP and DNRC pastures.

### 3. Vegetation enhancement

- Non-native grass reclamation- The majority of the ranch is native grassland, but approximately 100 acres of habitat had previously been converted to non-native grasses species. This acreage could be reseeded back to a native grass mixture or to a dense nesting cover seed mix that would be more beneficial to wildlife than the current species composition.
- Riparian Shrubs- There would be potential for planting individual shrubs or clusters of shrubs in riparian areas along the Milk River and associated coulees to improve these habitats for many wildlife species. There would also be the potential for planting shelterbelts in non-native habitat areas. Another practice that could be undertaken to improve riparian tree/shrub cover would be potential fencing of riparian shrub areas to prevent overbrowsing by livestock and/or wildlife.

### 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.
- Annually monitor roads and trails that are open to vehicles for new weed establishment.
- Coordinate with Hill 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 potential for establishing trend surveys on the ranch
  - Big game surveys
  - Lek counts
  - Pheasant crowing counts
  - Fish surveys
3. Sportsmen/Recreation Management
  - Identify existing motorized access routes
  - Minimize off-road vehicle use or use of closed roads through education and signing and minimize disturbance of wildlife and potential dispersal onto neighboring properties
4. Promote connectivity
  - Replace or modify existing fences with wildlife-friendly fence designs.
  - Evaluate and existing barriers to fish movement.
5. Trapping

- Trapping on the WMA would be allowed, but the trapping would be only with written permission from MFWP and the number of individuals trapping on the WMA would be limited.
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. Create a Travel Management Plan for the MRWMA
  - Designate roads open for motorized vehicle use.
  - The primary access point for the Ranch is from the south along County Road 145N. There may also be potential access available across state land to the east. Access to these state lands would be dependent upon determination of the legal status (e.g. county roads, section-line roads) of roads accessing these sections.
2. Restrictions
  - MFWP has developed general overall guidelines and restrictions for visitor use of WMA. 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 access on the WMA.
4. Minimize impacts to neighboring landowners
  - Sign primary access points and boundary fences to inform the public of the WMA property boundaries and decrease the potential for trespassing. Cooperate with Montana DNRC to mark the boundaries of contiguous state land boundaries
  - Cooperate with the county road department to address issues with impacts access roads and to minimize any dust problems
  - Provide garbage receptacles to help minimize littering.
  - Provide an MFWP presence on the property to discourage vandalism, littering, poaching, and other violations.

# **Appendix III**

MILK RIVER RANCH

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA  
ACQUISITION

## **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.

FWP proposes to use a Federal funding source referred to as Pittman Robinson funds (PR) which requires a 25% match from Habitat Montana therefore this acquisition still requires a socioeconomic assessment be completed.

This socioeconomic assessment addresses Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks’ proposed purchase of approximately 2,992 acres in Hill County, to be managed as a Wildlife Management Area.

## II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

### A. Property Description

Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes the fee title acquisition of a portion of the Milk River Ranch or 2,992 acres. The Milk River Ranch is located 42 miles northwest of Havre along the U.S.-Canadian border in Hill County, Montana. The purchase of the Milk River Ranch is a cooperative acquisition between MFWP and the Montana Department of Natural Resources (DNRC). The DNRC is proposing to purchase an additional 1513.5+ acres of the Milk River Ranch. The parcels proposed for purchase by the DNRC consist primarily of a mixture of agricultural and grazing land.

The proposed acquisition of 2,992 acres by FWP consists primarily of Milk River riparian habitat and associated uplands. The property includes 10 miles of riverfront habitat along the Milk River.

A detailed description of the property and relevant maps are included in the Environmental Assessment.

### B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

The property proposed for acquisition is comprised of over 95% intact native habitat. The native habitat consists primarily of Great Plains floodplain vegetation communities which are predominantly silver sagebrush grassland, cottonwood/shrub riparian habitat, greasewood flats and native mixed-grass prairie and badlands habitats.

A detailed description of the habitat and wildlife found on this property is included in the Environmental Assessment.

## C. Current Use

The Milk River Ranch is primarily a family owned livestock and small grain operation.

## III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

### **Land Management and Government Services:**

The proposed land acquisition of the 2,992 acres would be managed to conserve and enhance the existing native vegetation communities and wildlife populations. There is no crop land on the property that FWP is proposing to purchase and thus no need for reseeding of these properties or other habitat restoration. The vast majority of the acreage proposed for purchase by FWP is native rangeland and these acres would not need any intensive habitat modification. The small portion of the rangeland that has been converted to non-native grass production could be reseeded to more wildlife friendly grass mixes if desired in the future. The possibility of continued grazing on the Milk River Ranch would be evaluated. If grazing is determined to be compatible with the wildlife values and goals of the ranch, a rest-rotation grazing system would be implemented. Additional costs to modify the fencing or water sources of the current grazing systems and conduct other habitat improvements on this property would primarily be funded through FWP's Habitat Montana and Upland Game Bird Enhancement Programs. There may also be potential to secure funding from federal habitat improvement programs or from nongovernmental conservation organizations.

Possible Habitat Improvement Programs on this property are:

- 1) Implementation of a rest-rotation grazing system
- 2) Reseeding non-native fields
- 3) Planting of shrubs, trees, or shelterbelts
- 4) Noxious weed control
- 5) Installation of wildlife-friendly fence designs.

No change in local government services is anticipated for the property, and there will be no residences or permanent residents. FWP game wardens who patrol the area that include the Milk River Ranch WMA will continue to patrol the acquisitional land and will continue to cooperate with local law enforcement.

FWP is developing a weed management agreement with the Hill County Weed District, specifying respective roles in control efforts for noxious weeds on FWP lands in the county. The agreement will address the responsibilities for treatment of noxious weeds along roads and paths to reduce the spread of weeds off-site and to stop new infestations before they spread. Weed infestations in the interior of the WMA will also be treated by joint efforts from the County Weed District and FWP, depending on the severity of infestation, weed district time and personnel constraints, and accessibility for equipment. The acquisitional lands to be acquired for the WMA will be subject to this agreement.

### **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 2,992 acres will make this currently private land available for public recreation, thus increasing opportunities for hunting, wildlife viewing, and (depending on management direction) river floating/camping. 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.

In sum, FWP 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 proposed acquisition will require no additional public services, except some additional weed control efforts consistent with the existing agreement.

**Property Taxes:**

The sale of the fee title land and subsequent title transfer to FWP will not change the tax revenue that Hill 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 2,992 acres that MFWP proposes to acquire are approximately \$5,510 annually, and FWP will continue to make these payments based on the assessment provided by Hill County.

#### IV. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks’ fee title acquisition of approximately 2,992 acres will provide long term protection of wildlife habitat, maintain the rural open space integrity of the area, and provide additional opportunities for public recreation.

Overall, the acquisition will not have any “significant potential social and economic impacts.” Rather, FWP ownership of the property is expected to have a minimally positive impact on local economic activity through improved public hunting 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 revenues on this property.

**Appendix A. Comments on the Milk River WMA EA that were received during the public comment period**

Commenter #	Comment
1	<p>The Montana Wool Growers Association (MWGA) represents the interests of Montana’s sheep industry. On behalf of its membership, MWGA hereby submits the following comments on Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposal to purchase a ranch located along the Milk River. At this point in time, MWGA recommends that the no action alternative be adopted as the EA, as written, leaves too many questions unanswered. 1. This proposal requires an EIS, not an EA. Given the significant amount of land proposed to be purchased and its proximity to the Milk River, MWGA has concerns that an EA is not sufficient to properly analyze the true impact of this proposal. It is clear from the Draft EA that this proposal will have significant ramifications for property owners living in and around the proposed purchase location, and will have a significant and permanent impact on both the human and natural environment in the Milk River area. The EA seeks to minimize the impacts this purchase will have economically and socially on Hill County and its residents by making a summary statement in the findings and conclusions that the acquisition will not have any significant potential social and economic impacts. This statement flies in the face of findings found within the EA that surrounding landowners could be negatively impacted by the increased presence of wildlife and recreationalists on their land, as well as by the increased burden of traffic flowing to and from the proposed WMA. MWGA encourages FWP to conduct a full blown EIS on this proposal prior to making a final decision on the proposed purchase. 2. The EA is seriously deficient in analyzing the long-term costs to FWP should it purchase this ground. The EA is seriously lacking in detailing the source of the funding for this purchase, the amount of the purchase, and the long-term costs associated with maintaining this property if purchased. The EA identifies the legal authority for making the purchase; but the EA only speculates as to where the source of future funding may be found. For example, the EA speculates that funding could be secured from federal habitat improvement programs or from nongovernmental conservations organizations. Like many of its sister Montana associations that have been impacted by FWP s land purchase policies, MWGA has concerns about the ability of FWP to properly maintain property it presently owns and manages. MWGA has raised concerns previously about the inability of FWP to properly maintain WBA s and other properties currently under its control. MWGA s membership has strong concerns about the continuing drive by FWP to purchase more and more land without having a plan in place to ensure that its current maintenance and upkeep needs are being met. Given the lack of specification in the EA as to how the Milk River Ranch purchase will be financed, the Milk River Ranch title purchase appears to be another example of FWP s propensity to buy property now without thinking through the financial consequences. Clearly, more analysis is needed on the source of funding for this project. A detailed analysis of how FWP plans to pay for the long-term maintenance of this property, if purchased, is critical and must be done before the Montana Land Board takes action. 3. The no action analysis of this EA is skewed. The values of the author of this document clearly show through. The author obviously values aesthetics, which the author describes as preserving scenic views, and recreation above any other value. This is evidenced by the statement on page 17 of the document wherein the author states that if the No Action option were chosen, the land could be purchased by a private party resulting in parade of horrors, such as energy and agricultural development. MWGA has concerns about the overreliance of this EA on the alleged, and unsupported, negative impacts that could result from the sale of this property to a buyer who is not a government agency. FWP is tasked with promoting hunting and fishing opportunities, and tasked with conducting proper game management. FWP is not in the business of preserving the aesthetic value of land, nor in the business of discouraging economic development of lands within Montana. Yet, the analysis contained through the document related to the No Action alternative makes clear that the author of this EA considers economic development and private landownership to be negative actions. This is a position that is not supportable either as unbiased analysis or as an FWP policy given the directive that FWP work with private parties and others to promote private property protection. See, MCA 75-1-106. The purpose of an</p>

	<p>environmental assessment is not to cheerlead for or against a project. Rather, it is designed to analyze the impacts of a proposed government action. MWGA has real concerns that the No Action analysis is not neutral and is, in fact, skewed so as to favor the land purchase option. Comments in the EA such as if the property were to fall into private hands the terrible activities of sod busting and oil and gas development could occur evidence a bias on the part of the Department that warrants sending this EA back to the drawing board for a complete rewrite. 4. There is no discussion of whether FWP has coordinated with Hill County officials on this proposed land buy. FWP should coordinate with local governments on actions that seriously impact the use and government ownership of land within a Montana county. The draft EA analyzes some of the tax, road, and public service impacts this land purchase may have. However, beyond a few self-supporting statements that the land purchase proposal will have no impact on county services, the EA lacks any real analysis on or discussion of Hill County's position on the impacts of this land purchase proposal. Again, a full blown EIS should be conducted on this land purchase proposal. Such an analysis should be done in consultation with and coordination with Hill County officials. 5. The impacts of increased hunting on private landowners and residents should be better analyzed. Any increased hunting opportunities in the Milk River area resulting from this land purchase could result in significant harm to private landowners and residents. The EA recognizes this, but only discusses this in passing. More analysis is needed on the harm that could accrue to surrounding landowners as a result of putting this land into government hands. 6. There are agriculture producers who are interested in purchasing this property to expand their agriculture operations. FWP is improperly becoming a land purchase competitor, whose unlimited resources make it impossible for private agriculture producers to compete. As indicated, in the EA, the land sought to be purchased here has been used for agriculture purposes. MWGA is aware of agriculture producers who are interested in purchasing this land to add to and to expand their existing agriculture operations. MWGA has become increasingly troubled by FWP's entrance into the land purchasing business as such participation by FWP in purchasing land is skewing the market upwards for prime agriculture property in Montana. The reality is that individual agriculture operations cannot compete financially when FWP or any other State agency becomes a bidder on agriculture land that comes up for sale. It is MWGA's position that Montana's wildlife benefit and prosper when land is owned by private, agriculture producers as they do when land is owned by a state agency such as FWP. In this vain, the present EA is lacking because it fails to consider the positive impact agriculture production has on wildlife health and habitat in Montana. More analysis should be conducted on the true impact to wildlife and to land conservation should this property be purchased by a private ranch operation. In addition, a more definitive statement should be made on whether grazing will continue on this property if purchased by FWP. State lands are to be managed for multiple use. This EA fails to delineate specifically how FWP will implement true multiple use policies should the Milk River Ranch Fee Title Proposal be consummated and, consequently, the EA is not adequate at this point in time. On behalf of MWGA's membership, we appreciate the opportunity to submit these comments. Again, MWGA believes that the EA as drafted contains multiple analytical problems. Should this proposal move forward, it is MWGA's position at this time that the No Action alternative be adopted. If you or any member of your agency involved in this decision have questions for or want to express concerns to MWGA or if you need clarification of the comments made herein, please do not hesitate to contact the association.</p>
2	<p>I don't believe that MT FW&amp;P needs to own any land! I believe they have no business owning land. All of MT FW&amp;P goals can be accomplished by working with private landowners making a living off of the land, paying tax payer dollars to help get this country out of debt. We don't need another government agency owning land &amp; driving farmers &amp; ranchers into more debt--feeding less people in this country.</p>
3	<p>I have no problem with the Aageson's trying to sell their farm ground, but lets get real. Why does FWP need this ground for such a price. All you hear on the news is how far in debt our government is, but yet we can throw money away like this. It is my understanding, that there is only one access to this property &amp; that if purchased by FWP the county may not maintain that road (which they hardly do now). If that is the case, hunting will not be an option. &amp; when it comes to fishing, that is a real joke. Also, there is talk about the possibility of buffalo being placed there. That will not only limit hunting, but create problems for the farmers in</p>

	<p>the area that have the animals roaming onto their lands &amp; doing damage. This whole thing seems rather fishy &amp; to me sounds like politics are involved. I feel the public has a right to know what is actually going on &amp; not be left in the dark until the last minute to get the deal slid through before anyone is aware of it.</p>
4	<p>Please reconsider the purchase of this ground for the following reasons: 1. The appraised value is four times more than it is worth. Because of river bed, rough breaks, old river channels, and barren cut banks, alot of the acres are not even fit for grazing, let alone anything else. 2. Even tho it was stated otherwise, eventually the funds used to purchase this ground comes from our tax dollars whether from hunting fees,ammuntions or firearms. 3. You have taken private land that owners were paying taxes on and turned it into public land and then stated that the county would still get its' due tax. Guess what The rest of us taxpayers get to pay taxes for the "public land". This situation looks like a "payoff" to your friends instead of using common sense. The public meeting held October 13 was not a viable public hearing. The two FWP person answered questions with information they had, but numerous times I heard "we don't have that information" or simply "I don't know". They were being as honest as they could. To have a viable public hearing FWP needs to have personnel on site that can answer legitimate questions. Why adjacent landowners were not approached about joining their property with this proposal FWP could probable get a better cost/benefit result with increasing acreage with no increase in expenditure. Who did the appraisal can we get a copy All legitimate questions unanswered.</p>
5	<p>I am against the purchase of the Milk River Ranch by FWP. I beleive taking private land and making public land erodes the local economys. It removes one more oppportunity for a young farmer or rancher to own land which then in turn provides, jobs and money for the local businesses. FWP needs to focus on wildlife management on the land it owns and on private lands and not be in compitition with the the private citizens for real estate. The EA states that potential developemtn for agricultural production could have a negative long term impact to wildlife but agriculture does not neccasarily negativly impact wildlife and can actually provide good habitate. Taking this land from the private sector and making it public land will have long term negative affect on the local economy. Tourism and recreation should not have priority above food or energy production. Again I stress that the land should not be purchased by the FWP or any other govenmental agency.</p>
6	<p>Why doesn't FWP maintain all the land they already have &amp; quit worrying about buying more Land that they have already purchased still have noxious weeds that have never been dealt with. Besides that, you can never get ahold of an agent when you want &amp; if they are asked to take care of a carcass hit by a vehicle in the country, good luck.</p>
7	<p>I oppose this land transaction of buying the Milk River Ranch. This whole process was undertaken without enough input from the public at the beginning. There are many inconsistencies with the Milk River Ranch Purchase. Some of the issues that need to be addressed are letting the current owners stay on and operate after the purchase. The briefing mentioned the fisheries prospects of this land deal. This is not a blue ribbon trout stream or anything close and this should not be considered in the equation at all. FWP should not be purchasing any more land. They have trouble maintaining the land they have now and one only has to look at some of the WMA's they have to see that they do not maintain the weeds on these lands. As a water resource, there is only so much water in the Milk River and with the international uses there is not much that will be done to manage any more water in the Milk River. Access to this area is poor at best and unless the FWP plans to invest a lot to make it better the access issue won't get any better. If the current property owners were so concerned they could have sold a conservation easement and continued to operate the ranch. This option would have been much cheaper for the DNRC and FWP. Any other entity would be required to complete an EIS but for this they are only talking about an EA. Once again I oppose this proposed land purchase and think that it should be postponed for an indefinite period until all concerns can be addressed more fully.</p>
8	<p>I feel the FWP is paying inflated prices for land and therby increasing the value of land making it impossible for those like my family to expand and be able to include our children in our operation. This in turn will take nearly a whole generation out of agriculture. It would be far better to pay landowners a fair price for allowing public</p>

	hunting and let those in agriculture manage the land as they have done so well for many years.
9	First & foremost, FWP are suppose to manage fish, wildlife and parks. Why do they keep buying land at outrages prices As a hunter, I am sure this will increase our hunting permits to help pay the land & the only ones that will be able to hunt are the rich. What good is the land than The last good farm ground sold in northern Hill Co. was around \$500-\$650 an acre. FWP is purchasing the worse ground there is up here for \$775 an acre on farm ground, \$1,800 an acre on irrigated ground that hasn't been irrigated for over 5 years & range ground that is worth about \$100 an acre. Who in the world did the appraisal on this If the local people want to buy ground, there is no way they can afford it at those prices & still keep farming.
10	I've lived just 6 miles south of these properties in question for 61 years. I'm a lifetime farmer-gun buyer and a taxpayer. It just sickens me to see the blatant disregard for the way this proposal has been presented to "WE THE PEOPLE" also known as gun and ammo buyers, hunting and fishing license purchasers, and of course taxpayers. the bottom line is we pay for your every move, and now it's our turn to speak up for what's right and this is one of them. How can the powers of Government Agencies that preach fiscal responsibilities even think of spending 6 to 7 million dollars on land that should be valued at 2/3 of that . Is htis because ewe have "Money in the bank" A much used quote from our Governor! Don't get me wrong, I'm glad the Governor has been good at saying "no" and using his infamous "VETO" branding iron! But is he going out of office like Bill Clinton We have a great need for health care, education, infrastructure and numerous other programs in this Great State that would benefit the general public and not just a privileged few. The FWP has more responsibly then they can handle, adequately fund, manage and they continually want more. Makes no sense for us as the payers to keep paying for your PET project that will only benefit a few. WE all know this has bee done in the past like with the Charlie Lincoln Ranch on the Marias and others in the state. The Land Board Chairman and his "YEs Master" directors need to start thinking about WHO pays for all this and will continue to pay forever. We all know the GOOD OL BOY comradary has been going on for years and now it payback time, call in the chips! John Q Public gets it from both ends! This whole deal Stinks from the get go! IF the Chairman of the Board has any credibility left, that Branding Iron should be heated up red hot at least one more time. In your FWP Commission Agenda Item Cover Sheet dated May 10, 2012- the Background paragraph is so full of BS and smoke it's not even funny what acre out north doesn't support all the attributes listed. I have all these except the "breaks" and the "more than 10 miles of warm water fishing opportunities" At least in my area there's more fish than in the muddy Milk River and you won't starve to death trying to live off what you can catch. I could go on but I'm not sure the top Brass has the ears and the mind set to do what's right and in the best interest of the tax paying public!!!!
11	Truly feel that the land is way over-priced & will not provide hunting access to the normal sportsman. FWP keeps asking for higher & higher licensing fees & now you want to buy this land at an exorbitant price with little or no benefit to the average MT sportsman.
12	FWP: I have spoken with Scott Hemmer in Havre and with neighbors of Aageson's trying to get more information about the Milk River WMA proposal. I support the formation of the WMA as long as it does not affect county or state services to other private individuals. For example, if the county has to build and/or maintain roads for access to the WMA to the detriment of regular road maintenance, then I am against the proposal. The same goes for weed management, more funding for improvements for campgrounds, trails, restrooms, garbage dumpsters, etc. I realize my hunting license dollars will go to buy this property and then pay the property taxes and management of the WMA. I just do not want my license dollars going to this or any other WMA if my dollars could be used to better fund other areas of MTFWP - for instance increasing the budgets for game wardens and biologists to better do their jobs. I support formation of the Milk River WMA with the above listed concerns noted. FWP: I just sent a comment regarding the proposed Milk River WMA and want to make an additional comment. I just figured out the price per acre, and it is totally unacceptable!!! Scott Hemmer told me the appraised value for 2992 acres is \$4,708,500, and that comes out to \$1573.70 per acre!!! That is about twice what the land is worth. It is river bottoms, steep coulees, and is to be used for

	<p>recreation. Good farmland doesn't go for this much! Scott also told me the DNRC part of the land was appraised at \$1,411,953. I added up the land on the map and came up with approximately 1440 acres. The appraised value of this land is only about \$980 per acre. Why the huge difference The land should be valued more equitably, with the DNRC land probably valued higher since some of it can be farmed. Is it possible to get another appraisal by a different appraisal company If you will pay that much for land, I'll sell you mine.</p>
13	<p>I am writing to submit my concerns regarding the Milk River Ranch purchase. As a neighboring land owner, I have a number of specific concerns I wish to share. My first concern, I do not believe that the FWP is in a position to be buying ANY property, much less a piece of property which I believe will be logistically difficult to manage. This lack of management will directly impact those of us who neighbor the parcels. It will require extensive man power by FWP because of lack of access, and remoteness. We will have numerous issues of trespass around the subject property. Secondly, the price which has been established for purchase on the land is completely out of reason. The comparative sales have completely different recreational aspects than that of the Milk River Ranch. Having lived on that river my entire life, the elk hunting is completely by luck, or by locals which spend enormous amounts of time there and are fortunate enough to catch them on the US side of the boarder. Regarding it being a fishery, this is unrealistic. No one is going to fish the upper Milk for warm water fish. This is NOT the Madison, which was used as a comparative in the appraisal. How you can establish recreational value of \$1900/acre , which of the comparative sales, would be in the top 80%, with limited Elk and NO fishing, I find to be suspect. I cannot emphasize enough how I find this to be a mis-use of taxpayer dollars. My understanding of the land banking process would lead me to think that the FWP and the DNRC would be better stewards of tax-payer money to go and buy much greater amounts of land with the land bank dollars, than to be spending this obscene amount of money on these few acres, if they are truly looking to make a wildlife management area. I understand that this comment is directed to DNRC, but because of the proposed division of the ranch and how it will impact both agencies, I will proceed. The return on investment component for the DNRC is unobtainable because of the way the land is broken up. With all of the water given to the FWP, the DNRC will have huge expenditures in both fencing and water development to achieve their revenue on their grazing land. The proposed rotational grazing plan cannot be achieved with the existing fencing on the property. To achieve this grazing rotation, the state will have substantial expense in fencing. This has not been addressed at all in the proposal. The same goes for the irrigation component. It is my understanding that the water rights are not, in fact, in place. Putting an irrigated revenue projection, therefore, is inappropriate. I find it funny that irrigated land is worth \$1800/acre, but river bottom is worth \$1900/acre. Where else in the state would that be the case Lastly, but maybe most importantly, in reference to the appraisal; Why in the world would the MT tax-payers ever pay \$200 for a CRP lease that they already own. Or \$120/acre on a grazing lease which they already own. This is nothing more than irresponsible government. All this, with a reservation of archaeological and paleontological rights remaining to the existing owner And the appraisal is still one of the most expensive. This simply does not make sense. I don't think this in the best interest of either agency to have 5 acres mine sites anywhere when we are trying to do preservation. Where is the up-side for the citizens of MT in this deal.</p>
14	<p>I attended the meeting in Havre on October 30,2012. I and several others attending the meeting feel there nees to be a new appraisal of the land. We believe you are paying twice as much as you need to.</p>
15	<p>I live on the county road that accesses the property. My concerns are 1. I am against State government buying private land for public use. 2. I do not see a great advantage in having the State or MT FWP involved in owning land. 3. Appraisal price for the property is out of line with the value of property in this area. Why would the state of RWP be willing to pay above the local market value for any land. it doesn't just affect the land that is being purchased, it affects all of the surrounding landowners. 4. I am also concerned that if this WMA is approve , how will that affects the traffic and people that will be seen in the area/using the road that passes by our property during the hunting season. I am concerned about the potentia lfor crimae or trespassingon private property. 5. I am concerned about an increase in nonlocal hunters in the area. 6. I would ask that the commission/land Board vote against this project.</p>

16	<p>The State and particularly FWP has too much land already. FWP can't take care of what they have now. They refuse to manage elk in Hill County "Don't have the resources" 2. This parcel is way overpriced. Who did this appraisal 3. The public meeting Oct 30th 2012 at hill County Electric was totally inadequate. The FWP officer could not or would not answer the majority of the questions. He didn't answer questions pertaining to land appraisal, dates for future public meetings and comment before the Land Board. Future plans for bison establishment. We just don't need any more state purchases removing land from out tax rolls. I vehemently object to the State of Montana purchasing more land. Specifically the Milk River Ranch. This land is located approximately 10 miles north of our farm. I am familiar with the ranch and can tell you for sure that its value is not 6 million. It is about one third of that figure. It is pretty obvious that this is a top down deal. Payback for political support. Cronyism at its best or should we say worst. These are my tax dollars being extravagantly spent by an administration that wants to create a legacy of land purchases. This deal does not pass the smell test. I know that the Ageson brother may have financial problems, but this purchase is not in anyone's best interest. STOP this foolishness. I know the Governor likes to tout his 300 Million "in the bank" but don't squander it on such an expensive purchase with so little benefits. To the governor I would say "Get out your VETO Iron and put an end to this "Bat-crap crazy"</p>
17	<p>If the land is acquired it needs to have perfect fences. I fell you are going to be taking agricultural opportunities away from young ranchers and farmers. You need to put roads in if you are going to get it. Get the land surveyed. You're going to make the neighbors mad. You can't speak about a lot of things. You keep answering I don't know. Milk River-get the information together. there are national parks for wildlife. You are taking agricultural opportunities away from young farmers and ranchers. You are trying to do the same as the American Prairie Reserve. And the World Wildlife Fund. Both places can be grazed. Get roads. No on is going to walk the whole thing. It's like a federal land grab. Know what your talking about. I'm never going to get to be big in agriculture because of you. The wildlife are going to Canada and not coming back until hunting is over.</p>
18	<p>I farm and own land east of the Milk river ranch right along the Milk river. I also would like to sell my land for that price if the Fish and Game and the state has that kind of money. I have a buffalo jump, Indian Rings, CRP farm ground. I did not realize there was an option of selling land like this. I do not think its fair to bail out someone that's used the system their whole life and I wonder if there's an influence from our Governor or someone else to spend the state's money. I do not want higher taxes for my land and please contact me if you want to buy more land that's just as good or better than you're buying now. Thank You</p>
19	<p>I am a landowner (farmer/rancher) in the area-approximately 10 miles south of proposed purchase. I am opposed to State of Montana purchasing large acreages of private land converting ownership to public. Montana has enough public land. Specifically FWP has enough property under their ownership and management. Over-paying for property to put it in public ownership is not what state agencies need to be doing. Public boards (Commissions) acting on behalf of the citizens of this state have a fiduciary duty to expend public dollars carefully and prudently. The proposed cost of this project balanced with the limited benefits makes this a very expensive purchase. Not a prudent expenditure of public money. Note cost per acre of \$1570 is very, very expensive for property in this remote location. A second independent appraisal needs to be done before this is purchase is considered. EA assumptions are flawed. The potential conversion of this property to agricultural production resulting in loss of habitat is very low! Any conversion of suitable acreage would have already been done by the present owners. This leaves the unfamiliar reader with the wrong impression. Subdivisions are mentioned as a possibility; again this possibility is also very low. The remote location and nature of this property does not lend itself to any subdivisions. This is also not stated as being a very, very low potential. Fishermen looking for a reasonable chance for success are not going to choose this property as a destination. There are much, much better locations for that activity. Fishing activity is going to be nil. Habitat improvement. This land has changed little in the last 100 years under private ownership. Habitat has been doing just fine under private ownership. FWP is not going to appreciably increase the quality of habitat over what is there now. The topography and meandering river make fencing a</p>

	<p>very expensive proposition, difficult to build and maintain. Thus any rotation grazing system as stated in the EA is not a viable alternative. Shelterbelts as mentioned as possible improvement are not native habitat. Contrary to the goal to preserve native habitat as stated earlier in the EA. These are also expensive to establish and maintain. Does FWP have monies in their budget for these proposals? The above concerns do not lend this proposed purchase in its present form to be a good investment for the citizens of Montana. Commission members need to visit this site in person before make a decision to proceed. They need to know first hand what they are purchasing.</p>
20	<p>Concerned that with that big of a chunk of FWP and state land that buffalo would be introduced on the property.</p>
21	<p>I don't understand why FWP wants more land control. FWP acquisition takes land out of production that it could have if privately owned.</p>
22	<p>I believe this proposal is a bad idea for the State of Montana. 1..It is very overvalued on the appraisal, for acreage on the Milk River--other rivers in the state have a lot more value 2. Land with questionable water rights--has no value for irrigation and possibly grazing. 3. Boundaries need to be surveyed out and determined so people know where they can be hunting on state land and not private land. Existing fence lines are not on exact section lines. 4. Doesn't the FWP and DNRC have to show a return on investment to the State of Montana or operate in the black the same as any farmer or rancher in order to stay in business 5. If you were going to buy acreage--how could anyone agree to let the previous owners keep anything back for archeological and paleontological diggings or gravel royalties especially at this price. 6. Accessibility is very limited with private ownership to the west-Canada to the north. Lay of the river to the east. There isn't much area left to access the acreage. 7. A lot of money would be needed to put in fences so you could receive any income from grazing!!! 8. I have enclosed an article on hunting south of Malta--and this could be what this area would be looking at if this goes through. (Letter to the editor regarding closed land/block management due to bison/APF)</p>
23	<p>This notification was mailed on October 23rd and come to me 2 days before the meeting and I opened it the morning of the meeting. The letter was mailed to the wrong zip code so I got it later than late. It's like all of the most recent transactions like moving bison in the middle of the night against a judge's decision. It just doesn't feel right. Basically, I don't like what is happening, but you might as well buy my land because I won't be able to afford the taxes. Either you have me land locked or I have you land-locked. My land will give you a west-end access. You say it's a hunting preserve, yet they're trying to put bison on CMR now and I don't want any of my cattle anywhere close to bison. I specifically want to know when the hearing will be held with enough advance notice to be a participant. PS I'll throw in the wolves for free.</p>
24	<p>How can the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks and DNRC justify paying an inflated price for land that should not be take out of private ownership MFWP and DNRC are paying way more than what 320 acres of farm land that was sold recently west of Rudyard. I also would like to know who was the appraiser for the land and why was it appraised so high. Was it done by someone locally or from out of the state. Just what is the MFWP future plans for this property Will it be a place to run buffalo. I think the public needs to know more details about this. I am against the MFWP and DNRC buying land.</p>
25	<p>Do you often wonder why the U.S. has such a huge debt Is FWP job to manage wildlife or to acquire more land Is DNRC job to manage state lands they already have or acquire more 1/2 sec of good farmland just west of Rudyard sold for less Who did the appraisal I am not in favor of FWP or DNRC buying more land.</p>
26	<p>I am opposed to this land grab by the FWP and The NRC. We have the Indians buying up land to the south of us, federal gov. buying up land an restricting land use. Now we have you! The FWP and Dept of State lands trying to buy up land. You people don't have the money to take care of what you have. If you have all this money, why don't you invest it in the land you already own. Take this money and fix the culvert that has washed out, fix an old bridge. Co-finance with the USFS and BLM to fix a road or bridge for better access to the land you already have. I was on the Hill County Weed district for 12 years. You will have noxious weed</p>

	<p>problems on these properties. Yes you are going to do a plan. I have confronted you people in years past about your noxious weed problems in that you do nothing or very very little, and respond by saying that you have no money. People I can assure you that 12.6 million dollars can go a long way towards cleaning up some of you noxious weed problems. If the department of state lands busy some of this they will close it to the public just before hunting season. They already have done this practice around the state. You say the has a prestine elk habitat, you are probably right. However, several years ago you people said it wasn't and that you wanted the heard to go away because you didn't want to manage another herd and that these elk probably had wasting disease. You people "lie" depending on what you want. I think the only herd that you want to buy/own is just that that touches yours. What you are trying to do with my tax dollars is wrong.</p>
27	<p>I'm against the Fish and wildlife buying Aageson's Milk River Ranch or any other land. The farmers and ranchers are already doing more for wildlife than the fish and wildlife could do, their feeding them. The money you want to pay for this property is out of line, it could be put to better use in the State of Montana.</p>
28	<p>As a friend, associate, and concerned citizen I have questions regarding the acquisition of the aageson property. After discussing the issue with David I am concerned that the management of the property will not be to his satisfaction. He and his family in my opinion are very caring people and are considering this option not for financial reasons but simply for the benefit of the public. The public will have no interest in this property if FWP fails to manage the wildlife in a manner that is most beneficial for the public and the animals. It is quite obvious to me that hunting pressure and over harvest are the biggest concerns. In section 4.2.2 it state "increased public use by hunters would aid in management of the ungulate populations and decrease potential game damage problems." I would be as well as I think the aagesons would find a lot of comfort in a more specific management plan for the deer and elk. Another line of concern in the Draft Management Plan was the statement of "no removal of natural resources." I think this is a very vague, possible loop hole for FWP to eliminate the public resources of this property. It's obvious that my concerns focus on the wildlife resources abound on the property. My concerns, even as a sportsman that utilizes these resources are not entirely those of the public or the wildlife. I feel that the most important aspect of this entire project is the proper management of these animals so that that the public not only has access to a very rare opportunity, but also that the quality of the opportunity does not deteriorate.</p>
29	<p>Greetings. I am an author and journalist (former Outdoors columnist for the New York Times) who has visited the Milk River ranch numerous times. From the first day I set foot on that ground that once was sacred to natives, I was seduced by it's extraordinary if untypical beauty. I have been fascinated for over a decade by the landscape, wildlife and geology of the Milk River Ranch, and I heartily endorse any plan that would protect this critical habitat from debasement or development. To my eyes, it is a "legacy" property that can provide enormous pleasure and inspiration to anyone who visits it, as well as critically important habitat to wildlife and flora. Please do all that you can to preserve and protect it! Thank you for this opportunity to comment,</p>
30	<p>I have read carefully the Milk River WMA Proposal and the Draft Management Proposal. It appears that Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks has done a good job seeking informational assistance from other knowledgeable parties regarding the resources and attributes of the proposed WMA and adjacent lands, including the co-extensive habitat and fish and wildlife corridor connectivity with Canada. As a Montanan (born and raised in Havre, now residing in Helena), I can think of few places in the state that boast such a rich and voluminous array of precious resources -- including biological, archaeological, paleontological, cultural, historical, and recreational assets --- all occurring within a relatively small patch of the State's landscape. Most other areas with such an aggregation of treasures become National Parks. Portions of this highly concentrated trove are well described in the WMA proposal. However, based upon my personal acquaintance with this neighborhood (dating back to the 1960's when Professor Lou Hagener of Northern Montana College was exploring this little-known region) the WMA proposal of today understates the number and kind of high-public-value resources concentrated in the project area. Without going into extensive elaboration in this letter of</p>

	<p>support, suffice it to say that even a casual walkabout of the property would reveal not just a few archeological features and artifacts, but thousands; not just some obvious surface litter of fossils poking out of the ground, but museums-full of fossil material deposited in layer-cake tiers over the course of many eras of geological time. These layers of material are of great interest to science because they are undisturbed by cataclysmic geophysical events, and are therefore intact storybooks for paleontological study. The layers of this sedimentary cake are visible in the sidewalls of canyons and coulees cut by the knife of the Milk River. The bones of bison (at pishkuns), the graves of Indians, and the occasional buttons and bottles of bootleggers are evidence of past human use far more extensive than any of the scant written accounts reveal. In some ways, to even cite the existence of these many relics of man and nature is to risk their disturbance, desecration or theft. Although the management of habitat and public recreation are the dominant public values deserving WMA status, MT FWP, in this case, should be ongoingly mindful of the need to steward all of the values within this unique area. To the extent that these other values get little or no mention in either the WMA proposal or the Draft Management plan, both documents fall short of the scope surely required of our public agencies. Because the capital sources to be tapped for the project (Pittman-Robertson and Habitat Montana) emphasize wildlife habitat and public recreation, there will be an understandable bias to manage for those values. Yet it is critical that Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks integrate the Parks component of its mission in the long-term management of this particular WMA. This issue takes on greater significance in light of the fact that the collaborative public partner, DNRC, has no real interest or experience in managing its holdings for values other than revenue generation for the School Trust. Please think broadly and beyond the narrower zone of huntin,' fish'n and public access in which MT FWP traditionally dwells. And please discount the knee jerk criticisms of the WMA proposal coming from naysayers who object on grounds that it is too expensive, or that it shouldn't be done because it adds more public domain at a time when government should be shrinking. There have been too many good projects scrapped in the face of vocal minority bellicosity. We often find out that objections about cost are red herrings that prove petty in hindsight. In the interim, rare opportunities are lost, sometimes forever. In the case of the Milk River WMA proposal, the sum of its parts exceeds the appraised value by an order of magnitude. To pass up this excellent opportunity would be a tragedy whereas the protection of this area would be of incalculable value to future generation.</p>
31	<p>On behalf of World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and our 4089 members in Montana and 1.3 million members in the United States, I would like to express our support for Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks proposal to acquire the Milk River Ranch. World Wildlife Funds (WWF) Northern Great Plains (NGP) Program is actively engaged in prairie conservation in Montana and throughout the NGP. WWF's 2020 goal in the NGP is to achieve recovery of endangered and keystone species and natural processes, none of which can occur without intact grasslands such as those on the Milk River Ranch, which you propose to acquire and preserve. In 2004, WWF and partners in the Northern Plains Conservation Network (NPCN) conducted an assessment identifying areas of highest conservation value throughout the five states (MT, ND, SD, WY and NE) and two provinces (AB and SK) that make up the grasslands of the NGP. Eleven priority areas were identified, one being the Sage Creek/Southwest Pastures Complex, which the Milk River Ranch directly abuts. You can refer to the NPCN interactive web map to view the priority areas in Montana and throughout the NGP <a href="http://www.npcn.net/npcnWebmap/index.html">http://www.npcn.net/npcnWebmap/index.html</a>. As you have identified in the Environmental Assessment this area holds significant value for numerous game and non-game species. For example, WWF co-sponsored a pronghorn telemetry study in Alberta Canada that tracked the movements of 64 pronghorn between 2003 and 2007. Some of which migrated hundreds of miles from fawning to wintering sites. The study demonstrated that the transboundary area where the Milk River Ranch is located served as critical winter range for some migratory pronghorn. As you are well aware intact grasslands are at increasing risk of being plowed up; therefore, the preservation of those remaining high value grasslands should remain a top priority for MT FWP. Furthermore, protecting long stretches of intact riparian habitat adjacent to rivers of conservation importance, such as the Milk River, hold disproportionate value in the Great Plains because of the high biodiversity that these sites support. We thank you for this opportunity to provide WWF's perspective on the importance of</p>

	<p>this acquisition for prairie conservation efforts in the State of Montana. If you would like to discuss our submission please contact me at your convenience.</p>
32	<p>To whom it may concern; I have visited and walked much of the property proposed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks for purchase for a Wildlife Management Area on approximately 2,992 acres of property on the Milk River corridor. This is a most extraordinary corridor area of riparian and upland native ecosystems that have been kept largely intact by the landowners. To the north it is bordered by the US Canadian line, with pristine native prairie lands as far as the eye can see. Big game, including a rare and indigenous prairie elk herd, upland and waterfowl birds, non-game species as well as native fish and other small land and aquatic creatures enjoy this landscape. Some of the most striking features of this area are the cultural and Paleontological treasures it possesses. The area is replete with Native American Indian artifacts including sacred burial and ceremonial grounds, large and small tepee rings and "pishkuns" where buffalo were harvested by being driven over cliffs. This area was used for over 10,000 years by various native tribes, and preservation of its cultural resources has been endorsed by resolution of the Montana-Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council. Oral historians of the Salish Tribe can still determine the identity of some individuals buried at certain sites centuries ago. Dinosaur bones and other fossilized remains are extensive in the area, as it lies in the Judith River Formation, one of the world's largest sources of dinosaur remains and of our knowledge about them. This area is close to the city of Havre, and offers exciting recreational opportunities for hunters, anglers, hikers, naturalists, history and fossil hounds. The proposed agreement with the landowners is advantageous to the state and public, and my personal thanks go out to them for their understanding of these irreplaceable values of these lands, and of their stewardship of them. Loss of this unique area to development would be the height of imprudence. This is a once in history acquisition opportunity for America, Montana, and Native American Tribal ancestry.</p>
33	<p>I am writing in warm support of the purchase of the Milk River Ranch by Montana Fish, Wildlife &amp; Parks. My work as a wildlife, fishing and hunting photographer takes me all over the world, and I can honestly say that the Ranch exists as one of the world's special places. It is a terrific opportunity to be able to place this land into protection and conscientious development for public use. It's rawness and remoteness touched me and I would be thrilled to see it protected and appreciated as it truly deserves.</p>
34	<p>The Boone and Crockett Club applauds and supports the Ageson family's decision to sell the 2,992-acre portion of their Milk River Ranch to the state of Montana for multi-use management by MTFWP and the MDNRC. In its 125-year history the Club has done everything in its power to support the public access to wildlife and outdoor recreational activities, as well as the wise and shared use of natural resources. Securing critical wildlife migrating corridors and winter range while still managing these habitats for multiple use purposes accomplishes these objectives.</p>
35	<p>To whom it may concern: I support the FWP acquisition of the Ageson/Milk River tract for purposes of habitat protection and recreational opportunities for the people of Montana. I have had the opportunity to hunt this property with my son and this is a wonderful opportunity for the people of Montana that should not be passed up. If we act now, future generations of Montanans will be able to enjoy this incredible area for a multitude of recreational opportunities. Thank you for your consideration of this proposal.</p>
36	<p>Please accept this email as a letter of support for the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Park's proposal to purchase a tract of land from the Ageson ranch north of Gilford. As a lifelong outdoorsman I've had many opportunities hunt on property managed by the FWP and found those experiences to be exemplary. Accusation of private land by the FWP to provide hunting, fishing, and other outdoor activities to Montanans' s is becoming more and more important as access to private land is becoming more and more difficult to find. When I started hunting 50 years ago, access to private land wasn't much of an issue, but as the years have passed, much of that land has been leased out to outfitters and closed to the general public. I've also had the opportunity to</p>

	<p>hunt on the Aageson Ranch. This ranch, with its broken terrain, river bottoms, grasslands, and grain fields, holds some of the best deer and game bird hunting opportunities in North Central Montana. I'm in total support of this purchase for myself, my children, and all my fellow sportsman. Thanks.</p>
37	<p>After consulting with our directors of Public Lands/Water Access Assoc. We are in favor of the purchasing approximately 3000 acres of private property for public access. Please complete this transaction</p>
38	<p>I am writing to express my ardent support for the Montana FWP proposal to purchase 2,992 acres of native range habitat on the Milk River Ranch. After reviewing the Environmental Assessment of the proposed purchase, and having personal knowledge and experience with a significant portion of the riparian land in the proposed purchase area, I am confident that the responsible transfer of this land into state custody and protection would be beneficial to Montana, its native wildlife and habitat, its general public, and posterity. Through circumstances not reaching much beyond mere chance, I have been fortunate enough to cultivate an acquaintance and indeed a friendship with the Aageson family, the owners of the Milk River Ranch. This friendship has on several occasions afforded me the opportunity and privilege to explore some of the specific acreage now found at issue in this proposal. This opportunity allowed me to witness for myself the uniquely untouched native habitat and the flourishing wildlife found on the ranch, an opportunity that is, at present, unavailable to the general public. While the exclusivity of being able to hunt, hike, and ride in that undisturbed landscape in a private capacity is part of what made the time I spent there special, even more vital to the experience were the virtues of the land itself. I would not and cannot argue that any resident of Montana should be isolated from experiencing for themselves the same pleasures that I have derived from my time on that stretch of the Milk River corridor and that the Aageson family has enjoyed for several generations. When the prospect of sharing this land with the public is coupled with the state's primary goals of conservation and enhancement, it seems clear that the sale of this property to any party other than FWP carries with it the potential for detrimental side effects that cannot be ignored. As stated in the environmental assessment, the sale of the Milk River property to a private party introduces a high probability of the land being subdivided and/or converted away from its native state. This could deprive current wildlife on the ranch from continued access to uncorrupted native habitat as well as its present ability to migrate unimpeded throughout the undivided acreage of the property. Not only would wildlife suffer from subdivision, conversion, or development of the land, but also, in the event of sale to a private owner, the general public would also likely be deprived access to and enjoyment of a distinctly pristine piece of American landscape. Furthermore, to not study and preserve the rich paleontological deposits and historical sites on the property would truly be a great cultural loss for posterity. The initiatives and prohibitions suggested by FWP in the Environmental Assessment of this proposal demonstrate intent and a plan of action to preserve the integrity of the property and protect it from abuse by the public. FWP's responsible management of this land will result in the preservation, sensible use, and enjoyment of a richly unique sliver of Montana heritage that otherwise stands to be damaged or lost.</p>
39	<p>I support making the Milk River Ranch a WMA. I am familiar with the area for once a year I conduct a "Birds of Prey" Survey for the MtFWP Dept. south of the proposed border. I am interested in all birds so I note the birds I am seeing while slowly driving along the county road that borders just south of the proposed WMA. I have also visited the Milk River from the Aageson's ranch and have been impressed with the riparian corridor. Riparian corridors are so very important to nesting birds in Montana for the majority of Montana birds use this habitat. It is also important to note that the grasslands are critical for numerous birds. Grasshopper Sparrows, Savannah Sparrows, Baird's Sparrows, Sprague's Pipits, are among the passerine birds that will be effected by less grasslands. I note that more of the Conservation Reserve Program's grasslands are converting to cultivated small grain fields To have an area that will be kept in grasslands will be most welcome. I also would like to note that upland game birds and birds of prey will benefit from grasslands as well.</p>
40	<p>As President of the Public Land and Water Access Association. I wish to express our organization's support for your proposed Milk River Ranch project. As more and more Montana citizens reside in an urban setting it is</p>

	necessary to provide opportunities for them to experience wild land and other types of environments as a means of escape from crowds and pressure.
41	Good Luck and Congratulations on selecting this vital part of Hill County and Montana for the proposed acquisition. I as an active Real Estate Broker since 1977 have had the opportunity to access hundreds of rural properties throughout Montana, North Dakota, and Wyoming. This ranch is and always has stood out in my view as a "rare jewel" in many aspects, as the environmental assessment points out. I analyzed Hill County and notice a county with an estimated 1.9 million acres and the only "Public Interests" other than State lands are small acreages known as Creedman Coulee, Lake Thibadeau, Wild Horse Lake, and Bureau of reclamation (the Fresno Perimeter). I have been marketing this property and have had private interests and each time I present it my conscious tells me this needs to be preserved for future generations. This is a rare Milk River "sleeper". The archeological, cultural, paleontological and historical assets of this ranch are not to be found anywhere in this combination. In summary, I am in full support of the successful acquisition of this fragile Milk River Corridor. Respectfully submitted.
42	My husband and I support this proposal. This management area will allow public access to a great hunting ground. Many people will enjoy its benefits instead of only a very few who have historically had access. The beauty of the prairie will be preserved for future generations.
43	As a Lutheran pastor, I served seven years in Montana—two years at the Lutheran mission on the Rocky Boy’s Indian Reservation, and five years in a fifty-mile square of the Central Hi-Line. From both settings, I came to value greatly the interconnected depth and breadth of the human heritage, natural history, and daily beauty of this part of God’s Good Creation that are present still as a part of Montana. The skies, landscapes, and ever present birdlife and wildlife enabled me to understand the words of “where the deer and the antelope play” that I had learned in grade school years. The vision of a portion of the Milk River being set aside for research, preservation, and maintenance of a segment of this part of where the Great Plains begin to blend into the Great Mountains, has been a purposeful dream of some people for a long time. When I heard a few years ago of the idea and the reasons for it, I thought, “How appropriate!” for this unique natural area and for Montana pride. Having natural space for deer, elk, and antelope—and the accompanying bird and bug life!--as well as for their natural foods and for their natural predators, is important for them to carry on as species in ways they may be understood and appreciated in their natural habitat. For us as humans, we need to be able to see something of the way things once were...and maybe should and could be again. You can’t get this stuff in an urban zoo! May I extend to the Division for Fish, Wildlife and Parks <u>my personal and professional support</u> for the establishing of <u>The Milk River Project</u> ? Please feel free to add my encouragement to that of others in whatever ways may be helpful to secure the purchase of the land and further the development of this project.
44	I am writing to support the State's acquisition of the Milk River property owned by Verges and David Aageson, as a state park for education/research/cultural preservation. I am a Montana resident of 35 years and Director of the University of Notre Dame's Environmental Research Center (UNDERC) which operates several education/research programs, one in Montana. I have been involved in preserving this piece of property along the Milk River since 2001, and developing environmental education/research programs employing this property in partnership with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of Montana (CSKT). Since 2002, we have attempted to involve the University of Montana and Montana State University in this project without success, and UNDERC has invested more than \$2 million in operating this education/research program in Montana over the past 7 years. This program has been praised and endorsed by the tribal leaders of all the tribes in Montana and Wyoming, and Governor Schweitzer has been apprised by us on a number of occasions of this program and the Milk River property's potential. The Milk River property is truly unique, representing a treasure trove of dinosaur fossils, Native American cultural sites and prairie environs. Having guided a number of Governor Schweitzer's surrogates, tribal leaders and conservationists on the property over the past decade, all come away with the impression that this is what Montana looked like as the home of the many Native American tribes that crisscrossed the property and as Lewis and Clark saw it as the first Euro-Americans in the region. From a prairie elk herd, to swift foxes to high bird, insect, and plant diversity, the property preserves

	<p>our prairie natural heritage; the only element missing is bison, which Native American leaders want to reintroduce. The Aageson family deserves praise for their exceptional stewardship of this land. UNDERC, along with our CSKT partner, hope to employ this property in our continued education and research programs that further understanding of Native American cultures and the environment. Together we have worked to preserve this property and are poised to take advantage of its great education/research/cultural potential. Over the past seven years we have already involved more than 50 undergraduate students in our Montana education program (26 Native Americans-many from Montana tribes, 3 Hispanics and 1 Pacific Islander). Four faculty or Ph.D. students have conducted research as part of this project. We value the property's education/research/cultural potential, have already invested time and money into this potential and desire to continue to do so if it is preserved by the State. If you have any further questions please feel free to contact me.</p>
45	<p>Hellgate Hunters and Anglers is a Missoula-based rod and gun club with over 400 members that works to conserve Montana's wildlife, wild places, and fair-chase hunting and fishing heritage. Our organization strives to promote opportunities to experience wildlife, wild places, hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities. The Milk River, along the Canadian border, supports a range of pristine ecosystems that are largely unchanged from the time of Lewis and Clark. To ensure that these lands can be managed most effectively for fish, wildlife, the numerous historical sites and potentially undiscovered treasures in the area, we enthusiastically support the purchase of the Milk River Ranch by Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife &amp; Parks'. The Milk River Ranch is a nexus of remarkable biological, historical, cultural and spiritual resources. Very few places host the multiplicity and abundance of compelling features that are concentrated along the Milk River corridor. Through this purchase, publicly owned river frontage from the Canadian border to Fresno Dam would grow to roughly 38 linear miles, with approximately 7 of those miles from the Milk River Ranch. This area is home to native fish, one of the few remaining indigenous prairie elk herds, as well as a floodplain forest abundant with native birds and mammals, many of which are threatened or sensitive. Not only does the Milk River Ranch provide 4,504 acres of priceless fish and wildlife habitat, but it holds one of the greatest concentrations of Native American cultural sites in the US. Some of these sites date back 10,000 years, and include sacred burials, ceremonial grounds, tepee rings and pishkuns. The area continues to hold vast cultural value to all the Tribes of the area. In addition, the Milk River Ranch is part of the Judith River Geologic Formation, a dinosaur fossil-rich formation responsible for many important discoveries and advances in paleontological knowledge. We feel that the purchase of the Milk River Ranch represents a good investment for the department because the purchase will ensure the proper preservation and management of this important area for future generations of Montanans. Not only will wildlife, miles of fragile riparian areas, and important historical sites be protected through this purchase, but the acquisition of the Milk River Ranch will give hunters and anglers the opportunity to get out and enjoy this magnificent area. Thanks for the opportunity to comment.</p>
46	<p>I have been fortunate enough to be able to hunt this property for the last several years and it has been amazing. I have been able to harvest several deer, a cow elk, an antelope, several coyotes and many upland birds. This property is very diverse in both land types and species. It would be a shame for this proposal not to go through. They don't make any more land, so every opportunity that comes along for FWP to acquire some for public use is a win. The alternative is having it bought up by out of state owners and forever off limits to us. I fully support this acquisition and hope to see it come through.</p>
47	<p>This email is to lend support for the sale of the Aageson Ranch to the State of Montana. The Hirst Family is one of the largest holders of ranches and ranch land in Hill County and in the areas around Malta Montana. We also own 130,000 acres in NM as well. We also own farms in Washington State, NC, Va, Pa and NY. Our Milk River Ranch is the largest adjacent neighbor to the Aageson Ranch. We have owned it since 2006. We consider this sale to be positive for the residents of the state and it will preserve and protect unique features of this ranch for the general public. The sale to the state is the best of all outcomes for this property. We welcome the state as our neighbor and will cooperate with the state to help preserve this property. We will assist the state in any way the state asks as a neighbor and commend the state for this project.</p>

48	<p>I have lived in Montana my entire life and will continue to live in this great state due to recreational opportunities of hunting, fishing, and hiking that is provided through public access. What makes Montana my home, and sets it apart from other states I have visited, is not only the amount of public land available, but the diversity and ease of access of that land that allows for people like myself to be able to enjoy it. The Milk River area ranch that is proposed for purchase by the State of Montana, I believe would be an invaluable asset to the state of Montana. In my lifetime, I have witnessed and experienced first hand the effect of the change in our land-owning culture in this generation. I have seen large private ranches whom once allowed hunting and fishing access, change hands where within days, every fence-post is painted orange and every third post has no-trespassing signs. I was raised walking to people's front doors and asking for permission for access to hunt, and even if permission was not granted, you were greeted by a friendly face. Now I fear walking up to new owners, especially as the years pass and my children will accompany me, due to the history that I have been greeted with a shotgun in hand and door chained shut. Montana land-owner culture appears to be changing, which makes the opportunity for the state of Montana to obtain more land that truly is publicly owned, and managed, even more important. I have spent time in the Northeast corner of Montana and along the "High-line" and can safely say that the area proposed for sale by the State of Montana would add to the richness and fullness of our great state's public access areas not only in hunting and fishing, but for the educational and agriculture opportunities that it holds. For the State of Montana to miss taking advantage of this opportunity would not only lead to regret in my lifetime by the public access it would provide, but I feel it will be a loss to generations after mine that will also make a statement that public access is not longer a priority to the State of Montana for future generations. Montana holds a special place deeply in my heart, and thanks to generations before ours who understood that true public access means being able to walk for miles without crossing your own tracks twice, or fearing that behind every tree stands another hunter, we have acquired public access to the point where you can truly feel lost. I fully support the State of Montana purchasing and managing this large parcel of land in the Milk River corridor, and strongly feel that public access is our state's greatest asset, and to miss an opportunity as great as this would truly be a loss to The Treasure State.</p>
49	<p>The Milk River Ranch is unique because of its historical and wildlife significance. I've been lucky enough to get to hunt this land. It was one of the best hunts I've ever had. There are lots of mule deer, elk, antelope and whitetails. I saw partridge, pheasants and sharp tails. It is a sportsman's mecca. What was especially amazing was the teepee rings we saw above the river. While walking the property, it was amazing to get the sense that we were not the first to hunt this land. Seeing the archaeological sites was incredible. Not everywhere can you come across an old Indian encampment while stalking a big muley buck or a bull elk. The connectivity for wildlife from the Sweet Grass Hills, Canadian reserves, down to the Fresno reservoir would be a big conservation boon. Because the river is so winding, miles and miles of great upland bird hunting would be created for the public. The river offers a unique fishery far different from the trout streams elsewhere. It would create more diversity in the species available to anglers. I know the area has other historical significance, with a Canadian military outpost, the Benton to Walsh Trail, and it was a whisky running area too! Letting the paleontological aspects of this place get away and into the hands of a private citizen would be a travesty. Thank you to FWP for putting this proposal together and making this happen for Montana Sportsmen and sportswomen.</p>
50	<p>I support the Milk River Ranch Fee Title Proposal. These 10 miles of Milk River riparian habitat and associated overflow habitat will be a great acquisition for the Montana public recreationists. If this this acquisition comes to fruition, I hope access is limited to foot traffic only. I think this will allow for a more fulfilling experience for a diversity of recreational opportunities</p>
51	<p>I "recommend passage of these "issues=FWP-Region 6-"Spring Coulee Acquisition, Big Sandy, Buffalo Coulee, (Conservation Easment, Glasgow), Milk River Ranch Proposal, (Havre); Ft. Peck-Fisheries Mgmt. Plan."</p>
52	<p>As a 4th generation Montanan and outdoorsman, I wholeheartedly support the acquisition of the Milk River Ranch for a future WMA. As I have seen access to Montana fishing and hunting lands continue to erode over time as more and more property is purchased by out-of-state buyers, I strongly believe we need more</p>

	purchases of this type by the State of Montana. This will provide enhancement opportunities for wildlife and recreational opportunities for the public. This is money put to good use!
53	I support the proposed purchase of 2,992 acres of the Milk River Ranch. Thanks, Richard Traeger
54	The purchase of the milk river ranch is an excellent opportunity to enhance public access. i hunt in region 6 alot and public access is sometimes difficult. if this purchase is successful i plan to take full advantage of it. thanks FWP
55	Please note that I strongly favor the proposed Milk River WMA acquisition by the MTFWP. The acquisition would add needed acres to public hunting areas in the state and conserve wildlife habitat.The WMA would be a great addition to the state's existing WMAs.
56	I am for the purchase of this area. More state owned land equates to more public access, which is becoming more and more limited.
57	support Alternate A, the purchase of the Milk River Ranch. I really like the split purchase with the DNRC because they deal with agriculture leases for the School Trusts, so this should be a long term money source for our schools. Of course the protection of critical wildlife habitat is the most important reason I support this purchase. Please forward this to the DNRC as a support letter for their purchase also.
58	My name is Joe Ross as a local businessman and as an avid outdoorsman I offer my support to the Proposed Milk River Ranch land sale. I feel this is beneficial to people and will ensured access to a continuous piece of land that generations to follow will be able to use for hunting and other outdoor activities. Thank you for your consideration
59	My name is Doug Ross as a local businessman and as an avid outdoorsman I offer my support to the Proposed Milk River Ranch land sale. I feel this is beneficial to people and will ensured access to a continuous piece of land that generations to follow will be able to use for hunting and other outdoor activities. Thank you for your consideration
60	This letter is intended to indicate my support for the acquisition by the State Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks of the Aageson property in NW Hill County located along the upper reaches of the Milk River for the purpose and protection of the Archaeological, Geological, Historical, and Paleontological resources located there. I believe that the protective development of that area could benefit the State as well as the Hi-Line area which currently has only one State Park in its entire northern expanse. Montana's plains areas have already proven a variety of enticements to tourists including those of fishing and hunting as wll as a variety of other available pursuits unique to this area. I would hope that this State agency would concur in the recognition and preservation of this special area.
61	I think buying the Milk River ranch for the Fish and game is an awesome idea. Preserving the land for the migrating elk and deer herds for hunting is something that is truly needed. I also believe you need to continue up river to the "Arnie Hall Ranch". There is a high grade gravel road, a grated road down to the river and also a state lease on the top flat ground. This provides excellent hunting with easy access. This could easily be made handicap accesable. Which is something we need more of not all people can walk for miles to fish and hunt. I have seen the migrating deer and elk herds come through this place. I think the wildlife as well as the people need this land to be preserved as much as it can be. This could be a large hunting refuge with easy access for you, older or handicapped hunters, you seriously need to consider all off this.