



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

1400 South 19th Avenue, Bozeman, MT 59718
June 30, 2016

Governor's Office, Sheena Wilson, State Capitol, Room 204, P.O. Box 200801, Helena, MT 59620-0801
Environmental Quality Council, State Capitol, Room 106, P.O. Box 201704, Helena, MT 59620-1704
Dept. of Environmental Quality, Metcalf Building, P.O. Box 200901, Helena, MT 59620-0901
Dept. of Natural Resources & Conservation, P.O. Box 201601, Helena, MT 59620-1601

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks:

Director's Office	Parks Division	Lands Section	FWP Commissioners
Fisheries Division	Legal Unit	Wildlife Division	Design & Construction

MT Historical Society, State Historic Preservation Office, P.O. Box 201202, Helena, MT 59620-1202

MT State Parks Association, P.O. Box 699, Billings, MT 59103

MT State Library, 1515 E. Sixth Ave., P.O. Box 201800, Helena, MT 59620

James Jensen, Montana Environmental Information Center, P.O. Box 1184, Helena, MT 59624

Janet Ellis, Montana Audubon Council, P.O. Box 595, Helena, MT 59624

George Ochenski, P.O. Box 689, Helena, MT 59624

Jerry DiMarco, P.O. Box 1571, Bozeman, MT 59771

Montana Wildlife Federation, P.O. Box 1175, Helena, MT 59624

Wayne Hurst, P.O. Box 728, Libby, MT 59923

Jack Jones, 3014 Irene St., Butte, MT 59701

Cory and Diane Fitzgerald, 1233 Whitetail Road, Whitehall MT 59759

Jefferson County Commissioners, 155 West Granite, Butte, MT 59701

Madison Jefferson County Extension, P.O. Box 1079, Whitehall, MT 59759

Glenn Hockett, Gallatin Wildlife Association, 745 Doane Road, Bozeman, MT 59715

Jefferson Valley Sportsmen Association, P.O. Box 255, Whitehall, MT 59759

Skyline Sportsman Association, P.O. Box 173, Butte, MT 59701

Anaconda Sportsman Club, #2 Cherry, Anaconda, MT 59711

Dave Sabo, U.S. Forest Service, 1820 Meadowlark Lane, Butte, MT 59701

Scott Haight, Bureau of Land Management, 105 N. Parkmont, Butte, MT 59701

George Grant Chapter of TU, PO Box 563, Butte, MT 59703

Doug Salsbury, 169 Whitetail Rd, Whitehall, MT 59759

Steve Buckner, 53 Ridder Lane, Whitehall, MT 59759

Howard Moss, 895 Whitetail Rd, Whitehall, MT 59759

Bert Otis, PO Box 60, Emigrant, MT 59027

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The enclosed Decision Notice has been prepared for the Keogh Ranch Conservation Easement Addition Environmental Assessment. Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase a conservation easement on a 41-acre in-holding that lies in the middle of the existing Keogh Conservation Easement property (7,106 encumbered acres) located 15 miles north of Whitehall, MT. The in-holding used to be owned by the BLM, but is now in the possession of the Fitzgerald family who also owns the land encumbered by the FWP conservation easement. The cost of the easement is \$46,400. The Treasure State Chapter of the Mule Deer Foundation (Butte, MT) has committed to contribute \$10,000 toward the purchase. The balance of costs would be paid for through FWP's Habitat Montana Program. The in-holding would be encumbered with the same terms as the surrounding easement and managed under the same management plan.

Three comments were submitted during the 30-day comment period ending at 5:00 p.m. on June 24, 2016. All of the comments were in support of the proposed action.

The Decision Notice may also be obtained from FWP at the address provided above, or viewed on FWP's Internet website: <http://www.fwp.mt.gov>.

It is my decision to proceed with the proposed project detailed in the Keogh Ranch Conservation Easement Addition Environmental Assessment.

Questions regarding this Decision Notice should be mailed to:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Vanna Boccadori
1820 Meadowlark Lane
Butte, MT 59701

Or e-mailed to: vboccadori@mt.gov.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Sheppard', written in a cursive style.

Sam B. Sheppard
Region Three Supervisor

attachment

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE
for the
Keogh Ranch Conservation Easement Addition
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 3, Bozeman
June 30, 2016

Preface

In 1996, the Keogh Ranch was put into a conservation easement with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). At the time there was a 41-acre parcel within the ranch boundaries that was owned by the BLM and therefore left unencumbered by the easement. The in-holding is now in the possession of the Fitzgerald family who also owns the land encumbered by the FWP conservation easement. The parcel is in a prime residential development location with residential subdivision occurring less than two miles away at the southern boundary of the conservation easement. Because the in-holding is located in the middle of the conservation easement, the potential disturbance from residential development is substantial.

The Keogh Conservation Easement is located in the intermountain valley between the Boulder Mountains to the west and the Bull Mountains to the east. It is a working cattle and hay ranch that also provides important wildlife habitat. The property extends from the valley floor to the foothills of the Boulder and Bull Mountains. The land is comprised of native shrub grassland habitats intersected by Little Whitetail Creek and associated riparian habitat. The property supports breeding mountain plovers and the western-most known black-tailed prairie dog colony in Montana. It provides year-round range for mule deer and antelope as well as fall and winter range for elk and is an important link between the two mountain ranges. The ranch is enrolled in Block Management and provides hunting access for an average of 400 hunters annually. Species that can be hunted include elk, mule deer, antelope, mountain lion, and upland game birds. In addition, they allow public fishing access to their reservoir. Conservation values and recreation opportunities could be impacted if this in-holding were developed, sold, subdivided, or habitat lost through conversion.

The objective of purchasing a conservation easement on this 41-acre in-holding is to ensure the long-term protection of the wildlife and recreational values of this property and the adjacent 7,106 acres of the existing Keogh Ranch conservation easement, all while maintaining a viable family agricultural operation.

Proposed Action

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase a conservation easement on a 41-acre in-holding that lies in the middle of the existing Keogh Conservation Easement property (7,106 encumbered acres) located 15 miles north of Whitehall, MT. The in-holding used to be owned by the BLM but is now in the possession of the Fitzgerald family who also owns the land encumbered by the FWP conservation easement. The cost of the easement is \$46,400. The Treasure State Chapter of the Mule Deer Foundation (Butte, MT) has committed to contribute \$10,000 toward the purchase. The balance of costs would be paid for through FWP's Habitat Montana Program. The in-holding would be encumbered with the same terms as the surrounding easement and managed under the same management plan.

Public Process and Comments

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on May 26, 2016.

Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 30 days (through June 24, 2016). Legal notices were printed in the *Montana Standard* (Butte) and the *Whitehall Ledger*. The EA was also posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/>.

This project has been discussed with the Jefferson Valley Sportsmen Association, and copies of the EA were sent to adjacent landowners and several other interested parties. Three comments were received, all in support of the proposed action.

Final Environmental Assessment

The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment, it is my decision to approve the proposed action to purchase a conservation easement on a 41-acre in-holding that lies in the middle of the existing Keogh Conservation Easement property, pending FWP Commission approval.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



5/30/2016

Sam B. Sheppard
Region 3 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Date

