

Kootenai Forestlands Conservation Project Region 1



Pipe Creek – photo courtesy Bob Hosea, TheBobFactor.com

Wildlife Habitat Land Project Proposal February 2018

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WILDLIFE HABITAT LAND PROJECT PROPOSAL – vers. 1/2018

Instructions: FORMAT: Please follow this template to help streamline scoring. Italicized notes are intended to clarify the intent of each section and may be removed for the actual proposal. Proposals selected for Fish and Wildlife Commission endorsement will be included with the commission packet and will also be available for public review – please develop a professional proposal. Saving this file in an Adobe (pdf) format will reduce file size for emailing purposes. **SUBMISSION:** Submit as an electronic file both to the Habitat Bureau Chief and the Wildlife Division Office Manager. If the file is too large for email, please submit through the Montana File Transfer Service and send an email notification.

1. Applicant Name: Jim Williams – R1 Supervisor
2. Date: February 2018
3. Project Name: **Kootenai Forestlands Conservation Project**
Type of Acquisition: **Easement**
4. Size: **22,275 acres** of private timberland
5. Location: checkerboard of parcels around Libby, Lincoln County, FWP Region 1
6. Map(s): attached at end of document
7. Project Need (Application Overview – limit to 1,500 characters) – **up to 10 pts.**

This collaborative project will protect 22,275 acres of highly productive timberland in northwest Montana, including habitat for ESA-listed grizzly bear, Canada Lynx and bull trout and 40 other Species of Greatest Conservation Need, while allowing Stimson Lumber Co. to continue sustainable forest management. The project lands are nearly surrounded by Kootenai National Forest land, sharing 133 miles of border. The property could be subdivided into 139 separate parcels which would degrade or eliminate critical habitat and migration corridors and negatively impact the surrounding federal land. An extensive network of public roads provides easy access to the parcels, making the property highly developable and at increased risk of being converted to non-forest uses, especially given that these are some of the last undeveloped lands in the area. The proposed conservation easement would allow Stimson to retain these timberlands, preclude development, protect incredible wildlife habitat and key landscape connectivity, and provide permanent public access to extraordinary recreation lands. The project lies within both aquatic and terrestrial Tier I Focal Areas and has high quality habitat for Species of Greatest Conservation Need as well as high quality big game wintering habitat. This project will protect critical habitat for declining species and also maintain or improve habitat for game species while allowing the public to hunt, fish, and recreate on the property in perpetuity.

8. Broad Terrestrial and Aquatic Habitat Criteria – **up to 10 pts.**

The Kootenai Forestlands project is comprised of 17,250 acres of Tier I Terrestrial Community Types – 77% of the land. There are 480 acres of riparian habitat and 330 acres of wetlands for a total of 810 acres of the Riparian/Wetland community type. The wetland community types are quite diverse and include bog/fen, forested marsh, herbaceous marsh, and wet meadow. There are also 768 acres of the Intermountain Grassland (Montane Grassland) community type. Other Tier I community types found on the property include conifer-dominated forest and woodland (mesic-wet), conifer-dominated forest and woodland (xeric-mesic), and deciduous shrubland. All creeks on the property, 42 miles of stream, are the Tier I Aquatic Community Type. There is no cropland on the property.

9. Project Level Criteria

a) **Habitat Values – up to 10 pts.**

The project area supports 43 Species of Greatest Conservation Need and includes federally designated critical habitat for Canada lynx, grizzly bear, and bull trout. In addition, the habitat supports populations of mule and white-tailed deer, elk, moose, black bear, mountain lion, wolf, forest grouse, and turkeys. It also includes rare habitats for this portion of the state such as bogs and fens along with wet meadows and forested and herbaceous marshes. The highest quality riparian/wetland habitat is found along Pipe Creek, a stronghold for ESA-listed bull trout as well as westslope cutthroat trout and other aquatic Species of Greatest Conservation Need. The property is important for forest carnivores – 75% is the highest value habitat for marten and 30% is the highest value for fisher according to the FWP CAPS ranking. The entire property is high quality winter range for moose and 75% is high quality winter range for elk, mule deer, and white-tailed deer. Commercial management of forests in northwest Montana also adds diversity and produces berry crops important to both black and grizzly bears. This land supports wintering moose that may have declined over the past couple of decades because of forest succession on surrounding national forest lands.

b) **Threat Status:**

The threat status of this project is probable. The project lands constitute the majority of remaining developable land around the city of Libby. Lincoln County has climbed out of the recession and its population increased by 1.1% last year. The project lands are particularly vulnerable to development given the close proximity of existing infrastructure and utilities and 160 miles of high

quality roads (16% are county), in conjunction with the property's exceptional views, easy access, and gently sloping terrain. In the last decade, residential development activity in Lincoln County has been concentrated along Libby, Flower, and Pipe Creek, the Lake Koocanusa area, and the Turner Mountain Ski Resort, all extending development toward the project lands. Lincoln County's Growth Policy seeks to maintain the open, rural character of the county along with traditional land uses and the county commissioners submitted a letter of support for this project as part of the Forest Legacy application. Lincoln County currently has no zoning restrictions. Landowners may subdivide their land into parcels as small as 160 acres without any governmental review, allowing the property to be easily divided into 139 separate parcels. Additionally, splitting a 160-acre parcel into two to four lots requires only a minor subdivision review. Stimson is in the process of consolidating their timberlands with 29 properties currently listed for sale in Montana, representing 23% of their holdings. The project lands have similar or higher development potential to those currently listed for sale by Stimson. The 2017 West Fork Fire burned 3,600 acres (16%) of this newly acquired property (purchased in December 2016). If this conservation easement is not completed, Stimson may decide to sell some parcels rather than wait 50 more years before this newly burned land produces merchantable timber and a return on their 2016 investment. Except for the project lands, most of the privately-owned property surrounding Libby has already been subdivided and developed. Opening these parcels to development would extend the Wildland-Urban Interface nine miles further into the Kootenai National Forest, significantly increasing the potential for wildlife/human conflicts and the demand for FWP staff time to help deal with those conflicts.

c) Focal Priority – up to 10 pts.

All of the land south of Kootenai River is in the Tier I East Cabinet Front Terrestrial Focal Area and half of the land north of Kootenai River is in Tier II focal areas – the Yaak and Fivemile Terrestrial Focal Areas. For aquatic habitat, 75% of the entire project area is in the Tier I Upper Kootenai River South Focal Area. This project is part of a multi-partner funding and conservation initiative which includes FWP, The Trust for Public Land, Stimson Lumber Company, USFS, and potentially the USFWS. The project lands were identified as critical to an international landscape conservation initiative in a recent scientific publication (Proctor et al., 2015). The project lands are part of an area that has been identified in several USFWS management plans as important for the recovery of federally-listed species, including the 2015 Revised Draft Recovery Plan for Bull Trout, the 2013 draft Northern Continental Divide Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy, the 2000 Canada Lynx Conservation Assessment and Strategy, and the 1982 Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan. The project lands are designated as a high priority for habitat protection in state conservation plans including the 2010 Montana

State Assessment of Forest Resources, 2003 MT Gray Wolf Management Plan, and 1999 Conservation Agreement for Cutthroat Trout. Both state and federal plans are directing actions on and near the property to promote their specific conservation goals.

d) Geographic Effectiveness – up to 10 pts.

The 22,275-acre project area, though comprised of scattered parcels, is almost completely surrounded by Kootenai National Forest land. The project shares 133 miles of border with the National Forest, contributing to the integrity of the surrounding public land, improving management opportunities for both ownerships, reducing management conflicts with 139 new private owners if the parcels were developed, and providing a landscape-level block of habitat for the species in this area. The project will complement two nearby projects in Montana that were also funded by the USFS Forest Legacy Program (FLP): the 142,000-acre Thompson-Fisher conservation easement and the 28,000-acre Stimson Forestlands conservation easement, both similar working forestlands with high wildlife values within the Kootenai River drainage and Kootenai National Forest. This project also complements all the MT and ID FLP projects that cumulatively protect one quarter million acres. This project increases core habitat protections for T&E species, state species of concern, and game species, while also providing landscape-scale connectivity within the Kootenai National Forest that, in conjunction with already protected land, will ensure these species have opportunities sustain their populations through time.

e) Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation – up to 10 pts.

The project lands are currently open for hunting under the Block Management Program and all of the parcels are easily accessible by an extensive network of county and logging roads. Stimson has an open lands policy that allows general public recreation throughout the year in addition to seasonal hunting, fishing, and trapping. Under the terms of the conservation easement, free public access to the project lands will be permanently secured and will additionally contribute to access on all the adjoining national forest land, allowing this conservation easement to function as much larger block of land for public recreation opportunities. This 22,275-acre property alone currently provides over 1,100 days of public hunting access which would be secured in perpetuity under this proposal.

f) Management Considerations – 10 pts.

The habitat on this property is in good condition and not in need of restoration. Stimson Lumber Company only recently acquired this property (December 2016) and continues to manage it under the same Sustainable Forest Initiative standards and Native Fish Habitat Conservation Plan (NFHCP) used by Weyerhaeuser (Plum Creek). Stimson will continue to be responsible for the property management costs, including weed control. Under the terms of the conservation easement, the property would be managed by Stimson under an approved forest management plan similar to the one we developed for our other timber company easement properties which will protect important habitats for key species in perpetuity. We may need to seek USFWS Land Acquisition Grant funding for this project, and then the NFHCP would no longer be in effect and the conservation easement would have provisions to prevent take for any listed species. By eliminating future housing development, the project is likely to reduce ongoing FWP obligations by reducing future wildlife/human conflicts in an area that is highly prone to such conflicts. It would help reduce the need for additional time, effort and funding spent in wildlife conflict, which would likely offset the increased need to monitor our growing portfolio of conservation easements.



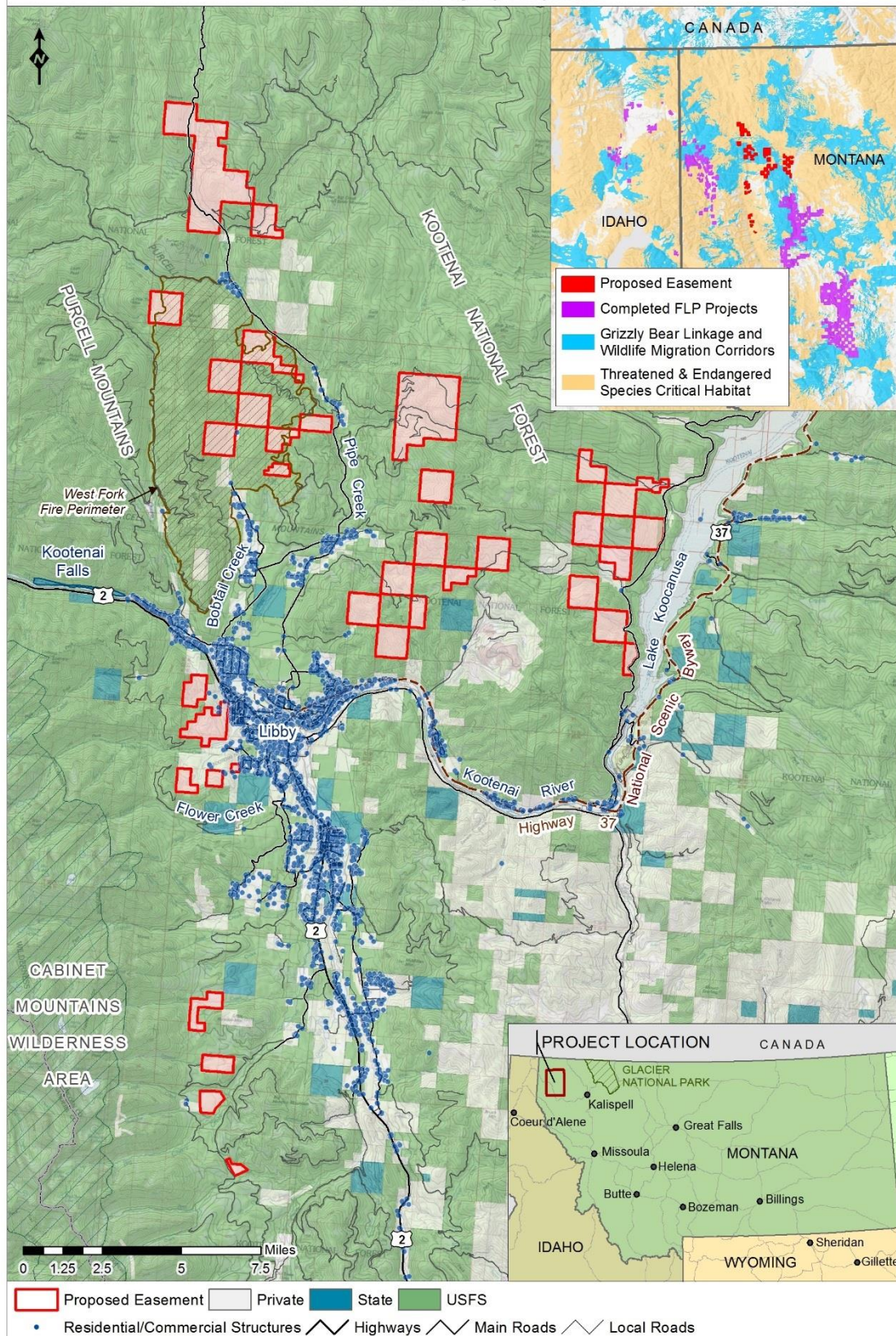
Bull trout and riparian habitat in Pipe Creek (photo by Kim Annis, FWP).



Expanding private residential development adjacent to the project lands
(photo by Chris Deming, TPL).

KOOTENAI FORESTLANDS CONSERVATION PROJECT

FY19 Forest Legacy Proposal



Version Jan. 2018