

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: June 19, 2019

Agenda Item: Wild River Conservation Project (R1)

Division: Fisheries

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

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Background:

FWP is working with The Vital Ground Foundation (VG) to conserve landscape connectivity along the Kootenai River just north of Troy, MT. One endangered and three threatened species listed under the Endangered Species Act occupy and/or move through this proposed project area: the endangered white sturgeon and the threatened grizzly bear, Canada lynx, and bull trout. This property offers the opportunity to restore habitat complexity in a side channel that would benefit these native fish species using funding from the Bonneville Power Administration wildlife mitigation program, and this conservation easement would secure that future investment. The project is also part of an area identified by grizzly bear scientists as the best linkage between the Purcell and Cabinet Mountains in the Cabinet-Yaak recovery area. FWP conserved a large portion of this linkage in 2012 with our Kootenai Valleys conservation easement. Vital ground is working to conserve the remaining gaps in this area. This project would continue our collaborative effort by helping VG conserve approximately 42.6 acres of riparian and upland habitat. They would continue to own and manage the land, and FWP will hold a no-development conservation easement which will ensure the property is managed to benefit fish and wildlife habitat in perpetuity. Public access to the property will be allowed for fishing and bird watching opportunities. Hunting access would not be required under the terms of the conservation easement due to the property's small size and its proximity to Highway 2 and established residences. Purchase of the conservation easement would be funded by a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Recovery Land Acquisition Grant in the amount of \$396,000 with VG providing the needed non-federal matching funds.

Public Involvement Process & Results:

No public involvement has yet occurred. If endorsed, FWP would draft and distribute an EA to provide the public an opportunity to comment on this proposal.

Alternatives and Analysis:

If FWP does not acquire a conservation easement on these lands, we would miss an opportunity to collaborate with Vital Ground on conserving this important area and would not use the money that the FWS granted to FWP for this project. FWP would also lose out on an opportunity to work on this property to enhance side-channel habitat on the Kootenai River. Vital Ground would lose out on funding they could use to continue their conservation work in this area.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale:

FWP recommends the commission endorse this proposed project to allow the department to continue to work with Vital Ground on this proposal to conserve valuable fish and wildlife habitat as well as a site that will provide walk-in fishing and bird watching opportunities for the public.

Proposed Motion:

I move that the commission endorse FWP's proposal to negotiate a conservation easement for the Wild River Conservation Project.