

## ***Chapter 2. Alternatives, Including the Preferred Alternative***

This Chapter describes the two alternatives identified for this project: a No Action Alternative and an alternative giving the Service the authority to create the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program in the vicinity of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The Alternatives consider the effects of a Conservation Easement Program within the project area boundary identified in this Environmental Assessment.

If the preferred alternative is selected, current and future conservation easements acquired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are administered in accordance with Executive Order 12996, *Management and General Public Use of The National Wildlife Refuge System* (1996) and the *National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act* (1997). Monitoring consists of periodically reviewing land status to ensure that the non-development goal of the conservation easement is being achieved according to the terms of the easement. The Service would continue to monitor the status and recovery of endangered, threatened, and candidate species, conduct other activities for enhancing wildlife habitat and restoring native species with landowners permission and coordinate with private organizations, and State and Federal agencies.

### **Alternative A. No Action**

Under the No Action Alternative, the 158,972-acre boundary for the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program would not be established and, therefore, funds from the Land and Water Conservation fund would not be used to purchase perpetual conservation easements on 42,000 acres. Lands in the Centennial Valley may be developed as second or recreational home subdivisions or isolated housing or commercial uses as the agricultural economy changes or when the land changes ownership. Conservation easements could still be secured through private efforts, including efforts by The Nature Conservancy and other entities. Habitat enhancement or restoration projects on private lands, such as water developments, grazing systems, and riparian management exclosures, would also continue through landowner efforts or other partnerships.

Lands already within the Executive Order boundary of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge would continue to be purchased from willing sellers as opportunities arise.

## **Alternative B. Establish the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program (Preferred Alternative)**

Under Alternative B, the Service would establish the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program within the Centennial Valley of southwestern Montana. The Conservation Easement Program will be part of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge staff will manage the conservation easement program and will monitor the easements. The executive boundary consisting of 158,972 acres, of which 42,000 acres is proposed for conservation easements extends from the eastern and upper end of the Centennial Valley (Alaska Basin) west to Lima Reservoir (Figure 3). The easement program would preserve approximately 42,000 acres of privately-owned mountain foothills, wetlands, stream courses, grasslands, sagebrush-grassland, and sandhills habitat. The habitat would be perpetually protected from conversion to home, industrial, or commercial building sites. The goal of the project is to preserve habitat that will protect vegetation of high quality foothills, wetlands, and upland habitat sagebrush-grasslands, or land in lower priority zones with other types of cover, may be purchased to connect and round-out larger tracts of high quality grasslands. To meet this goal, priority areas have been identified within the project area. Within these focus areas, tracts will be given priority for purchase (see attached Land Protection Plan) which depend on impacts to water quality, threats of development, riparian habitat quality, and vegetation significance (Figure 5). Priority areas were also devised to link nearby protected areas, such as TNC easement tracts, to create a relatively large, unfragmented block of habitat for large mammal movement and migratory bird protection.

Lands already within the Executive Order boundary of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge would continue to be purchased from willing sellers as opportunities arise.

The easement program would rely on voluntary participation from landowners. Grazing would not be restricted on the land included in the easement contract. Cultivation of the land would not be permitted. Neither would game farms, oil and gas drilling, and wetland drainage. All land would remain in private ownership and, therefore, property tax and weed control would remain the responsibility of the landowner. Control of public access to the land would also remain under control of the landowner.

## **Alternatives Considered but not Studied**

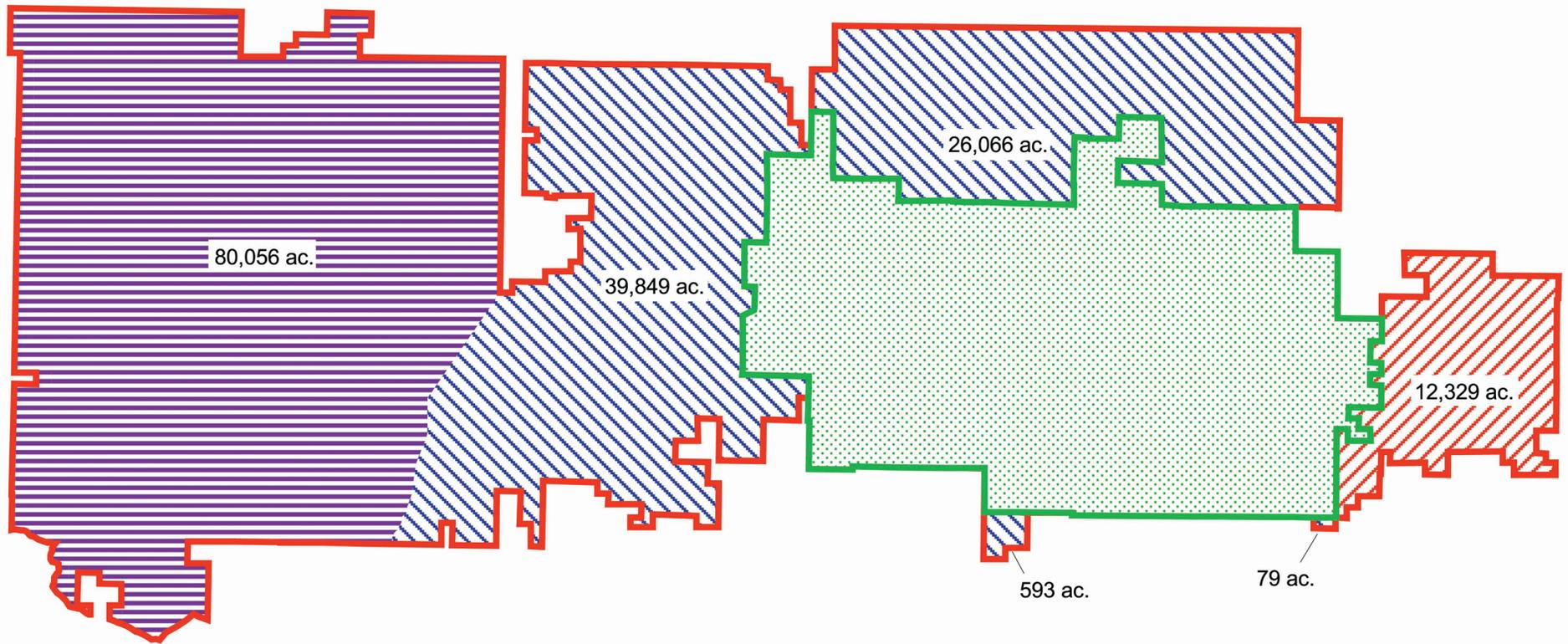
### **Voluntary Landowner Zoning**

Under this alternative, landowners can voluntarily petition the county commissioners to create a zoning district to direct the types of development that can occur within an area. This type of voluntary zoning is considered a "citizen initiated" zoning. For example, landowners could petition the county government to zone an area as agricultural, precluding certain types of non-agricultural development, such as residential subdivision. "Citizen initiative" is rarely used, and this alternative was not studied further.

### **County Zoning**

This alternative would involve a traditional approach used by counties and municipalities. The local government would use zoning as a means of designating what type of development can occur in an area. Beaverhead County officials prefer not to use this method, and the alternative was not studied further. The county commissioners, however, expressed support instead for the conservation easement alternative as a means of maintaining rural area values and perhaps reducing the need for future zoning.

# Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program



Scale 1:230000



## Legend

- Project Boundary
- Refuge Executive Order Boundary
- Easement Priority Areas**
  - FIRST (12,329 acres)
  - SECOND (66,587 acres)
  - THIRD (80,056 acres)

Figure 5 - Easement Priority Areas

