

Land Protection Plan

Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program

Prepared by

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge
27820 Southside Centennial Road
Lima, Montana 59739

and

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
RW-RE Branch of Planning
P.O. Box 25486 - DFC
Denver, Colorado 80225

March 2001

Table of Contents

Land Protection Plan

Introduction	1
Project Location	1
Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program Purpose	2
Threats to and Status of Resources	2
Refuge Administration	5
Areas of Management Focus and Habitat Management	5
Resource Monitoring	5
Public Use Activities	6
Habitat Protection Methods	6
Planning and Coordination	7
Sociocultural Considerations	7
Summary of Proposed Action	8

Figures

Figure 1 Centennial Valley Project	3
Figure 2 Centennial Valley Ownership	11

Table

Table 1 Summarization of Priority I, II, and III	9
--	---

Land Protection Plan

Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed the Environmental Assessment for the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program in Beaverhead County, Montana. The Environmental Assessment evaluates the environmental effects of establishing an approved boundary for acquiring conservation easements in Centennial Valley. The Service selected the Preferred Alternative B establishing the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement boundary of 158,972 acres. The Service intends on purchasing or receiving donated conservation easements from willing landowners of approximately 42,000 acres within the approved boundary (Figure 1). Under the Preferred Alternative, the Service proposes to purchase conservation easements primarily on high quality wetland, grassland, and mountain frontage not only for waterfowl, but also for the myriad of other bird species, plants, and mammals that rely on this habitat as well as the overall protection of the critically declining intact intermountain landscapes. The Service views agriculturally-based and rural settings of the Centennial Valley as a mainstay in maintaining habitat integrity for wildlife. This habitat integrity would be changed dramatically if residential or commercial development began to take hold. Such changes have occurred elsewhere in Montana and the rural west.

This Land Protection Plan provides a general description of the operations and management of the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program, as outlined in the Preferred Alternative of the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program Environmental Assessment.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has developed this Land Protection Plan during the planning process to provide local landowners, governmental agencies, and the interested public with a general understanding of the anticipated management approaches for the proposed easement program. The purpose of the Land Protection Plan is to present a broad overview of the Service's proposed management approach to wildlife and associated habitats, public uses, interagency coordination, public outreach and other operational needs.

Project Location

The Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program area extends from the upper headwaters of the Centennial Valley to the western downstream end at Lima Reservoir. The proposed easement area harbors miles of riparian (river or stream) corridors and critical acres of wetlands that make up a core component of wildlife habitat. Private lands lay primarily along the Valley bottom and low foothills, while public lands make up more of the mid-to-upper slopes of the Centennial Mountains to the south and Gravelly Mountains to the north. The Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge protects and manages valley-bottom wetlands, meadows, and uplands which make up a key habitat component at the upper end of the Valley.

The elevations of the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program area range from over 6,400 feet at Lima Reservoir, to 6,600 feet at the Lower Lake Dam, to over 6,800 feet at the upper end of the Valley in Alaska Basin. The project area is primarily a mixture of grassland, sagebrush-grassland, wetlands, and mountain foothills. The public land is primarily owned by the State of Montana and the Federal government. Agencies within the Federal government that manage lands are the Bureau of Land Management (Dillon Resource Area) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge).

Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program Purpose

The Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program encompasses some of the highest quality remaining intermountain wet meadow and wetlands within the western states. Most valleys and foothills in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Area and near the Centennial Valley are being developed or subdivided to provide second homes. The Centennial Valley remains biologically intact and its habitats have not been fragmented by housing developments. Given the diversity of plants and animals that rely on this habitat, the ability of this project to protect the habitat integrity in perpetuity is critical. The purposes of this project are:

- to protect native wet meadows, wetlands, uplands, and mountain foothills from future conversion to second and recreational home uses;
- to protect habitat integrity by preventing fragmentation;
- to preserve key wilderness values and viewshed throughout and adjacent to the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge;
- to promote landscape integrity in order to maintain, sustain, and enhance the historic plant, animal, and insect biodiversity of native prairie habitats, and associated ranching heritage;
- to minimize noxious weed infestations from soil disturbance, road building, and increased traffic resulting from rural housing development;
- to a lesser extent, to minimize future demands on local government resources necessitated by providing services associated with increasing rural development.

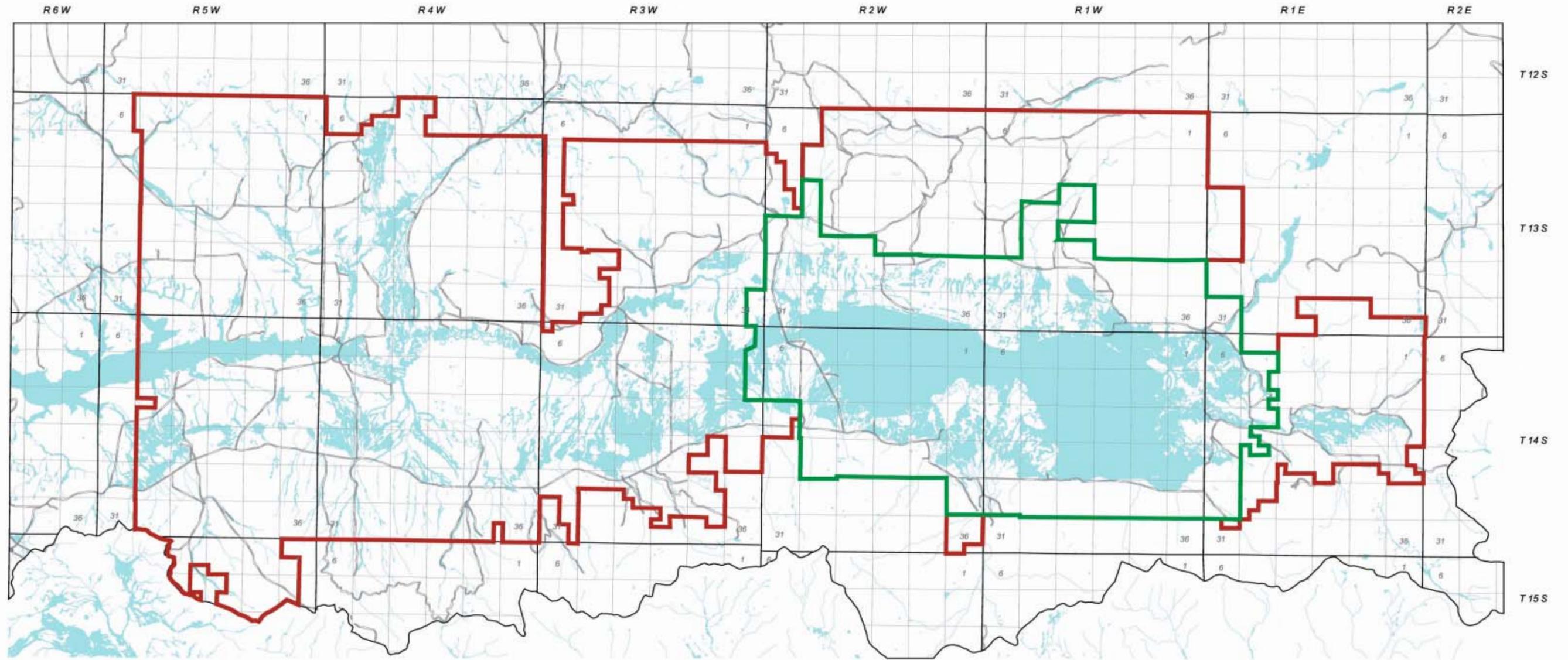
Threats to and Status of the Resources

The rural character of the Refuge and the Centennial Valley as a whole is likely to undergo substantial change in the next 10 to 20 years. The Service believes that the proposed conservation easement initiative is a positive effort towards perpetual support of wildlife values by protecting large tracts of private lands from the type of housing development that would undermine these values and fragment habitats.

The Service, as well as local conservation groups, and people in the region have voiced concern with the fragmentation of habitats in other areas of Montana. This loss is due primarily to the conversion of lands, once significant to wildlife, to summer homes and associated human use pressures. For example, residential development in the Valley presents a potentially significant threat to the aquatic ecosystem. Sewage-derived nutrient additions to streams and lakes could have devastating effects on the aquatic ecology. Housing developments also can bring wetland drainage, water diversion, weeds, and introduction of nonnative fish into artificial ponds from which they can move into streams.

Another key result is habitat fragmentation caused by land subdivision and residential development. Almost 100,000 acres in the Centennial are privately-owned and the majority of this land remains as large ranches. However, given the current trends of low cattle prices and a strong market for scenic western properties, Centennial Valley ranches can be vulnerable to sale and subdivision for recreational development. The subdivision process is not difficult; under Montana law, land may be split into lots of 160 acres or greater without local review or approval. Moreover, with no county zoning in place, small-lot subdivisions are possible. In 1993, for example, the Beaverhead County Commissioners approved a controversial 5-lot subdivision adjacent to the headquarters of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program



Scale 1:185000



Legend

-  Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge Boundary (Executive Order)
-  Project Boundary
-  Wetland
-  Section
-  Township
-  Road

Project Location



Figure 1 - Centennial Valley Project

Refuge Administration

The proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program would be administered by the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, 28 miles east of Monida, Montana and adjacent to the conservation easement area. Easements would be monitored by Refuge staff.

Easement monitoring can increase the workload of existing Refuge staffing in the form of biological monitoring and may result in additional costs. However, if most landowners abide by the covenants of a conservation easement, monitoring costs should be minimized. Initial first year oversight and monitoring costs incurred in launching the program will range from \$15,000 to \$25,000, but should decrease over time to about \$10,000 per year.

Areas of Management Focus and Habitat Management

Conservation of existing habitat is the key focus for the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program. In general, the Service views the Centennial Valley easement program as compatible with current ranching management practices, such as grazing. Thus, the Centennial Valley easement program can help maintain the rapidly disappearing agricultural way of life and provide for management practices and natural processes that benefit a wide diversity of wildlife species.

The proposed conservation easement initiative supports the perpetual conservation of wildlife values by protecting large tracts of private lands from the type of housing development that would undermine these values and fragment habitats. Because the Centennial Valley can be thought of as interconnected habitats, lands not adjacent to the Refuge would be evaluated based on their relationship to key habitats or wildlife use patterns. The proposed easement program would prevent extensive residential development, protect wetland values, and secure open space. In so doing, the easements would also help protect air and water quality and maintain a large landscape which provides key wildlife habitats. The combination of numerous wetlands, riparian areas, sandhills, and grass/sagebrush uplands creates the diversity for which this area is highly regarded. The wetlands and riparian areas support an entire suite of plants and animals, while the grassland/sagebrush and sandhills support yet another suite of plants and animals, and in many cases, the biodiversity of this area relies on a combination of resources from wetlands and uplands. Maintaining these habitat values also helps preserve the interconnected wildlife values of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and the upper Centennial Valley.

Resource Monitoring

With the purchase of conservation easements, the Service's role is to monitor the purchased easements to ensure that landowners comply with the easement agreement so that the property does not undergo subdivision, development for home sites or conversion of native rangeland to cropland.

Other types of resource monitoring surveys will only be conducted with the permission of the landowner. These surveys may be done with the cooperation of the landowner, non-governmental organizations, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, National Biological Survey, universities, and/or volunteers.

The Valley area exhibits excellent species diversity, from waterfowl to great gray owls, grizzly bears, moose, Franklin's gulls, long-billed curlews, Arctic grayling, peregrine falcons, westslope cutthroat trout, and ferruginous hawks. Two hundred sixty-one birds species, or approximately 70 percent of those found in Montana, inhabit the Valley. At least 150 species of birds breed in the Valley. The Valley soils give rise to a diverse array of plant communities, including some of considerable scientific importance. Location records from the *Montana Natural Heritage Program* (1996) indicate 41 species of special concern, including 5 that may be globally rare and 7 that are known in Montana only from the Valley (Povilitis and Mahr, 1998). Vegetation in the Valley sandhills represents one of Montana's most intact native plant associations, and includes at least five state-rare species: Sand wildrye, Platte cinquefoil, Mealy primrose, Wolf's willow, and Letterman's needlegrass. With the high diversity of species found within the Valley, a resource monitoring program will benefit the conservation of the biodiversity of Centennial Valley.

Public Use Activities

Service conservation easements are designed primarily to maintain habitat integrity and not necessarily to change management of private lands. Management improvements can be accomplished on a voluntary partnership basis through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, a Service program, which assists landowners in implementing and completing habitat restoration and improvement projects. Private lands protected by Service conservation easements remain in private ownership, and public use or other management activities outside the scope of the easement remains at the landowners discretion.

Habitat Protection Methods

The Service is proposing to establish the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program by purchasing or receiving in donation, conservation easements from willing landowners, consisting of approximately 42,000 acres of private land adjacent to or in proximity to the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The Service proposes to purchase conservation easements primarily on high quality wetland, grassland, and mountain frontage not only for waterfowl, but also for the myriad of other bird species, plants and mammals that rely on this habitat as well as the overall protection of the critically declining intact intermountain landscapes.

The Service views agriculturally-based and rural settings of the Centennial Valley as a mainstay in maintaining habitat integrity for wildlife. This habitat integrity would be changed dramatically if residential or commercial development began to take hold. Such changes have occurred elsewhere in Montana and the rural west. This type of development tends to fragment wildlife habitat and generally increases costs to counties which have to provide services to remote developments. The development can also lead to water quality issues, change big game migration patterns, and degrade wetlands. The goal of this project is to maintain wildlife habitat integrity on a large landscape scale by helping to maintain open space in a rural setting.

The Service proposes to acquire these conservation easements principally by using funds appropriated under the Land and Water Conservation Act, which derives funds from royalties paid for offshore oil and gas leasing. Such funds are intended for land and water conservation projects. The funds are not derived from general taxes.

Planning and Coordination

The proposal for the establishment of the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program, through the authorization of an executive boundary consisting of approximately 158,972 acres, with the proposed easement acreage of 42,000, has been discussed with landowners, conservation organizations, Federal, State and county governments, and other interested groups and individuals.

The proposal and associated National Environmental Policy Act documentation addresses the protection of native grasslands, primarily through acquisition of conservation easements, by the Service under the direction of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

An open house was held in Lima, Montana on December 9, 1999. Approximately 20 landowners, citizens, and elected representatives attended. Most people expressed positive comments towards the project which would maintain the present landscape and the rural lifestyle. Through a partnership with the Service, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a private non-profit organization, has contacted landowners, outdoor users, other public and elected persons, and many have expressed interest and a desire to protect the Centennial Valley from the pressures brought about by housing development.

For the last three years, TNC has been working in the Centennial Valley with the goal of purchasing conservation easements for the protection of the Valley's biodiversity. To this end, TNC has also performed some baseline work on plant and animal inventory of the landscape. No major issues have surfaced to-date.

Management activities associated with easements may be funded through other sources, such as The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, North American Wetland Conservation Act grants, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, and other private and public partners. Other endeavors include the Beaverhead Wetland Protection Project II.

Sociocultural Considerations

Lakeview is the only community within the project area and consists of approximately 10 people, and another two communities (Monida and Lima) of approximately 100 people border of the project area. Dillon, the county seat of Beaverhead County, lies 60 miles to the north of the project area and has a population of about 4,000. Much of the rural population are involved in hay and livestock production. Private lands are also used for hunting a wide variety of game species. Most Refuge visitors participate in hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, photography, bicycling, camping and canoeing.

Historically, concern has been expressed about the amount of tax generated to the counties when such land protection programs take place. Since this is an easement program, the land enrolled in the program does not change hands and, therefore, the taxes paid by the landowner are not affected. Since development of rural landscapes often leads to increased demand for services and higher costs to rural counties, any perceived reduction in the tax base would be offset since the county would not incur the expense of providing services to rural developments. The use of conservation easements serve an additional function as easements preclude the necessity for county zoning in the program area. Open space also may enhance the property value of adjoining land. Open space and undeveloped lands will become more valuable in the future as residential development encompasses more rural lands.

Summary of Proposed Action

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to acquire conservation easements on approximately 42,000 acres of privately-owned lands within the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement boundary consisting of 158,972 acres. These lands consist of mountain foothills, wetlands, stream courses, grasslands, and sagebrush-grassland and sandhills from willing participants. Table 1 and Figure 2 summarizes the protection priorities. The Service believes these are the minimum interests necessary to preserve the uplands, wetland and riparian habitats for the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program.

The properties have been prioritized for conservation easement acquisition using the following criteria:

- biological significance;
- existing and potential threats;
- significance of the area to refuge management and administration; and
- existing commitments to purchase or protect land.

Priority I Lands: Priority I lands (See Table 1 and Figure 2) within the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement boundary identify ownerships that encompass upland drainage and wetland/riparian habitats associated with Red Rock Creek and its tributaries in Alaska Basin.

Priority II Lands: Priority II lands (See Table 1 and Figure 2) within the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement boundary identify ownerships that provide important upland habitat and buffer the core wetland habitat of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

Priority III Lands: Targeted Priority III lands (See Table 1 and Figure 2) within the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement boundary identify ownerships that provide important upland habitat and wetland/riparian habitat to the west of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. Although these habitats are important, they are considered lower in acquisition priority because they do not directly impact water quality and wildlife movement patterns in and around the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

Table 1 depicts the habitat protection priority (I, II, and III) of properties identified for inclusion in the easement program. It is Service policy to include entire ownerships (mainly for appraisal purposes) in the project area even though only a portion may contain wildlife habitat of interest to the Service.

Table 1 Summarization of Priority I Tracts

Priority	Name	Approximate Tract Acres
I	Alaska Basin Grazing Association	1,488
	Centennial Livestock	4,214
	Gray-Taft, Caroline	45
	Heppenheimer Trust	39
	Huntsman Ranch	2,272
	John Taft Corp	993
	Lee Martinell CO	472
	Matador Cattle CO	156
	Running Deer Ranch	279
	Rush, Keith	357
	Wainwright, Carroll/Nina	393
	Walsh	628
	Walsh	2,386
	Walsh	636

Table 1 Summarization of Priority II Tracts

Priority	Name	Approximate Tract Acres
II	Allen, Paul	2,384
	Centennial Livestock	3,921
	Centennial Livestock	82
	Conservation End Fund	38
	Coppock, Walter/Ruth	40
	Dennis, Daniel	283
	High Mtn Ranches	1,249
	Huntsman Ranches	2,873
	Lee Martinell CO	2,155
	Matador Cattle CO	278
	Matador Cattle CO	4,389
	Matador Cattle CO	8,465
	Matador Cattle CO	465
	Matador Cattle CO	330
	Ruby Dell Ranch	64
	Ruby Dell Ranch	618
	Saier, Volker/Lois	161
	Saier, Volker/Lois	618
	Scheid, Gerald H.	1,997
	Schuelt	539
	Stibal Ranch	3,134
	Stibal Ranch	320
	Stibal Ranch	38
	Stibal Ranch	1,163
	Stibal Ranch	123
	Taft, Melody Ann	411
	Wolf	74

Table 1 Summarization of Priority III Tracts

Priority	Name	Approximate Tract Acres
III	Delany, Peggy	814
	Duffner Ranches	983
	Duffner Ranches	1,456
	Duffner Ranches	1,089
	High Mtn Ranches	256
	High Mtn Ranches	3,200
	Huntsman Ranches	1,292
	J Bar L	410
	J Bar L	736
	Keith Fairbanks Ranches	40
	Lach, Montgomery	634
	Lee Martinell CO	78
	Matador Cattle CO	13,364
	Matador Cattle CO	661
	Munday, James/Elaine	734
	Munday, James/Elaine	963
	Munday, James/Elaine	238
	Raffety, Mike/Mark	305
	Raffety, Mike/Mark	167
	Robison, William/Norma	438
	Schuel, David	4,870
	Stibal Ranch	1,814
	Thomas Family Trust	633
	Thomas Family Trust	331
	Trapp Livestock	662
	Trapp Livestock	653
Water Users Irrigation	121	

Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge

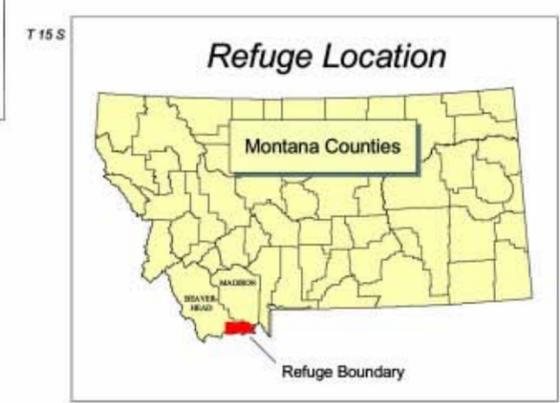
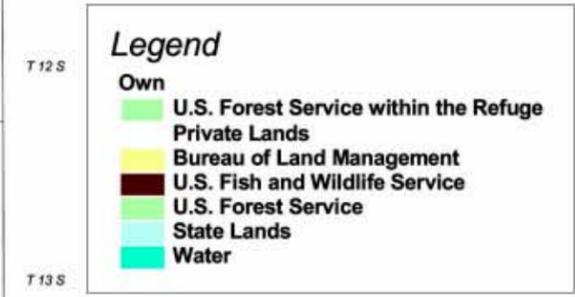
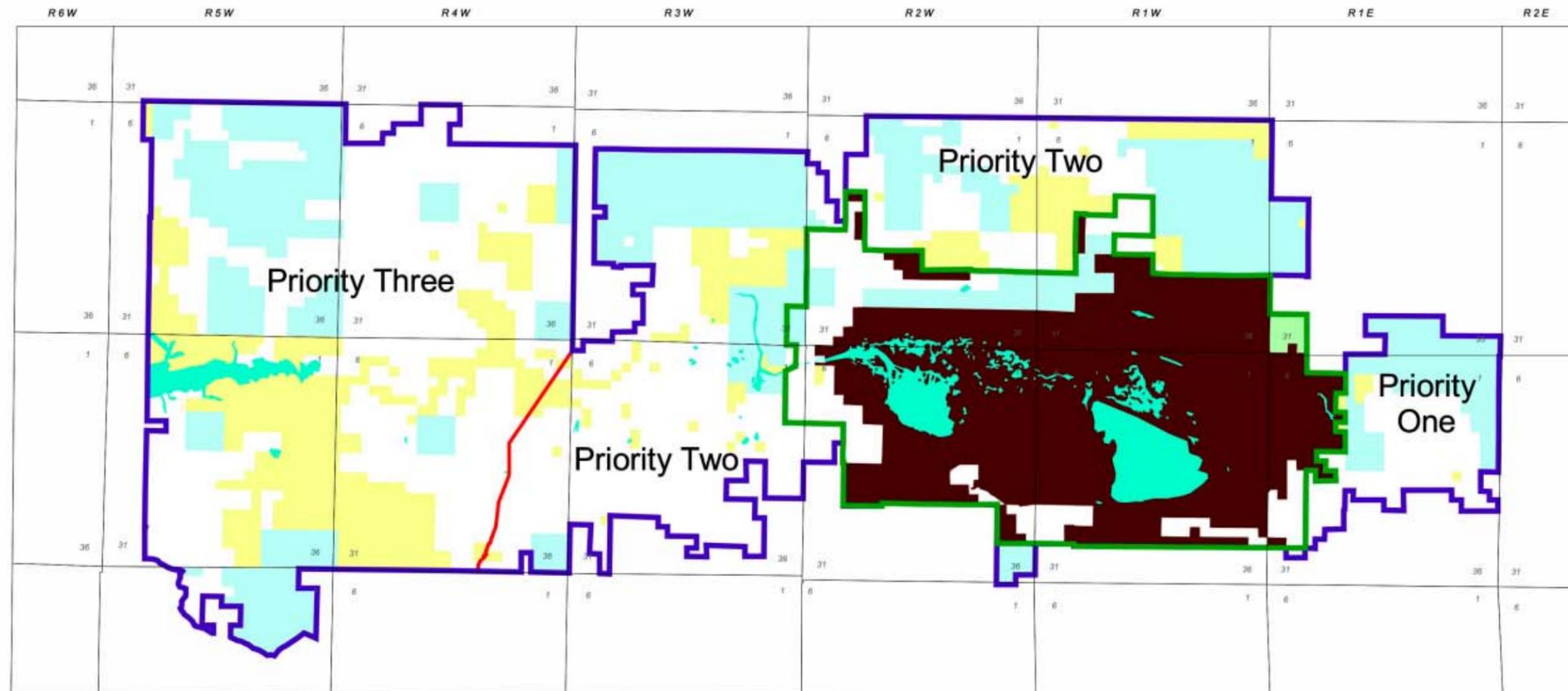


Figure 2 - Centennial Valley Ownership

