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# Land Protection Plan for the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area

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*Prepared by*

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# Land Protection Plan

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 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 acquisition priorities for the proposed easement program.

## *Introduction and Project Description*

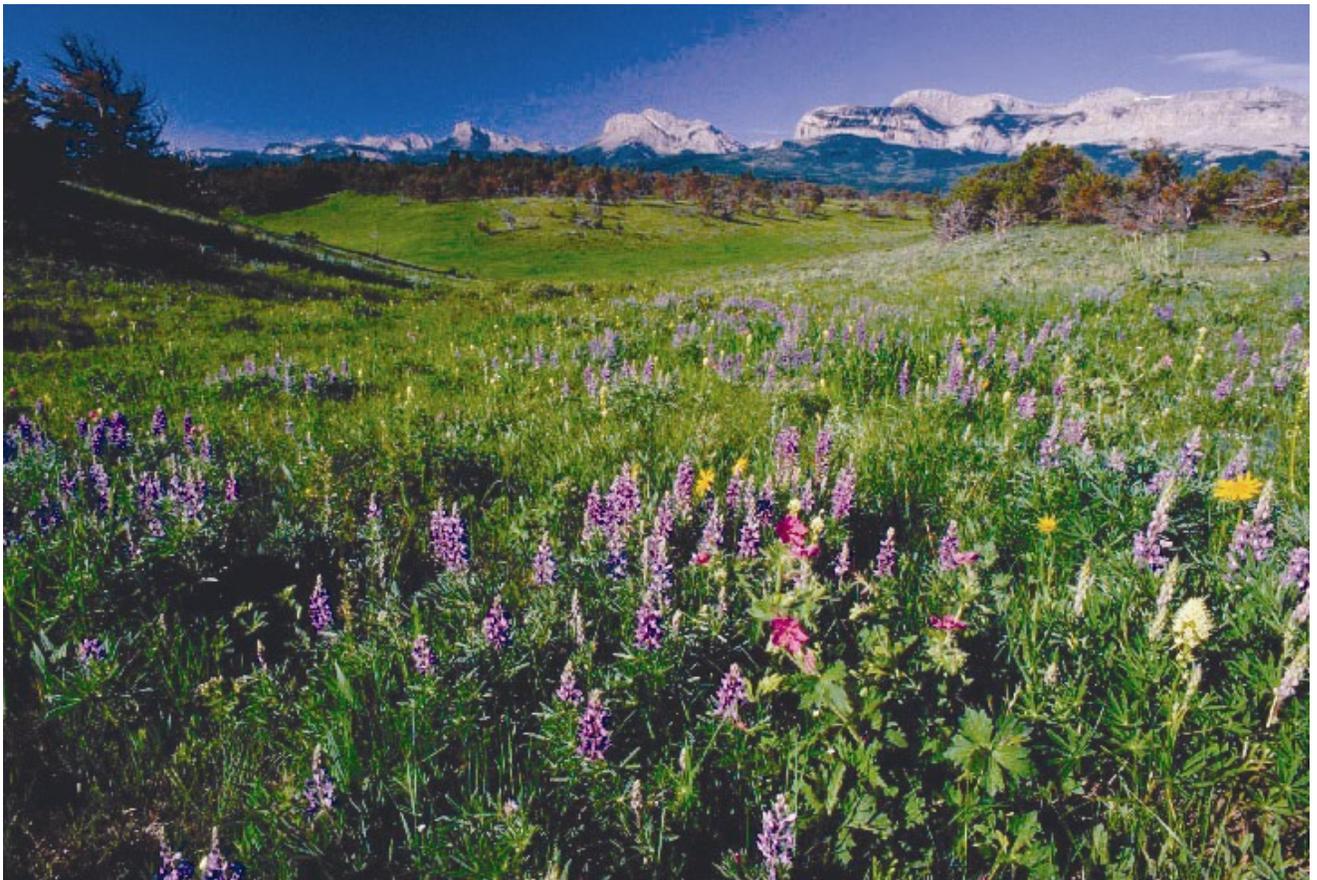
The proposed Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area is located along the eastern edge of the Continental Divide in northwestern Montana. This area is located approximately 65 miles northwest of Great Falls, Montana. The project area extends from Birch Creek along the northern boundary and southward to the South Fork of the Dearborn River watershed (figure 1). The boundary of the project area contains approximately 918,000 acres.

The Service intends to purchase or receive donated conservation easements on approximately 170,000 acres of private land from willing landowners within

the approved boundary. Conservation easements would be purchased on wetlands, grasslands, riparian corridors, and other important habitats. These easements would connect and expand existing protected conservation lands within the project area.

The project area encompasses one of the last truly “wild” landscapes in the lower 48 states. Lying in the shadow of the rugged Continental Divide, the Rocky Mountain Front hosts a rich mixture of glaciated wetlands (“prairie potholes”), riparian corridors, mixed-grass prairie, and coniferous forest. In this largely intact landscape comes a nearly complete historical suite of species—including waterfowl, bald eagle, black tern, long-billed curlew, Baird’s sparrow, American peregrine falcon, ferruginous hawk, grizzly bear, moose, gray wolf, and westslope cutthroat trout.

The fact that the front remains biologically and ecologically intact is a tribute to the area’s ranchers and residents, and other conservation-minded individuals and groups, who have long recognized what this unique and important landscape represents



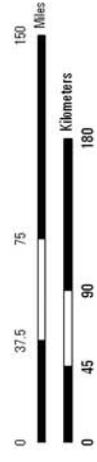
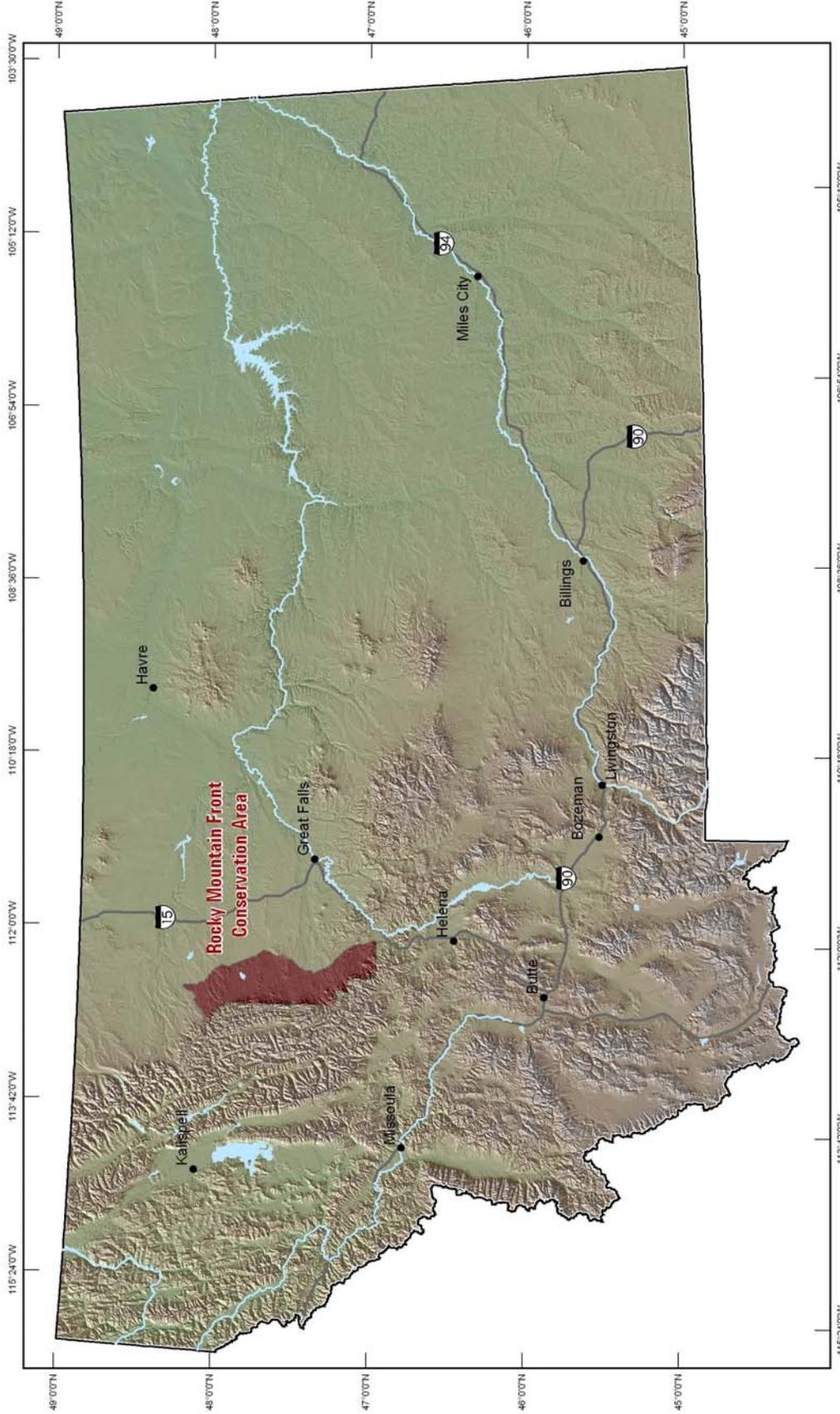
*Diverse habitats along the Rocky Mountain Front support a variety of wildlife.*  
Photograph by The Nature Conservancy

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

**Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area**  
*Lewis & Clark, Pondera and Teton Counties, Montana*



Vicinity Map



PRODUCED IN THE DIVISION OF REFUGE PLANNING  
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Figure 1. Vicinity map

for ranching and wildlife. The project aims to ensure habitat for wildlife remains intact in perpetuity and, by doing so, strengthen the ranching heritage of the front.

The purposes of this project are:

- to protect mountain foothills, uplands, and riparian and other wetland areas from future residential development
- to protect habitat integrity by preventing fragmentation
- to preserve landscape integrity to maintain, sustain, and enhance the historical plant, animal, and insect biodiversity of native prairie habitats, and to preserve the associated ranching heritage
- to minimize invasive plant infestations caused by soil disturbance, road building, and increased traffic resulting from rural housing development
- to minimize future demands on local government resources necessitated by providing services associated with increasing rural residential development

## *Threats to and Status of Resources*

The rural character of the Rocky Mountain Front is likely to undergo substantial change over the next 10–20 years. The proposed conservation easement program is a positive effort towards perpetual support of wildlife values. The program would protect large tracts of private lands from residential and commercial development that would undermine wildlife values and fragment habitats.

The Service, as well as conservation groups and people in the region, have voiced concern with the fragmentation of habitats in other areas of Montana. This habitat loss is due primarily to the conversion of lands, once significant to wildlife, to summer homes and associated human-use pressures. In a landscape largely intact, habitat fragmentation poses a substantial threat to the continued viability of wildlife populations within the front including grizzly bear recovery efforts.

Given the current strong market for scenic western properties, especially when cattle prices are low, ranches along the front will be vulnerable to sale and subdivision for residential and commercial development. The subdivision process is not difficult. Under Montana law, land may be split into lots of 160 acres or greater without local zoning review or approval. Moreover, with no county zoning in place, small-lot subdivisions are possible.

In addition to fragmentation, residential and commercial development can present a substantial threat to aquatic ecosystems. Housing developments can bring sewage-derived nutrient additions to streams and lakes. Development can result in wetland drainage, water diversion, invasive plant infestations, and introduction of nonnative fishes into aquatic ecosystems.

## *Proposed Action*

The Service intends to purchase or receive donated conservation easements on approximately 170,000 acres from willing landowners within the approved conservation area boundary. The only method of protection that would be used within the project boundary is a conservation easement. *No fee-title acquisition would be considered as part of this project.*

The Service has standard conservation easement agreements that have been used successfully in other areas of Montana. The Service would use the same language and terms for the conservation easements along the front to minimize confusion, for ease of enforcement, and to provide the necessary level of protection for the resources.

The easement program would rely on voluntary participation from landowners. Grazing would not be restricted on the land included in an easement contract. Grazing is compatible with the purpose of easement program and is an important part of the rich ranching heritage of the region.

Subdivision and development for residential, commercial, or industrial purposes would not be permitted. Alteration of the natural topography, conversion of native grassland to cropland, drainage of wetland, and establishment of game farms would be prohibited.

All land would remain in private ownership; property tax and invasive plant control would remain the responsibility of the landowner. Control of public access to the land would remain under the control of the landowner.

The easement program would be managed as part of the 10-county wetland management district (WMD), which is administered by the Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge near Great Falls, Montana.

WMD staff, to ensure landowner compliance with the easement terms, would check easements annually. This monitoring is important to ensure that easement properties do not undergo subdivision, development for home sites, or conversion of native rangeland to cropland.

## Protection Alternatives

Outside of Alaska, the Rocky Mountain Front is one of the last truly wild places in North America. The wildlife resources within the project area are tremendous and include almost all of the species present 200 years ago.

The current agricultural and ranching practices along the front, together with existing protected lands, have been critical in maintaining the biological integrity of the area. However, new threats from subdivision and development make the future uncertain.

For this project area of more than 918,000 acres, successful protection of the wildlife habitat and natural resources requires the cooperation and efforts of many partners. Alternatives for protection include no action, acquisition or management by others, and conservation easement acquisition by the Service.

### No Action

The EA explored the consequences of no further action by the Service. These consequences were considered unacceptable, leading to the selection of the preferred alternative to establish a conservation area along the front (alternative B of the EA).

### Acquisition or Management by Others

There are already more than 258,000 acres of habitat along the front with some level of protection. Most of this land has been acquired and is managed by other federal agencies or non-governmental conservation groups.

The Service's 170,000 acres of easements would be an important addition to these conservation efforts and key to maintaining the overall biological integrity of the project area. It is unlikely that other agencies or groups would protect the 170,000 acres if the Service does not create the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area.

### Conservation Easements

The easement program would be a tool to conserve up to 170,000 acres, complementing other efforts on the front. Conservation easements are the most cost-effective and socially acceptable means to ensure protection of important habitats within the project area.

Fee-title acquisition is not required for, nor is it preferable to, conservation easements along the front to achieve habitat protection. Fee-title acquisition would triple or quadruple the cost of land acquisition in addition to significant increases in management costs.

A strong and vibrant rural lifestyle, with ranching as the dominant land use, is one of the key components for ensuring habitat integrity and wildlife resource protection. Conservation easements are the only viable means to protect wildlife values on a landscape scale.

### Priority Zones

There are more than 650,800 acres of unencumbered private land within the project area that may be eligible for the Service's conservation easement program. The Service's 170,000-acre target is less than 30 percent of the available private land within the project area.

The Service has created three priority zones to focus the acquisition of easements on private lands that would provide the greatest benefit to wildlife.

Providing connectivity through wildlife habitat linkages to existing protected lands is a key element used to delineate priority areas within the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area.

Connectivity of habitats would help ensure that wide-ranging species such as grizzly bears have sufficient habitat to meet their life cycle requirements. The grizzly bear is a good "umbrella species" for other species within the project area. This means that, if grizzly bears have adequate habitat protection, the needs of a larger, more diverse suite of species would also be met.

The Service and its partners recognize that there is tremendous opportunity to expand existing blocks of conservation lands within the project area. This includes state or federal fee-title ownership and private lands already under conservation easement. This also includes conservation-oriented, non-governmental organization ownership (e.g., The Nature Conservancy and Boone and Crockett Club).

More than 258,000 acres of public and private lands in the project area currently have some form of conservation protection in place. This represents approximately 28 percent of the area.

Within these protected lands, the Service has identified "core" lands that provide a high level of existing protection for wildlife and natural resources. These areas provide good anchors from which to build the easement program and increase connectivity.

Core areas include:

- The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Pine Bluff Swamp
- the Boone and Crockett Club's Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch
- several large state wildlife management areas

- Bureau of Land Management lands
- Bureau of Reclamation lands
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service lands
- private lands already under conservation easement

The project area has been split into three priority zones (figure 2) for acquiring conservation easements using the following criteria:

- connectivity to other protected lands
- biological significance to grizzly bears (as umbrella species for other species)

**Priority 1**—This includes the area north of Willow Creek to the North Fork Birch Creek drainage, and to the east. The eastern boundary was based on the best available information about the biological needs of grizzly bears, drawing on expert opinion. Within the priority 1 zone, approximately 179,000 acres of public and private land currently have some level of protection. Key anchors, which can be expanded on

to increase connectivity, are the state wildlife management areas, TNC lands, Lewis and Clark National Forest, Boone and Crockett lands, and private lands with existing conservation easements.

**Priority 2**—Priority zone 2 extends from Willow Creek to the south, to just south of the South Fork of Dearborn River. Within this zone, there are approximately 33,000 acres of public and private lands with some level of protection. The key anchor is the Lewis and Clark National Forest. Service easements can provide a key linkage to the front for wildlife using the national forest.

**Priority 3**—This includes the remaining areas within the project area. This zone is part of the front ecoregion, and contains large continuous blocks of native prairie.

Table 1 depicts the acreages within the priority zones, including those identified as potential for inclusion in the easement program.

**Table 1. Habitat protection priority zones for the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area, Montana**

<i>Zone</i>	<i>Total Area (acres)</i>	<i>Protected Core Lands<sup>1</sup> (acres)</i>	<i>Other Protected Lands<sup>2</sup> (acres)</i>	<i>Private Lands Potentially Eligible for Easements (acres)</i>
Priority 1	415,900	115,026	63,661	234,874
Priority 2	181,438	7,711	25,157	147,649
Priority 3	321,038	13,110	33,948	268,286
Total acreage	918,378	135,847	122,766	650,809

<sup>1</sup>Includes all federal fee-ownership, state wildlife management areas, TNC and Boone and Crockett Club lands, and all lands with conservation easements.

<sup>2</sup>Includes Montana state trust lands.

## Acquisition Alternatives

The Service proposes to acquire conservation easements, principally by using funds appropriated under the Land and Water Conservation Act (LWCF). LWCF funds apply more widely than other sources for protection of uplands and grasslands.

The federal monies used to acquire conservation easements from the LWCF are derived primarily from oil and gas leases on the outer continental shelf, motorboat fuel tax revenues, and sale of surplus federal property. General taxes do not generate LWCF funds.

Migratory Bird Conservation Fund (MBCF) monies may also be used within the project area. Since the early 1970s, the Service has worked to protect waterfowl and other wildlife habitat on private land along the front through the small wetlands

acquisition program. Conservation easements along the front protect more than 12,000 acres of wetlands and 9,000 acres of important upland habitat on private land. However, much of the land along the front is not eligible for these funds, which limits the use of this tool within the project area.

Other sources (such as TNC, Ducks Unlimited, North American Wetland Conservation Act grants, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, and other private and public partners) may fund management activities associated with easements.

## Coordination

The proposed Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area has been discussed with landowners, conservation organizations, government officials, and other interested groups and individuals. The proposal and associated EA address the protection of

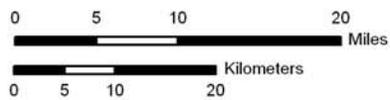
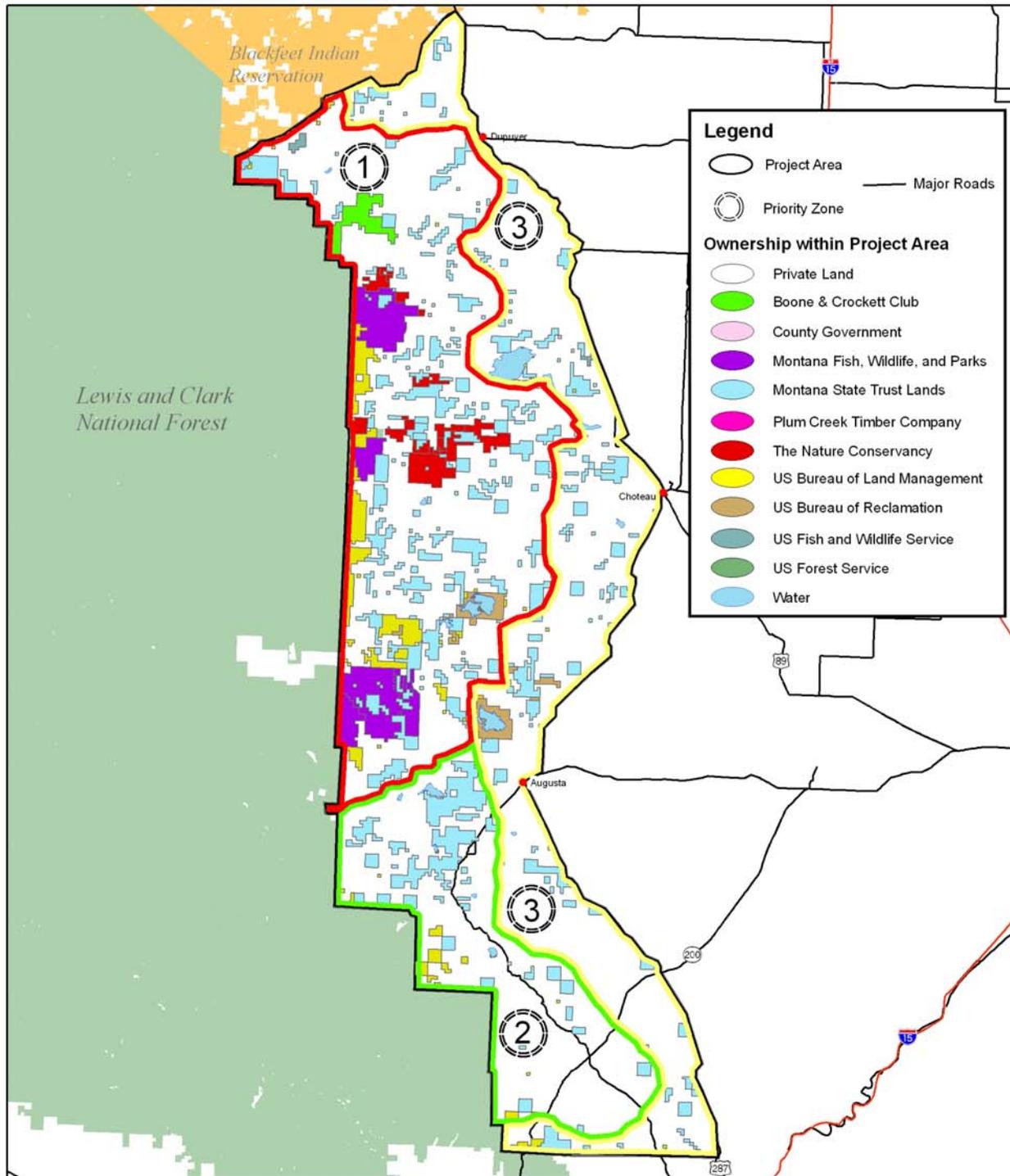


U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

**Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area**

Pondera, Lewis & Clark, Teton Counties, Montana

Priority Zones



**Figure 2. Priority zones for the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area**

native habitats, primarily through acquisition of conservation easements by the Service under the direction of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Open houses were held in Augusta, Choteau, and Great Falls, Montana on December 14, 15, and 16, 2004. Public comments were taken to identify issues to be analyzed for the proposed project.

Approximately 100 landowners, citizens, and elected representatives attended and most expressed positive support for the project.

In addition, the Service's field staff has contacted local government officials, other public agencies, sportsman and woman groups, and conservation groups, all of which have expressed an interest in and a desire to protect the front from the pressures brought about by rural subdivisions.

## *Socio-cultural Considerations*

The economy of the front is primarily agrarian and cattle ranches dominate the private lands within the project area. Ownerships are relatively large in size (2,000- to 25,000-acre blocks), which helps maintain this intact landscape.

The human population is sparse and towns are widely scattered. Private lands are used for hunting, with elk-hunting season bringing the most people to the front. A seasonal influx of tourists is attracted to the front for opportunities to bird watch, mountain bike, horseback ride, backpack, camp, canoe, fish, and view archeological and paleontological resources.

Choteau and Augusta are "gateway" communities for recreational activities on the Lewis and Clark National Forest, Bob Marshall and Scapegoat Wildernesses, and Glacier National Park.

Historically, residents and county governments have been concerned about the amount of taxes paid to the counties when land protection programs such as this occur. Because this project is a conservation easement program, the land enrolled does not change hands and taxes paid to the counties by the landowner are not affected.

Over the short-term, money paid by the Service for a conservation easement becomes another source of income for the landowner, with a portion of those dollars likely to be spent locally in the region. In addition, development of rural landscapes often leads to increased demand for services and higher costs to rural counties. These costs likely would not be incurred if the rural landscape were to remain intact.

In addition, the use of conservation easements precludes the necessity for county zoning within the program area. Proximity of protected lands also tends to enhance the property value of adjoining lands.

The ranchers' livelihoods depend on natural resources (grass, water, and open space). The key to protecting the front lies primarily in sustaining the current pattern of ranching and low-density use. The easement program is not expected to cause any significant changes to the socio-cultural climate along the front but, rather, would help sustain the current condition.

## *Summary of Proposed Action*

The rural character of the Rocky Mountain Front is likely to undergo substantial change over the next 10–20 years as pressures from residential and commercial development continue to increase.

The Service and its partners view the front as one of the last great wild places to view undisturbed, native habitat and the plethora of plant and animal species that reside there.

The Service intends to purchase or receive donated conservation easements on approximately 170,000 acres from willing landowners within the approved project boundary. The only method of protection that would be used within the project boundary is a conservation easement. Easements would be acquired principally using funds appropriated under the LWCF.

