

2 Alternatives, Including the Proposed Action



Ear Mountain in the Rocky Mountain Front.

This chapter describes the two alternatives identified for this project:

- alternative A, the no-action alternative
- alternative B, the proposed action, giving the Service the authority to expand the boundary of the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area

The alternatives consider the effects of expanding the conservation project within the boundaries identified for this project area in this EA.

ALTERNATIVE A (NO ACTION)

The Service started a conservation easement project in the Rocky Mountain Front in 2005. The project authorized the Service to purchase easements from willing sellers on up to 170,000 acres of private land in Lewis and Clark, Teton, and Pondera counties.

To date the Service has acquired easements on nearly 28,000 acres within the current project boundary using LWCF funding. The Service will continue to secure conservation easements on the remaining 142,000 acres of the acquisition goal. When the 170,000 easement-acre goal is reached, no new easements would be acquired with LWCF money.

Habitat enhancement or restoration projects on private lands such as water developments, grazing systems, and grassland management could continue through cooperative efforts with private landowners.

Private efforts by land trusts will continue to secure conservation easements.

ALTERNATIVE B (PROPOSED ACTION)

This proposal involves acquisition of up to an additional 125,000 acres of conservation easements within an expanded project boundary encompassing approximately 918,000 acres. No land would be purchased in fee title under this project.

The Service would seek to purchase conservation easements from willing sellers on privately owned mountain foothills, wetlands, stream courses, and native grasslands. Conservation easement contracts would specify perpetual protection of habitat for trust species and would restrict development.

Prioritization of areas considered for conservation easements within the project areas would be based on the biological needs of the wildlife species of concern (migratory birds, and threatened and endangered species), the threat of development, connectivity with other protected lands, and the quality of habitat types (including riparian areas, wetlands, and native grasslands) for trust species. The land protection plan (LPP) describes these priorities in detail.

The proposed easement expansion project would rely on voluntary participation from landowners. Grazing would not be restricted on the land included in the easement contract.

Subdividing and development for residential, commercial, or industrial purposes would not be permitted on properties under a conservation easement. Alteration of the natural topography, conversion of native grassland to cropland, drainage of wetlands, and establishment of game farms would also be prohibited.

Conservation easement lands would remain in private ownership; property tax and land management, including invasive weed control, would remain the responsibility of the landowner. The Service would seek to provide participating landowners with additional assistance with invasive plant control. Control of public access to the land would remain under the control of the landowner.

The project area would be managed by the Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex staff headquartered in Great Falls, Montana. The Benton Lake NWR Complex staff would be responsible for monitoring and administering all easements on private land. Monitoring would consist of periodically reviewing land status in meetings with landowners or land managers to ensure that the stipulations of the conservation easement are being met. Photo documentation and a baseline inventory study would be used at the time the easements are established to document baseline conditions.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT STUDIED

There was no further analysis for the following two alternatives.

VOLUNTARY LANDOWNER ZONING

Landowners would voluntarily petition the county commissioners to create a zoning district to direct the types of development that can occur within an area. This is “citizen-initiated” zoning. For example, landowners would petition the county government to zone an area as agricultural, precluding certain types of non agricultural development such as residential subdivision. “Citizen initiatives” are rarely used and this alternative was not studied further.

COUNTY ZONING

In a traditional approach used by counties and municipalities, the local government would use zoning as a means of designating what type of development could occur in an area. Most counties in Montana prefer not to use this method and the alternative was not studied further. Comments received from county commissioners to date have expressed support instead for conservation easements (alternative B) as a means of maintaining rural area values and potentially reducing the need for future zoning. In addition, zoning would be subject to frequent changes, and would not ensure the long-term prevention of residential or commercial development in the proposed conservation areas.