

2 Alternatives

This chapter describes the two alternatives identified for this project:

- no-action alternative
- proposed action, giving the Service the authority to expand the boundary of the Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area

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

ALTERNATIVE A (NO ACTION)

The Service started a conservation easement program in the Blackfoot Valley in 1994. Conservation easements are currently available through the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program (SWAP) and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The current project boundary is 165,000 acres with a goal of acquiring easements on 23,500 acres within the project boundary.

To date, the Service has acquired approximately 20,000 acres of easements within the current project boundary. The Service would continue to secure conservation easements on the remaining 3,500 acres of the acquisition goal. When the 23,500 easement acre goal is reached, no new easements would be acquired with LWCF money.

Alternative A assumes the management of habitat benefiting migratory birds and other wildlife will remain at current levels. Enhancement or restoration projects on private land such as water development, grazing systems, and grassland management would continue through cooperative efforts with private landowners. There will be no effort made to expand current conservation areas.

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

ALTERNATIVE B (PROPOSED ACTION)

The Blackfoot Valley WMA is a landscape conservation strategy to protect one of the last undeveloped, low elevation river valley ecosystems in western Montana. The Service proposes to expand the existing boundary of the Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area from 165,000 acres to approximately 824,024, and to acquire an additional 80,000 acres within that project boundary. The project

area provides a vital habitat corridor between existing U.S. Forest Service boundaries, Bureau of Land Management properties, state wildlife management areas, Service waterfowl production areas, Nature Conservancy easements, Service conservation easements, and Partners for Fish and Wildlife projects.

The Service would seek to purchase conservation easements from willing sellers on privately owned land. Conservation easement contracts would specify perpetual protection of habitat for trust species and 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 quality of habitat types (including riparian areas, wetlands, and native grasslands) for trust species. The Service generally focuses on parcels >160 acres, however parcels <160 acres may be considered for conservation easements if unique biological values exist. The land protection plan describes these priorities in detail.

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



Marbled godwit.

Development for residential, and commercial or industrial purposes, such as energy and aggregate extraction 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.

No fee-title acquisition will occur. Conservation easement lands would remain in private ownership; property tax and land management 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 by the Benton Lake NWR Complex staff headquartered in Great Falls, Montana. The Benton Lake NWR Complex staff would be responsible for monitoring

and administration of all easements on private land. Monitoring would consist of periodically reviewing land status in meetings with the landowners or land managers to ensure that the stipulations of the conservation easement are being met. Photo documentation would be used at the time the easements are established to document baseline conditions. An estimated 1.67 full-time equivalent (FTE) employees would be hired at an average salary of \$54,911 per employee under this management alternative.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT STUDIED

No other alternatives were considered.

