1 Purpose of and Need for Action

USFWS

Sandhill cranes in forest opening.

The Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is one of the last undeveloped, low elevation river valley ecosystems in western Montana. It is part of the Crown of the Continent ecosystem (CoCE), which includes the larger Columbia Basin and Upper Missouri/Yellowstone Rivers watersheds (see figure 1).

Within the CoCE, an exceptional diversity of wetland types occurs including: major riparian areas, smaller riparian tributaries, glacial prairie potholes, lakes, bogs, fens, swamps, and boreal peatlands. The lowlands support over 170 different species of wetland plants.

In the Blackfoot Valley, wetland densities exceed 100 basins per square mile. The project area includes over 34,000 miles of rivers, creeks, and streams. Along the elevation gradient, large expanses of fescue grasslands phase into alpine meadows or sagebrush steppe, which then transition into montane forests consisting of white pine, Douglas-fir, and ponderosa pine. These transitional zones of valley floors to montane forests are extremely important to fish and wildlife.

The continued presence of this large expanse of intact habitat and historical wildlife corridors will benefit federal trust species such as grizzly bear, gray wolf, wolverine, pine martin, and Canada lynx; migratory birds such as harlequin ducks, red-necked grebes, Brewer's sparrow, black tern, olive-sided flycatcher, peregrine falcons, greater sandhill cranes, and trumpeter swans; and fish such as bull trout. The Blackfoot Valley WMA provides excellent habitat for black bear, elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, moose, mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, wolverine, fisher, and a wide variety of small mammals.

PROPOSAL

The Blackfoot Valley WMA easement project is a landscape conservation strategy to protect one of the last undeveloped, low elevation river valley ecosystems in western Montana (see figure 2). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) will expand the existing boundary of the Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area from 165,000 acres to 824,024. The Blackfoot Valley provides a vital habitat corridor between existing U.S. Forest Service (USFS) 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 (PFW) projects. A protection project based on obtaining conservation easements began for the Blackfoot Valley in 1994, and it has experienced a great deal of support and success. There is new opportunity in the Blackfoot Valley for easements that lie outside of the existing boundary. The proposed expansion involves the acquisition of up to an additional 80,000 acres of conservation easements from willing sellers on private land

Figure 1. Crown of the Continent ecosystem.

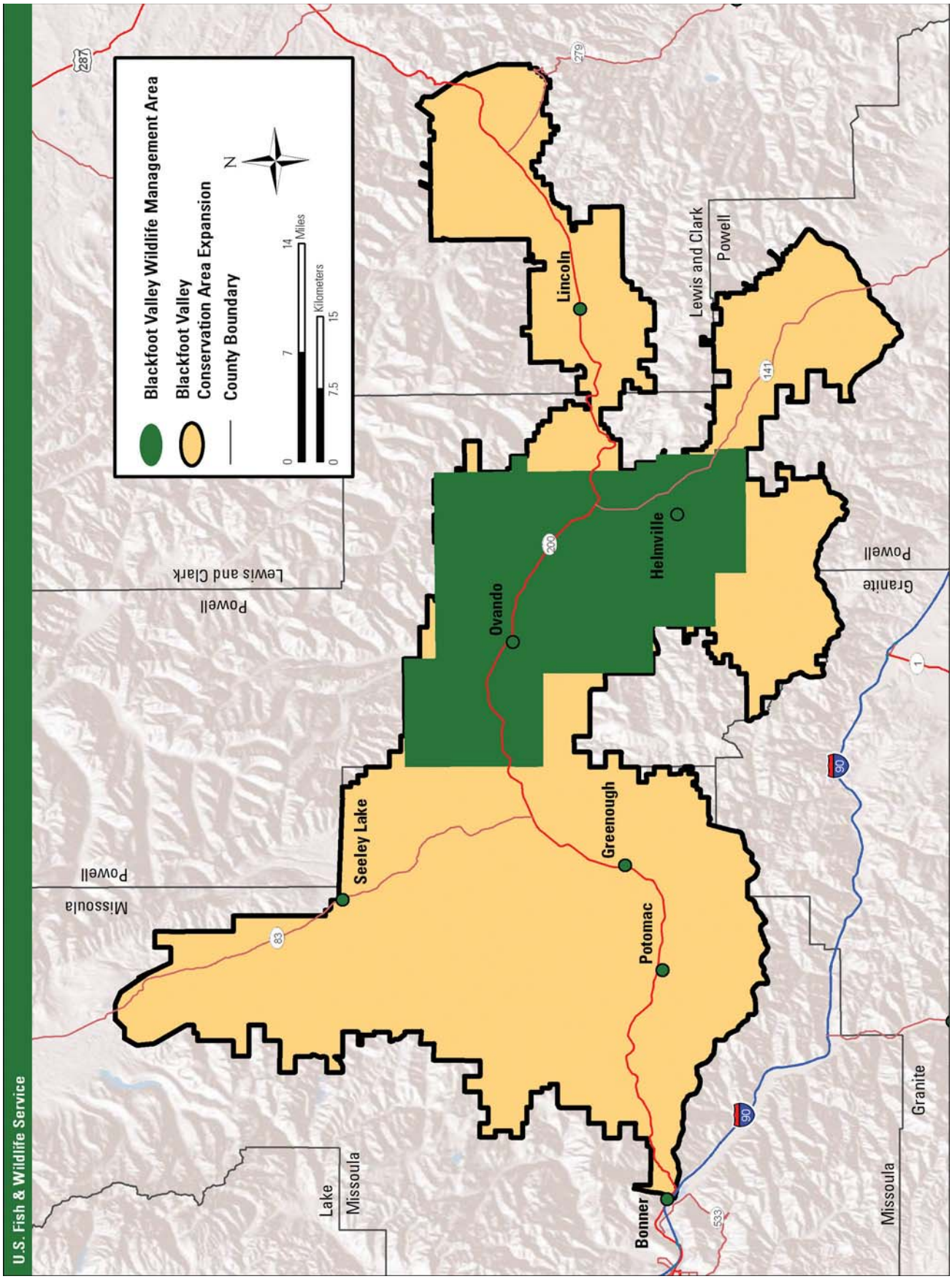

Figure 2. Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area expansion project area.

within the watershed. The project also continues to complement other components of a broad partnership known as the "Blackfoot Challenge."

PROJECT AREA

The Blackfoot Valley WMA project area encompasses an 824,024-acre ecosystem that includes portions of Missoula, Powell, and Lewis and Clark counties (see figure 2). Parts of these counties make up the Blackfoot River watershed in western Montana. The watershed is bordered to the east by the Continental Divide, to the south by the Garnet Mountains, to the north by the Bob Marshall and Lincoln-Scapegoat wilderness areas, and to the west by the Rattlesnake Wilderness Area.

The watershed is located at the southern edge of the CoCE, a 10 million-acre area of the Northern Rocky Mountains that extends north into Canada and includes Waterton-Glacier International Peace Park, Canada's Castle Wilderness, the Bob Marshall–Great Bear–Scapegoat Wilderness Complex, parts of the Flathead and Blackfeet Indian Reservations, Bureau of Land Management lands, and significant acreage of state and private lands. The watershed provides critical connections between the CoCE and the Selway/Bitterroot Ecosystem to the south. The center of the project area lies about 55 miles east of Missoula.

DECISIONS TO BE MADE

Based on the analysis in this environmental assessment (EA), the Service's director of region 6, with the concurrence of the director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, will make three decisions:

- Determine whether the Service should expand the existing boundary of the Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area.
- If yes, select an approved, conservation easement project boundary that best fulfills the habitat protection purposes.
- If yes, determine whether the selected alternative will have a significant impact on the quality of the human environment. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 requires this decision. If the quality of the human environment would not be significantly affected, a finding of no significant impact (FONSI) will be signed and made available to the public. If the alternative would have a significant impact, completion of an environmental impact statement would be required to address further those impacts.

ISSUES IDENTIFIED AND SELECTED FOR ANALYSIS

An open house public meeting was held in Ovando, Montana on May 19, 2010. Public comments were taken to identify issues to be analyzed for the proposed project. Approximately fifteen landowners, citizens, and elected representatives attended the meetings and all expressed positive support for the project. Factsheet and flyers were posted in the Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) Complex headquarter's visitor center notifying visitors of the proposed project. Project information was made available on the refuge and regional planning websites. Five individuals, two agencies, and two organizations provided comments during the scoping period.

Many of the comments received addressed the need for a balance between natural and cultural systems. There are two main categories of commonly expressed issues and concerns, biological and socioeconomic.

Biological Issues

The biological issues mentioned were

- the impacts of habitat fragmentation due to residential development;
- concerns about the effect of habitat fragmentation on wildlife habitat and water resources.

Wildlife Habitat

Habitat fragmentation is a concern not only in the Blackfoot Valley, but also in other areas of Montana. Given the current strong market for scenic western properties, especially when cattle prices are low, there was concern that ranches in the Blackfoot Valley will be vulnerable to sale and subdivision for residential and commercial development.

Housing development, and the associated infrastructure, can disrupt wildlife migration patterns. Nesting raptors and grassland bird species may be especially vulnerable to habitat fragmentation in the Blackfoot Valley.

Riparian habitat loss due to development was a key concern. Riparian habitat is a key component to grizzly bear movement between the mountains and valley. Livestock grazing and ranching practices tend to be compatible with grizzly bears, which move unimpeded up and down riparian corridors. Riparian areas also provide nest sites for many species of migratory birds that may be negatively impacted by development.

Water Resources

Residential development in the Blackfoot Valley presents a potentially significant threat to the aquatic ecosystem. Housing developments can bring about sewage-derived nutrient additions to streams and lakes, additional wetland drainage, water diversion, and introduction of invasive species.

Socioeconomic Issues

Socioeconomic issues mentioned were

- the need to keep private land in private ownership;
- the impacts of conservation easements on local community centers and their ability to grow;
- public access for hunting or other recreational opportunities.

Landownership and Land Use

There was concern that perpetual easements will negatively affect future generations of landowners. Specifically, the concern was that conservation easements will limit the choices of future landowners, even though they may have paid as much for the land as if it had no restrictions.

There were concerns that perpetual easements will lower the resale value of the land.

There was concern that the selection process will favor landowners whose properties are larger in size over smaller, but biologically valuable, properties.

Concern also exists over "boxing in" rural communities which could limit the opportunity for development. Suggestions included the placement of a no-easement buffer around rural communities to ensure potential growth.

Public Use

The public's right to use or access lands encumbered with a conservation easement is a concern. Landowners were concerned they would be forced to allow the public to access their land for hunting, fishing, or other recreational uses.

Issues Not Selected for Detailed Analysis

There were two issues that were not analyzed in this EA.

Property Tax

Historically, there has been concern about the amount of tax generated to the counties when land protection projects take place. Lands encumbered by a conservation easement remain in private ownership. Property taxes paid by the landowner to the county are not affected.

Development of rural landscapes often leads to increased demand for services and higher costs to rural counties. There will generally be an offset of any perceived reduction in the tax base since the county will not incur the expense of providing services to rural developments. The use of conservation easements serves an additional function since easements preclude the necessity for county zoning in the project area.

Nomenclature

During the scoping for this project, it became apparent that the name "Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area" causes confusion among the public, local agencies, and organizations. Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) commonly use the term "wildlife management area" to designate wildlife areas that are managed by the state. When both the Service and MFWP use this term, many people are confused about which agency is responsible for managing the area.

The naming of National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS) units is an internal administrative action, and does not require an environmental analysis under NEPA. As such, the planning team pursued a name change for this unit in a separate process from this EA. The team recommended the new name for this unit to be the "Blackfoot Valley Conservation Area" which is consistent with other easement projects in the NWRS.

NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM AND AUTHORITIES

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to preserve a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. The Blackfoot Valley WMA expansion will be managed as part of the Refuge System in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 and other relevant legislation, executive orders, regulations, policies, and management plans such as:

- Land and Water Conservation Fund Act (1965)
- Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1918)
- Endangered Species Act (1973)
- Bald Eagle Protection Act (1940)
- Migratory Non-game Birds of Management Concern in the U.S. (2002)
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Act (1956)
- North American Waterfowl Management Plan (1994)

RELATED ACTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

Landownership in the watershed is 54% federal (U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management), 10% state (Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation; Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks; and University of Montana), 31% private, and 5% by corporate timber company (Plum Creek Timber Company). Most of the middle and high elevation forested lands within the watershed are administered by the USFS. Private lands are concentrated in the low elevation portions of the watershed. Landownership patterns in the watershed have changed in recent years due to large-scale transfers of Plum Creek Timber Company (PCTC) lands.

In 2002, the Blackfoot Challenge initiated a three-phase landscape-level effort to protect, restore, and enhance 37,000 acres of biologically significant wetlands (5,310 acres) and associated uplands (31,690 acres) for migratory birds and other wildlife species by 2015. The Blackfoot Watershed I, Montana Project was completed in 2007, resulting in protection, restoration, and enhancement of a total of 16,794 acres (3,027 acres of wetland and 13,767 acres of associated upland). The Blackfoot Watershed II, Montana Project is currently in progress.

In 2003, the Blackfoot Challenge and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) initiated the Blackfoot Community Project, which involved the purchase and resale of 89,215 acres of PCTC lands based on a community-driven disposition plan. The lands encompassed all PCTC lands from the Blackfoot River headwaters near Rogers Pass to the Clearwater drainage. Approximately 75% of the lands have been or will be transferred into federal or state ownership and 25% into private ownership.

In 2008, the Nature Conservancy and the Trust for Public Land entered into another agreement with PCTC called the Montana Legacy Project, to purchase 312,500 acres of timberland in western Montana. As part of the Montana Legacy Project, a total of 71,754 acres in the Clearwater and Potomac valleys of the watershed will be purchased and resold to public agencies and/or private buyers. The majority of these lands are intended to be resold to the USFS and Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC).

In 2009, the Blackfoot Challenge and Trout Unlimited prepared a Blackfoot Sub-basin Plan for the Northwest Power and Conservation Council. The vision for the Blackfoot Sub-basin is for a place characterized by dynamic natural processes that create and sustain diverse and resilient communities of native fish and wildlife and the aquatic and terrestrial habitats on which they depend, thereby assuring substantial ecological, economic, and cultural benefits. The efforts to conserve and enhance those natural resources will be implemented through a cooperative partnership between public and private interests that will seek to sustain not only those natural resources, but the rural way of life of the Blackfoot River Valley for present and future generations (Blackfoot Challenge and Trout Unlimited 2009). Expansion of the Service's easement project boundary supports and complements this vision.

HABITAT PROTECTION AND EASEMENT ACQUISITION PROCESS

Habitat protection will occur through the purchase of conservation easements. It is the long-established policy of the Service to acquire minimum interest in land from willing sellers to achieve habitat acquisition goals.

The acquisition authority for the proposed action is the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742 a-742j). The federal money used to acquire conservation easements from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) are derived primarily from oil and gas leases on the outer continental shelf, motorboat fuel tax revenues, and sale of surplus federal property. There could be additional funds to acquire lands, waters, or interest therein for fish and wildlife conservation purposes through congressional appropriations, the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund, the North American Waterfowl Conservation Act funds, and donations from nonprofit organizations.

The basic considerations in acquiring an easement interest in private land are the biological significance of the area, existing and anticipated threats to wildlife resources, and landowner interest in the project. The purchase of conservation easements will occur with willing sellers only and will be subject to available funding.