

Proposed Expansion of Conservation Easement Program

Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to protect one of the last undeveloped, low-elevation, river valley ecosystems in western Montana by expanding the existing boundary of the federally designated Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area from 165,000 acres to 824,024 acres.

The federal Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area (“Blackfoot Valley area”) is managed through a conservation easement program where easements are purchased from willing sellers within the wildlife management area. Started in 1994, the purpose of the program is to protect a vital habitat corridor between federally protected lands, state wildlife management areas, waterfowl production areas, voluntary perpetual easements, and private lands that are part of Partners for Fish and Wildlife projects.

Expansion of the Blackfoot Valley area boundary and associated easement program would protect unique plant communities and help prevent the

listing of several candidate species. The program would continue to complement other components of a broad partnership known as the “Blackfoot Challenge.”

The Blackfoot Challenge is a landowner-based group that coordinates management of the Blackfoot River, its tributaries, and adjacent lands. Organized locally, the group is known nationally as a model for preserving the rural character and natural beauty of a watershed. Expansion of the easement program boundary for the Blackfoot Valley area supports the vision of the Blackfoot Challenge.

How would the conservation easement program work?

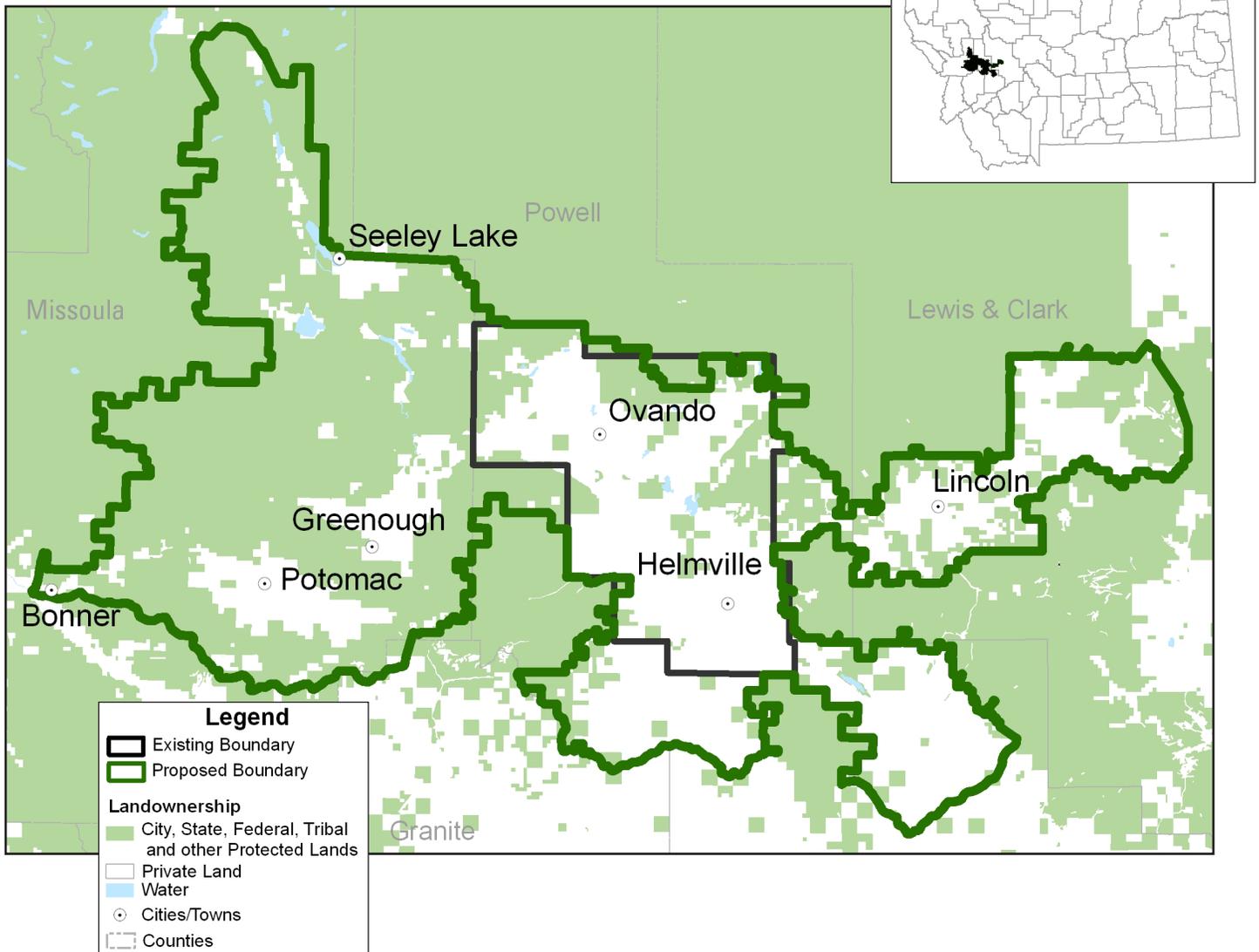
The proposed expansion encompasses an 824,024-acre ecosystem that includes portions of Missoula, Powell, and Lewis and Clark counties. The boundary expansion would provide opportunities for easement acquisition from willing sellers.

Conservation easements are voluntary legal agreements between landowners and government agencies or qualified conservation organizations. These easements limit the type and amount of development that may take place on a property in the future. Service easements are perpetual and typically prohibit subdivision and commercial development activities but allow for continued agricultural uses such as livestock grazing and haying. Conservation easements not only protect important wildlife habitat but also help maintain the working ranches and agricultural lifestyle of the area.

Under conservation easements, the land ownership and property rights including control of public access would remain with the participating landowner. In addition, participating properties remain on local tax rolls. Easement values are determined by appraisal and typically are about one-third of the property’s full-market value.



Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area, Montana



What resources would benefit from the conservation easement program?

The Blackfoot River watershed—with more than 100 wetland basins per square mile—is one of the most biologically diverse and intact landscapes in the western United States. The watershed supports an estimated 250 species of birds, 63 species of mammals, 5 species of amphibians, 6 species of reptiles, and 25 species of fish.

Because of its rural and largely intact nature, the watershed retains the full complement of large mammals, many of which have been eliminated from portions of their historical ranges. The Blackfoot River watershed provides excellent habitat for black bear, Rocky

Mountain elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, mountain lion, and wolverine.

Quality habitat supports migratory birds during breeding, nesting, migration, and wintering. Benefitting species include common loon, trumpeter swan, harlequin duck, hooded merganser, Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, black-backed woodpecker, flammulated owl, brown creeper, and western Montana's largest population of Brewer's sparrow—one of the state's highest priority songbirds.

The Blackfoot River watershed hosts the largest black tern colony documented in Montana. The watershed is perhaps

also the best breeding and nesting area for the long-billed curlew in western Montana. This species is declining nationally and a priority in shorebird and Partners in Flight conservation plans.

There are 12 native fish species and 13 non-native fish species in the watershed, as well as several hybrid salmonids.

Does the Service have other land conservation efforts in the area?

The Service has successfully used its conservation easement program to work cooperatively with private landowners to conserve more than 100,000 acres along the Rocky Mountain Front and in the Blackfoot and Centennial valleys of western Montana. This approach enjoys broad support from the conservation community, landowners, and Montana's congressional delegation.

The Service is looking for opportunities to strategically link areas for preservation of wildlife corridors and significant fish and wildlife habitat. In addition to the Blackfoot Valley, the Service has identified other areas for landscape conservation planning within this region of Montana including the Rocky Mountain Front and the Swan Valley.

These areas share exceptional diversity of habitat types including riparian areas, glacial prairie, potholes, lakes, bogs, fens, swamps, and boreal peat lands. Transitional zones between valley floors and mountains are extremely important to fish and wildlife. Large expanses of fescue grasslands phase into alpine

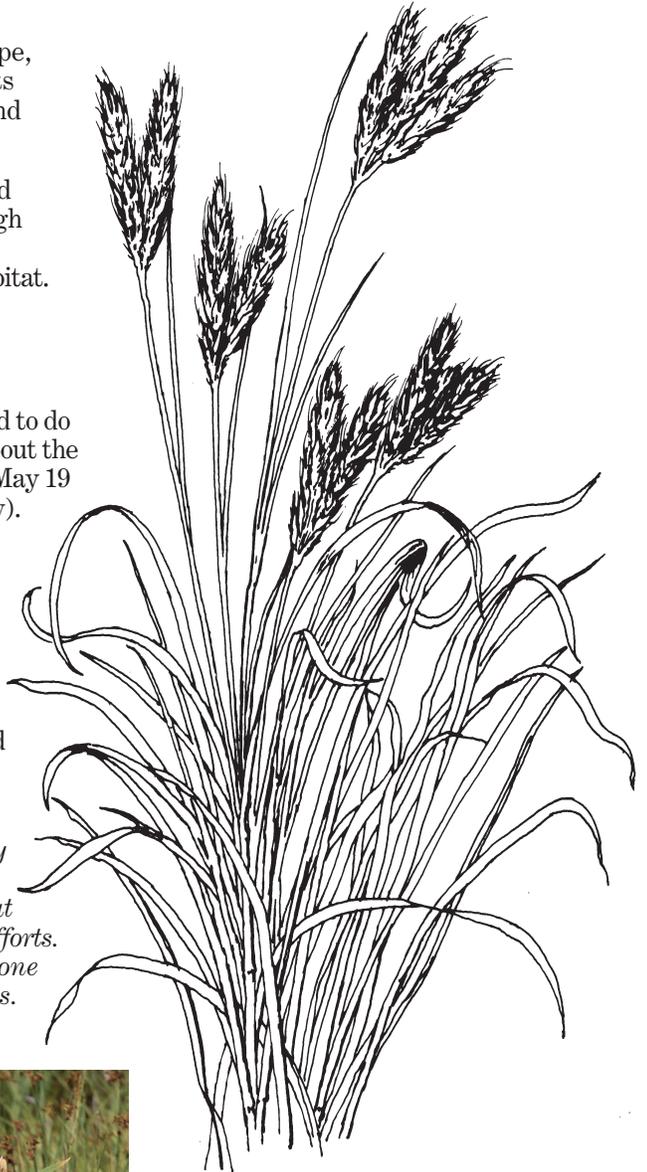
meadows or sagebrush steppe, which transitions into forests of white pine, Douglas-fir, and ponderosa pine.

The proposed projects would be carried out mainly through conservation easements to preserve essential wildlife habitat.

What is the next step in the process?

We want to hear from you, and to do that we will hold a meeting about the Blackfoot Valley proposal on May 19 (see meeting schedule below). At the meeting, you will be able to meet with Service personnel, learn about the proposal, and provide input. We also encourage you to comment through letters, emails, and phone calls to the local or regional contact listed below.

This meeting is one of three public meetings during May 2010 that will be forums for sharing ideas and issues about proposed land conservation efforts. Each meeting will focus on one of the conservation proposals.



Ryan Hagerly/USFWS

Trumpeter Swan Family

We will use your input when developing a draft environmental assessment and land protection plan for the proposed expansion of the conservation easement program for the Blackfoot Valley area. These documents will highlight the resource values; present alternatives that address issues that the Service, our conservation partners, and the public identified; and evaluate the effects that may occur if the proposal is determined to be a viable tool for conserving habitat. The draft environmental assessment and land protection plan will be distributed to those who would like to review and comment on the documents. The Service will consider all comments, and then prepare the final land protection plan.



Meeting Schedule

Proposed Expansion of the Conservation Easement Program in the Rocky Mountain Front

May 17, 2010; 4–7 p.m.
Choteau, Montana
Stage Stop Inn, 1005 N. Main Avenue

Proposed Conservation Easement Program in the Swan Valley

May 18, 2010; 4–6 p.m.
Condon, Montana
Swan Valley Community Center,
6799 Highway 83

Proposed Expansion of the Conservation Easement Program in the Blackfoot Valley

May 19, 2010; 7–9 p.m.
Ovando, Montana
Ovando School, 108 Birch Street

How do I get involved?

The Service welcomes your questions and comments! Whether you are an individual or a group representative, please do not hesitate to call, write, or request information concerning the proposed expansion of the conservation easement program in the Blackfoot Valley area or any of the other land conservation proposals.

For more information, contact:

Kevin Ertl, Refuge Operations Specialist
H2-O Waterfowl Production Area
967 Marsh Lane
Helmville, Montana 59843
kevin_ertl@fws.gov
406 / 793 0050

Kathy Burchett, Project Leader
Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge
922 Bootlegger Trail
Great Falls, Montana 59404
bentonlake@fws.gov
406 / 727 7400

Toni Griffin, Planning Team Leader
Division of Refuge Planning
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
P.O. Box 25486, DFC
Denver, Colorado 80225
toni_griffin@fws.gov
303 / 236 4378



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