

4 Project Implementation

This chapter provides a general description of the operations and management of the expanded Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area.

LAND PROTECTION OPTIONS

Two alternatives were considered for the environmental assessment (EA), no action and the chosen alternative, acquiring additional conservation easements along the Rocky Mountain Front.

ACTION AND OBJECTIVES

The Service plans to expand the authorized acquisition goal by up to an additional 125,000 acres, resulting in the approval to acquire conservation easements on 295,000 acres of private land within the expanded project boundary.

The easement expansion project relies on voluntary involvement by landowners. The expansion project does not involve fee-title acquisitions. Land owner management practices such as grazing will continue on the land included in the easement contract. All land within an easement remains in private ownership and, therefore, property tax and grassland management activities such as invasive plant and tree control, grazing, and burning will remain the responsibility of the landowner. Public access, including hunting, also remains under the control of the landowner.

The easement project will be managed by staff located at the Benton Lake National Wildlife Complex. The Service staff will be responsible for monitoring and administering of all easements on private land. Monitoring will 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. The Service's role is to monitor the purchased easements to ensure that landowners comply with the easement agreement so that the property does not undergo subdivision, commercial or industrial development, or conversion of native prairie grassland to cropland. Photo documentation will be used at the time the easements are established as part of a documentation of baseline conditions.

Conservation easements are the most cost-effective, politically acceptable means to ensure protection of critical habitats that occur within the project area. Although habitat protection through fee-title

acquisition is preferable in some locations, it is not required and is not preferable to conservation easements in the Rocky Mountain Front. Fee-title acquisition will triple or quadruple the cost of land acquisition in addition to adding significant increases in long-term management and operational costs for the Service. The Service views a strong and vibrant rural lifestyle, of which ranching is the dominant land use, as one of the key components to ensure habitat integrity and wildlife resource protection.

The analysis and documentation was prepared by a combination of field and regional Service staff, along with partners (see appendix C). After completion of an environmental assessment and after conducting a public comment period, the proposed alternative of acquiring conservation easements was chosen. The expansion project was found to have no significant impacts on the quality of the environment, thus the finding of no significant impact (FONSI) has been completed and signed (see appendix D). The FONSI document is basically the EA modified to reflect all applicable comments and responses. Appendix E is the environmental action statement, appendix F is the environmental compliance certificate, and appendix G is the section 7 biological evaluation. Director's approval memorandums are appendix H.

ACQUISITION ALTERNATIVES

The Service will acquire conservation easements principally by using funds appropriated under the Land and Water Conservation Act, which derives funds primarily from royalties paid for by offshore oil and gas leasing. Such funds are intended for land and water conservation projects. These funds are not derived from general taxes. Funding is subject to annual appropriations by Congress for specific acquisition projects.

Funding from other sources may also be used within the project area. Management activities associated with easements may be funded through other sources, such as TNC, PFW, and other private and public partners. The Service will also consider accepting voluntary donations for easements.

STRATEGIC HABITAT CONSERVATION

Strategic habitat conservation (SHC) involves an ongoing cycle of biological planning, conservation design, conservation delivery, outcome-based monitoring, and assumption-based research. SHC

uses science to focus conservation in the right places (USFWS 2008).

In 2004, the Service Partners for Fish and Wildlife program led a statewide, strategic habitat conservation planning effort for focusing work in Montana. The state was divided into three broad geographic regions based on similar habitat types. Within each region, priority federal trust species and “guilds” were identified. The Montana Habitat and Population Evaluation Team office then assisted with gathering and creating spatially-explicit models and data sets for priority trust resources. In addition, the scientific-based planning efforts of partner agencies and conservation organizations were incorporated. These include the “Strategic Habitat Conservation Report” prepared by the National Ecological Assessment Team, the “Upper Missouri/Yellowstone/Upper Columbia River Ecosystem Team Focus Area Plan,” the “Montana Partners Program 1999 Focus Area Plan,” “Montana’s Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy Plan,” and The Nature Conservancy of Montana’s “Statewide Conservation Plan.” Seven stakeholder meetings were held to gather input from other partners to identify focus areas and to develop an appropriate conservation strategy. The “2007 Montana Step-down Strategic Plan” identified geographic focus areas, habitat accomplishment targets, and benefits to federal trust species. The comprehensive process ultimately produced ten conservation focus areas for Montana, including the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area.

The preparation of this project area land protection plan (LPP) addresses the four key elements of SHC: planning, design, delivery, and monitoring and research (see figure 5).

BIOLOGICAL PLANNING

Among conservation biologists, the Front is ranked in the top one percent of wildlife habitat remaining in the United States (The Nature Conservancy 1999). Virtually every wildlife species found in this area upon the arrival of Lewis and Clark in 1806, with the exception of free ranging bison, remains today in relatively stable or increasing numbers. In addition, it is the only remaining area in the continental United States with a complete, intact assemblage of large mammalian carnivores, including the grizzly bear, gray wolf, wolverine, pine marten, and Canada lynx.

Three federally listed mammals will benefit from habitat protection. A stable population of grizzly bears occurs throughout the area. Gray wolves have migrated back into the Front from the Canadian Rockies and several packs have established home ranges west of the project boundary in Bob Marshall Wilderness. The Front also supports one of the largest populations of Canada lynx in the lower forty-eight states.

Riparian areas, wetland, and large expanses of native prairie provide important habitats for migratory birds. There are approximately 240 species of birds that use the Front including species of concern such as harlequin ducks, trumpeter swans, ferruginous hawks, peregrine falcons, chestnut-collared longspurs, Sprague’s pipits, and long-billed curlews.

Focal Species

In order to strategically conserve habitat along the Front, the Service chose the grizzly bear as a key focal species. Focusing on grizzly bears is likely to capture the habitat needs of several of the other key trust species. The Service is currently studying how waterfowl use wetland and upland habitat along the Front, and when that study is complete it will be added to the grizzly bear information to update the conservation strategy.

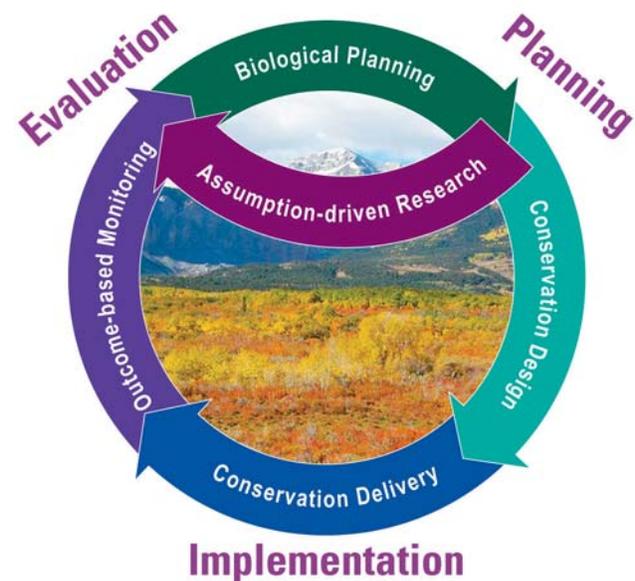


Figure 5. The basic strategic habitat conservation cycle.

Population Objectives for Grizzly Bear

The Rocky Mountain Front CA is part of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem recovery zone. The Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (USFWS 1993) specifies multiple thresholds that must be maintained before the grizzly bear population in the NCDE can be considered recovered. For the NCDE these thresholds are:

- Ten females with cubs inside Glacier National Park, and twelve females with cubs outside GNP over a running 6-year average, both inside the recovery zone, and within a 10-mile area immediately surrounding the recovery zone, excluding Canada; and
- Twenty-one of twenty-three bear management units (BMUs) occupied by females with young

form a running 6-year sum of verified sightings and evidence, with no two adjacent BMUs unoccupied; and known human-caused mortality not to exceed 4 percent of the population estimate based on the most recent 3-year sum of females with cubs.

Limiting Factors

Increasing urbanization causing increased fragmentation of habitat from housing developments and associated road development is a major threat to the Rocky Mountain Front and the entire CoCE. For wide-ranging species, such as the grizzly bear, unplanned development leads to loss of habitat connectivity within the project area and, on a larger scale, between the CoCE and other historical or potential ranges.

Riparian zones, for example, provide excellent habitat and cover for bears moving throughout the watersheds, but they are also among the most desired locations for building sites (Lolo National Forest 2003). An increase in development also leads to more frequent conflicts between bears and people due in large part to the increased presence of bear attractants. Human garbage, dog food, and bird seed can condition and habituate bears leading to more interactions and conflicts with people. These factors can lead to human-caused grizzly bear mortality, which in turn results in a decrease in grizzly bear reproduction and loss of population and genetic viability. More than 17% of the NCDE is private land and an estimated 71% of bear-human conflicts and bear deaths occur on these private lands (Dr. Christopher Servheen, Grizzly Bear Recovery Coordinator, University of Montana, Missoula, MT; personal interview, 11 June 2008). Minimizing attractants on private lands and limiting subdivision are keys to reducing this threat to grizzly bears.

Key Habitats for Protection

In order to identify which habitats along the Front are the highest priorities for grizzly bears, the Service used a model developed specifically for the eastern side of the NCDE recovery zone by a multi-agency working group. The NCDE model uses logistic regression in calculating seasonal resource selection functions for grizzly bear habitat (Mace et al. 1999). The model considers several characteristics of habitat, disturbance by human activity and telemetry locations of grizzly bears.

CONSERVATION DESIGN

The design stage of the SHC process involves assessment of the current state of the system, formulation of habitat objectives, and determination of priority areas.

Current State of the System

In recent years, the mortality threshold for grizzly bear recovery in the NCDE has been exceeded, but the significance of these numbers cannot be evaluated until there is accurate information on population size. Through the use of genetic analysis on collected hair samples, researchers were able to determine that an estimated 765 grizzly bears make their home in the Northern Continental Divide. Of those 765, researchers estimate 470 bears are females. Female bears were also found throughout the entire study area, indicating a good reproductive potential for the species. Analysis of hair samples has allowed researchers to determine the genetic health of the grizzly bear population. Although overall genetic variation indicates a healthy population, it is only one piece of the puzzle that managers need for the recovery of grizzlies in the NCDE to be successful (Kendall et al 2009).



Subdivision development impacts habitat connectivity.

Formulation of Habitat Objectives

Currently, there are approximately 600,000 acres of unencumbered private land in the Rocky Mountain Front CA. With the current levels of development and fragmentation along the Front, grizzly bear populations appear stable; however, the pressure of human-cause mortality on grizzly bears is higher than acceptable for recovery across the NCDE. How much more fragmentation or development could occur without affecting population stability or significantly effecting grizzly bear mortality is unknown. Given that conserving all of the remaining private land with easements to prevent additional development is not a reasonable or desired goal, especially around the existing population centers of Augusta, Choteau, Dupuyer, and Bynum, the Service has set a goal to protect 295,000 acres of existing private lands. Long-term monitoring of grizzly bears will be conducted and the goal of 295,000 acres will be periodically re-evaluated.

Buffer areas will be maintained around communities to provide rural communities the ability to meet their community development goals and objectives. The Service will work individually with communities to determine the configuration of the community buffer to address growth issues within the buffer zones.

Priority Areas

The Service will expand the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area by purchasing conservation easements to reduce future impacts of development and habitat fragmentation. Typically, the Service will purchase an easement for the entire ownership of a landowner; therefore the priorities for the “Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area Land Protection Plan” are based on the best available data on existing private ownerships.

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, nongovernmental organization ownership such as The Nature Conservancy, and the Boone and Crockett Club.

The project area has been split into three priority zones (see figure 6) for acquiring conservation easements using the following criteria:

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

Priority 1 includes areas within the project with the highest quality grizzly bear habitat and the greatest opportunity for connectivity. The eastern boundary is based generally on the eastern edge of the NCDE grizzly model. Key anchors, which can be expanded upon 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 includes other important grizzly bear habitat and some opportunities for connectivity. It also includes areas where other funding sources are available to purchase conservation easements.

Priority 3 includes the remaining areas within the project area. This zone is part of the Front ecoregion, and contains large continuous blocks of native prairie. Priority 3 also includes the opportunity to protect important riparian corridors for grizzlies across the entire project area.

These priority areas will be regularly reevaluated and may change as data on the habitat needs and limiting factors for focal species in the Rocky Mountain Front CA become available. The “Monitoring and Research” section that follows provides further details on this feedback loop.

CONSERVATION DELIVERY

Habitat protection will occur through the purchase of additional 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 expansion project 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 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, landowner interest in the expansion project, and size of the parcel. The purchase of conservation easements will occur with willing sellers only and will be subject to available funding.

MONITORING AND RESEARCH

As the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area expansion project develops and conservation easements are purchased, grizzly bears will continue to be monitored. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) all have active grizzly bear monitoring and research projects. MFWP, in particular, is focused on developing a science-based population monitoring program that provides the information necessary to successfully manage bears in western Montana (Dood et al. 2006). Specifically, MFWP will monitor a representative sample of twenty-five or more adult females in the NCDE to establish population trends, and will use verified sightings to document changes in bear distribution and linkage areas used, especially by female bears. MFWP will monitor mortality including timing and causes and gather survivorship data in cooperation with other agencies. In addition, results from the 2004 USGS NCDE Grizzly Bear DNA project (USGS 2004) will assist MFWP with bear population size estimation, distribution, and population trends which will provide additional information for focusing acquisition efforts.

Grizzly bears and bull trout have been identified as a focal species for the Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative (GNLCC) (see figure 7). The GNLCC was established, in part, to foster cooperation between agencies and support monitoring and research where there are common interests. Continual evaluation of grizzly bear population trends and habitat use will be used to

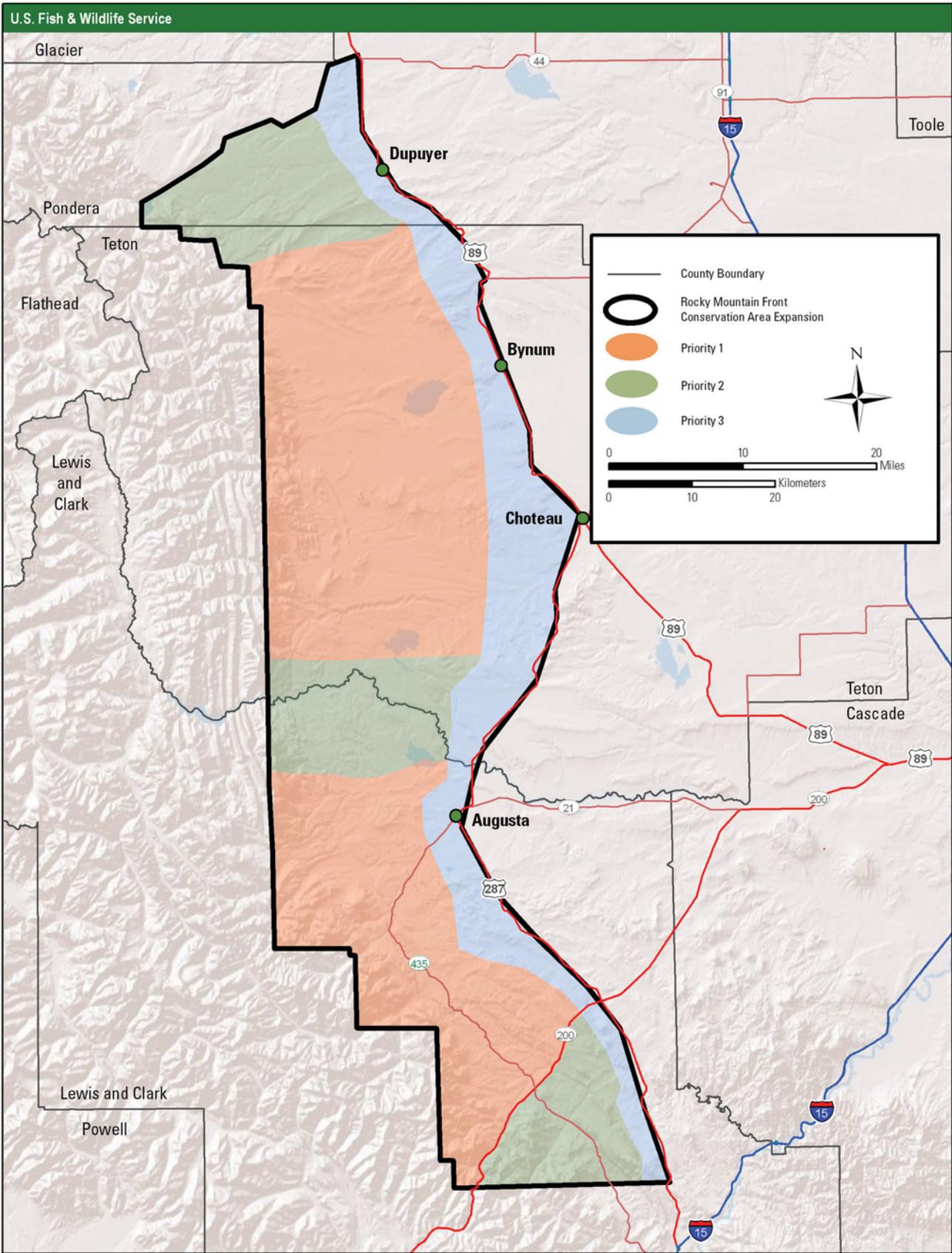


Figure 6. Priority areas for the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area expansion.

evaluate and refine conservation efforts on the ground within the GNLCC.

LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION COOPERATIVES

Strategic habitat conservation is a means of applying adaptive management across large landscapes. Landscape conservation cooperatives will facilitate strategic habitat conservation.

The Rocky Mountain Front CA lies within the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative. The GNLCC includes the mountain and transitional habitats in regions of Wyoming, Montana, Idaho, and the upper Green River basin in southern Wyoming and small parts of Colorado and Utah, and portions of the Interior Columbia Plateau reaching into Oregon and Washington westward to the Cascade Mountains. The GNLCC also includes the international landscapes of the interior British Columbia and Alberta, Canada, and covers the entirety of the northern Rocky Mountains and mid-continent lowlands of the interior northwest.



USFWS

Collared grizzly bear movement data is used to assess populations.

The GNLCC has identified priority species including: bull trout, grizzly bear, Lewis's woodpecker, trumpeter swan, westslope cutthroat trout, Arctic grayling, wolverine, willow flycatcher, sage grouse, burrowing owl, and Columbia spotted frog. Eight of these priority species exist within the project area.

The GNLCC works with a variety of science partners including many of which are also supporters of the expansion of the easement project. The protection of the Rocky Mountain Front, through a conservation easement project, will significantly contribute to the conservation of GNLCC priority habitats and the federal trust species identified above.

As the GNLCC continues to develop, an over arching priority will be to serve as a convening body, bringing together partners to address existing and future issues related to climate change and landscape scale conservation. The Service will work with existing partnerships within the Rocky Mountain Front to further refine priorities and leverage resources for acquisition.

COORDINATION

Public involvement was initiated for the proposed expansion of the conservation easement project in the Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area in May 2010. An open house public scoping meeting was held in Choteau, Montana on May 17, 2010. Public comments were taken to identify issues to be analyzed for the expansion project. Thirty people attended. In addition, fourteen individuals, four agencies, and two organizations provided written comments during the scoping process.

In addition, the Service's field staff has contacted local government officials, other public agencies, sportsmen's and women's groups, and conservation groups, all of which have expressed an interest in and a desire to protect the Rocky Mountain Front from the pressures brought about by rural subdivision.

The draft EA and draft LPP was issued on July 26, 2010 for a 30-day comment period. Five written comments were received during the comment period. Detailed comments and their responses are included in appendix I.

CONTAMINANTS AND HAZARDOUS MATERIALS

Fieldwork for pre acquisition contaminant surveys will be conducted, on a tract-by-tract basis, prior to the purchase of any land interest. Any suspected problems or contaminants requiring additional surveys will be referred to a contaminants specialist located in the Service's Ecological Services office in Helena, Montana.

NATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT

As a federal agency, the Service must comply with provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act. An EA is required under NEPA to evaluate reasonable alternatives that will meet stated



Figure 7. Great Northern Landscape Conservation Cooperative with Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area expansion.

objectives, and to assess the possible impacts to the human environment. The draft EA, published in July 2010, served as the basis for determining whether implementation of the expansion project will constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment.

DISTRIBUTION AND AVAILABILITY

Copies of the LPP were sent to federal and state legislative delegations, tribes, agencies, landowners, private groups, and other interested individuals.

Additional copies of the document are available from the following offices and websites.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 Benton Lake National Wildlife Refuge Complex
 922 Bootlegger Trail
 Great Falls, MT 59404-6133
 406 / 727 7400
<http://www.fws.gov/bentonlake>

and

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 Region 6, Division of Refuge Planning
 Branch of Land Protection Planning
 P.O. Box 25486–DFC
 Denver, Colorado 80225
 303 / 236 4378
 303 / 236 4792 fax
<http://mountain-prairie.fws.gov/planning/lpp.htm>