

Proposed Expansion of Conservation Easement Program

Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area



Rocky Mountain Front

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The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing to expand protection of the natural values along Montana's Rocky Mountain Front.

The Service started a conservation easement program in the Front in 2005. The program 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 50,000 acres.

The proposed project area within which easements could be purchased from willing sellers would be expanded from 527,000 acres to 918,000 acres. The expanded easement program would add 125,000 acres, for a total of 295,000 acres of easements. No land would be purchased in fee title.

The purpose of the proposed expansion is to maintain biological diversity and related wildlife values and to conserve the relatively naturally functioning systems and processes of the Rocky Mountain Front. Conservation

easements would protect and maintain the integrity of the Front's unique complex of wetland, grassland, and riparian habitats and their diverse complement of fish, wildlife, and plants. These easements would also provide a vital link or habitat corridor between existing protected lands.

How would the conservation easement program work?

The proposed expansion encompasses 918,000. An expanded project area boundary would provide opportunities for easement acquisition.

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.

Large, working ranches along the Rocky Mountain Front support and protect the area's biological values. Long-established ranching families have passed the land down over generations, thus preventing subdivision and playing a vital role in conserving important fish and wildlife habitat. Conservation easements have proven to be an effective, non-regulatory approach to conserving habitat and maintaining the historic ranching heritage in Montana.

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.

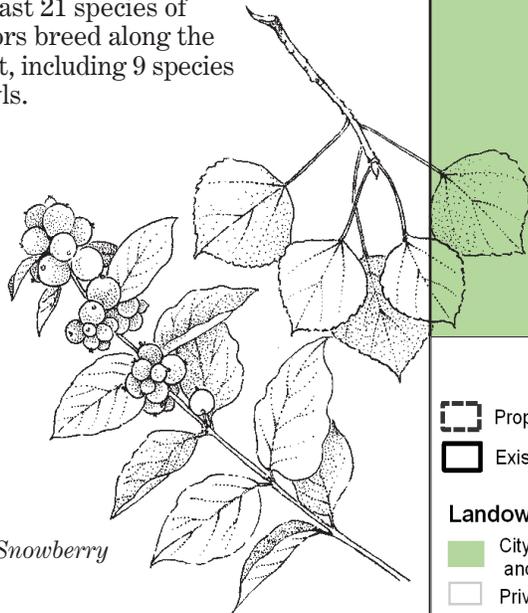
What resources would benefit from the conservation easement program?

The Rocky Mountain Front has one of the largest remaining expanses of native prairie left in the northern Great Plains. This “sea of grass” provides essential habitat for numerous grassland birds—many of which are experiencing population declines—including chestnut-collared longspur, Le Conte’s sparrow, bobolink, burrowing owl, and long-billed curlew.

The diverse habitats of the Rocky Mountain Front play an important role in sustaining the northern Continental Divide’s free-ranging wildlife populations. This is the last remaining area in the continental United States with an intact assemblage of large mammalian carnivores—it is the only place in the world where grizzly bears still roam from the mountains onto the prairies as they did nearly 200 years ago.

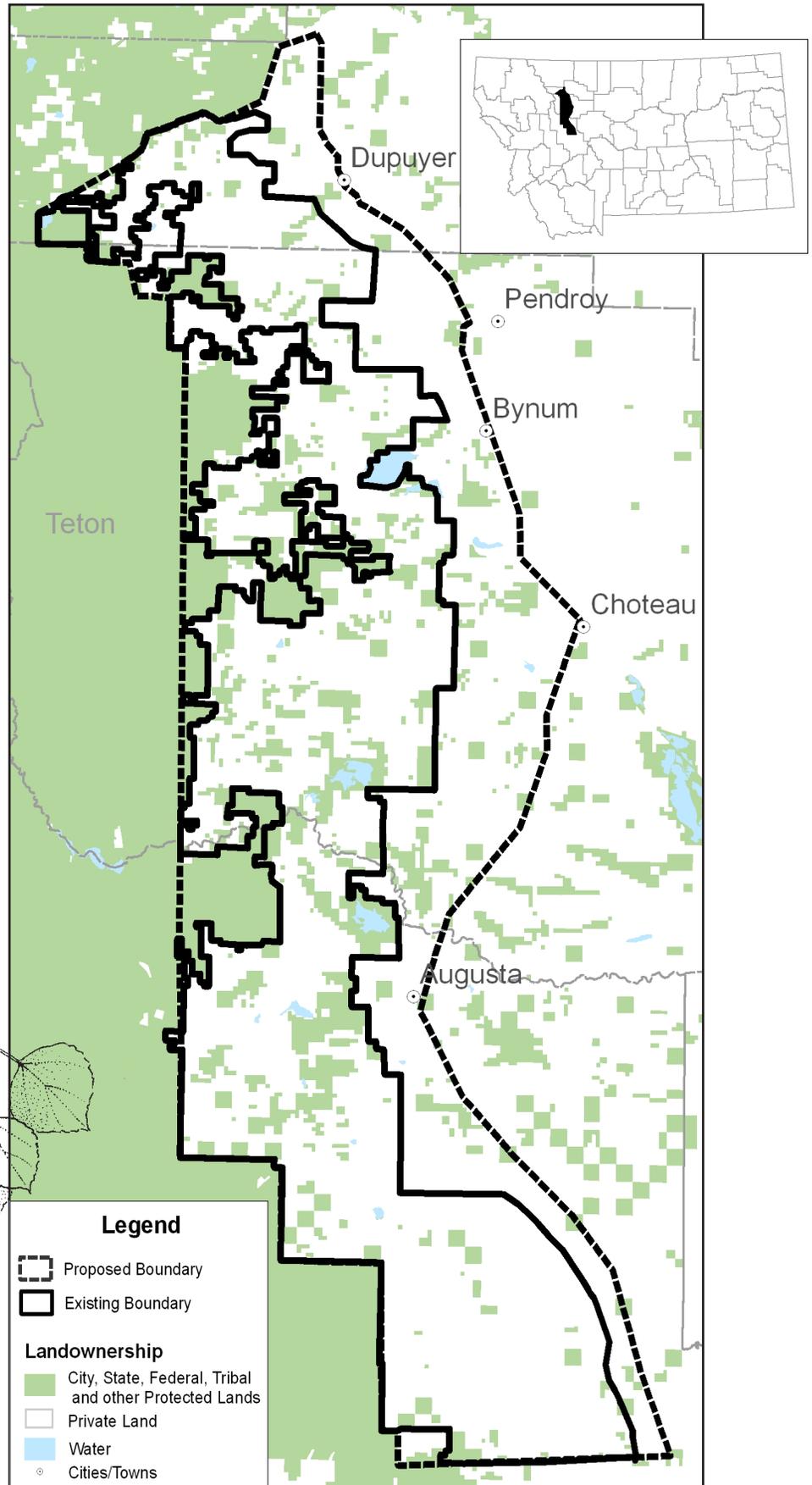
The proposed conservation area provides habitat for a diversity of wetland-dependent species. Peak flights of waterfowl along the Front during spring and fall migration often exceed several million birds. At least 17 species of waterfowl breed in the area including the harlequin duck, which inhabits several mountain streams.

Cliffs and riparian areas provide important habitat for nesting raptors. At least 21 species of raptors breed along the Front, including 9 species of owls.



Snowberry

Rocky Mountain Front Conservation Area, Montana



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 Rocky Mountain Front, the Service has identified other areas for landscape conservation planning within this region of Montana including the Blackfoot Valley 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 Rocky Mountain Front proposal on May 17 (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.

We will use your input when developing a draft environmental assessment and land protection plan for the proposed expansion of the conservation easement program in the Rocky Mountain Front. 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.



Long-billed Curlew

Lee Karney/USFWS



Western Meadowlark

Gary Kramer/USFWS



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 Rocky Mountain Front or any of the other land conservation proposals.

For more information, contact:

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