

2 Alternatives, Including the Proposed Action

This chapter describes the two alternatives identified for this project:

- no-action alternative
- proposed action, giving the Service the authority to establish the Swan Valley Conservation Area

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

ALTERNATIVE A (NO ACTION)

Currently, Service easements are available through the small wetlands acquisition program for landowners that qualify in Lake County.

Habitat enhancement or restoration projects on private lands such as wetland restoration, timber management, instream restoration, and grassland management could continue through cooperative efforts with private landowners.

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

ALTERNATIVE B (PROPOSED ACTION)

This alternative focuses on the strategic purchase of up to 10,000 acres of conservation easements on private lands nestled between the Bob Marshall Wilderness and the Mission Mountain Wilderness. Fee-title acquisition would be limited to no more than 1,000 acres on lands immediately adjacent to Swan River National Wildlife Refuge. A combination of depressed timber markets and high recreational values of the land have recently threatened not only the connectivity for wildlife, but are also impacting the traditional rural lifestyle for residents of the Swan Valley. The watershed is just over 469,000 acres with over 332,000 acres in protected public ownership.

The Service would seek to purchase conservation easements and fee-title lands from willing sellers only. Conservation easement contracts would specify perpetual protection of habitat for trust species and restrict development. Fee-title lands would be managed as additions to the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge.

Prioritization of areas considered for conservation easements or fee-title acquisition within the project

areas will 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 (LPP) within this volume 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.

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. Haying is permitted after July 15th. Timber harvest is permitted on lands with an approved timber harvest management plan.

Conservation easement lands would remain in private ownership; property tax and land management, including invasive weed control, would remain the responsibility of the landowner. The Service would seek to provide participating landowners with additional assistance with invasive



Swan Range.

plant control. Control of public access to the land would remain under the control of the landowner.

The project area 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. A baseline inventory study which includes photo documentation would be completed 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

There was no further analysis for the following alternative.

COUNTY ZONING

In a traditional approach used by counties and municipalities, the local government would use zoning as a means of designating what type of development could occur in an area. Comments received from county commissioners to date have expressed support for conservation easements (alternative B) as a means of compensating private landowners for maintaining the rural area values. In counties where zoning occurs, conservation easements are recognized as a tool to ensure the long-term prevention of residential or commercial development in the conservation area.

