

2 Alternatives

This chapter describes the two alternatives identified for this project:

- no-action alternative
- proposed action, giving the Service the authority to expand the boundary of the Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area

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

ALTERNATIVE A (NO ACTION)

The Service started a conservation easement project in the Blackfoot Valley in 1994. Conservation easements are currently available through the Small Wetlands Acquisition Program and the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The current project boundary is 165,000 acres with a goal of acquiring easements on 23,500 acres within the project boundary.

To date, the Service has acquired approximately 20,000 acres of easements within the current project boundary. The Service would continue to secure conservation easements on the remaining 3,500 acres of the acquisition goal. When the 23,500 easement acre goal is reached, no new easements would be acquired with LWCF money.

Alternative A assumes the management of habitat benefiting migratory birds and other wildlife would remain at current levels. Enhancement or restoration projects on private land such as water development, grazing systems, and grassland management would continue through cooperative efforts with private landowners. There would be no effort made to expand current conservation easement areas.

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

ALTERNATIVE B (PROPOSED ACTION)

The Blackfoot Valley WMA is a landscape conservation strategy to protect one of the last undeveloped, low elevation river valley ecosystems in western Montana. The Service proposes to expand the existing boundary of the Blackfoot Valley Wildlife Management Area from 165,000 acres to approximately 824,024, and acquire up to an additional 80,000 acres within that project boundary.

The project area provides a vital habitat corridor between existing U.S. Forest Service 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 projects.

The Service would seek to purchase conservation easements from willing sellers only on privately owned land. Conservation easement contracts would specify perpetual protection of habitat for trust species and would restrict development.

Prioritization of areas considered for conservation easements within the project areas would 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 the quality of habitat types (including riparian areas, wetlands, and native grasslands) for trust species. The Service generally focuses on parcels greater than 160 acres, however parcels less than 160 acres may be considered for conservation easements if unique biological values exist. The final land protection plan (LPP), which is a separate document, describes these priorities in detail.



Marbled godwit.

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The easement project 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.

No fee-title acquisition would occur. Conservation easement lands would remain in private ownership, and property tax and land management would remain the responsibility of the landowner. Control of public access to the land would remain under the control of the landowner.

The easement project 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 were being met. Photo documentation would be used 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 \$54,801 per employee under this management alternative.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED BUT NOT STUDIED

There was no further analysis conducted for the following three alternatives.

VOLUNTARY LANDOWNER ZONING

Landowners would voluntarily petition the county commissioners to create a zoning district directing the types of development that can occur within an area. This is “citizen-initiated” zoning. For example, landowners would petition the county government to zone an area as agricultural, precluding certain types of non agricultural development such as residential subdivision. “Citizen initiatives” are rarely used and this alternative was not studied further.

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. Many counties in Montana have opted to have no planning or

zoning requirements and the alternative was not studied further. Comments received from county commissioners to date have expressed support instead for conservation easements, alternative B, as a means of maintaining rural area values and potentially reducing the need for future zoning. Zoning would be subject to frequent changes, and would not ensure the long-term prevention of residential or commercial development in the project area.

FEE-TITLE ACQUISITION

Some organizations and individuals have expressed an interest in Service-provided oversight and restrictions on management practices of prescribed fire, grazing, and timber management in the Blackfoot Valley. Fee-title purchase of land in the Blackfoot Valley would be required to provide the Service with full authority and responsibility for planning and implementing these management activities. However, little to no public support was expressed for the possibility of fee-title acquisition by the Service in public meetings and in correspondence received for the Blackfoot Valley WMA expansion project. The initial cost associated with fee-title acquisition would be two to three times higher than the purchase of conservation easements. In addition, there would be substantial annual costs for staffing and materials needed by the Service to manage fee-title land. The much higher costs associated with this method would result in limiting acquisition to a much smaller area, making landscape scale conservation unlikely.

It is the long-established policy of the Service to acquire minimum interest in land from willing sellers to achieve Service habitat acquisition goals. Fee-title acquisition is not preferable to the use of conservation easements, nor is this method of acquisition necessary to conserve native habitat and trust wildlife resources in the Blackfoot Valley region.

No other alternatives were considered.