

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

New Northwest Montana Wetland Management District Administrative Facilities

Environmental Assessment

March 2022

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife, plants, and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people.



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Abbreviations

BMP	Best Management Practice
BR	Bison Range
CEQ	Council on Environmental Quality
C.F.R.	Code of Federal Regulations
CSKT	Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
EA	Environmental Assessment
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FONSI	Finding of No Significant Impact
LEED	Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design
MT FWP	Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NWMT WMD or District	Northwest Montana Wetland Management District
NWRS or Refuge System	National Wildlife Refuge System
NWRSAA	National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act
PM	Particulate Matter
T&E	Threatened and Endangered
TEK	Traditional Ecological Knowledge
THPO	Tribal Historic Preservation Office
U.S.	United States
U.S.C.	United States Code
USFWS	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey
WMD	Wetland Management District
WMTC	Western Montana National Wildlife Refuge Complex
WPA	Waterfowl Production Area

Executive Summary

This Environmental Assessment (EA) evaluates five alternatives including four proposed action alternatives—Alternatives B through E—and one no action alternative—Alternative A. The proposed action will construct new facilities to administer those units of the Western Montana National Wildlife Refuge Complex (WMTC) located in northwestern Montana that were previously administered out of facilities on the Bison Range (BR; formerly the National Bison Range). The proposed construction includes a maintenance shop, multipurpose building, storage buildings, residences and other supporting infrastructure that would allow access to and use of the proposed facilities. The no action alternative would not construct new facilities, and so there would no longer be infrastructure available for continued administration of these properties now that the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) has assumed full management of the BR.

This EA examines the potential environmental impacts associated with the five alternatives and has been prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (42 United States Code [U.S.C.] §§ 4321 et seq.) in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality (40 Code of Federal Regulations [C.F.R.] Parts 1500–1508), Department of the Interior (43 C.F.R. Part 46; 516 DM 8), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) (550 FW 3) regulations and policies.

The following resource categories were analyzed in this EA: Geology and Soils, Hydrology and Wetlands, Air Quality, Habitat and Vegetation, Wildlife and Species of Special Management, Visitor Use and Experience, Cultural Resources, Socioeconomics, and Environmental Justice. Based on the analysis presented in the EA and coordination and/or consultation with all appropriate federal, state, and local agencies as well as all pertinent federally recognized Native American tribes, the USFWS has determined that the impacts associated with the proposed action and its alternatives would not individually or cumulatively have a significant impact on the quality of the physical or human environment.

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1 Purpose and Need for Action

1.1 Introduction

The units of the Western Montana National Wildlife Refuge Complex (WMTC) that are geographically situated within the Mission, Flathead, and Swan Valleys of northwestern Montana are administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS). These units contribute to a larger network of conservation lands across four counties and support a diversity of game and non-game wildlife species that enhance and highlight the biodiversity of northwestern Montana.

The mission of the NWRS, as outlined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act (NWRSA) and as amended by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act (16 United States Code [U.S.C.] §§ 668dd et seq.), is:

“ . . . to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

USFWS staff have been administering these properties from facilities on the Bison Range (BR; formerly the National Bison Range), in Moiese, Montana. These facilities include a 4,700-square-foot visitor center with offices; a 2,300-square-foot residence repurposed as offices; a 5,500-square-foot maintenance shop; 2,000 square feet of warm storage; 6,000 square feet of cold storage; a 5-acre equipment yard; and three additional residences for staff and interns.

On December 27, 2020, the BR was restored to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT) to be held in federal trust ownership, under Section 12 of the Montana Water Rights Protection Act, signed into law with the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021.

This law provides that:

“ . . . the United States shall convey to the Tribes, to own in fee, all ownership interests in all buildings, structures, improvements, and appurtenances located on the land restored by this Act and further establishes a two-year transition period during which the Secretary shall cooperate with the Tribes in transition activities regarding the management of land, bison, and other resources conveyed by this Act, including by providing to the Tribes, funds, personal property, equipment, or other resources for the performance of, or assistance with, the types of activities carried out at the National Bison Range.”

As a result, the facilities located on the BR are no longer available for use, and the USFWS has identified a need for replacement facilities. This Environmental Assessment (EA) was prepared to evaluate the effects associated with the proposed action and complies with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969 (42 U.S.C. §§ 4321 et seq.) in accordance with Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ; 40 Code of Federal Regulation [C.F.R.] Parts 1500–1508), Department of the Interior (43 C.F.R. Part 46; 516 DM 8), and USFWS (550 FW 3) regulations and policies. NEPA requires examination of the effects of proposed actions on the natural and human environment.

1.2 Proposed Action

The USFWS proposes to acquire land in the Mission Valley for the construction of new facilities to administer four National Wildlife Refuges (Ninepipe, Pablo, Lost Trail, and Swan River); two conservation areas (Swan River and Lost Trail); the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District (NWMT WMD; or District), which comprises 15 Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs; Blasdel, Smith Lake, McGregor Meadows, Batavia, Flathead, Kicking Horse, Crow, Anderson, Duck Haven, Ereaux, Johnson 80, Montgomery, Sandsmark, Herak, and Cruz); and a network of easements (Appendix B: Figure 1).

Acquisition would focus on the most cost-effective option that meets management needs. Suitable buildings present on the acquisition site that meet the needs of the USFWS would be used and retrofitted if necessary to meet requirements; however, new facilities may need to be constructed for administration of the NWMT WMD and the associated refuges.

If unable to acquire land for the construction of facilities, Alternative C will be selected, and the USFWS will remain committed to expanding conservation lands through acquisition in Lake County.

Alternative E was selected over the other alternatives because it will best fill the USFWS needs while preserving the open space, wildlife habitat, public recreation areas, and conservation lands on the WPAs. In addition, any excess land on an acquisition could be restored and protected for wildlife, habitat, education, interpretation, and public use.

The proposed action areas are located on or in the vicinity of the NWMT WMD within the Mission Valley of Lake County, an intermontane basin south of Flathead Lake in western Montana. The Lake County portion of the NWMT WMD comprises 3,268 acres of protected habitat and is generally surrounded by state and tribal conservation areas as well as private land conservation easements.

The USFWS considered multiple factors when selecting location alternatives for new construction. Past restoration efforts, use by species of concern or trust species, presence of wetlands, and surrounding open space were heavily considered. Public opinion, quality and success of hunting and photography, safe ingress and egress to the site, impact to traffic and roads, and central location were also weighed in the site selection process. The location must have cultural and archeological clearance. Secondary road access to the other units in the Lake County portion of the district is

preferred, as is ease of access to and from primary roads for additional safety when staff are transporting heavy equipment between management units. The ability to protect people, equipment, and facilities on the site is critical; there have been security issues resulting in property damage in the local area. Other factors include average well depth in the area, soil type, and distance to adequate power.

1.3 Purpose for Action

The USFWS is committed to maintaining a presence within commuting distance of the BR and existing NWRs-managed lands and within the Flathead Indian Reservation in order to ensure the continuation of a strong partnership between the USFWS and the CSKT, to improve the quality and accuracy of cultural messaging across the WMTC, and to amplify our ability to incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) into our programs. In addition, constructing management facilities within the Mission Valley ensures that staff and resources are located centrally within the District.

The USFWS seeks to continue to facilitate collaborative, cooperative, and coordinated management with our federal, tribal, state, local, public, and private partners. USFWS lands contribute to landscape-level management of wildlife species and enable cross-boundary movements by contributing to corridors for wildlife migration and movement. USFWS will continue to incorporate the expertise, resources, and efforts of our partners to help facilitate the benefits of a broader functioning landscape. This proposal will contribute to strengthening the USFWS's conservation stewardship legacy, modernizing infrastructure, fostering an atmosphere of trust with local communities, and supporting a robust local tourism industry by continuing to attract and educate visitors to the area for outdoor recreation and wildlife observation.

1.4 Need for Action

Due to the transfer of the BR to the CSKT, the facilities and equipment on the BR will no longer be available for use by the USFWS personnel; therefore, alternatives for creating or obtaining replacement facilities must be identified and assessed.

The USFWS maintains the responsibility to administer the units of the NWRs in northwestern Montana and foresees the potential for expansion of management responsibilities across the WMTC.

The proposed action will allow the USFWS to meet priorities and mandates as outlined by the NWRsAA to:

- Ensure that the mission of the NWRs described at 16 U.S.C. § 668dd(a)(2) and the purposes of each refuge are carried out; and
- Ensure effective coordination, interaction, and cooperation with owners of land adjoining refuges and the fish and wildlife agency of the states in which the units of the NWRs are located.

Replacement facilities are necessary to provide workspace for refuge staff; space for storage and maintenance of property; the ability to oversee and protect equipment and facilities; residence for permanent or seasonal staff; space for USFWS staff to create new partnerships and collaborate with its current partners; a place for the public to interact with refuge staff; and interpretive opportunities for the public to learn about the mission of the NWRS, the surrounding area, and our wildlife. Preliminary engineering design estimate the proposed project area for new facilities to be approximately 12 acres, which encompasses the total area of disturbance.

Currently, managing the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas involves an extensive local and regional network of mutually beneficial partnerships for resource and information sharing and coordinated management of conservation lands. To facilitate, create, and maintain high quality partnerships, USFWS staff rely on face-to-face communication, and often host in-person planning meetings, training opportunities, and workshops. Without facilities and available space, these crucial partnerships would be difficult to maintain, and the services that USFWS staff offer to local and regional agencies and organizations would likely be compromised.

1.5 Tribal Consultation

Regular updates have been provided to CSKT's Natural Resource Department staff on the status of this EA. The USFWS also consulted with the CSKT Tribal Historic Preservation Office (THPO) regarding compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The CSKT THPO issued an associated Cultural Clearance permit on July 14, 2021, recommending that Alternatives B, C, or D commence. On July 22, 2021, the CSKT THPO also concurred with the USFWS Zone Archeologist's subsequent recommendation that the undertaking proceed as planned with no further work at the locations comprising Alternatives B, C, or D. If Alternative E is selected, additional consultation and coordination pursuant to Section 106 would be necessary following identification of the specific site. Please see Appendix E on page E-1 of this document for reference.

1.6 Public Involvement

To solicit public review and comment, the USFWS sent notices to area newspapers and media outlets that have wide local distributions: the *Valley Journal*, *Char-Koosta*, and *Flathead Beacon*; published in the Federal Register; posted notices on social media; and posted on the former NWMT WMD website at https://www.FWS.gov/refuge/Northwest_Montana_Flathead_County_WMD/. The Draft EA was made available for public review and comment from September 28 to October 27, 2021.

USFWS received comments from one organization and 25 individuals. USFWS staff read and considered all comments including those of a technical nature; opinions, feelings, or preferences for one element or alternative over another; and comments of a personal or philosophical nature. The team grouped and organized comments by issues and themes and participated in developing the comment response. Several clarifications and minor editorial changes were made to the EA as a result of these comments, and comments were largely supportive of Alternative E. See Appendix D.

2 Description of Alternatives

2.1 Alternative A – No Action

Under the no action alternative, the USFWS will no longer have facilities available for continued administration of the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas (Appendix B: Figure 1), once the CSKT assumes full management of the BR.

2.2 Alternative B – Construct New Facilities on Anderson Waterfowl Production Area

Under Alternative B, the USFWS will construct new facilities on the southern part of Anderson WPA (Appendix B: Figure 2) to administer the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas. Without the BR management responsibility, the USFWS will not need the same type and size of facilities currently in use. The structures for the administrative site are described in 2.2.1–2.2.5 below.

2.2.1 Maintenance Shop

A shop would provide the required space for staff to maintain vehicles, equipment, and tools; safe storage and organization of tools, equipment, and materials; an office for files and record keeping; space for construction and welding operations; and space for other government and personal property. The shop is the highest priority and would be constructed first.

2.2.2 Multipurpose Building

The second priority would be to build a new multipurpose building with a visitor contact station that will feature enclosed offices and open desk areas that can be combined to accommodate full-time employees, temporary employees, and seasonal staff; a conference room; a break room; a visitor contact area; storage and mechanical areas; a work room; and restrooms.

2.2.3 Storage

The USFWS would build one or more structures to provide cold storage and protection for heavy- and light-duty equipment such as tractors, skid steers, mowers, all-terrain vehicles, and trucks. This building would include additional space for hand and power tools, and other personal property needed by USFWS staff. A warm storage bay would be constructed in order to safely store herbicides, chemicals, and other temperature-sensitive equipment such as fire and spray trucks.

2.2.4 Residences

A bunkhouse and residence would be constructed on the site to maintain necessary housing options for permanent and seasonal staff, interns, and volunteers.

2.2.5 Other

Roads required by staff and visitors to access the new headquarters as well as interconnecting roads between individual facilities would be built to support the movement of vehicles, trailers, and heavy equipment. Staff and minimally sized visitor parking would be constructed at the headquarters to accommodate both staff and visitors.

Single or multiple well(s) and septic systems adequate to provide a water source and proper sewage disposal to all necessary buildings would be built on the site. Utility lines would also be installed to connect the facilities to the appropriate power source.

2.3 Alternative C – Construct New Facilities on Crow Waterfowl Production Area

Under Alternative C, USFWS will construct new facilities on the Brome 80 unit of Crow WPA (Appendix B: Figure 3) to administer the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas.

The number, size, type, and use of the facilities constructed on this location would be the same as those described under Alternative B.

2.4 Alternative D – Construct New Facilities on Herak Waterfowl Production Area

Under Alternative D, the USFWS will construct new facilities on Herak WPA (Appendix B: Figure 4) to administer the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas.

The number, size, type, and use of the facilities constructed on this location would be the same as those described under Alternative B.

2.5 Alternative E – Purchase Property and Construct Facilities

In acquiring administrative sites, the USFWS can utilize Land and Water Conservation Funds and Migratory Bird Conservation Funds as required for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of natural resources (16 U.S.C. § 742f(4)). Acquisition would focus on the most cost-effective option that meets management needs and is only being considered within the Mission Valley of Montana.

New facilities may need to be constructed for administration of the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas. The number, size, type, and use of the facilities constructed on this location would be the same as those described under Alternative B. Suitable buildings present on the acquisition site that meet the needs of the aforementioned facilities under Alternative B would be used and retrofitted if necessary to meet USFWS requirements.

2.6 Mitigation Measures and Best Management Practices

Mitigation measures include:

1. Avoiding impacts by not taking an action or parts of an action;
2. Minimizing impacts by limiting the degree or magnitude of an action; or
3. Rectifying impacts by repairing, rehabilitating, or restoring the affected environment.

Best Management Practices (BMPs) can include an array of alternatives that produce desirable results with minimal impact on other resources. Construction BMPs can be put into place to eliminate or reduce environmental impacts associated with construction activities, such as erosion or sediment control. This allows USFWS to choose the most economical, effective, and possibly innovative BMPs to reduce or eliminate impacts.

A Construction BMP Plan would be created to address erosion and sediment control, soil stabilization, spill prevention/control, and non-compliance reporting protocols. The Construction BMP Plan would be retained at the project area throughout construction and should always be available to on-site employees, representatives of the USFWS, and other environmental quality agencies.

2.6.1 Migratory Bird Mitigation Measures and BMPs

As part of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Certification requirements for the new facilities, this project would include compliance with Pilot Credit 55: Bird Collision Deterrence to minimize impacts to migratory birds. This measure is intended to reduce the chances of bird injury and mortality from in-flight collisions with buildings. This rule requires designers and builders to comply with building façade and site structures that include a lighting and a monitoring plan designed to minimize bird collisions.

2.6.2 Soil Mitigation Measures and BMPs

Contractors would provide erosion-control methods (such as watering dry soils) and structures (such as silt fences) as necessary to prevent wind-borne dust and water-borne silt from leaving the immediate work areas.

In addition, native topsoil would be stockpiled and reused for landscaping purposes around the exterior of the facilities. Access points would be designated and flagged to minimize soil compaction. Mats or boards would be used to access equipment during wet conditions to prevent rutting and soil loss.

An effective combination of erosion- and sediment-control BMPs would be implemented and maintained throughout construction. The following principles would be followed to the maximum extent practicable to control erosion and sedimentation in disturbed areas at the site:

- Fit grading to the surrounding terrain.
- Time grading operations to minimize soil exposure.
- Retain existing vegetation whenever feasible.
- Vegetate and mulch or otherwise stabilize disturbed areas.
- Minimize the length and steepness of slopes.
- Keep runoff velocities low.
- Prepare drainage ways and outlets to handle concentrated runoff until permanent drainage structures are constructed.
- Trap sediment on-site.
- Inspect and maintain control measures frequently.

Soil stabilization, also referred to as erosion control, consists of source-control measures that are designed to prevent soil particles from detaching and becoming transported in stormwater runoff. Soil stabilization BMPs protect the soil surface by covering and/or binding soil particles. Soil stabilization or erosion-control measures are required for actions that anticipate the disturbance of soils on-site. The proposed action will incorporate minimum temporary soil stabilization requirements, temporary soil stabilization measures required by the contract documents, and other measures selected by the construction contractor. The proposed action would implement the following practices for effective temporary and final soil stabilization during construction:

- Preserve existing vegetation and hydrologic features where required and when feasible.
- Apply temporary soil stabilization (erosion control) to remaining active and non-active areas. Reapply as necessary to maintain effectiveness.
- Implement temporary soil stabilization measures at regular intervals throughout the defined rainy season to achieve and maintain the contract's disturbed soil area requirements.
- Control erosion in concentrated flow paths by applying erosion-control blankets, check dams, and erosion-control seeding, and lining swales as shown on plans.
- Apply seed to areas deemed substantially complete during the defined rainy season.
- At completion of construction, apply permanent erosion control to remaining disturbed soil areas as early as feasible and as shown on plans.

2.6.3 Wetland and Hydrological Mitigation Measures and BMPs

During both site selection and construction of new facilities, all wetland and other significant hydrological areas will be identified and avoided to preserve the integrity of the surrounding wetlands and water systems.

2.6.4 Archeology and Cultural Resources Mitigation Measures and BMPs

If paleontological, archeological, or historical remains (including burials or skeletal material) are encountered, all work would be immediately halted and a construction representative, contracting officer representative, contracting officer or an USFWS representative would be notified. The contracting officer would notify the regional archeologist, and the CSKT THPO to ensure that the provisions of 36 C.F.R. 800.7 and other relevant laws are followed. Work would cease in the immediate vicinity until permitted to resume by written order from the contracting officer. Work in other areas may proceed as approved by the contracting officer.

All mitigation measures discussed in consultation with the CSKT THPO in relation to this project would be administered.

2.6.5 Footprint Size Mitigation and BMPs

In order to reduce the amount of wildlife disturbance and habitat loss due to the construction of facilities, the USFWS will take measures to minimize the actual acreage of the footprint. Measures include combining multiple uses into one building, reducing the number of residences and storage, and utilizing layouts that decrease square footage when possible.

Furthermore, the USFWS will work the Lake County Roads Department to direct visitation traffic on paved roads by using updated signage to reduce impact on the surrounding roads.

2.6.6 Climate Change

The USFWS will strive to plan and take actions consistent with existing USFWS and partner climate change strategies and anticipate impacts from the effects of climate change on habitat, species (fauna and flora), water, forage, and wildfire. USFWS staff rely on outside entities such as the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) to help downscale climate change models to increase predictability of temperature and precipitation changes and use these predictions to help inform adaptive management activities, as warranted. The CSKT have also recognized the potential impacts of climate change and are committed to addressing effects as well as integrating TEK into their CSKT Climate Change Strategic Plan (CSKT 2013).

Warming, whether it results from anthropogenic or natural sources, is expected to affect a variety of natural processes and associated resources. Climate changes (past century) are accelerating and already have substantially, and often unexpectedly, changed this ecosystem from what early Euro-American explorers and settlers chronicled (Belovsky and Slade, in prep). However, the complexity of ecological systems means that there is a tremendous amount of uncertainty about the impact climate change will actually have. In particular, the localized effects of climate change are still a matter of much debate. Montana's climate is changing; in the past century, most of the state has warmed about two degrees Fahrenheit (EPA 2016). Heat waves are becoming more common, and snow is melting earlier in spring. Rising temperatures and recent droughts have killed many trees by drying out soils, increasing the risk of forest fires, or enabling outbreaks of forest insects. In the coming decades, the changing climate is likely to decrease the availability of water in Montana, affect agricultural yields, and further increase the risk of wildfires (EPA 2016).

Similarly, there is no definitive information on how exactly changes in climate will affect species populations in Lake County and the proposed project areas. Potential impacts could include earlier stopovers in bird migration patterns, increased frequency of wildfires, habitat conversion (i.e., salt marsh to open water), and decreased or increased water availability. While the exact effects of construction of the proposed facilities on climate change are not quantifiable, and therefore not analyzed, the USFWS will continue to mitigate potential impacts by using best practices and following LEED Certification requirements.

2.7 Alternatives Considered but Dismissed from Further Consideration

2.7.1 Construction on Ninepipe and Pablo National Wildlife Refuges

Ninepipe and Pablo National Wildlife Refuges were established as easement refuges in 1921 “as refuge and breeding grounds for native birds,” per the request of the CSKT. Both Refuges are located within the Mission Valley of the Flathead Indian Reservation on Tribal Trust Lands of the CSKT. Currently managed by USFWS staff out of the WMTC, they are administered under the NWRS. Although these are perpetual refuge easement lands, the land is owned by the CSKT and subsequently construction is not preferred on these sites.

2.7.2 Construction on Other Units of the Lake County Waterfowl Production Areas

Other WPAs within the NWMT WMD were considered as possible locations for these facilities but did not possess an equal or greater number of the attributes required for selection as the proposed alternatives. Many WPAs lack safe ingress and egress from main roads; others have a higher density or extent of wetlands; some have extensive habitat restoration already underway or completed; and several WPAs have a higher percentage of intact native vegetation or provide more critical habitat for species of concern. Other reasons for not choosing any of these locations include the complete or near complete lack of access to utilities or unfavorable topography for administrative site functions that would not meet the needs of the NWMT WMD.

3 Affected Environment and Environmental Consequences

This section is organized by resource categories and discusses both the existing environmental or socioeconomic baseline in the affected area for each category, and the anticipated effects or impacts of the proposed action for each of the alternatives in each resource category. The effects and impacts of the proposed action considered here are changes to the human environment, whether adverse or beneficial, that are reasonably foreseeable and have a reasonably close causal relationship to the proposed action or alternatives.

Impacts identified in this analysis are based specifically on the activities associated with the construction of new facilities. Anticipated impacts to the resource based on an inability to effectively manage NWRS lands due to a lack of available facilities is referenced in the Purpose and Need section of this document.

The following resources either (1) do not exist within the project area, or (2) would not be affected by the proposed action: floodplains, wilderness, and water quality. Floodplains do not occur within the project area, and the lands associated with the proposed site(s) in this EA have not been proposed for Wilderness designation or do not meet the minimum requirements (with size being the most evident criteria as defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964). As such, these resources are not further analyzed in this EA.

3.1 Geology and Soils

3.1.1 Affected Environment

The dominant soils over the southern part of the Mission Valley, extending from St. Ignatius to Crow Creek, are classified in the Post series. Soils in the Post and Crow series are well developed but have “tough” compact subsoils and heavy-textured stratified substrata, with restricted subdrainage” (DeYoung and Roberts 1929:16). Permeability is described as comparatively impervious to water or very slowly permeable. Surficial soils in this series have varying textures, and deeper parent materials are modified by superficial deposition of glacial ice-laid material with different quantities of gravel and boulders (DeYoung and Roberts 1929; Appendix B: Figure 5).

There are no known environmental trends or planned actions that are likely to impact soils in the area.

3.1.2 Potential Impacts to Soils

Alternative A

There would be no construction and subsequently no impacts to soils.

Alternative B

Impacts to the soils at the project area are anticipated due to removal of topsoil for new buildings, roads, utilities, and parking lots. Soil mitigation measures and BMPs would ensure minimized disturbance.

Temporary ground disturbance is expected during the construction phase, but efforts to landscape and restore areas post-construction would minimize long-term impacts.

No impacts are expected outside of the project area.

Alternative C

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

Alternative D

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

Alternative E

Impacts to soils under Alternative E are anticipated to be directly comparable to or less than those described under Alternative B. If suitable buildings for USFWS use are already present on the purchased property, it would lead to a reduction in size of the project area and a potential decrease in overall impacts due to less soil disturbance.

3.2 Hydrology and Wetlands

3.2.1 Affected Environment

A recent publication from the CSKT (2020) provides individual hydrogeologic unit descriptions and a map showing their approximate locations. Alternative locations B, C, and D are located south of Crow Creek, within the Mission Valley Charlo hydrogeologic unit. This unit contains a productive aquifer composed of gravel at depths of 350 to 450 feet below the surface that is about 10 to 25 feet thick. Near each site are wells less than 550 feet deep that have static water levels of less than 200 feet.

Heterogeneous topography resulting from the valley's relatively recent glaciated geologic history created a diversity of surfaces supporting numerous wetland types. The regional groundwater flow system in the Mission Valley appears to be poorly connected to the shallow groundwater flow system and is not affected by stage variations in reservoirs or leakage from irrigation canals (Slagle 1988). Depressions near the proposed project areas are relatively shallow with limited surface water even in wet years and are also predominantly composed of smooth brome (Appendix B: Figure 6).

Local development and current agricultural trends, causing draining and/or filling of small temporary and seasonal wetlands, is likely to continue (Borth 1998), making the existing wetlands even more important (Hansen 1995). Maintenance, renovation, and restoration efforts are actively

underway in the surrounding area by the USFWS, the CSKT, and Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MT FWP).

3.2.2 Potential Impacts to Hydrology and Wetlands

Alternative A

There would be no construction and subsequently no impacts to wetlands.

Alternative B

Negative impacts to hydrology and wetlands are not anticipated because the site is located within the Mission Valley Charlo hydrogeologic unit, which contains a productive aquifer (CSKT 2020), and the placement of a groundwater well in these locations would likely support the needs of a new facility. All wetland areas would be avoided during construction of facilities, and the USFWS would also likely enhance wetlands on these sites.

Alternative C

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

Alternative D

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

Alternative E

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

3.3 Air Quality

3.3.1 Affected Environment

The Flathead Indian Reservation was designated in 1979 as a voluntary class 1 airshed under provisions of the Clean Air Act, which confers the highest degree of protection under the act. Air quality is considered exceptionally good, with no nearby manufacturing sites or major point sources of pollution. However, the cities of Polson and Ronan in Lake County are designated as nonattainment areas—areas that do not meet air quality standards—and are not in compliance with suspended particulate matter (i.e., PM₁₀, particulate matter which has a diameter of less than 10 micrometers; EPA 2018). All of the proposed project areas are classified as in attainment with air quality standards.

Seasonal burning of logging slash in the mountains and stubble fields on valley ranches causes short-term, localized smoke. In drought years, there has been heavy smoke from local wildfires or delivered from distant fires by prevailing winds. Smoke from wood-burning stoves is trapped in the valley during temperature inversions that are common in winter months. In addition to the factors mentioned above, carbon from automobiles and diesel engines and dust associated with wind-blown sand and dirt from roadways, fields, and construction sites may all contribute to

particulate matter. The major sources of particulate matter are vehicles traveling on unpaved roads, sand and gravel from winter traction material, and residential wood burning (USFWS 2019).

Air quality is protected under several provisions of the Clean Air Act, including the National Ambient Air Quality Standards and the Prevention of Significant Deterioration program. One of the goals of the Prevention of Significant Deterioration program is to preserve, protect, and enhance air quality in areas of special natural, recreational, scenic, or historic resources (42 U.S.C. § 7470).

3.3.2 Potential Impacts to Air Quality

Alternative A

There would be no construction and subsequently no impacts to air quality from this activity.

Alternative B

The proposed action would likely result in direct, temporary impacts to air quality during the construction phase of the project. These impacts are associated with emissions and dust from the use of heavy equipment and other vehicles during the construction phase. The operation of USFWS facilities is not expected to contribute significantly to or exceed the current impacts of activities and seasonal changes to air quality in the surrounding area. No impacts are expected outside of the project area.

Alternative C

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

Alternative D

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

Alternative E

Impacts to air quality are anticipated to be directly comparable to or slightly less than those described under Alternative B. If suitable buildings for USFWS use are already present on the purchased property, it would lead to a reduction in the size of the project area and a potential decrease in overall impacts.

3.4 Habitat and Vegetation

3.4.1 Affected Environment

The habitats within the proposed project areas are retired agricultural land and pastures dominated by non-native grass and forb species (Borth 1998). Although these sites can provide some cover for wildlife, they lack the diversity of grass and native forb species important for healthy grassland ecosystems.

Infestations of invasive forbs have reduced the health and quality of the habitat by altering ecological processes such as community productivity; soil, water, and nutrient dynamics (Charles and Dukes 2008:224); plant community successional patterns (sequential changes in vegetation); and disturbance cycles (Charles and Dukes 2008:225). Noxious weed monocultures change the physical structure of the native communities by reducing species diversity (Charles and Dukes 2008:223), increasing soil erosion resulting in changes to soil structure and chemical composition (Charles and Dukes 2008:225–226), and altering the microclimates (the climate characteristics in a small space such as the layer near the ground that is influenced by vegetative cover; Charles and Dukes 2008:225–226). Invasive plants can detrimentally affect native communities through competitive exclusion, altering behaviors of insect predation, and hybridization with native plants (Charles and Dukes 2008:223).

3.4.2 Impacts on Habitat and Vegetation

Alternative A

There would be no construction and subsequently no impacts from this activity to the local vegetation and habitat.

Alternative B

Impacts to vegetation and habitat may occur within the project area due to the removal of upland vegetation and replacement with buildings and other infrastructure such as roads, utilities, parking lots, and driveways. Removal of grasses and forbs within the project area would result in a loss of currently undeveloped habitat. However, vegetation at this site is primarily comprised of non-native and invasive plant species, and BMPs will be implemented to minimize disturbance.

A benefit to grasslands outside the project area and in the immediate vicinity is expected due to an increased ability to manage invasive species efficiently in this area. In addition to new facilities providing the means for the USFWS to continue management in the District, there are expected improvements, due to proximity, in our ability to manage habitat, restore previously disturbed areas, and remove invasive plant species.

Wetlands, pothole depressions, and riparian areas adjacent to Crow Creek are not considered suitable for construction and would be avoided. Therefore, there would be no adverse impacts on these habitats from construction activities. In the immediate vicinity and outside of the project area, there may be direct, long-term, intermediate beneficial impacts.

Alternative C

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

Alternative D

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

Alternative E

Impacts to vegetation and habitat under Alternative D are anticipated to be directly comparable to or slightly less than those described under Alternative B. If suitable buildings for USFWS use are already present on the purchased property, it would lead to a reduction in the size of the project area and a potential decrease in overall impacts. While construction would impact vegetation and habitat, the composition of the habitat on the acquisition property is primarily previously disturbed, non-native tame pasture grass.

Some positive impacts on the habitat can be anticipated from the management associated with upkeeping an interpretation area for visitors on the site and the increase in conservation acres.

Sites with riparian vegetation would be avoided. Therefore, there would be no effect on riparian corridors from the construction activities. There may be direct, long-term, intermediate beneficial impacts in the immediate vicinity and outside of the project area.

3.5 Wildlife and Species of Special Management Concern

3.5.1 Affected Environment

The proposed project areas provide moderate nesting cover for some species of waterfowl, upland game birds, and other ground nesting species such as short-eared owls. Other wildlife that potentially use the area include reptiles, small mammals, and invertebrates (e.g., garter snakes, shrews, voles, butterflies, moths, grasshoppers).

Threatened (T), Endangered (E), and Candidate (C)—T&E for short—species whose range overlaps with the proposed action include grizzly bears (T; *Ursus arctos horribilis*), monarch butterfly (C; *Danaus plexippus*), the yellow billed cuckoo (T; *Coccyzus americanus*), Spalding’s catchfly (T; *Silene spaldingii*), and Canada lynx (T; *Lynx canadensis*). The plant water howellia (*Howellia aquatilis*; formerly T) was delisted from the Endangered Species Act in June 2021.

While the federally listed grizzly bear is known to utilize the surrounding areas for passageway and to forage, there is no designated critical habitat for this species on or adjacent to these sites (USFWS 2021a). There are sites adjacent to and throughout the NWMT WMD that can serve as habitat for individuals displaced as a result of the proposed action.

Canada lynx occur on the greater Flathead Indian Reservation in montane spruce/fir forests, but there is no habitat at any of the alternative construction sites. None of the other federally listed species described above have habitat on these sites, thus the USFWS anticipates there will be no effect by construction of the proposed facilities.

There are no known environmental trends likely to decrease potential habitat for the previously mentioned species in the vicinity of the proposed action. Similarly, there are no planned actions in the area that, when combined with the anticipated effects of the proposed action, would have a compounded negative impact on the quality or availability of habitat to T&E species.

The CSKT, USFWS, and MT FWP negotiated plans for completing updates to Highway 93 that include a series of structures designed to improve safe wildlife passage.

3.5.2 Impacts on Wildlife

Alternative A

There would be no construction and subsequently no impacts to wildlife from this activity.

Alternative B

Impacts to wildlife include potential disturbance and displacement as well as direct mortality of less mobile wildlife due to demolition and construction activities. Visual and noise disturbances could disrupt normal wildlife behavior during construction activities. There are sufficient grassland and wetland habitats on all sides of the project area for wildlife to disperse into if disturbed or affected by the proposed action. The construction activities would likely occur in phases as USFWS identifies priorities for construction.

Construction of the new facilities may have limited impacts to waterfowl nesting sites, but there is abundant nesting habitat available in the immediate vicinity of the project area, and the proposed project areas do not provide high quality habitat.

Construction activities may disturb grizzly bears in the area during work hours, but the valley already exhibits a variety of human activity and is bisected by roads. Therefore, construction would not disturb grizzly bears in secure habitat and would have insignificant effects.

Due to the lack of adequate habitat for the specific needs of the monarch butterfly on this site, USFWS expects that there would be no effect on this insect species at the project area.

None of the other federally listed species whose ranges overlap with the proposed action, including the yellow billed cuckoo, Spalding's catchfly, and Canada lynx have habitat on this site. Thus, USFWS anticipates there will be no effect from construction of the proposed facilities. Construction activities would include the use of heavy equipment (e.g., bulldozers, excavators, tractors, skid steers), light-duty vehicles, and a variety of power tools to build the proposed facilities. Vehicular traffic on the work site, as well as foot traffic and equipment operations, have the potential to flush birds and wildlife. These effects would be temporary and minimized due to the presence of sufficient habitat in the immediate vicinity of the project area to provide security to displaced wildlife.

There may be more direct impacts to and mortality among reptiles and small mammals inhabiting the proposed project sites that are less mobile and unable to avoid construction equipment.

Once construction is complete, some disturbance to wildlife could continue due to administrative use of the facilities. These effects would be on par with current disturbance levels at the BR facilities and would include everyday activities associated with active management of the facilities. Vehicular traffic as well as foot traffic at the new headquarters is anticipated to be much less than

at the previous visitor center due to lack of the charismatic megafauna that were present on the BR.

Under this alternative, beneficial impacts to habitat conditions, and subsequently to associated wildlife, are expected. This would be the direct result of increased presence of staff and proximity of facilities to the habitats being managed. Consolidating all necessary infrastructure onto one headquarters campus will reduce the overall human footprint on habitats while increasing management capabilities and reducing traveling distances. There would be increased staff focus on the wetland management district resulting in beneficial changes to habitat conditions, public uses, and overall management of the units. The more central location of the headquarters campus in relation to all the units will improve management logistics and distribution of staff and resources.

Alternative C

Impacts to wildlife under Alternative C are anticipated to be directly comparable to those described under Alternative B.

Alternative D

Impacts to wildlife under Alternative D are anticipated to be directly comparable to those described under Alternative B.

Alternative E

Impacts to wildlife under Alternative E are anticipated to be directly comparable to or slightly less than those described under Alternative B. If suitable buildings for USFWS use are already present on the purchased property, it would lead to a reduction in the size of the project area and a potential decrease in overall impacts.

3.6 Visitor Use and Experience

3.6.1 Affected Environment

Nestled in the Mission Valley of Lake County are nine WPAs. USFWS administers these WPAs, which are part of a larger network of wetland communities in the valley that are managed by our partners in conservation, the CSKT and the MT FWP.

At this point in time, all of the WPAs have minimal to nonexistent visitation outside of the waterfowl and pheasant hunting season. There are no existing opportunities for interpretation, environmental education, or fishing on the WPAs. Annual refuge visitation reporting to the WPAs showed 2,000 visits that were primarily waterfowl and upland bird hunters. Wildlife observation and photography activities bring the next highest number of visitors to the district. Three of these WPAs—Anderson, Crow, and Herak—are being considered as potential sites for new facilities.

There are some opportunities available for hunting, wildlife observation, and photography on the proposed construction sites. Photography and wildlife observation are primarily conducted by

visitors from the county roads that run through or along the boundaries of the WPAs containing the proposed construction sites. The actual proposed sites were partially chosen due to their distance from the existing wetlands and only offer opportunities for upland bird hunting.

There are no qualitative visitation data specific to the proposed construction areas on Anderson, Crow, or Herak WPA at this time.

3.6.2 Impacts on Visitor Use and Experience

Alternative A

There would be no expected impacts on the project area or in the immediate vicinity to visitor use and experience.

Alternative B

Visitor use and experience in the NWMT WMD would be improved through the creation of facilities, including a visitor contact station located in the multipurpose building. In addition, an increase in staff presence through a common office location would create more opportunities to interact with visitors and to maintain facilities and infrastructure. Proposed facilities on Anderson WPA would be constructed more than 150 yards from the wetlands where waterfowl hunting is typically conducted, thus only impacting the minimal upland bird hunting, photography, and wildlife observation that happens within the actual project area. Finally, the active management of wetlands around facilities would improve waterfowl habitat around the proposed project areas and could increase the quality of the surrounding visitor use and experience.

The proposed action is expected to have direct, long-term, adverse impacts within the project area and in the immediate vicinity by reducing opportunities for hunting, wildlife observation, and photography. Outside of the project area, there is expected to be direct, long-term, beneficial effects due to potential improvement of the adjacent habitats.

These impacts are expected to be minimal due to the other available public lands for hunting within the surrounding area. Within Lake County, there are 13,901 acres of publicly accessible state, federal, and tribal land for hunting and recreation. The proposed action would remove 0.09% of the total acreage, and 0.37% of USFWS acreage. There are no anticipated impacts to fishing opportunities.

Alternative C

Crow WPA, including the proposed site, is more heavily used by hunters than the other two WPA sites. However, impacts are still anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

Alternative D

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

Alternative E

There are no expected impacts in the project area or in the immediate vicinity to visitor use and experience. Outside of the project area, the impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B.

3.7 Cultural Resources

3.7.1 Affected Environment

A variety of cultural resources, including precontact and historic archeological sites as well as historic built environment resources, are present across the Mission Valley. Types of cultural resources that might be expected to occur generally include (but are not limited to) precontact and/or protohistoric open camps, stone circles and alignments, cairns, lithic scatters, rock shelters, drive lines, kill (i.e., jump or pound) sites, hunting blinds, eagle traps, fasting beds, and rock imagery as well as extant historic buildings and structures (e.g., residences, bunkhouses, barns, garages, pole barns, Quonset huts, and/or other outbuildings), remnants of homestead and ranch complexes, livestock infrastructure (e.g., corrals, loading facilities, and stock dams), ditches, water control structures (e.g., culverts, dams, and dikes), trails, and roads.

There are no known environmental trends that are likely to negatively impact cultural resources in the vicinity of the proposed action. Similarly, there are no planned actions in the area that, when combined with the anticipated impacts of the proposed action, would have a negative compounding impact on cultural resources.

3.7.2 Impacts on Cultural Resources

Alternative A

Under Alternative A, there would be no construction and subsequently no impacts to cultural resources.

Alternative B

Per established protocol within the boundaries of the Flathead Indian Reservation, the USFWS submitted a Cultural Clearance Request for Alternatives B, C, and D to the CSKT THPO on May 26, 2021. The CSKT THPO subsequently issued a Cultural Clearance permit on July 14, 2021, indicating that no known cultural or historical site locations are present, stating:

“After research, review, and field analysis there are no further concerns of potential adverse effect to historical structures and/or cultural features within the project location. Preservation Department is confident the project can continue without a staff member present. Please continue with the project as requested.”

Based on the information provided by the CSKT THPO in the aforementioned permit, in conjunction with associated discussions between the THPO and the USFWS Zone Archeologist

on July 22, 2021, the USFWS Zone Archeologist also recommends that Alternatives B, C, or D proceed as planned with no further work.

As no known cultural or historical site locations are present within the project area, Alternative B would have no direct, physical impacts on cultural resources. Visual and auditory impacts to any cultural resources occurring outside of the project area are not expected and would likely be insignificant in the event any impacts were to occur. A number of existing small farms and ranches are scattered across the greater area in the vicinity of Alternative B; the addition of an administrative site of similar size and makeup under Alternative B would not significantly alter the landscape's rural character, and existing levels of integrity of setting, feeling, and association would largely be maintained. While there would be an increase in human presence and associated noise during both construction and operation, this increase would not impact any nearby cultural resources.

In the unexpected event that cultural resources are encountered during the course of the project, work would be stopped and the USFWS Cultural Resources staff and CSKT THPO contacted as soon as possible in order to document, evaluate, and potentially mitigate (if necessary) the resource at hand.

Alternative C

As no known cultural or historical site locations are present within the project area, impacts under Alternative C are anticipated to be directly comparable to those described under Alternative B.

Alternative D

As no known cultural or historical site locations are present within the project area, impacts under Alternative D are anticipated to be directly comparable to those described under Alternative B.

Alternative E

Alternative E, if selected, would be submitted to the USFWS Cultural Resources staff and CSKT THPO for further review and evaluation of potential to effect historic properties, as well as the possible need for further cultural resources work under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act. The Section 106 compliance process would be completed prior to the implementation of project activities under Alternative E.

3.8 Socioeconomics

3.8.1 Affected Environment

All sites being considered for the construction of new facilities are located in Lake County, Montana. Lake County is home to the CSKT of the Flathead Nation, and offers outstanding opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, photography, and environmental education.

In 2019, the population of Lake County was 30,013; it has been steadily increasing to be more than double the population in 1970 (U.S. Census Bureau 2021).

Visitors that live within the local 50-mile radius of a refuge typically have different spending patterns than those that travel from longer distances. Nonlocal visitors are more likely to stay in the local area. Expenditures by these travelers support locally owned businesses, including hotels, coffee shops, restaurants, boutiques, and art galleries.

According to the USFWS socioeconomic report in 2019, employment in Lake County totaled 15,068 jobs. In 2019, per capita personal income in Lake County was \$25,388; this is less than per capita personal income in the United States, which is estimated at \$34,103 (USFWS 2021b).

Hunting at the proposed construction sites has been observed to be less frequent than other areas within the WPAs in Lake County.

3.8.2 Impacts on Socioeconomics

Alternative A

Under Alternative A, there would be no construction and subsequently no impacts to the socioeconomics of the surrounding area.

Alternative B

Improved infrastructure and public use facilities would benefit socioeconomics for the entire region. The District would have the ability to meet the needs of everyday management activities and refuge operations with improved and efficient facilities. Construction activities could also have beneficial economic impacts in the local area if supplies were purchased and equipment was rented in neighboring communities.

With limited types of outdoor recreation available to the public in this area, increased capacity and improved facilities would continue to support the economy. Building new administrative facilities with a visitor contact station could increase recreational opportunities and visitation in the local area and would ensure local economies continue to benefit from tourism dollars.

Due to this location's proximity to Highway 93, a transportation corridor between Missoula to the South and Glacier National Park to the North, it could attract more visitors to the local area than the alternative sites.

Alternative C

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B, although this location may not attract as many visitors as compared to Alternative B.

Alternative D

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B, although this location may not attract as many visitors as compared to Alternative B.

Alternative E

Impacts are anticipated to be directly comparable to Alternative B, although this location may not attract as many visitors as compared to Alternative B.

3.9 Environmental Justice

3.9.1 Affected Environment

Executive Order 12898, Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations, requires all federal agencies to incorporate environmental justice into their missions by identifying and addressing disproportionately high or adverse human health or environmental effects of their programs and policies on minorities and low-income populations and communities.

Lake County is Montana's ninth most populated county. Polson, the county seat, is the state's 18th largest city with a population of 4,488 according to the 2010 Census.

According to the race and ethnicity section of the USFWS socioeconomic report in 2019, the racial composition of Lake County is 67% white, 0.3% African American, 24.3% American Indian, 0.3% Asian American, 4.6% Hispanic American, and 0.2% Native Hawaiian and/or Pacific Islander. According to a 2020 Environmental Protection Agency Environmental Justice (EJSCREEN) Report generated in 2021 for Lake County (Montana), there are no Superfund or Hazardous Treatment and/or Storage and/or Disposal Facilities within the county (EPA 2021). The same report provides the data for environmental justice parameters for Lake County (listed as "Value" in Table 3-1 on the following page).

3.9.2 Impacts on Environmental Justice

There are no Superfund nor Hazardous Treatment and/or Storage and/or Disposal Facilities within the county. In addition, USFWS has not identified any potential adverse environmental or human health impacts from this proposed action or any of the alternatives. Continuation of refuge management and constructing new administrative facilities would not disproportionately affect minority or low-income communities. Rather, by keeping facilities, resources, and access on the Flathead Indian Reservation, there is potential for positive impacts to local minority and low-income families. Additionally, the USFWS is committed to working with CSKT to incorporate appropriate cultural messaging and traditional ecological knowledge into management decisions and visitor services.

Table 3-1. Summary of Environmental Justice Parameters for Lake County

<i>Selected Variables</i>	<i>Value</i>	<i>State Average</i>	<i>Percentile in State</i>	<i>EPA Region Average</i>	<i>Percentile in EPA Region</i>	<i>US Average</i>	<i>Percentile in US</i>
Environmental Indicators							
Fine Particulate Matter (PM _{2.5} in micrograms per cubic meter)	10.8	8.7	73	7.05	97	8.55	93
Ozone (parts per billion)	42.3	45.2	14	51.4	12	42.9	45
NATA* Diesel Particulate Matter (micrograms per cubic meter)	0.0354	0.112	28	0.423	<50 th	0.478	<50 th
NATA* Cancer Risk (lifetime risk per million)	19	18	62	23	<50 th	32	<50 th
NATA* Respiratory Hazard Index	0.28	0.24	70	0.31	<50 th	0.44	<50 th
Traffic Proximity and Volume (daily traffic count/distance to road)	72	190	51	460	30	750	30
Lead Paint Indicator (percent pre-1960 housing)	0.21	0.28	54	0.21	67	0.28	54
Superfund Proximity (site count per kilometer distance)	0.018	0.12	24	0.11	37	0.13	16
Risk Management Plan Proximity (facility count per kilometer distance)	0.023	0.48	10	0.63	3	0.74	0
Hazardous Waste Proximity (facility count per kilometer distance)	0.022	0.94	15	0.89	8	5	1
Wastewater Discharge Indicator (toxicity-weighted concentration per meter distance)	5.6E-06	2	40	33	31	9.4	43
Demographic Indicators							
Demographic Index	39%	24%	89	26%	79	36%	62
People of Color Population	35%	14%	92	25%	76	39%	54
Low Income Population	42%	34%	73	28%	79	33%	70
Linguistically Isolated Population	0%	0%	85	2%	56	4%	45
Population With Less Than High School Education	9%	7%	72	8%	67	13%	48
Population Under 5 Years of Age	6%	6%	60	7%	48	6%	56
Population Over 60 Years of Age	21%	18%	67	13%	83	15%	78

Source: EPA 2021

* The National-Scale Air Toxics Assessment (NATA) is the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) ongoing, comprehensive evaluation of air toxics in the United States. EPA developed the NATA to prioritize air toxics, emission sources, and locations of interest for further study. It is important to remember that NATA provides broad estimates of health risks over geographic areas of the country, not definitive risks to specific individuals or locations. More information on the NATA analysis can be found at: <https://www.epa.gov/national-air-toxics-assessment>.

3.10 Summary of Analysis

The proposed action would meet the purpose of and need for the USFWS to provide infrastructure and facilities sufficient to manage habitat requirements and visitor service activities on the WMTC.

Construction activities under the proposed action would have minimal impacts on some natural resources including wildlife, air quality, soils, and vegetation. Mitigation and BMPs would minimize impacts on these resources. There would be beneficial impacts on administration, public use, and recreation under the proposed action by enhancing the visitor center and consolidating administrative facilities to support wildlife and habitat management while supporting ecotourism in the region.

A summary of the potential impacts for each alternative is provided in Table 3-2 below. For this evaluation, the project area is considered to include the land directly under the facilities, the immediate vicinity on which equipment and materials will be located during the construction process, and all access roads to the sites. For impacts to non-listed species under Alternative A, USFWS evaluated the effects of continued management operation from the existing facilities at the BR on these species at the NWMT WMD sites (the affected environment). In Alternatives B through D, USFWS expects long-term, beneficial impacts to the wildlife and habitat based on the understanding USFWS will be working to improve the overall condition of the site and availability of habitat to all species once construction is complete.

The proposed action is consistent in meeting the purpose and needs of the USFWS because this project would ensure the NWMT WMD has infrastructure and facilities sufficient to support habitat and wildlife management while also meeting the needs of various visitor services activities.

Table 3-2. Summary of the Potential Impacts for Each Alternative

<i>Affected Environment Category</i>	<i>Alternative A: No Action</i>	<i>Alternative B: Construct New on Anderson WPA</i>	<i>Alternative C: Construct New on Crow WPA</i>	<i>Alternative D: Construct New on Herak WPA</i>	<i>Alternative E: Construct New on New Property</i>
Topography	No effect	In the project area, long-term, adverse impacts are expected. Outside of the project area, no impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Soils	No effect	In the project area, long-term, adverse impacts are expected. Outside of the project area, no impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Hydrology	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect
Air Quality Index	No effect	In the immediate vicinity of the project area, there would be short-term, negligible impacts. Outside of the project area, no impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Vegetation: Wetlands	No effect	No effect within the project area. Outside of the project area, long-term beneficial impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Vegetation: Pingos/potholes/depressions	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect
Vegetation: Prairie/Grassland	No effect	In the project area, there would be long term, adverse impacts. Outside of the project area, long term, beneficial impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Vegetation: Invasive Plant Species	No effect	In the project area, long-term, major beneficial effects are expected. Outside of the project area, long-term beneficial impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Vegetation: Riparian	No effect	In the immediate vicinity of the project area, long-term, beneficial impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Crow Creek	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect

Affected Environment Category	Alternative A: No Action	Alternative B: Construct New on Anderson WPA	Alternative C: Construct New on Crow WPA	Alternative D: Construct New on Herak WPA	Alternative E: Construct New on New Property
Wildlife: Avian Species	No effect	In the project area, long-term, adverse impacts are expected. Outside of the project area, long-term beneficial impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Wildlife: Mammals, Reptiles and Amphibians	No effect	In the project area, long-term, minor adverse impacts are expected. Outside of the project area, long-term beneficial impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Wildlife: Fish	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect
Wildlife: Invertebrates	No effect	In the project area, long-term, negligible impacts are expected. Outside of the project area, long-term, beneficial impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Wildlife: Grizzly Bear	No effect	In the project area, long-term, negligible impacts are expected. Outside of the project area, long-term, beneficial impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Wildlife: Monarch Butterfly	No effect	In the project area, no impacts are expected. In the immediate vicinity and outside of the project area, long-term beneficial impacts are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Wildlife: Yellow Billed Cuckoo, Water Howellia, Spalding's Catchfly, Canada Lynx	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect
Visitor Use: Hunting (upland game bird/waterfowl)	No effect	In the project area and in the immediate vicinity, long-term, adverse effects are expected. Outside of the project area, long-term beneficial effects are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	In the project area, no effects are expected. Outside of the project area, same as Alternative B.

<i>Affected Environment Category</i>	<i>Alternative A: No Action</i>	<i>Alternative B: Construct New on Anderson WPA</i>	<i>Alternative C: Construct New on Crow WPA</i>	<i>Alternative D: Construct New on Herak WPA</i>	<i>Alternative E: Construct New on New Property</i>
Visitor Use: Fishing	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	In the project area, no effects are expected. Outside of the project area, long-term, beneficial effects are expected.
Visitor Use: Wildlife Observation and Photography	No effect	In the project area, long-term adverse effects are expected. In the immediate vicinity and outside of the project area, long-term, beneficial effects are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	In the project area, no effects are expected. Outside of the project area, same as Alternative B.
Visitor Use: Education and Interpretation	No effect	Long-term, beneficial effects are expected.	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B	Same as Alternative B
Cultural Resources	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	Additional evaluation would need to be completed should this alternative be selected.
Socioeconomics: Demographics, Population Trends	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect	No effect
Socioeconomics: Employment, Income, Minority Populations, Low-Income Populations	Long-term, beneficial effects are expected.	Same as Alternative A	Same as Alternative A	Same as Alternative A	Same as Alternative A

4 References

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5 List of Preparers

Bernardo Garza, USFWS Planner

Amy Coffman, NWMT WMD Refuge Manager

Amy Lisk, USFWS Biologist

Elizabeth Tsang, USFWS Natural Resource Specialist

Appendix A: Applicable Statutes and Regulations

This appendix lists all applicable statutes, regulations, and executive orders not otherwise addressed in this EA.

Cultural Resources

American Indian Religious Freedom Act, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 1996–1996a; 43 C.F.R. Part 7

Antiquities Act of 1906, 16 U.S.C. 431–433; 43 C.F.R. Part 3

Archaeological Resources Protection Act of 1979, 16 U.S.C. 470aa–470mm; 18 C.F.R. Part 1312; 32 C.F.R. Part 229; 36 C.F.R. Part 296; 43 C.F.R. Part 7

National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 470–470x-6; 36 C.F.R. Parts 60, 63, 78, 79, 800, 801, and 810

Paleontological Resources Protection Act, 16 U.S.C. 470aaa–470aaa-11

Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, 25 U.S.C. 3001–3013; 43 C.F.R. Part 10

Executive Order 11593 – Protection and Enhancement of the Cultural Environment, 36 Fed. Reg. 8921 (1971)

Executive Order 13007 – Indian Sacred Sites, 61 Fed. Reg. 26771 (1996)

Fish and Wildlife

Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 668–668c, 50 C.F.R. 22

Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 1531–1544; 36 C.F.R. Part 13; 50 C.F.R. Parts 10, 17, 23, 81, 217, 222, 225, 402, 450

Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956, 16 U.S.C. 742a–m

Lacey Act, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 3371 et seq.; 15 C.F.R. Parts 10, 11, 12, 14, 300, and 904

Migratory Bird Treaty Act, as amended, 16 U.S.C. 703–712; 50 C.F.R. Parts 10, 12, 20, and 21

Executive Order 13186 – Responsibilities of Federal Agencies to Protect Migratory Birds, 66 Fed. Reg. 3853 (2001)

Natural Resources

Clean Air Act, as amended, 42 U.S.C. 7401–7671q; 40 C.F.R. Parts 23, 50, 51, 52, 58, 60, 61, 82, and 93; 48 C.F.R. Part 23

Wilderness Act, 16 U.S.C. 1131 et seq.

Executive Order 13112 – Invasive Species, 64 Fed. Reg. 6183 (1999)

Appendix B: Maps

This appendix contains maps relevant to the alternatives and affected environment in this EA.

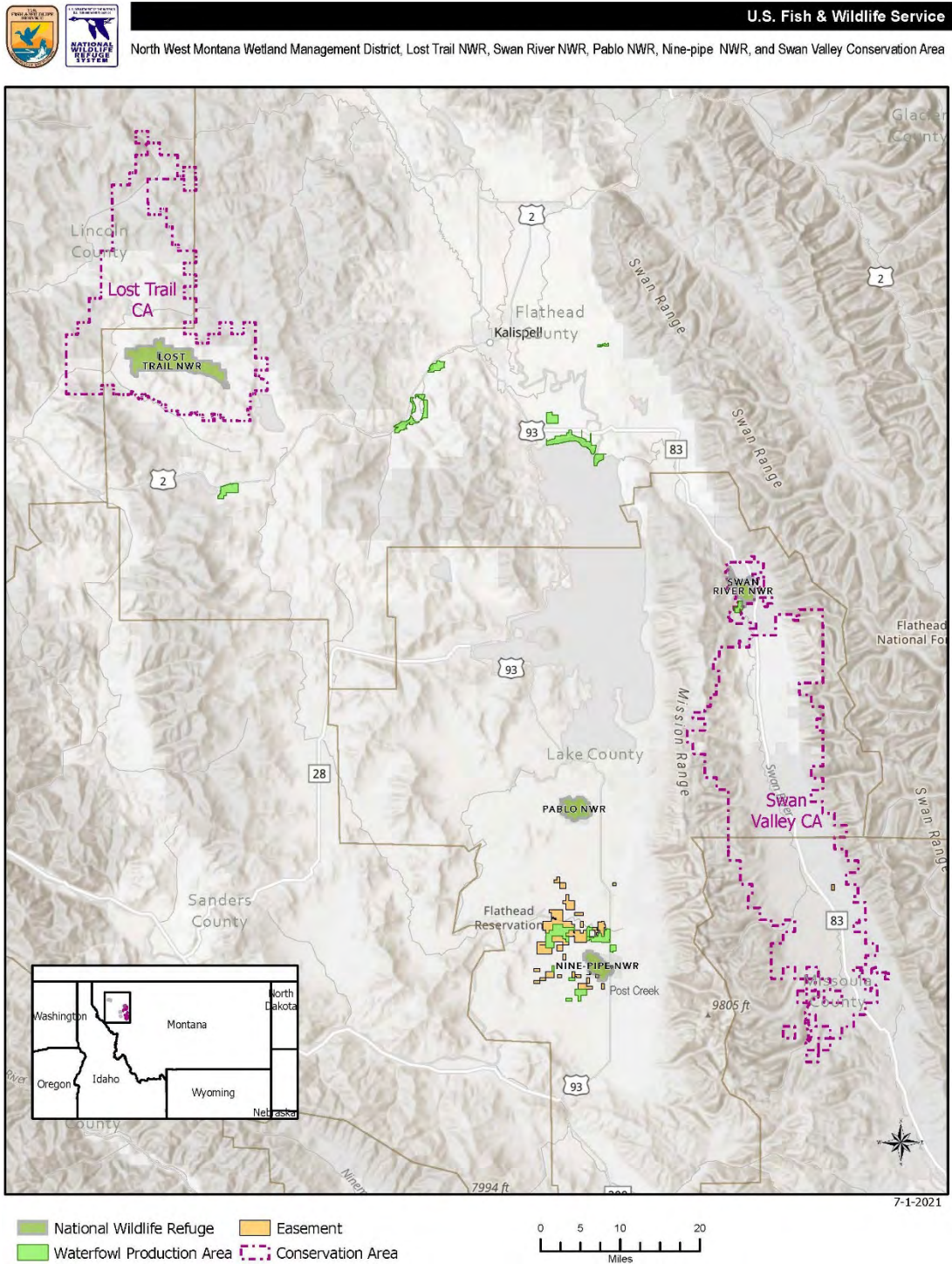


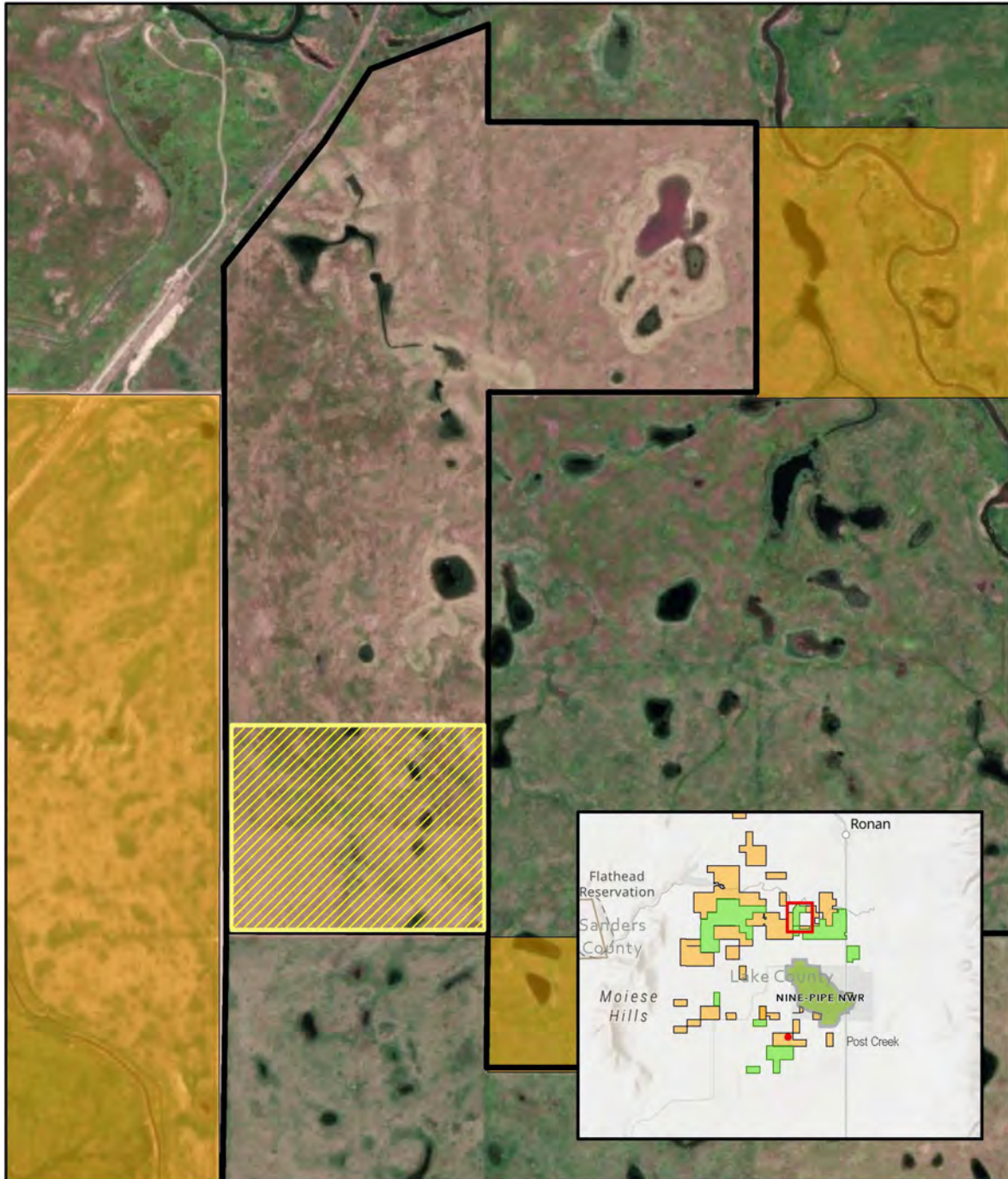
Figure 1. Overview map of the Administrative Units in Northwest Montana.



Anderson Waterfowl Production Area

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Proposed Facilities



6-29-2021




-  Waterfowl Production Area
-  Easement
-  Proposed Facilities



Figure 2. Map of Alternative B project area on Anderson WPA.

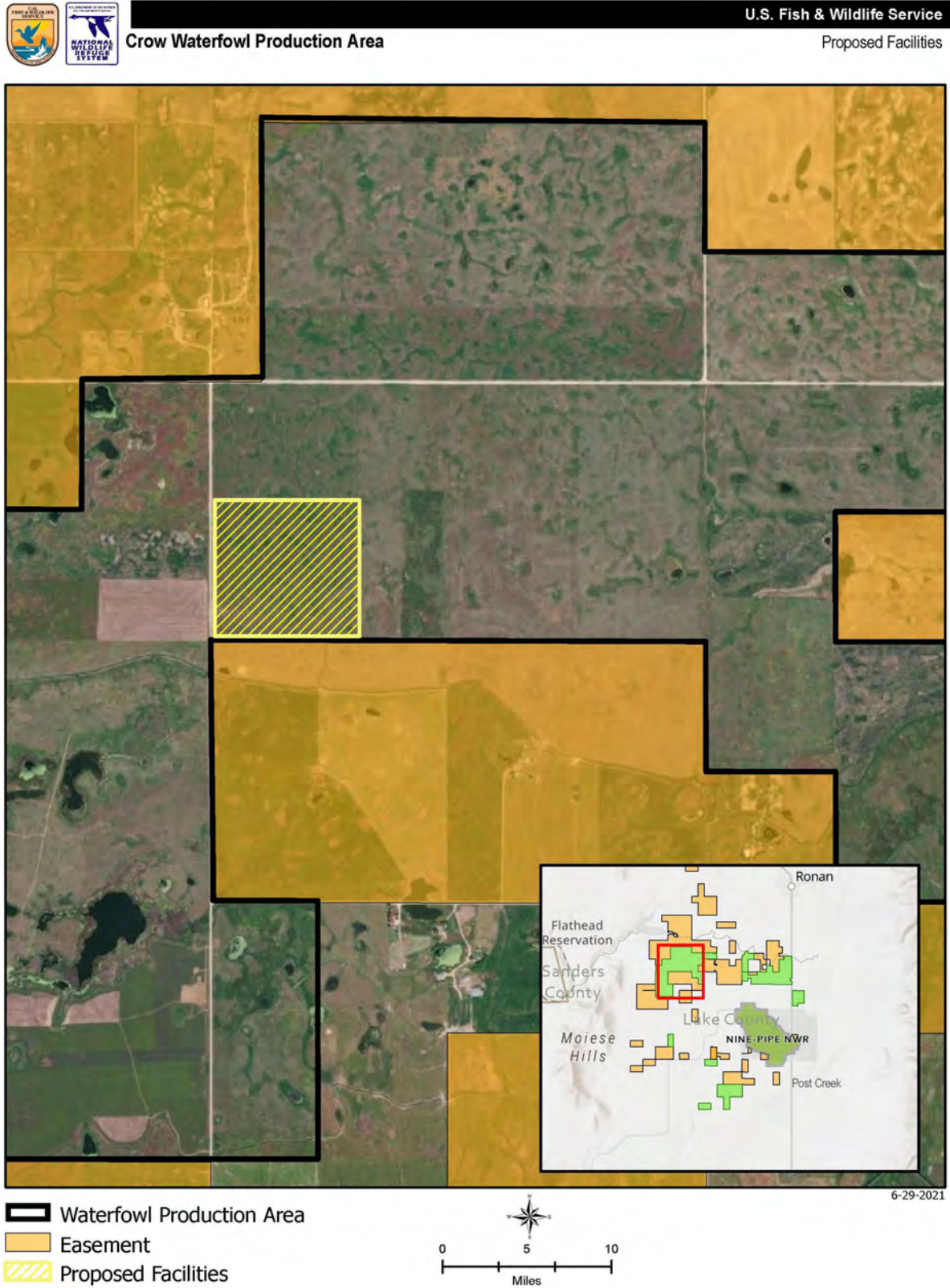
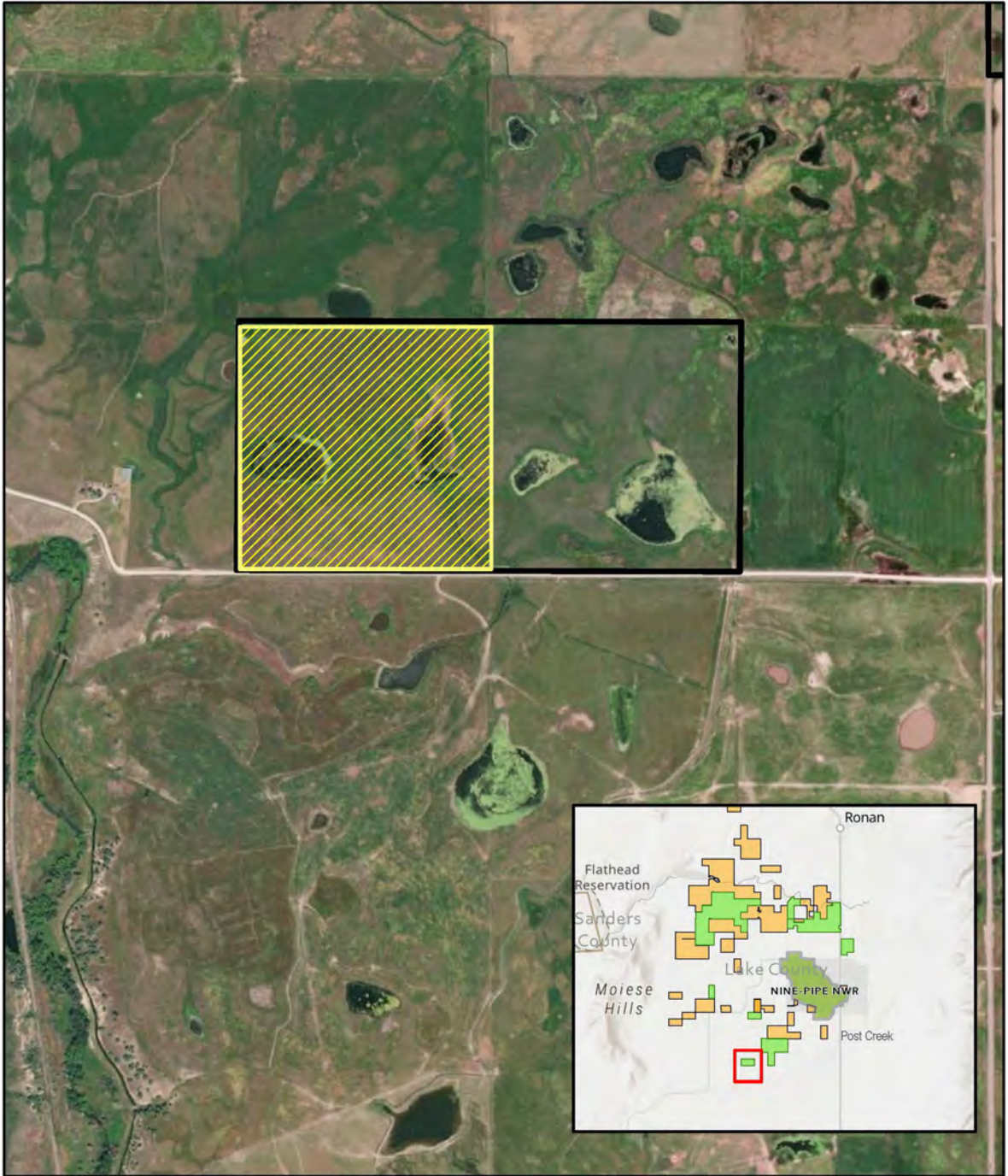


Figure 3. Map of Alternative C project area on Crow WPA.






-  Waterfowl Production Area
-  Easement
-  Proposed Facilities



Figure 4. Map of Alternative D project area on Herak WPA.

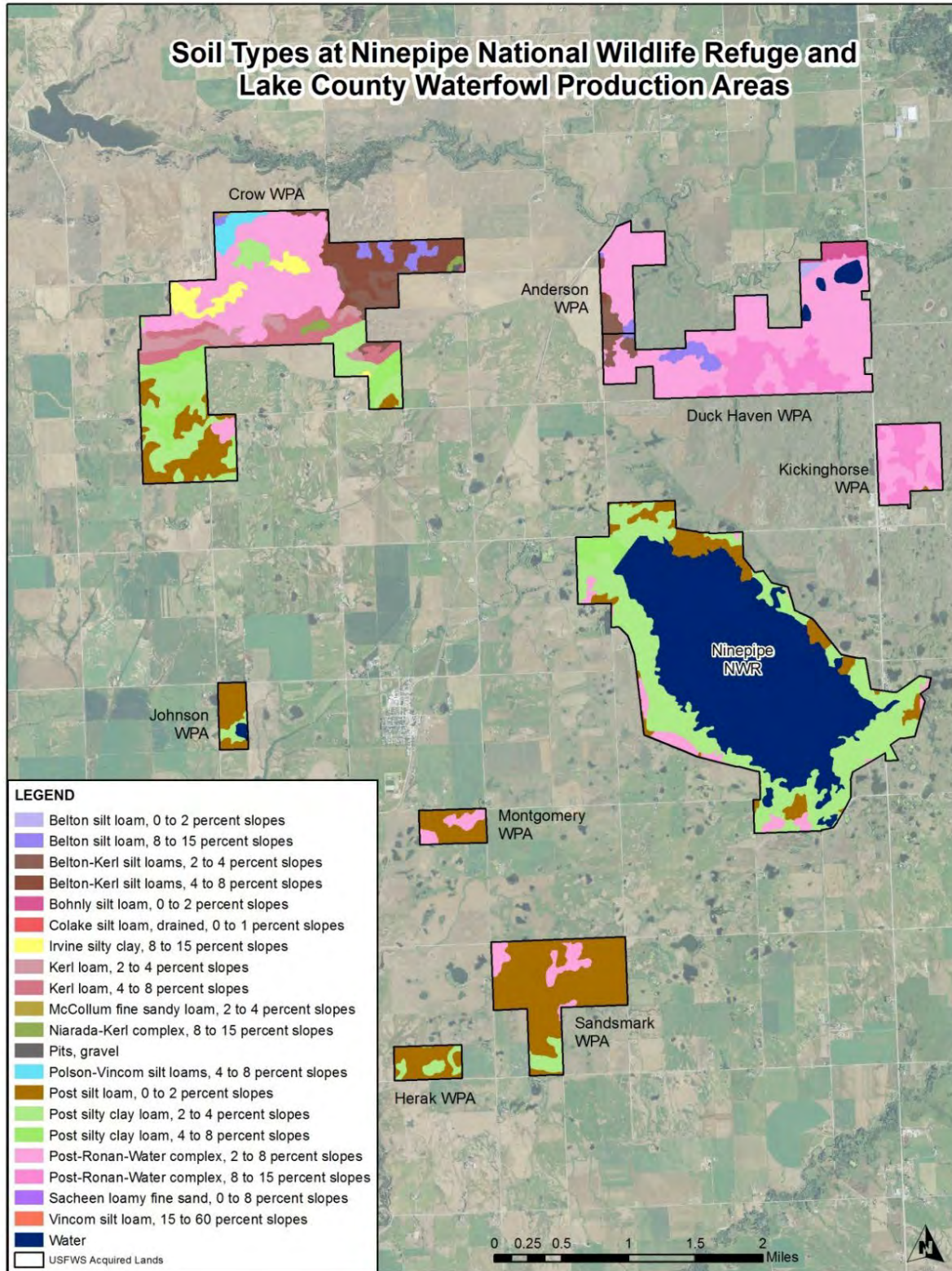


Figure 5. Soil types within USFWS-managed lands in the Mission Valley. Data from the 1995–2012 soil survey of Lake County (NRCS 2008, 2012).

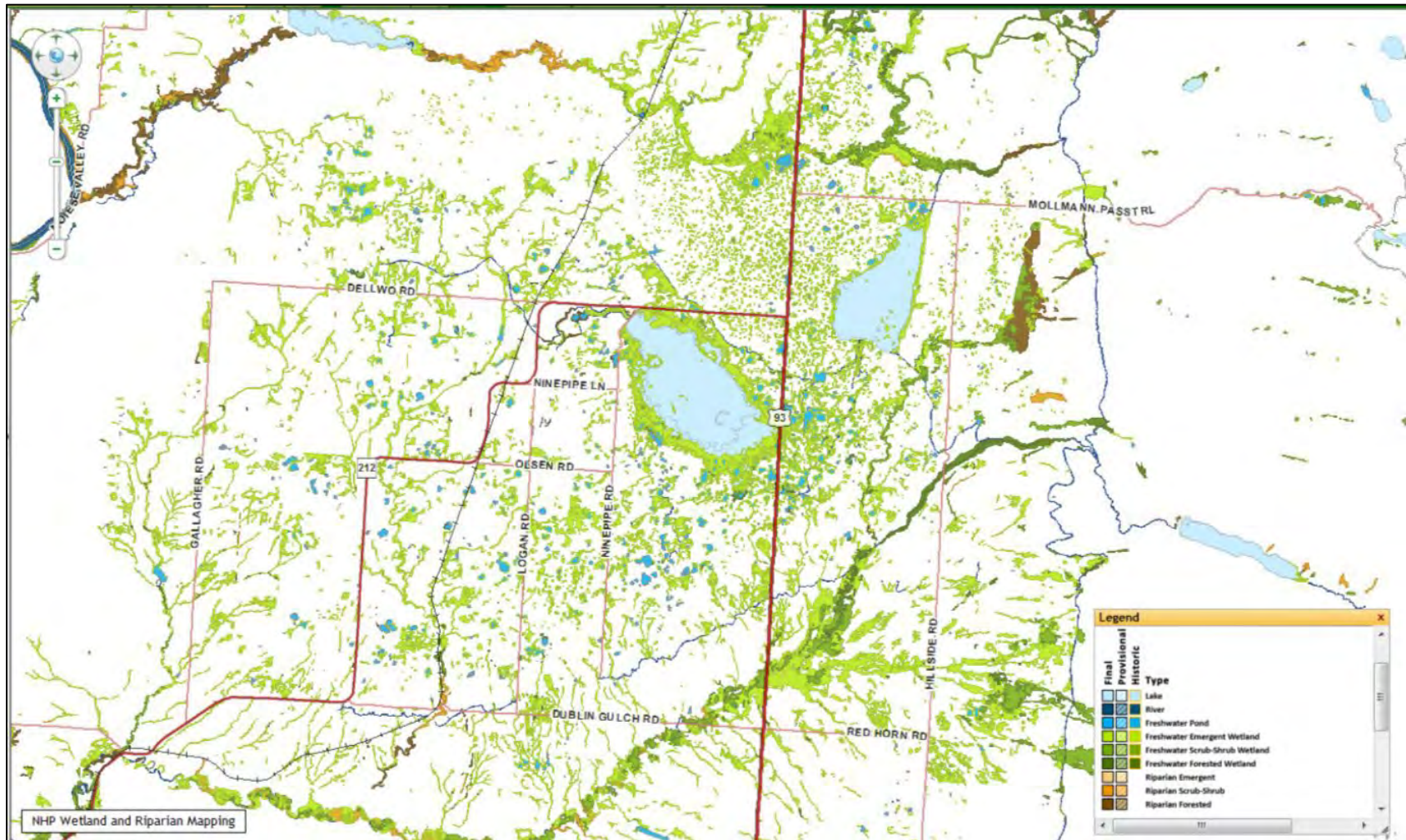


Figure 6. Wetland types in the vicinity of Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge. From Montana Natural Heritage Program (<http://mtnhp.org/nwi/>).

Appendix C: Glossary

Active Management: The direct manipulation of habitats or wildlife populations to achieve specific objectives. Actions could include planting food plots, managing water levels, prescribed grazing or fire, or wildlife relocation.

Alternative: A reasonable way to solve an identified problem or satisfy the stated need (40 C.F.R. 1501.2); one of several different means if accomplishing refuge purposes and goals and contributing to the National Wildlife Refuge System mission (The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual, 602 FW 1.5).

Baseline: A set of critical observations, data, or information used for comparison or a control.

Biodiversity: The variety of life and its processes including the variety of living organisms, the genetic differences among them, and the communities and ecosystems in which they occur (The Fish and Wildlife Service Manual, 052 FW 1.12B). The National Wildlife Refuge System's focus is on indigenous species, biotic communities, and ecological processes.

Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.): The codification of the general and permanent rules published in the Federal Register by the Executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government. Each volume of the C.F.R. is updated once each calendar year.

Corridor: A landscape feature that facilitates the biologically effective transport of animals between larger patches of habitat dedicated to conservation functions. Such corridors may facilitate several kinds of traffic including frequent foraging movement, seasonal migration, or the once in a lifetime dispersal of juvenile animals. These are transition habitats and need not contain all the habitat elements required for long-term survival or reproduction of its migrants.

Cover Type: Present vegetation.

Cultural Resources: Includes the material evidence of past human activities: prehistoric and historic. Also includes traditional cultural properties that may or may not have material evidence.

Ecosystem: A dynamic and interrelating complex of plant and animal communities and their associated nonliving environment; a biological community, together with its environment, functioning as a unit. For administrative purposes, USFWS has designated 53 ecosystems covering the United States and its possessions. These ecosystems generally correspond with watershed boundaries and their sizes and ecological complexity vary.

Fauna: All the vertebrate and invertebrate animals in an area.

Habitat: Suite of existing environmental conditions required by an organism for survival and reproduction; the place where an organism typically lives and grows.

Invasive Plant: A species that is non-native to the ecosystem under consideration and whose introduction causes, or is likely to cause, economic or environmental harm or harm to human health (Executive Order 13112).

Migration: Regular extensive, seasonal movements of birds between their breeding regions and their wintering regions; to pass usually periodically from one region or climate to another for feeding or breeding.

Mitigation: Measure designed to counteract an environmental impact or to make an impact less severe.

Non-native Species: A species present in an area due to intentional or unintentional escape, release, dissemination, or placement into an ecosystem as a result of human activity.

Project Area: The area containing all elements of the construction of the proposed new administrative facilities. Distance between individual buildings will vary with topography at each potential project area location, but the overall project area is estimated to be approximately 12 acres for this proposed action.

Proposed Action: The alternative proposed to best achieve the purpose, vision, and goals of a refuge (contributes to the National Wildlife Refuge System mission, addresses the significant issues, and is consistent with principles of sound fish and wildlife management).

Restoration: Management emphasis designed to move ecosystems to desired conditions and processes, such as healthy upland habitats and aquatic systems. Often implies a complete return to “natural” or historic conditions.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK): Traditional Ecological Knowledge, also called by other names including Indigenous Knowledge or Native Science, refers to the evolving knowledge acquired by Indigenous and local peoples over hundreds or thousands of years through direct contact with the environment. This knowledge is specific to a location and includes the relationships between plants, animals, natural phenomena, landscapes, and timing of events that are used for lifeways, including but not limited to hunting, fishing, trapping, agriculture, and forestry. TEK is an accumulating body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission, about the relationship of living beings (human and non-human) with one another and with the environment. It encompasses the world view of Indigenous people which includes ecology, spirituality, human and animal relationships, and more.

Appendix D: Public Comment

Comment 1:

As a resident of lake county, Montana who frequently recreates on all of the proposed properties I would prefer that none of the existing wpa properties be removed from habitat to make was for infrastructure, therefore my first choice would be Alternate E. Another reason to consider alternative properties is because most of the selected sites are accessible only via gravel roads and are located in otherwise rural areas. Adding infrastructure in these areas will create more traffic and further reduce open space.

I do however understand and appreciate the logistical challenges inherent in purchasing alternative property for the infrastructure. If the infrastructure must be placed on an existing WPA then I would favor Alternative B.

Comment 2:

I strongly believe the Confederated Salish Kootenai and Pend d'Oreille tribes can take over the management of these refuges and provide all the care and maintenance they need. They have a wonderful track record for management of the lands they have acquired around these said areas already. They already have the resources and manpower within their Natural Resources and Wildlife Management departments. Their track record of accomplishments is already well known and proven. Water and Land protection is of utmost importance to the tribe for the wildlife residing in the area and to recreation of said lands by the public. I myself am a hiker and birder that uses the a lot.

Comment 3:

I support the proposed building locations for the NW MT Wetland Management District Admin Facilities. I believe the staff in this area need to have a new building as soon as possible and the work that has been put into this assessment is appropriate and complete in my opinion. Any property that the Service can find to build new buildings to house their staff and equipment should move forward quickly.

Comment 4:

As residents of the Mission Valley and St. Ignatius in particular, my wife and I are both very happy with the manner in which the Tribe is managing the land and water in our area. We would like to see them assume more control of the wildlife areas and are pleased to see their interest in returning wetlands to prosper the bird, duck and geese habitat. We are happy that the irrigation interests of all of us have been settled and look forward to the implementation of the water delivery being improved under their leadership.

Comment 5:

The F&WS WMD is a key partner in a world class complex of Tribal, Federal, State and private lands managed for wildlife habitat and conservation in the Mission Valley of Montana, the Swan Valley, and Flathead Valley. It is essential that there be adequate facilities for the F&WS to accomplish their mission. After review of the EA, Alternatives B, C, D, I would recommend use of the Andersen WPA location (Alternative B) based on my knowledge of all three WPA's. However, I have confidence that leadership of the WMD will select the best alternative location based on their thoughtful deliberations.

I look forward to working with the WMD personnel.

Comment 6:

FWS:

I have recently read the EA for establishing a new administration facility for the Montana Wetland Management District, and my comment is none of the proposals to develop portions of existing WPAs (options B, C and D) is acceptable. There are several reasons for my comment:

- 1) WPA lands that have been set aside for wildlife habitat should not be, in turn, made available for future development, especially by the very agency that maintains a mission of promoting and managing wildlife habitat.*
- 2) Wildlife habitat lands with public, multi-use access are difficult to attain. Any plan to eliminate land that has already been successfully acquired and managed for that purpose is not responsible. The optics of proposals B, C and D are awful, and I believe the assessment is significantly incomplete because it makes no accounting of the resulting large public backlash to a proposal to reduce publicly accessible wildlife habitat previously set aside for that very purpose. As a resident of Charlo and avid photographer and bird hunter, I can attest that each of the parcels proposed for development are productive habitat for waterfowl and upland birds.*
- 3) There appears to be little discussion on option E (acquire new land), which is the proposal I support. The amount of land in the ninepipes complex that is set aside as wildlife habitat is a fraction of total land in the surrounding Mission Valley. If 12 acres is what is needed for the project, it is hard to fathom that this size parcel cannot be found in a more appropriate setting than on already established WPA land. From a practical standpoint of day-to-day operations, locating the facilities closer to a travel route such as highway 212 or highway 93 makes a lot of sense, and there are many more options in such areas to utilize land that has less value in terms of potential wildlife habitat. For example, was any consideration given to the existing maintenance facilities at the intersection of Highway 212 and Piedalue Rd?*

Thank you for considering my comments. I welcome any opportunity to discuss them further.

Comment 7:

I am writing to express my opposition to Alternatives B, C and D in the draft Environmental Assessment for New Northwest Montana Wetland Management District Administrative Facilities. My family (Bonnie Ellis and Jack Stanford) own property just east of Anderson Waterfowl Production Area, and I assist in managing that land and know the area well. While I understand the need for The Fish and Wildlife Service to have centralized facilities in the region and look forward to having their staff on the ground in the area and actively managing these public lands, these alternatives are contradictory to the FWS's mission and not in the best interest of the public or wildlife. Although its drafters obviously took into account some wildlife considerations in selecting locations, it appears it was a forgone conclusion that these new facilities had to be on an existing Waterfowl Production Area? Since the FWS stated mission includes "...restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans" it would make sense to preserve as much habitat as possible in a region where development is already running rampant. Although sites selected are supposedly sub-prime habitat, they are still better than a paved surface or buildings. As a specific example, Alternative B on Anderson is right in the middle of an area that is otherwise free from buildings, constant human presence and lights. Currently in the area the two closest buildings are roughly a mile apart. The Anderson proposal would create a large human presence right in the middle of that otherwise open space.

Avoiding further loss of habitat in the area should be the priority in selecting the location of these new facilities. It is for this reason that I support "Alternative E-Purchase Property and Construct Facilities". The urban areas in the region have numerous vacant lots which could likely be acquired and built to suit FWS needs. This would potentially be more convenient for carrying out maintenance while also not destroying habitat. Although not ideal, selecting an area of Duck Haven WPA on its eastern border next to HWY 93 would not damage the overall character of the area while still meeting the FWS's needs for a centralized location. Because of the highway, the habitat is already severely diminished and holds much less value than the other more remote sections of WPAs suggested.

I understand the need for new facilities and look forward to a higher level of management from FWS now that the Bison Range will be transferred to CSKT. That being said, we must do better in finding a suitable location for the facilities. This location should not destroy habitat, should make the best and most efficient use of conservation dollars and meet FWS's needs.

Comment 8:

As a longtime supporter of FWS wetland management in western Montana, as well as a retired biologist and land manager I offer the following comments.

I have lived adjacent to the Mission Valley for 45 years and have enjoyed both consumptive and non-consumptive uses of wetland wildlife. We enjoy viewing all the species, as well as the

habitat needed to sustain the wildlife. We greatly appreciate knowing such habitat is protected. We also hunt all the WPAs mentioned in Alts B, C, and D.

We also appreciate the need for new facilities. But location matters.

I urge dismissal of Alts B, C and D. I favor Alt E.

It makes little sense to destroy wetland habitat to save and manage it, as would by placing facilities on an existing WPA, as proposed by Alts B, C and D. Of course, the footprint of such a facility is small compared to the much larger wildlife impact. Roads, powerlines, sewer and water all create lasting impacts. Certainly many wildlife species would avoid such facilities. Hunting would be prohibited for likely some distance, shrinking public land sportsmen opportunities which are already limited.

Instead, Alt E could enhance wildlife habitat if such a facility were placed on purchased potential habitat if land is currently largely unsuitable, due to current management or uses. Such a facility in a restored habitat could be an educational opportunity and inspiration to some visitors and cooperators.

Please protect existing WPA habitats by selecting Alternative e.

Comment 9:

Looks like alternate purchase of non. USFWS property would be best.

Other sites provide good habitat for waterfowl and sensitive species.

Comment 10:

I am writing in response to your proposed development on the Waterfowl Production Areas in western Montana near Ronan. In addition to the unnecessary loss of habitat from placing a facility on a WPA, there are numerous other potential impacts from 13 staff coming and going on those unpaved roads which are subject to significant frost heave in the spring, a permanent residence, bunk houses for temporary staff, RV pads, maintenance area, storage for large equipment, etc. These impacts will not be limited to the 12-acre development. As a result of my evaluation, I would recommending Alternative E which does not involve building on WPA properties established to protect and enhance waterfowl.

As you are aware these lands have been set aside for the production of waterfowl, not the development of infrastructure. Nationally these WPA's are critical lands toward meeting the goals of the waterfowl management community in the United States and Canada which developed a strategy to restore them through habitat protection, restoration and enhancement - an unprecedented recognition of the need for international cooperation to help recover these shared resources. This strategy has become the North American Waterfowl Management Plan.

Your agency is charged with the protection of this system. You must not cause the loss of acreage and thus diminish the available lands for production. Having lived in the area for a number of years I feel sure other lands are available for your needs such as the current facilities at the National Bison Range.

Comment 11:

I wish to comment on the proposed new facility on/near the Anderson waterfowl facility Southwest of Ronan Montana, specifically plan B.

I have two special interests in the region. First I am a PhD Ecologist who has been associated with the UM Bio Station since 1984. Second, and more important, I have been hunting, fishing, wildlife watching and hiking this exact and adjacent areas for thousands of hours, in all seasons for nearly 40 years. That region was a critical reason for the decision for my wife and I to decide to retire in Western Montana and get one more wonderful English Setter.

I have seen otters, bears, whistling swans (I think) and many many game and other interesting animals on this and adjacent lands in these 40 years. I have many wonderful dog and fish and owl and otter stories that I can share. My beloved dog Molly is buried there. I was devastated as more and more of what was once universally accessible land came under private ownership and as the default position for Montana accessibility was no longer posted but no longer accessible (without permission or public).

I have read the Environmental Impact Statement for this Facility. I would like to register that the facility makes no sense, or rather negative sense, to me relative to the stated goals of MFW&Parks which my wife read to me this morning. As more and more undeveloped land comes under development why in the world would you build a new facility in one of the few relatively large wild areas remaining? Why would you have a "visitors center" to encourage more people into an area devoted to wildlife? How could you take away one of the few last remaining areas where I am free to hunt and where I do hunt every year?

Other reasons include my desire to not encourage even more people to visit our valley or especially that specific region, a desire to not disturb wildlife even more, a sense that this area is ancestral to Native Americans and may eventually revert to their administration (as with the Bison Range) and my general distaste for any development outside of towns.

I am generally favorably inclined toward FW&P and recognize that they have many difficult decisions to make. But in my opinion, and with many other options, this is not a good decision.

P.S. please acknowledge my recent email on the Anderson site. I wish to add that my comments probably apply to at least some of the other sites, which I did not initially understand were in same general area.

Comment 12:

It was with dismay that I learned today of the proposal to build a new district management facility within one of three wildlife protection areas (WPA) located in the Mission Valley of Lake County, Montana. It is ironic that the first page of the environmental assessment for said project highlights the USFWS mission, which is at complete odds with potential "solutions" A, B, C, or D described on the following pages of the draft environmental assessment.

As someone who uses, frequents, and loves this area, and as a former professor and environmental science researcher whose focus was land use change impacts on water quality and quantity, soil and landscape carbon dynamics, forest and wildlife viability, I am deeply frustrated that in spite of all we have learned (and published) solutions B, C, or D could be seriously considered by these two noble agencies (USFWS, MTFWP). Anyone who has studied the needs of wildlife to thrive, understands the role of landscape connectivity, roadless wilderness, nighttime dark skies, among the myriad additional species-specific habitat requirements. Interrupting the ecological structure and function of any one of the sites with intense human activity will, furthermore, put additional pressure on the remaining WPAs and preserves in the surrounding areas.

Finally, at a time when access to fishing and hunting lands continues to diminish with each passing year, the siting of the proposed facility on any of the WPA units is an affront to Montana's "common" sports men and women. I have always been a fan of both USFWS and MTFWP particularly because I love their dedication to wildlife protection, while at the same time working to guarantee sportsmen sustainable access to the latter. As stated, proposed sites B, C, and D are in direct conflict with that long-held mission. Neither would plan A allow for continued protection nor wise management of these precious resources.

I implore the decision makers to implement plan E , which I hope would result in a new structure adjacent or proximate to existing "urban" infrastructure, such as roads, runoff capture, sewage treatment, etc. thus diminishing impacts to wildlife, their habitats, and the people who seek out these wild places.

Comment 13:

We represent approximately 3,000 dues-paying Montana sportsmen and women. Backcountry Hunters and Anglers advocates to protect quality habitat, fish and wildlife, access, and fair chase traditions. We are writing to express our opposition to Alternatives B, C and D in this draft assessment. All three of these alternatives would destroy valuable habitat for wildlife including ducks, geese, Hungarian partridge, and pheasants. This loss of acreage would also be a loss of access for our members and the many other Montanans who hunt and recreate in the Mission Valley. Furthermore, we are surprised that the USFWS would choose to develop land that they have previously designated as a Waterfowl Production Area. For these reasons we support Alternative E in which the USFWS would purchase property and build new facilities in

an area of little conservation value. In our view this option would be the best for wildlife, the public land hunter, and it would be the wisest use of valuable conservation dollars.

Comment 14:

I have just been made aware of the proposal for 12 acres of pristine land to be used to build facilities for USFWS staff and equipment, etc... I cannot even begin to state how unnerving it is to think about such a proposal in this area. As an entity dedicated to the protection of wildlife it would be absolutely counterintuitive for you to use this wonderful land for such destructive purposes. We have had so many sandhill cranes this year it is unbelievable. To have disruption to them alone would be devastating.

My husband and I have lived on our acreage for 32 years. Any small change (such as the trailer house that was set in the refuge area this year) causes disturbance to any and all of the wildlife. The deer have to find different pathways to their water, the birds have to find different nesting areas. The impact to this area would be enormous if the magnitude of the proposed construction would be implemented. It doesn't make sense at all for buildings to be put on this site and only shows a lack of knowledge about the ecosystem in this area. If the goal of your agency is to preserve wildlife you are way off the mark if you put a facility on the Anderson WPA.

Comment 15:

The responsibilities of the federal Fish & Wildlife Service to protect and restore threatened and endangered species, monitor and manage migratory birds, and conserve wetland habitat are more vital than ever in this era of climate change, ongoing habitat loss, and continuing human population growth and development. With such significant threats to these resources here in northwest Montana and elsewhere, it is vital to protect the habitats that remain. I strongly urge you to reconsider the options for locating a new facility to administer the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District. All the alternatives (other than no action) described in the Draft Environmental Assessment for the New NW Montana Wetland Management District Administrative Facilities would permanently disturb and reduce habitat and habitat quality. I believe there are feasible alternatives that remain to be carefully considered, including reducing the size of the proposed management facility, dispersing management operations to a few locations, and locating new or purchasing existing facilities close to towns, cities, or other developed communities. The DEIS should include an evaluation of travel times and fuel use to and from the USFWS facilities both on and off the CSKT Reservation to identify options which would entail the least travel time and fossil fuel use. In this era of easy and inexpensive online communication, travel should be minimized as much as possible to maximize efficiencies in use of staff time, fuel, and vehicle and maintenance expenses. The ability to maintain community connections and build partnerships during the COVID pandemic provide relevant information and lessons that should be given full consideration in the DEA. These opportunities are likely to expand in the future, and should be carefully considered in order to reduce the need for onsite housing of personnel and reduce the need for travel, thereby reducing the size of facilities needed. Community and partner connections may be better served by significantly reducing

onsite housing for both permanent and seasonal staff so personnel live and become part of the many communities near the USFWS-managed properties throughout northwestern Montana, while reducing the impacts on the WPAs' numerous resource values. The potential benefits of locating management facilities in and near communities close to WMA sites throughout NW Montana are not given serious consideration in the DEIS. Further consideration should also be given to the impacts of climate change. For example, the DEIS states: Similarly, there is no definitive information on how exactly changes in climate will impact species populations. Potential impacts could include earlier stop overs in bird migration patterns, increased frequency of wildfires, habitat conversion (i.e. salt marsh to open water), decreased or increased water availability. This statement completely ignores the extensive scientific information that demonstrates climate change is currently having significant impacts on bird populations. Those impacts are likely to increase in the future, making habitat protection and restoration even more vital. The draft EIS states: There is expected to be a benefit to grasslands outside the project area and in the immediate vicinity due to an increased ability to manage invasive species efficiently in this area. In addition to new facilities providing the means for the USFWS to continue management in the District, there are expected improvements, due to proximity, in our ability to manage habitat, restore previously disturbed areas, and remove invasive plant species. This statement appears to be misleading since the previous facility location at the National Bison Range was certainly in the proximity of the WPAs in need of habitat restoration in the Mission Valley. Therefore logic indicates that the preferred location would not provide new opportunities that were not previously available. I strongly recommend careful review and consideration of opportunities to:

- reduce the size and footprint of any new facilities (including reducing or eliminating staff housing),*
- take advantage of the effective online communications opportunities available, thereby reducing travel and related expenses,*
- disperse the management facilities to communities near F&WS properties throughout northwest Montana, taking advantage of existing infrastructure,*
- maintain and restore habitat values of the WPAs in the face of numerous threats, including climate change.*

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. I have had the opportunity to enjoy the diversity of birds and other wildlife supported by, and the unique beauty of the prairie potholes of the Mission Valley and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Ninepipes Wildlife Protection Area for many years.

Comment 16:

For some 30 years we have invested in conservation of wildlife habitat and open space in the Mission Valley. Our 300 acres adjacent to the Anderson unit were purchased for use by wildlife in harmony with FWS and FWP lands in the valley. Recently we signed a cooperative agreement with FWS to develop food and cover plots for wildlife on our property in concert with similar activities on WPA, easement and other private lands. Prior to that, we participated with the FWS (Bill West) to buy new WPA lands and easements to maintain open space, dark-night sky and wildlife habitat from Hwy 93 to the Flathead River. Your idea to put your facility in that corridor violates the intent and success of all that work.

Owing to our personal investment in sustaining and enhancing wildlife on the WPA units and easements and in spirit of fostering the objective of preserving open space, dark night-sky and wildlife habitat in the Hwy 93-FR corridor, we ask that you cease consideration of your options B, C and D, forgoing the idea of development on Anderson or any other WPA unit. We support construction of a carefully planned and justified administrative facility in an urbanizing area of the valley (option E).

Comment 17:

We reside within the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District that is the subject of the September 2021 Draft Environmental Assessment. Our home is in close proximity to the site envisioned for development in Alternative B (the Anderson waterfowl production Area). We have enjoyed our region's wildlife abundance, outdoor recreational and sporting opportunities, mountain vistas, Big Sky Montana openness, and, particularly, our son's cattle grazing on pastures surrounding our home.

We support the Fish and Wildlife Service's current desire to maintain its management role within the District, and, particularly, its continued work in full cooperation with CSKT.

The Environmental Assessment process is intended to determine whether or not a proposed project's potential for significant environmental impacts requires preparation of a full environmental review (Draft and Final EIS) prior to a decision as to approval. Our comments below address Alternative B principally, which would be sited just up the road from our home, but the comments may be applicable to other alternatives as well.

While we are principally concerned with the overall approach taken in the Service's development plans, as will be discussed below, we have identified a few preliminary matters that merit further analysis during the Environmental Assessment process:

Placing the facility proposed in Alternative B well within the Anderson WPA will degrade the roads accessing the development site and thereby adversely affect the local community.

We assume that paving, tarring or other road improvements may ultimately be required for access routes to the facility. The upgraded road contaminants will wash down along -side the

roads to the harm of local wildlife and habitat. Increased speed along the improved roads, and greater frequency of traffic would reduce the safety and compatibility of use that these roads provide to the current farming community they serve.

We note that siting the facility along Route 93 would avoid these local impacts, while making the facility more suitable to public access, and more accessible to other WPAs in the District.

The determination to locate staff homes within the WPA is not justified in the Draft EA, nor were alternative siting solutions examined that would benefit from co-location with other government agencies or private co-partners outside the WPA.

Would employees prefer to live at the site of employment, or elsewhere? Would convenience to their employment site be preferable to convenience to local resources and friends? Could land and construction costs of the project be significantly reduced if shared with others - public or private co-partners? Could facilities supporting appropriately low-density public education and wildlife experiences within a WPA be limited to parking areas with minimal construction for interpretive use? These issues and alternatives are simply ignored in the Draft EA, but they should be addressed in reasonable detail.

Our greatest disappointment, however, is that Alt would removal of approximately 12 acres from its present waterfowl production use. and the development of the 12 acres for a proposed administrative facility and housing.

It is our belief that the purpose of this diminution of the Anderson WPA's wildlife carrying capacity is essentially to save money - to save the cost of purchasing, renting or developing land or facilities outside of the WPA for the proposed administrative uses. What funds are available to secure land for the needed facilities outside of the WPAs? Have the funds been pursued, and with what result?

The U.S. Fish & Wildlife's primary management goal for the District should be the preservation and enhancement of the District's wildlife value, not the erosion of this value so as to protect funds for administrative purposes. What Alternative B proposes is essentially "selling off" the future environmental value of an environmental asset so as to support the management program. This trade-off, however, has been neither clearly characterized nor justified in the Draft EA.

New contiguous land suitable for environmental productivity and waterfowl production is not being created in the Northwest Montana wetlands District. What we now have is simply irreplaceable. We will always have no more than what we have now and refuse to sacrifice. Too many bites have already been taken out of the region's waterfowl productivity, and no new resource management program should assume it can take yet another bite.

We believe that the U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service should undertake a more comprehensive review of the issues and concerns identified above, with the primary goal of maintaining and, where feasible, improving the productivity of the WPAs while at the same time securing the facilities needed for the Service's long-term management and protection.

Comment 18:

It is the closing day of the comment period, so I will make my comments brief.

My family lives 1/4 mile north of "Alternative C" located on the Crow WPA. We are not in favor of a public facility being built on that proposed site. We live in a very rural and undeveloped part of the Mission Valley. Actually its one of the few places left with open space, and for that reason we are not in favor of a public facility on the Crow WPA. Also, that area is at the heart of our family cattle ranch. We have the need to move cows and calves on Hall road often. A public facility at that site would cause increased traffic. Increased traffic would make it more difficult to move our cattle to and from our pastures. I know that the above reasons are personal to myself and my family, but I think its important to address them here.

I would like to comment more on open space. The area West of highway 93 that includes Duck Haven, Anderson, and Crow WPA's is some of the last open space left in the Mission Valley. Most of our family ranch in that area is under conservation easement which prohibits development and guarantees open space. Our family mission is to keep the ranch in production and conserve the land and habitat resource for as long as possible. Once open space is developed, it is lost forever. In my view, a public development in this area would have a negative effect on the conservation measures and management that is already in place.

I need to comment on the county roads. It would be good for a new administrative facility to be located as close to paved roads as possible. The county roads in Lake County are already stressed. The county shop is only able to grade the roads two and rarely three times per year. The roads are often very rough and not a pleasure to travel. Adding additional traffic would just add additional burden to the already stressed county roads. This might seem like a silly comment, however, I drive these roads every day and they are not fit for "good" access to a new public facility.

I agree that the WMD staff needs a new and workable facility. I also think it is important that the facility stay in Lake county due to the large concentration of NWRs and WPAs in the area. I sincerely hope a good solution for admirative facilities can be found.

I would like to offer my thoughts for a new administrative facilities site. I think more emphasis should be put toward a site that is already developed or near other developed sites. Open Space is a resource that we are all running out of, and no amount of management will ever bring the it back. I also would like to see the facility located closer to a paved road for good public and staff access.

Finally, the EA discussed purchasing a site, but none were identified. I would like to give an example of a site that I think would be an excellent example. Directly East of Charlo, MT the state of MT has a site with a shop and an access road that has two entries. This site is on Logan road just south of highway 212. I am in favor of a site like this because it already exists, its in a developed area, there are paved roads within 1/2 mile to the north and south, electricity is already there, and it would not add new development to a currently undeveloped area.

My comments are sincere, and I hope they are helpful. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Comment 19:

This email represents our comments to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Proposed Administrative Facilities (the “Facilities”) and Draft Environmental Assessment (“EA”) prepared with respect thereto.

My family resides on Herak Lane in Charlo. Our property is a part of the “Haywire Ranch” on Herak Road in Charlo and abuts the property described in the EA as “Alternative D-Facilities on Herak WPA” (hereinafter, the Herak WPA is referred to as the “Site”).

We strongly oppose the construction of the Facilities at the Site. First and foremost, since the Site abuts my family’s ranch, the adverse effect on the value of my family’s ranch is substantial. Among other reasons, one of the purposes of living on the ranch is for peace and quiet, the views of the Mission Mountains and the myriad species of wildlife present on and around the ranch. Construction of the Facilities at the Site would greatly interfere with the views of the Mission Mountains, and would greatly impact any wildlife presence on and/or migration through or around the ranch. The Site is now used for public hunting, which would cease if the Facilities are constructed.

With respect to the EA, we believe there are gross errors in analysis and judgment of the preparers of the EA. With respect to the statement “Outside of the project area, no impacts are expected.”; we are not sure what world the preparers live in, but it is a well-known fact that, and indeed common sensical, when a large facility is constructed on any property situated in a rural area, there are always significant adverse impacts on areas surrounding such construction.

Additionally, the statement “Outside of the project area, long term, beneficial impacts are expected.”; is absolutely absurd and nonsensical. How can reasonable minds come to the conclusion that, if the Facilities are constructed, things like, among those listed in the EA, “Prairie/Grassland”, or “Avian Species”, or “Mammals, Reptiles and Amphibians”, would benefit long-term from such construction? The very habitat, including any surrounding area, and including any migration area, is being literally destroyed which such mammals or avian species now occupy. How can this destruction be beneficial, long-term or otherwise??

Further, all surrounding infrastructure, including roads to and from the Site, will be substantially adversely impacted. For example, Herak Road is already impacted by throngs going to and from the dump. Herak Road is constantly being “fixed” and is in dire need of reconstruction in and of itself. A culvert is collapsing within a short distance north of the dump which will need replaced in the very near future, causing a complete road closure for an indeterminate time period.

Here are our initial questions and concerns, which we feel must be addressed prior to the beginning of any construction of the Facilities at the Site:

1 - Has a traffic study been conducted regarding the impact of increased traffic on surrounding roads?

2 - *Have studies been conducted on the impact of construction of the Facilities would have on water flow migration?*

3 - *Have studies been conducted regarding the impact the construction of the Facilities will have on surrounding water wells? There is already a great deal of arsenic present in many wells in the surrounding area.*

4 - *What adverse impacts (i.e., flooding) to our ranch property would occur from the construction of impervious surfaces on the Site?*

5 - *What safe practices and/or precautions will be taken with respect to disposition of hazardous waste in connection with vehicle maintenance on the Site?*

6 - *In the event of a hazardous waste spill, what measures will be taken to avoid migration of such hazardous waste onto our ranch property?*

7 - *Would all vehicles belonging to contractors and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service adhere to local road load limit requirements?*

8 - *Will day to day operation of the Facilities disturb the peaceful and quiet enjoyment of the surrounding residents?*

9 - *What steps will be taken to ensure there will be no noise or light pollution in the surrounding area?*

We have not seen any such studies and, by this email, hereby request that such studies be conducted prior to any construction of the Facilities on the Site, and that we are able to review such studies, in addition to direct discussion of the issues and concerns raised in this email, and those issues and concerns which may arise in the future.

Finally, we find it very disturbing, as would all hunters, that, according to the signs posted at the Site, the Site was purchased with funds from the Duck Stamp Program. To construct the Facilities at the Site would be an injustice to all hunters who “purchased the Site” with funds spent on Duck Stamps who, in turn, will no longer be able to hunt the Site.

There is such great, substantial adverse impact on the surrounding area of the Site to be considered for construction of the Facilities.

The entire Wharton family, their descendants, the tenants of the Haywire Ranch, the hunters who frequent the Site, the many, many species of mammals and birds, both upland and waterfowl, migratory and otherwise, pray the Site will remain in its current unspoiled, natural state, and that construction of the Facilities will be where natural habitat will not be destroyed and is more conducive to public access.

Comment 20:

It has recently come to my attention the plans to build a structure on Herak Road, abutting Haywire Ranch. I am very concerned about multiple aspects of this proposal as well as the lack of proper notification to people who will be affected adversely by this proposal.

Here are my initial questions and concerns, which I feel must be addressed prior to the beginning of any construction of the Proposed Administrative Facilities on West Post Creek Road next to Haywire Ranch property:

1 - Has a traffic study been conducted regarding the impact of increased traffic on surrounding roads and populations?

2 - Have studies been conducted on the impact of construction of the Facilities would have on water flow migration?

3 - Have studies been conducted regarding the impact the construction of the Facilities will have on surrounding water wells? There is already a great deal of arsenic present in many wells in the surrounding area.

4 - What adverse impacts (i.e., flooding) to our ranch property would occur from the construction of impervious surfaces on the Site?

5 - What safe practices and/or precautions will be taken with respect to disposition of hazardous waste in connection with vehicle maintenance on the Site?

6 - In the event of a hazardous waste spill, what measures will be taken to avoid migration of such hazardous waste onto our ranch property?

7 - Would all vehicles belonging to contractors and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service adhere to local road load limit requirements?

8 - Will day to day operation of the Facilities disturb the peaceful and quiet enjoyment of the surrounding residents?

9 - What steps will be taken to ensure there will be no noise or light pollution in the surrounding area?

We have not seen any such studies and, by this email, hereby request that such studies be conducted prior to any construction of the Facilities on the Site, and that we are able to review such studies, in addition to direct discussion of the issues and concerns raised in this email, and those issues and concerns which may arise in the future.

Comment 21:

It has recently come to my attention the plans to build a structure on Herak Road, abutting Haywire Ranch. I am very concerned about multiple aspects of this proposal as well as the lack of proper notification to people who will be affected adversely by this proposal.

Here are my initial questions and concerns, which I feel must be addressed prior to the beginning of any construction of the Proposed Administrative Facilities on West Post Creek Road next to Haywire Ranch property:

1 - Has a traffic study been conducted regarding the impact of increased traffic on surrounding roads and populations?

2 - Have studies been conducted on the impact of construction of the Facilities would have on water flow migration?

3 - Have studies been conducted regarding the impact the construction of the Facilities will have on surrounding water wells? There is already a great deal of arsenic present in many wells in the surrounding area.

4 - What adverse impacts (i.e., flooding) to our ranch property would occur from the construction of impervious surfaces on the Site?

5 - What safe practices and/or precautions will be taken with respect to disposition of hazardous waste in connection with vehicle maintenance on the Site?

6 - In the event of a hazardous waste spill, what measures will be taken to avoid migration of such hazardous waste onto our ranch property?

7 - Would all vehicles belonging to contractors and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service adhere to local road load limit requirements?

8 - Will day to day operation of the Facilities disturb the peaceful and quiet enjoyment of the surrounding residents?

9 - What steps will be taken to ensure there will be no noise or light pollution in the surrounding area?

We have not seen any such studies and, by this email, hereby request that such studies be conducted prior to any construction of the Facilities on the Site, and that we are able to review such studies, in addition to direct discussion of the issues and concerns raised in this email, and those issues and concerns which may arise in the future.

Comment 22:

After reviewing the EA for administrative facilities construction I strongly prefer alternative E. Building infrastructure at Anderson WPA or Crow WPA would diminish the entire Duck Road, Johnson Road, Hall Road remoteness and vastly reduce the ground nesting bird value of the WMD. These locations are valued by any wildlife advocate or enthusiast who has ever experienced them. The area is listed in the "Montana Wildlife Viewing Guide" (published 1993). Please don't put buildings on them.

Past wildlife events, as well as data on file in your office support this opinion.

Examples:

1. The Anderson WPA alternative B would impact grasslands that are ground nesting migratory bird habitat near large wetlands. These wetlands were pumped full from Crow Creek in the 2006-08 era. The water levels sustained in these potholes with natural runoff for years, once filled by human effort. The large pump and a mile of pipe should be on your property list. These potholes and associated grassland are great habitat for migratory birds native to the Mission Valley. Acre for acre better than most in your FWS Region.

2, Facilities at Crow WPA would be very tragic. Please don't select that location. It is not only migratory bird nesting habitat, it is roosting habitat for short eared owls in late fall, early winter and is foraging habitat for rough legged hawks in winter. One morning in November of 1990s I personally counted 83 short eared owls exiting cattails of one wetland basin located at 47 28'50".30 N 114 11' 43".90 W. That wetland is now dry but former owner of that property, Jaye Johnson, told me it was never dry in his life time until recent times. Maybe an example of climate change? Pumping it full once might rejuvenate it for years, if not decades. 40 acres for alternative B is adjacent to this wetland.

Herak WPA alternative C would be less destructive to wildlife, but that is because the man made wetlands there need maintenance and restoration. If restored, the facilities would be at odds with the mission of the FWS and NWRS. Please do not build facilities here.

A quick search of Zillow found a good location for you to pursue under alternative E (acquire land on which to build). Here is a link:

The 25.6 acre property is 3 miles south of Charlo along Highway 212.

[https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/59910-Highway-212-Charlo-MT-59824/2075779077_zpid/?](https://www.zillow.com/homedetails/59910-Highway-212-Charlo-MT-59824/2075779077_zpid/)

Comment 23:

We echo our family's concerns and opinions expressed in the letter below (reprinted for the impact that this thoughtful, well considered, deeply heartfelt letter expresses). To the letter below, I add the following comments:

With three alternative sites available, two of which are off of Route 93, why would you even consider Herak/West Post Creek Road? Such construction will effectively destroy the peaceful existence of Herak Road and Herak Lane residents. The area being considered for constructing the planned facilities is presently peaceful and residential with private homes and abundant wildlife including four-legged and winged species. Perhaps the most impressive feature of this area is its views of the Mission Mountains.

Your commercial facilities should be constructed in a commercial – NOT A RESIDENTIAL – location. Route 93 is clearly a more logical and less negatively impactful location for the contemplated facilities. It is already a main thoroughfare with business/commercial enterprises all along it, north to south. Route 93 would be an easily accessible location for everyone. Route 93 is currently traversed by 18-wheelers, tractor trailers, campers, vehicles, trucks, RVs, motor homes, and the like. The infrastructure is already in place for your facilities.

Herak Road and Herak Lane residents are already negatively impacted by heavy traffic going to and from the dump! Why would you add insult to injury by inflicting yet another widely used destination to draw even more traffic to that area? Herak Road itself, already in need of frequent repairs, will not survive.

Residents living along West Post Creek Road, and those including my family living along Herak Road and Herak Lane, moved there for a peaceful, quiet life in the small community of Charlo, Montana. There are magnificent views of the majestic Mission Mountains. There is abundant wildlife. There are migrations of amazing numbers of birds and waterfowl to and from Ninepipes Reservoir. These residents moved here to get away from congested, noisy areas to find the peaceful life they have lived for generations. Why would you deliberately destroy this?? With three alternative sites for this project, why not select the one that least negatively impacts the lives of the taxpayers and residents who live there?

You have choices. Please consider the alternatives.

Comment 24:

We are opposed to the proposed Facs at Herak Rd and believe that the Crow Dam site would be a much better location.

The WPA is close to the Nine Pipes Reservoir and serves as an additional nearby habitat for lots of wildlife not just waterfowl. In addition there are several large farm pastures near the Herak Rd proposed site which may be adversely affected by the proposed Facs

Whereas there seems to be less impact of Crow Rd proposed location to ranches and large waterfowl areas

Thank you for your consideration in this public matter

We are against the proposed Herak Rd Administration Facs location.

Comment 25:

I am submitting this comment on behalf of Tom Cargo. Tom is an environmental engineer and a resident of Ohio, whose family ranch is adjacent and to the North of Herak WPA.

Mr. Cargo called the office this afternoon to relay his concerns with the proposed construction of new facilities for the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District.

He is opposed to construction on Herak and believes the FWS investigation was not detailed enough to fully determine impacts. He feels we should consider alternatives that are less invasive to the area. He understands that new facilities are needed and supports acquisition, especially if in an area better suited to development.

He has been visiting this area for 25 years, and regularly sees 25+ species of waterfowl on wetlands in the area. He described the area as pristine and believes it should be protected. He feels this is the largest and most important migratory path for waterfowl in North America.

He felt there would be an impact to the value of their ranch. Expressed concerns regarding the impact to the roads in the area, which were not designed for heavy traffic. He also felt the impact to the ecosystem would be greater than the EA suggests.

He would like for the FWS to consider other locations.

Comment 26:

I am submitting a comment on behalf of Jerry Smith of Charlo who lives adjacent and to the west of Herak WPA.

Mr. Smith called the office this morning to relay his concerns with the proposed construction of new facilities for the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District.

He is opposed to construction on Herak WPA. Mr. Smith is particularly concerned with the likelihood of increased traffic on the road where he and his young family live. He feels that these roads were not designed for the kind of traffic that the proposed facilities would likely draw.

He was also quite concerned by the potential loss of habitat and hunting opportunities, as they are already quite limited in the area. Especially for non-members.

He has spoken with other neighbors, and they are all in opposition of development on Herak. Mr. Smith is purchasing his property from the Haywire Ranch which was formally owned by the Herak family who donated the ground for the WPA. He feels the FWS should not be developing on land that was donated for conservation, and he's certain the Heraks would concur.

Mr. Smith understands that new facilities are needed and supports acquisition, especially if in an area better suited to development and on a road better suited (paved) to the amount and types of uses required by the FWS.

He would like for the FWS to consider other locations.

Response:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) would like to thank all those who submitted comments during the review period for the New Northwest Montana Wetland Management District (NWMT WMD) Administrative Facilities Draft Environmental Assessment (EA).

The team read and heard your concerns regarding the proposed construction on units of the NWMT WMD in the Mission Valley. Subsequently, the EA team categorized responses by topic under the subheadings below. Any edits made to the final document in response to comments are also referenced below.

Loss of Habitat and Open Space:

There were multiple comments regarding the loss of habitat or open space. The USFWS recognizes the importance of connectivity and open space to the overall value of these habitats and remains committed to conservation in the Mission Valley.

The proposed sites are composed of retired agricultural land dominated by non-native and invasive grasses and forbs. Although they provide some cover for wildlife, they lack the diverse composition of native grass and forb species representative of healthy grassland ecosystems. The proposed construction is estimated to involve 12 acres of total disturbance, representing 0.37% of the Lake County portion of the NWMT WMD and an even smaller fraction of the total protected acres in the Mission Valley. The habitat on these sites requires regular management to be sustained as suitable habitat; by maintaining our presence in the Valley, USFWS increases our ability to improve habitat and nesting opportunities significantly.

The dispersal of buildings throughout management lands was also considered but dismissed as it would potentially increase the total area of disturbance to wildlife and habitat. Development of each building creates both permanent and temporary disturbance to the surrounding area. By constructing facilities in close proximity and overlapping the areas of disturbance, USFWS will reduce the overall footprint of this project.

Furthermore, utilizing various preexisting facilities spread throughout northwest Montana would not allow the USFWS to effectively manage our conservation lands as other facilities in northwest Montana range from an hour and thirty minutes to four hours driving one way.

Finally, the USFWS is committed to the continual acquisition of new conservation lands in the Mission Valley, individually or with partners, to increase protected habitat and open space.

Hunting and Public Access:

There were multiple comments expressing concerns over loss of public access and based on this USFWS further analyzed impacts of the construction on the availability of hunting on the Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs). Please see section 3.6.1 on page 3-8 of the EA for reference.

Hunting within 150 yards of the constructed facilities would be prohibited under CSKT and Montana State law, resulting in a small, negligible loss of huntable acres. However, the USFWS

is committed to acquiring conservation land in Lake County using Land and Water Conservation Funds and Migratory Bird Conservation Funds (16 U.S.C. § 742f(4)) authorized by the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act (16 U.S.C. §§ 718–718j, 48 Stat. 452). In accordance with 50 C.F.R. 32.1 and 50 C.F.R. 32.4, fee title lands acquired as WPAs are immediately open to public hunting of migratory game birds, upland game, and big game, as well as fishing, subject to state law and regulations and the pertinent provisions of 50 C.F.R. Parts 25–31.

Suggested Alternatives:

Several comments provided suggestions for additional alternatives (e.g., former Ninepipe NWR headquarters on Highway 212 and Piedalue Road, or portions of WPAs like Duckhaven that are adjacent to Highway 93).

These and many other sites were considered but dismissed from analysis because they did not possess an equal or greater number of the criteria for selection as the units in the proposed alternatives (e.g., a lack of safe ingress and egress from main roads, a high density or extent of wetlands, extensive habitat restoration already underway or completed, a high percentage of intact native vegetation, existence of critical habitat for species of concern, and/or lands not owned by the USFWS).

Other reasons for not choosing any of these locations include difficult access to utilities or unfavorable topography for administrative site functions that would not meet the needs of the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas.

The USFWS frequently partners with the CSKT, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (MTFWP), and the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS), and we considered collocation during the initial selection of alternatives. This was dismissed from the analysis due to a lack of capacity in current partner facilities and the uncertain or lengthy timeline of preexisting construction plans by current partners. Please see section 2.7, Alternatives Considered but Dismissed, on page 2-6 of the EA for reference.

The USFWS will continue to collaborate with the CSKT, but facilities on the BR were officially transferred to CSKT ownership and are no longer available to the USFWS. Please see section 1.1 on page 1-1 of the EA for more information.

In selecting a site, the USFWS is first pursuing acquisition over constructing facilities on an existing WPA in Lake County; however, the current climate of the real estate market poses challenges when competing for property acquisition and warrants consideration of all options.

Currently, the USFWS supports telework and virtual meetings to the extent possible, but work in the field (e.g., invasive species management, water management, biological surveys) constitutes the majority of staff time. All alternatives propose locations that are central to both staff and the units of the NWMT WMD in Lake County to reduce travel time and fuel use. Without facilities in a central location to store equipment necessary for the continued management and improvement

of conservation lands, an excess of time would be spent transporting equipment to and from work sites.

Regarding the purchase of existing facilities or developed land, please see description of Alternative E in section 2.5 on page 2-2.

Climate Change:

One comment was received with respect to climate change. The USFWS is dedicated to managing our conservation lands to help combat the impacts of climate change on habitat and wildlife. While there is scientific information that demonstrates climate change is currently having significant impacts on bird populations, the purpose of our analysis is to evaluate the impacts of our proposed actions. It is not possible to conduct a qualitative assessment of the exact impacts of the construction of our proposed facilities on climate change.

In order to offset possible impacts of our construction on climate change, the USFWS has committed to following LEED-certified building requirements; designing facilities that minimize carbon output, water consumption, light pollution, and noise; and constructing the minimum number of facilities required to manage the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas.

Roads and Traffic:

Multiple commenters expressed concerns about an increase in traffic and the resulting impacts to the roads. Although the use of roads by future visitors cannot be preliminarily quantified or analyzed, we acknowledge there is likely to be a slight increase in traffic to the selected site, specifically during the construction phase. However, the USFWS does not anticipate a significant increase in current visitation on the units of the NWMT WMD, nor do we view these facilities as a draw to the public. This is reflected in the design of the multipurpose building, where only a limited area is designated for visitor contact. In addition, we believe that the traffic generated by USFWS staff regularly reporting to this site will have minimal impacts due to the relatively small number of employees with staggered start times and work schedules, and an ability to telework. USFWS will work closely with the Lake County Roads Department and Montana Department of Transportation to identify issues, develop appropriate access, and provide adequate signage for directing traffic on paved and developed roads wherever possible. Furthermore, all USFWS staff, volunteers, and contractors are required to adhere to traffic laws (e.g., road weight and speed limits) and recommendations set forth by these transportation agencies.

Please see the additional comment on page 2-5 in the EA; section 2.6.5 was added to address this topic.

Operations:

Several commenters expressed concerns for disturbance resulting from day-to-day operations. USFWS expects operations necessary to maintaining and managing our conservation lands are similar to those of local farms and ranches. The USFWS will implement downward facing lights

in the construction of facilities to minimize light pollution and will primarily work within daylight hours.

All work involving hazardous materials will be conducted in compliance with applicable federal, state, and local laws, and associated wastes will be handled following standard approved USFWS safety plans.

For a list of additional BMPs and mitigation measures the USFWS has committed to implementing to prevent damage to the surrounding area (e.g., erosion and runoff) please see section 2.6 starting on page 2-3 in the EA.

Improvements Outside of Construction Area:

One commenter expressed concern regarding expected improvements on the land surrounding proposed construction sites and other WPAs. Continued management is already necessary on and around these sites just to combat the impact of present threats including pollutants, development pressure, alteration or suppression of ecological processes, the spread of invasive species, and even climate change. With the bulk of USFWS staff time and budget no longer being allocated to the management of the BR, these resources can be redirected to the improvement of the WPAs.

Additional Research:

Two commenters suggested a need for additional research. The USFWS has used the best available science to conduct this analysis, as is required by NEPA. No new data was presented during the review period, and therefore additional use of federal resources to conduct research is not warranted.

The USFWS appreciates all of the public support for continued management of the USFWS properties in the Mission Valley and remains committed to restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources for current and future generations of Americans.

Please reference the FONSI in Appendix G of our EA to see the description of the proposed alternatives.

Appendix E: Cultural Clearance



A Confederation of the Salish,
Pend d' Oreille
and Kootenai Tribes

THE CONFEDERATED SALISH AND KOOTENAI TRIBES
OF THE FLATHEAD NATION
P.O. BOX 278
Pablo, Montana 59855
(406) 275-2700
FAX (406) 275-2806
www.cskt.org



A People of Vision

TRIBAL COUNCIL MEMBERS:

Shelly R. Fyant -Chairwoman
Anita L. Matt -Vice Chair
Ellie Bundy McLeod - Secretary
Martin Charlo -Treasurer
Len Two Teeth
D. Fred Matt
Carole Lankford
James "Bing" Matt
Charmel R. Gillin
Mike Dolson

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
Cultural Clearance Form
Date 07/14/2021

Cultural Clearance # 21-104 Project Name: FWS Administrative Facilities Construction
Applicant Name: Amy Lisk Phone #: amy_lisk@fws.gov
Agency Name: US Fish & Wildlife Services

The Tribal Preservation Office requires the following conditions:

- There are **NO KNOWN** cultural or historical site locations present. Project may commence as described in Cultural Clearance application.
- This undertaking will have **NO ADVERSE EFFECT** to cultural and /or historical site(s). Project may commence as described in Cultural Clearance application.
- This undertaking will have an **ADVERSE EFFECT** to cultural and /or historical site(s). Special conditions are required to be in compliance with CSKT's Cultural Resource Protection Ordinance. See comments and/or attached document(s).

This project qualifies as a NEPA Categorical Exclusion? Yes No

COMMENTS: After research, review, and field analysis there are no further concerns of potential adverse effect to historical structures and/or cultural features within the project location. Preservation Department is confident the project can continue without a staff member present. Please continue with the project as requested. If there are any modifications to the original request please resubmit and allow staff to review.

****All areas** within the exterior boundaries of the Flathead Indian Reservation have the potential to contain cultural and historical resources. If any such resources or site locations are located during the project, cease activity in the vicinity of the cultural and/or historical resource and contact the Tribal Preservation Office (TPO) immediately.**

Louie Pierre + Madeline Caye
Compliance Technician

Kasim Sheld
Approving Official

IMPORTANT STIPULATIONS: This Cultural Clearance permit is only valid for the activity described within the original application for one year. Any alterations to project plans invalidate this permit. All conditions established by the TPO must be adhered to or this permit is invalid. The applicant/agency are subject to penalties as defined in CSKT's Cultural Resource Protection Ordinance.

Kathryn McDonald
Tribal Historic Preservation Officer
Tribal Preservation Department
Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribes
406-675-2700 Ext. 1082
kathryn.mcdonald@cskt.org

July 22, 2021

Allison Parrish
Zone Archaeologist MT/UT/WY
U.S. Fish & Wildlife Services, Mountain-Prairie Region
Bozeman Fish Technology Center
4050 Bridger Canyon Road
Bozeman, MT 59715
406-994-9949 (Office)
406-404-4137 (Cell)
Allison_Parrish@fws.gov

RE: Northwest Montana WMD Administrative Facilities Complex

Dear Allison Parrish,

In this concurrence letter, as the Confederated Salish Kootenai Tribe (CSKT) Tribal Historic Preservation Officer (THPO), I am agreeing the previously signed Cultural Clearance Letterhead covers research and survey for the block areas as well as the individual boring site locations.

CSKT THPO also agrees with the language as stated in the 7/22/2021 email from Allison Parrish, *"I recommend that the undertaking proceed as planned with no further work on the Anderson, Herak, or Brome Project Areas. In the unexpected event that cultural resources are encountered during the course of Project activities, work would be stopped and the FWS Cultural Resources staff and CSKT THPO contacted as soon as possible in order to document, evaluate, and potentially mitigate (if necessary) the resource at hand."*

Sincerely,



Kathryn McDonald

Appendix F: Section 7

Intra-Service Section 7 Biological Evaluation Form - Region 6

Originating Person: Amy Lisk

Date Submitted: 02/18/2022

Telephone Number: 406-240-8146

I. Service Program and Geographic Area or Station Name:

Northwest Montana Wetland Management District

II. Flexible Funding Program (e.g. Joint Venture, etc) if applicable:

Land and Water Conservation Funds and Migratory Bird Conservation Funds

III. Location:

The proposed action areas are located on or in the vicinity of the NWMT WMD within the Mission Valley of Lake County, an intermontane basin south of Flathead Lake in Western Montana. The Lake County portion of the NWMT WMD comprises 3,268 acres of protected habitat and is generally surrounded by state and tribal conservation areas, and private land conservation easements.

IV. Species/Critical Habitat:

Threatened (T), Endangered (E), and Candidate (C) species whose range overlaps with the proposed action include grizzly bears (T) (*Ursus arctos horribilis*), monarch butterfly (C) (*Danaus plexippus*), the yellow billed cuckoo (T) (*Coccyzus americanus*), Spalding's catchfly (T) (*Silene spaldingii*), and Canada lynx (T) (*Lynx canadensis*). Although initially considered during planning, Water howellia (*Howellia aquatilis*) (formerly Threatened) was delisted from the Endangered Species Act in June 2021.

V. Project Description:

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is proposing to construct new administrative facilities on land currently owned or acquired for the management of the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District (NWMT WMD), Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Pablo NWR, Lost Trail NWR, and Swan River NWR due to the transfer of the current Bison Range facilities to the Confederate Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). The new administrative facilities proposal will include a multipurpose building, shop, storage, residences, and associated roads and utilities. Construction for the proposed project will impact approximately 12 acres of land.

VI. Biological Justification:

The habitats within the proposed project areas are retired agricultural land and pastures dominated by non-native grass and forb species. Although these sites can provide some cover for wildlife, they lack the diversity of grass and native forb species important for healthy grassland ecosystems.

Additionally, without the construction of new facilities, the USFWS will not be able to properly manage and improve any of the surrounding Service land, thus having a more significant negative impact on available habitat for endangered and species of concern.

VII. Determination of Effects:

(A) Description of Effects:

Construction activities may disturb grizzly bears in the area during work hours but the valley already exhibits a variety of human activity and is bisected by roads. Therefore construction would not disturb grizzly bears in secure habitat and would have insignificant effects. There are sufficient

grassland and wetland habitats and pockets of cover on all sides of the project area for grizzly bears to forage and shelter in if disturbed or affected by the proposed action. Thus, the project may affect but is not likely to adversely affect grizzly bears.

Canada lynx occur on the greater Flathead Indian Reservation in montane spruce and fir forests, but there is no habitat at any of the alternative construction sites; so there would be no effect. None of the other federally listed species described above have habitat on these sites, thus the USFWS anticipates there will be no effect by construction of the proposed facilities.

(B) Determination: Determine the anticipated effects of the proposed project on species and critical habitats listed in item IV. Check all applicable boxes and list the species (or attach a list) associated with each determination.

Determination

No Effect: This determination is appropriate when the proposed project will not directly or indirectly affect (neither negatively nor beneficially) individuals of listed/proposed/candidate species or designated/proposed critical habitat of such species. **No concurrence from ESFO required.**

 X
 Monarch butterfly, yellow billed
 cuckoo, Spalding's catchfly, and
 Canada lynx

May Affect but Not Likely to Adversely Affect: This determination is appropriate when the proposed project is likely to cause insignificant, discountable, or wholly beneficial effects to individuals of listed species and/or designated critical habitat. **Concurrence from ESFO required.**

 X
 Grizzly Bear

May Affect and Likely to Adversely Affect: This determination is appropriate when the proposed project is likely to adversely impact individuals of listed species and/or designated critical habitat. **Formal consultation with ESFO required.**

May Affect and Likely to Adversely Affect but the proposed action is for the purpose of endangered or threatened species recovery and falls under Region 6's Programmatic Consultation on Service-initiated Recovery Actions: This determination is appropriate when adverse effects are likely but the project is designed to assist with recovery of listed species and/or designated critical habitat. **Concurrence from the ESFO that the project is covered by the programmatic consultation is required.**

May affect but Not Likely to Jeopardize candidate or proposed species/critical habitat: This determination is appropriate when the proposed project may affect, but is not expected to jeopardize the continued existence of a species proposed for listing or a candidate species, or adversely modify an area proposed for designation as critical habitat. **Concurrence from ESFO optional.**

Likely to Jeopardize candidate or proposed species/critical habitat: This determination is appropriate when the proposed project is reasonably expected to jeopardize the continued existence of a species proposed for listing or a candidate species, or adversely modify an area proposed for designation as critical habitat. **Conferencing with ESFO required.**

Signature AMY LISK Digitally signed by AMY LISK
Date: 2022.02.24 22:56:28
-07'00' Date _____

Reviewing Ecological Services Office Evaluation (check all that apply):

A. Concurrence X Nonconcurrency _____

Explanation for nonconcurrency:

B. Formal consultation required _____
List species or critical habitat unit _____

C. Effects are addressed in the Programmatic Consultation on R6's
Recovery Program – no further consultation needed _____

D. Conference required _____
List species or critical habitat unit _____

Name of Reviewing ES Office Montana Ecological Services Office

Signature BENJAMIN CONARD Digitally signed by BENJAMIN
CONARD
Date: 2022.02.25 08:22:56 -07'00' Date _____

Revised 1/2012

Appendix G: Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)

**FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT
AND DECISION
NEW NORTHWEST MONTANA WETLAND MANAGEMENT DISTRICT
ADMINISTRATIVE FACILITIES**

**NORTHWEST MONTANA WETLAND MANAGEMENT DISTRICT
AND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES**

LAKE COUNTY, MONTANA

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is proposing to acquire land to construct new administrative facilities for the management of four national wildlife refuges (Ninepipe, Pablo, Lost Trail, and Swan River); two conservation areas (Swan River and Lost Trail); the Northwest Montana Wetland Management District (NWMT WMD; or District), which comprises 15 Waterfowl Production Areas (WPAs; Blasdel, Smith Lake, McGregor Meadows, Batavia, Flathead, Kicking Horse, Crow, Anderson, Duck Haven, Ereaux, Johnson 80, Montgomery, Sandsmark, Herak, and Cruz); and a network of easements, due to the transfer of the current Bison Range facilities to the Confederate Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT). The new administrative facilities will include a multipurpose building, shop, storage, residences, and associated roads and utilities. Construction for the proposed project will impact approximately 12 acres of land. The USFWS must examine the potential effects of this construction project on Refuge and surrounding lands and has written an Environmental Assessment (EA) to analyze possible environmental consequences of this action. The EA is incorporated by reference into this decision document.

Selected Action

Alternative E – Proposed Action Alternative: Purchase Property and Construct Facilities

Under this alternative, the USFWS will acquire land in the Mission Valley for the purpose of constructing replacement facilities and potentially increasing conservation land using Land and Water Conservation Funds and Migratory Bird Conservation Funds. Acquisition will focus on the most cost-effective option that meets management needs. Suitable buildings present on the acquisition site that meet the needs of the USFWS will be used and retrofitted if necessary to meet requirements; however, new facilities may need to be constructed for administration of the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas. The number, size, type, and use of the facilities constructed on this location would be the same as those described under Alternative B in the EA.

This alternative was selected over the other alternatives because Alternative E will best fill the USFWS needs while preserving the open space, wildlife habitat, public recreation areas, and conservation lands on the WPAs. In addition, any excess land on an acquisition could be restored and protected for wildlife, habitat, education, interpretation, and public use.

If the USFWS is unable to acquire land for the construction of facilities, Alternative C will be implemented instead.

Under Alternative C, the USFWS will construct new facilities on the Brome 80 unit of Crow WPA to administer the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas.

Alternative C was selected over Alternatives B and D as the secondary alternative through the implementation of a decision matrix that accounted for presence of wetlands, past restoration efforts, impact to open space, use by species of concern and trust species, access to utilities, geotechnical results and topography, safe ingress and egress, impact to public use, public opinion, central location, equipment safety, and impact to roads. After Alternative E, Alternative C best fills the USFWS needs while preserving open space, wildlife habitat, public recreation areas, and conservation lands on the WPAs.

The USFWS will continue to work towards the acquisition of new conservation land within Lake County regardless of the alternative implemented.

Other Alternatives Considered and Analyzed

Alternative A – No Action Alternative

Under Alternative A, the USFWS will no longer have facilities available for the continued administration of the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas once the CSKT assumes full management of the Bison Range and will lose the ability to effectively manage conservation lands.

Alternative B – Construct New Facilities on Anderson WPA

Under Alternative B, the USFWS would construct new facilities on the southern part of Anderson WPA to administer the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas.

Alternative D – Construct New Facilities on Herak WPA

Under Alternative D, the USFWS would construct new facilities on Herak WPA to administer the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas.

Summary of Effects of the Selected Actions

An EA was prepared in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to provide decision-making framework that (1) explored a reasonable range of alternatives to meet project objectives; (2) evaluated potential issues and impacts to the refuge, resources, and values; and (3) identified mitigation measures to lessen the degree or extent of these impacts. The EA evaluated the effects associated with each alternative.

Implementation of either the agency's primary or backup decisions would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects: long-term, adverse impacts to grassland vegetation, birds, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, invertebrates, hunting, and wildlife observation within the 12-acre project area; and long-term, beneficial impacts to grassland vegetation, wetlands, invasive species control, birds, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, invertebrates, hunting, wildlife observation, education, and interpretation outside of the project area.

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the selected action. These measures include the following:

Soil Erosion and Sediment Control – Implementing erosion-control measures and structures such as watering dry soil, installing silt fences, reusing native topsoil from the project site, designating

and marking access points to minimize soil compaction, accessing equipment with mats or boards during wet conditions to prevent rutting and soil loss, fitting grading to the surrounding terrain, timing grading operations to minimize soil exposure, retaining existing vegetation whenever feasible, vegetating and mulching to stabilize disturbed areas, minimizing the length and steepness of slopes, keeping runoff velocity low, preparing drainage ways and outlets to handle concentrated runoff until permanent drainage structures are constructed, trapping sediment on-site, and inspecting and maintaining control measures frequently.

Soil Stabilization – Preserving existing vegetation and hydrologic features when required and feasible; applying temporary soil stabilization to remaining active and non-active areas and reapplying them as necessary to maintain effectiveness; implementing temporary soil stabilization measures at regular intervals throughout the defined rainy season to achieve and maintain the contract’s disturbed soil area requirements; controlling erosion in concentrated flow paths by applying erosion-control blankets, check dams, and erosion-control seeding and lining swales as shown on plans; applying seed to areas deemed substantially completed during the defined rainy season; and applying permanent erosion control to remaining disturbed soil areas as early as feasible and as shown on plans at the completion of the construction.

Other – Following Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Certification requirements for new facilities and complying with bird collision deterrence; identifying and avoiding all wetlands and other significant hydrological areas during site selection and construction; halting construction and notifying the regional archeologist and the CSKT Tribal Historic Preservation Office if paleontological, archeological, or historical remains are encountered; combining multiple buildings or reducing the size and number of buildings when possible to decrease the impact area; and working with the Lake County Roads Departments to direct visitation traffic on paved roads and update signage.

While refuges, by their nature, are unique areas protected for conservation of fish, wildlife and habitat, the proposed action will not have a significant impact on refuge resources and uses for several reasons:

- The action will result in beneficial impacts to the human environment, including the biodiversity and ecological integrity of the WPAs, as well as the wildlife-dependent recreational opportunities and socioeconomics of the local economy, with only negligible, adverse impacts to the human environment, as discussed above.
- The adverse direct and indirect effects of the proposed action on air, water, soil, habitat, wildlife, aesthetic/visual resources, and wilderness values are expected to be mostly minor and short term outside of the 12-acre project area. The benefits to long-term ecosystem health that the presence of USFWS staff will accomplish far outweigh any of the short-term, adverse impacts discussed in this document.
- Planned mitigation measures will contribute to the reduction and elimination of adverse impacts to the analyzed resources.
- The action is not in an ecologically sensitive area.

- The action will not impact any threatened or endangered species, or any federally designated critical habitat.
- The action will not impact any cultural or historical resources.
- The action will not impact any wilderness areas.
- There is no scientific controversy over the impacts of this action, and the impacts of the proposed action are relatively certain.
- The proposal is not expected to have any significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988.

Public Review

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties. Parties contacted included CSKT; Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks; Natural Resource Conservation Service; and Lake County.

On September 28, 2021, the Draft EA was made available on the Federal Register for 30-day public review and comment. USFWS received 26 comments on the Draft EA. Appendix D of the Final EA contains each comment and a written response.

Finding of No Significant Impact

Based upon a review and evaluation of the information contained in the EA as well as other documents and actions of record affiliated with this proposal, the USFWS has determined that the proposal to implement the purchase of land and construction of new administrative facilities for the NWMT WMD, Refuges, and Conservation Areas does not constitute a major federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section 102(2)(c) of NEPA (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required.

Decision

The USFWS has decided to acquire for the construction of new administrative facilities in order to continue the management and improvement of the conservation lands entrusted to the USFWS in northwest Montana. If suitable land cannot be acquired in a timely manner, USFWS will build on the Crow WPA.

This action is compatible with the purpose and the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The action is consistent with applicable laws and policies.

STACY ARMITAGE

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Date: 2022.06.13 12:19:25 -06'00'

Assistant Regional Director, Refuges, R6