



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405
406-454-5840
FAX: 406-761-8477
31 March 2010

To Whom It May Concern:

The Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department (MFWP) proposes to acquire a conservation easement on an 800-acre parcel of land known as the Pheasants Forever Coffee Creek Property. This Property lies in between a 320-acre parcel and an 880-acre parcel of Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation land, and also abuts privately owned farm land. The Central Montana Chapter of Pheasants Forever acquired this property in 1998 in order to enhance it as upland game bird habitat – that would be open to free walk-in public hunting. The Pheasants Forever Coffee Creek Property is located 6 miles N of Denton in Fergus County.

Since Pheasants Forever acquired the Coffee Creek Property they have planted over 47,000 trees and shrubs, developed 34 plus acres of small grain food plots, refurbished over 400 acres of upland bird nesting cover, as well as managed the native upland and riparian vegetation, to benefit wildlife and public recreation.

Enclosed are the Pheasants Forever Coffee Creek Property Draft Environmental Assessment, Draft Management Plan, and Socio-Economic Assessment for your review. Public comment is welcome and will be received through April 30, 2010. If you have questions, need additional copies of the draft EA or choose to provide written comments, please contact us at the following address:

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks
% Pheasants Forever Coffee Creek EA
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

Electronic comment may also be received at: fwprg42@mt.gov

Thank you for your interest,

Graham Taylor
Regional Wildlife Manager
Great Falls, Montana

/pf
Enclosure

**DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT
DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN
DRAFT SOCIOECONOMIC ASSESSMENT
(March, 2010)**

**A CONSERVATION EASEMENT
FOR THE
PHEASANTS FOREVER COFFEE CREEK
(FERGUS COUNTY)**

PREPARED AND PROPOSED BY:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Wildlife Bureau
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DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

I. INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) invites the public to comment on a proposal to purchase a perpetual conservation easement on the 800-acre Coffee Creek property currently owned by Pheasants Forever, Inc. The Coffee Creek property is located approximately 6 miles north of Denton, Montana in Fergus County and is comprised of lands within T19N, R14E. The purpose of the proposed project is to protect the high quality upland bird habitat, public recreation and open space that exists on the property -- consisting of 720 acres of uplands, which are enhanced with shelterbelts, shrub plantings, food plots, nesting and brood rearing cover, plus native grasses and shrubs including 80 acres of native riparian vegetation on Coffee Creek. This proposed project would also protect and maintain 206 acres of farmable, and 218 acres of grazeable, lands. This proposed conservation easement would also guarantee public access for hunting and wildlife viewing.

FWP proposes to utilize funds in its Habitat Montana Program and Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program to acquire the conservation easement. Total value of the Coffee Creek conservation easement is \$304,000.

This draft Environmental Assessment further explains how FWP's proposed expenditure for this conservation easement would help facilitate protection of Coffee Creek's conservation values. A draft Management Plan and draft Socio-Economic analysis are also included for public review at this time.

II. AUTHORITIES AND DIRECTION

FWP has the authority under law (MCA 87-1-201) to protect, enhance and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In 1987, the Montana Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 526, which earmarked hunting license revenues to secure wildlife habitat through lease, conservation easement or fee title acquisition (MCA 87-1-241 and 242). This is now referred to as the Habitat Montana Program. Habitat Montana recognizes that certain native plant communities constituting wildlife habitat, which include intermountain grasslands, sagebrush grasslands and riparian corridors, are worthy of perpetual conservation. The Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (MCA 87-1-246, 247 and 248) also earmarks hunting license revenues that may be used for the development, enhancement, and conservation of upland game bird habitat in Montana.

The Pheasants Forever (PF) Coffee Creek property includes such habitats and warrants conservation considerations. A conservation easement has been offered to FWP by Pheasants Forever. This offer reflects their desire to maintain and protect the upland bird habitat they have enhanced, as well as open space and farming and ranching. It is proposed that a conservation easement, to be held by FWP, be purchased from Pheasants Forever. This easement would ensure the property remains excellent upland bird habitat, while preserving agricultural lands and open space. The easement would also guarantee public access for hunting and wildlife viewing on the project area.

As with other FWP property acquisition proposals, the Fish, Wildlife and Parks Commission and the State Land Board must approve any easement proposals that are larger than 100 acres or exceed \$100,000. This Environmental Assessment (EA) is part of that decision making process.

III. PROJECT LOCATION

The PF Coffee Creek property is located approximately 6 miles north of Denton, Montana in Fergus County and is comprised of 800 contiguous acres of land within T19N, R14E. The PF Coffee Creek property lies in between 2 Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) parcels -- a 320-acre parcel to the west, and an 880-acre parcel of DNRC land to the east. Coffee Creek runs through both DNRC parcels and the northern portion of the PF Coffee Creek Property. These properties lie within deer/elk hunting district 426. A map of the property is included in Appendix I in this document.

IV. PURPOSE AND NEED FOR THE PROPOSED ACTION

The primary purpose of this action is to preserve the upland bird habitat that PF acquired in 1998 and has since enhanced, and the integrity of the associated native habitats, while maintaining traditional agricultural land uses and public hunting.

The primary habitats represented on the PF Coffee Creek property include riparian plant communities in the creek bottom and coulees, which are dominated by chokecherry and buffalo berry shrub, plus the native grassland and shrub communities in the uplands, as well the 480 acres of upland bird habitat enhancements consisting of shelterbelts, native shrub plantings, food plots, and nesting and brood rearing cover. By maintaining the existing habitat acreages and habitat quality, and existing and planned enhancements, wildlife use by game species such as white-tailed deer, mule deer, antelope, pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge, along with numerous non-game wildlife species, including species of concern such as bobolink, chestnut-collared longspur, long-billed curlew, northern leopard frog, and plains spade-foot toads, will be perpetuated.

The Coffee Creek property supports 70 to 100 mule deer, 10 to 20 white-tailed deer, and 10 to 20 antelope. Pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse and Hungarian partridge are abundant year round inhabitants that provide 400 hunter days of recreation during fall hunting seasons. Other game and non-game species also inhabit the property and the adjacent DNRC lands (1,200 acres).

A secondary result of this project is guaranteed free public walk-in hunting and recreational access, particularly for upland game birds, which, relative to demand is quite limited in Central Montana. Since the Coffee Creek property also lies between 2 parcels (320-acre and an 880-acre parcel) of DNRC lands, this juxtaposition increases the quantity and quality of upland bird hunting opportunities on the respective properties (2000 acres in total).

It should be reiterated that the availability of free upland game bird hunting, on good quality habitat in Central Montana, is very limited. The very best upland bird habitat is being purchased as private hunting lands, at an alarming rate, which are mainly closed to free public hunting.

Even average quality upland bird habitat is being purchased by private individuals who often employ private consultants, or US Department of Agricultural programs, to enhance upland bird habitat for their personal use. This proposed project would mitigate this ever-increasing trend.

The need for this project is not predicated on just upland bird habitat, wildlife use or recreation. The need is also linked to threats directed towards native habitats. These threats are manifested as residential subdivision, excessive livestock use, sodbusting of native range, along with the associated detriments such as noxious weed encroachment and reduced carrying capacity for livestock and wildlife. This threat level is evident both locally and on a statewide basis. FWP has determined that intermountain grasslands, riparian habitats and sagebrush plant communities are most imperiled. The Coffee Creek property has the potential to be subdivided, most imminently as agricultural or recreational residences, which could result in increased roads, houses, lawns, outbuildings, domestic animals, livestock, and acreages farmed, which could negatively impact the riparian habitat and sagebrush grasslands directly, or the use of those habitats by wildlife indirectly. This easement would intend that the fundamental elements of the wildlife habitat and its management, including the appropriate mix between native and agricultural acreages, be protected into perpetuity, regardless of changes in property ownership.

V. DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

The proposed action is for FWP to purchase, hold and monitor a conservation easement on the Coffee Creek property. This easement would include 800 deeded acres purchased by local Montana chapters of PF and held by Pheasants Forever Inc. PF also holds a lease on an additional 319 acres of DNRC land that abuts their deeded acres on the west side. Total purchase price of the easement is \$304,000. FWP would also share in the cost of constructing and, or, refurbishing fences and livestock water developments (up to \$40,000), which is necessary to implement a rest and rotational grazing system on the PF Coffee Creek property. FWP's Habitat Montana Program and the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program are the funding sources for this project.

To define and ensure sound grazing practices across time and landowners, this FWP easement requires a rest and rotational grazing system on the PF Coffee Creek property (which is designed to work with, but is not dependent on, an additional 319 acres of adjoining DNRC lands currently under state grazing lease). For pasture delineations and seasons of use, see the attached grazing plan schematics in the draft FWP / Coffee Creek Management Plan (Exhibits A, B & C). This rotational grazing system will be monitored on an annual basis for compliance and will be reviewed every 5 years for functionality.

The proposed FWP conservation easement would also enhance benefits to the public by guaranteeing access for public hunting and wildlife viewing. Terms of the easement specify that the Coffee Creek property will provide reasonable free public access for hunting and wildlife viewing at appropriate times of the year, via a method mutually agreed upon in the draft FWP / Coffee Creek Management Plan. Whereas the easement language is intended to endure into perpetuity, the Management Plan may be amended later, by mutual consent between the Landowner and FWP, to address changing conditions and emerging issues.

As they have been doing since the property was acquired, PF proposes to allow unlimited walk-in hunting and wildlife viewing, year round, from a designated parking area that is located just off the N. Denton county road in DNRC Section 16, T19N, R14E. Hunter and recreational use will be documented by way of a sign-in box located in the parking area. Rules pertaining to hunting and recreational use are defined in the Coffee Creek Management Plan and may be altered upon mutual agreement between FWP and the Landowner. The Landowner may also deny access to, or expel from the Land, any person for cause, including (but not exclusively) the following: intoxication or use of illegal substances; reckless behavior that jeopardizes human life, wildlife habitat, or Landowner's property, or is in violation of law or regulation applicable to public use of the Land; or misconduct under or violation of the terms of public access provided in this Easement, including any plan of access adopted and implemented under this Easement.

Specific terms of the easement in their entirety are contained in a separate legal document, which is the proposed "Deed of Conservation Easement". This document lists FWP and landowner rights under the terms of the easement as well as restrictions on landowner activities. The rights of both parties and restrictions on landowner activities were negotiated with and agreed to by FWP and the landowner.

To summarize terms of this easement, FWP's rights include the right to: (1) identify, preserve and enhance specific habitats; (2) monitor and enforce restrictions; (3) prevent activities inconsistent with purpose of the easement; and (4) provide public access for hunting and wildlife viewing.

Landowner's retained rights include the right to: (1) graze livestock within the described rotational grazing system; (2) cultivate and farm hay land and grain fields as described; (3) continue to regulate public use of the Land at all times; (4) develop and maintain water resources, including springs, on the Land necessary for farming, grazing and wildlife purposes that are allowed by this easement; (5) repair, renovate, improve or remove existing buildings; (6) repair, renovate or improve existing roads; (7) construct, remove, repair and/or replace fences for grazing livestock and to exclude deer from headquarter equipment area; (8) construct facilities for the development and utilization of energy resources such as wind and solar; (9) use agricultural chemicals for the control of noxious weeds; (10) install utility structures as long as they are consistent with the purposes of the Conservation Easement and will not significantly impact the conservation values of the Land. The significance of an impact will be evaluated by the severity, duration, geographic extent and frequency of the occurrence of the potential impact.

Restrictions placed upon Landowner activities include: (1) no removal, control or manipulation by any means of shrub species browsed by wildlife (including but not limited to: snowberry, rose, hawthorne, chokecherry, buffalo berry, silver sage and willow) except in routine clearing for roads, trails, structures and fencelines; (2) no subdivision; (3) no cultivation or farming beyond what's described; (4) adherence to a described grazing plan which does include an AUM cap; (5) no outfitting or fee hunting; (6) no surface mining except that gravel and rock may be extracted for use on the property; (7) no commercial feed lots; (8) no game farms; (9) no refuse dumping; (10) no commercial or industrial use except traditional agricultural use.

VI. DESCRIPTION OF ALTERNATIVES TO THE PROPOSED ACTION

Alternative A—No Action

FWP considered the alternative of taking no action. Under the "No Action Alternative" PF would intend to manage the Coffee Creek property as they have since 1998, but there would be no guarantee the near ideal mix of agricultural values, wildlife habitat, open space, recreational values and other resources that now occur on the property would be preserved. Specifically, without the proposed easement, these resources are vulnerable to: future residential occupancy and subdivision, farming of native range, improper and excessive livestock grazing, improper and excessive farming practices, improper or decreased maintenance and management of the enhanced wildlife habitat, commercial shooting preserve, commercial feedlots, and surface mining. These activities would likely result in decreased habitat quantity, quality and wildlife use. There would also be no guarantee of free public access to the property without this easement. The magnitude of these and other potential impacts to this and adjacent physical and human environments are difficult to measure due to the uncertainty of future events.

Alternatives Considered but Dropped from Further Consideration

The landowner initiated the conservation easement process with FWP and at no point expressed interest in fee title sale or a long-term lease, therefore the alternative of purchasing the Coffee Creek property fee title, or having a long-term lease, is not an option. Some bystanders have suggested that PF should gift the Coffee Creek property to FWP, or to some other resource management agency, but PF desires to continue managing the property in the near term, or influence management of the property for the long term, to ensure that the upland bird habitat they have so diligently and painstakingly enhanced is actively, and accordingly, managed and maintained. Thus, a conservation easement, which is also FWP's preferred option, is the only reasonable alternative considered in this EA.

VII. EVALUATION OF IMPACTS ON THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. Land Resources

Impact of Proposed Action: No negative impact should occur as a result of this proposal. The terms of the proposed easement are structured to prevent adverse impacts to soils and vegetation. A grazing plan and farming plan have been developed, which when implemented will prevent adverse impacts to soils and vegetation (see Coffee Creek Management Plan). Subdivision and development of the land is restricted under terms of the easement, as is cultivation of native plant communities (sod-busting). The proposed easement will ensure that land resources are maintained and/or enhanced into perpetuity.

No Action Alternative: This alternative would allow for potential disturbances to soils and vegetation from improper agricultural or commercial practices and from possible residential development.

2. Air Resources

Impact of proposed action: The proposed action would likely result in a net reduction in potential, future risks to air and water quality on the subject property, compared to no action.

No Action Alternative: There would be no immediate impact. However, if the property was sold without an easement increased human activity in the future could potentially degrade air quality.

3. Water Resources

Impact of proposed action: There would be no, or a negligible, impact over what is currently occurring relative to livestock and farming practices. Current and proposed agricultural practices on the property have proven to be generally compatible with maintenance of water quality.

No Action Alternative: There would be no immediate impact. However, there would be no assurances that over time the property wouldn't change to a more intensively farmed or grazed agricultural operation with less conservation and protection of water resources.

4. Vegetation Resources

Impact of proposed action: This action would result in a positive impact. The terms of the easement protect the quantity, quality and character of the native plant communities found on the property. The prescribed farming plan (see Coffee Creek Management Plan) would enhance and maintain shrub plantings, shelterbelts, and upland bird nesting and brood cover. The prescribed grazing system (Coffee Creek Management Plan) would foster native vegetation establishment, recovery and maintenance on all sites within the grazing system.

No Action Alternative: There would be no immediate impact. If the primary use of the property was to change from its strong emphasis on upland bird habitat management, to predominantly agricultural or subdivision, or to some other commercial use, there would be fewer conservation measures in place to maintain productivity of the land. There would be no long-term protection of existing native plant communities. Livestock grazing, sod-busting and potential subdivision would be more unrestricted under the no action alternative.

5. Fish/Wildlife Resources

Impact of Proposed Action: This action will benefit a variety of wildlife by conserving the land as agricultural and open space, which would provide year-round habitat for many of Montana's native wildlife species. Wildlife and agriculture can coexist, well, together and this proposed action would ensure that this relationship continues. Conserving native plant communities is important for most of Montanan's indigenous wildlife species. Implementation of a rest-rotation grazing system will ensure adequate quantity and quality of forage and cover for a variety of wildlife species while still allowing the land to be used for agricultural production. No adverse effects are expected relative to the current diversity or abundance of game species, non-game species or unique, rare, threatened or endangered species. There would be no barriers erected which would limit fish or wildlife migration or daily movements.

No Action Alternative: With this alternative the land would continue to be managed as it is for as long as the current landowner keeps the property. However, without long-term conservation protection measures the potential exists that the land is sold and more intensively utilized for commercial, agricultural, and/or recreational purposes, or subdivided. Should this occur, open space would, and native plant communities would likely, diminish over time. The quantity and quality of wildlife habitat would most certainly be reduced, resulting in significant long-term negative impacts to most species of wildlife.

6. Adjacent Land

Impact of Proposed Action: No negative impact is expected. The property will be maintained as it has been since 1998. The number of public hunter days should not increase in the area because of the proposed action. The landowner also holds a grazing lease on 319 acres of adjoining DNRC land. The rest and rotational grazing plan on the deeded land will compliment the grazing of the DNRC land and ensure that the physical environment of both properties are conserved and enhanced for as long as PF holds the DNRC lease (see Coffee Creek Management Plan).

No Action Alternative: There would be no immediate impact. However, the No Action Alternative would allow for the possibility of future subdivision and habitat loss, potentially causing impacts to neighboring lands as wildlife populations are displaced.

VII. EVALUATION OF IMPACTS ON THE HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Through prevention of certain identified activities, this conservation easement would legally maintain and/or improve existing habitats into perpetuity. Impacts associated with this proposed action shall be determined only as they apply to current resource ownership, uses and conditions. Under the No Action Alternative, resource ownership, uses and conditions may or may not change. Consequently, impacts associated with the No Action Alternative are unknown.

1. Noise/Electrical Effects

Impact of Proposed Action: No impact would occur over existing conditions. Preservation of open space into perpetuity will ensure noise and electrical impacts on the property remain as in existing conditions.

No Action Alternative: Noise and electrical impacts could negatively impact the area through potential future housing and road developments. Utilities would be required to develop the area, negatively impacting the project area and neighboring lands compared to the Proposed Action Alternative.

2. Land Use

Impact of Proposed Action: The property would continue to be operated as is for the short-term (CRP, upland bird habitat enhancements, with public hunting) -- with additional farming and

grazing practices implemented in the near-term future. The better soils, of the acreage currently enrolled in the USDA Conservation Reserve Program, will be farmed when those contracts expire (current contracts expire in 2013 and 2019), which would increase the agricultural productivity and profitability of the property. Implementation of the rest and rotational grazing plan will also increase agricultural productivity and profitability of the property. Such foreseen changes in the management of the property should not conflict with existing land uses in the area.

No Action Alternative: No immediate impact would occur. However, with potential future changes in land ownership and land use, habitat quality, wildlife use and recreational opportunities could be diminished.

3. Risk/Health Hazards

Impact of Proposed Action: No impact would occur.

No Action Alternative: No impact would occur.

4. Neighboring Landowners and Local Community Impacts

Impact of the Proposed Action: The proposed action would generally maintain existing conditions in the local community. There would be no anticipated negative impacts to the community. The scenic values and open character of this property would be maintained and enjoyed by the public into perpetuity. Refer to the attached Socio-Economic Assessment for additional analysis of impacts on the human environment.

No Action Alternative: Future residential development, and future development of the property for personal or commercial recreational purposes, could occur and may be deemed as positive by some members of the community, while other neighbors or community members may not. This alternative would allow for the possibility of substantial changes in future land uses, which may also affect neighboring property values to varying degrees, which could concern neighboring farmers and ranchers.

5. Public Services/Taxes/Utilities

Impact of Proposed Action: There would be no effect on the local or state tax bases or revenues, no alterations of existing utility systems nor tax bases of revenues, nor increased uses of energy sources. As an agricultural property, the land would continue to be taxed as it has been. This issue is also addressed in the attached Socio-Economic Assessment.

No Action Alternative: If residential development or subdivision occurred, greater demands would be placed on police and fire protection, road improvements, utilities and other county services.

6. Aesthetics/Recreation

Impact of Proposed Action: There would be a positive impact. The easement would maintain the quality and quantity of recreational opportunities and scenic vistas, and provide public access for hunting and wildlife viewing on the property in perpetuity.

No Action Alternative: Under the No Action Alternative there could be a change in ownership and management, to residential or personal recreational development e.g., which would reduce the aesthetic and public recreational opportunities on the property.

7. Cultural/Historic Resources

Impact of Proposed Action: There would be a positive impact. A plaque and monument honoring the Goettle family (the original owners) and the location of their homestead would be on display at the homestead site and maintained through the terms of the conservation easement.

No Action Alternative: Potential residential and/or commercial developments allowable under this alternative would leave cultural and historical resources at risk.

8. Socio-Economic Assessment

Please refer to the attached Socio-Economic Assessment for additional analysis of impacts on the human environment.

IX. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Proposed Action Alternative does not negatively affect current conditions, and should not have a negative cumulative effect. However, when considered on a larger scale, this action poses a positive cumulative effect on wildlife, wildlife habitat, range management, farming and open space. The property will produce agricultural products, as well as provide ample recreational opportunities, and thus increase monetary contributions to the local economy.

The No Action Alternative could allow changes in land management that would not preserve the near ideal mix of wildlife habitat, agricultural production, and free public recreation, which in aggregate would be negative to those land attributes and the local economy.

X. EVALUATION OF NEED FOR AN ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT

Based on the above assessment, an Environmental Impact Statement is not required and an Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of review.

XI. PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Formal public participation specific to FWP's proposed purchase of this conservation easement will begin with the availability of this draft Environmental Assessment (EA) for public review for a one-month comment period. The availability of this EA for public review will be advertised in the Lewistown and Denton areas, and through statewide media via FWP's website at www.fwp.mt.gov. A copy of the draft EA will be mailed to all parties who indicate an interest

in this proposal. The public review and comment period will be April 1 through April 30, 2010. A public hearing will be held at the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Lewistown Area Office on Thursday, April 15th at 7:00 P.M. After reviewing public input received on or before April 30, FWP will decide upon a preferred alternative. The Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission and State Board of Land Commissioners will be asked to render final decisions on this proposal at their regularly scheduled meetings in May 2010.

Comments should be addressed to:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
% Pheasants Forever Coffee Creek EA
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840

Or

fwprg42@mt.gov

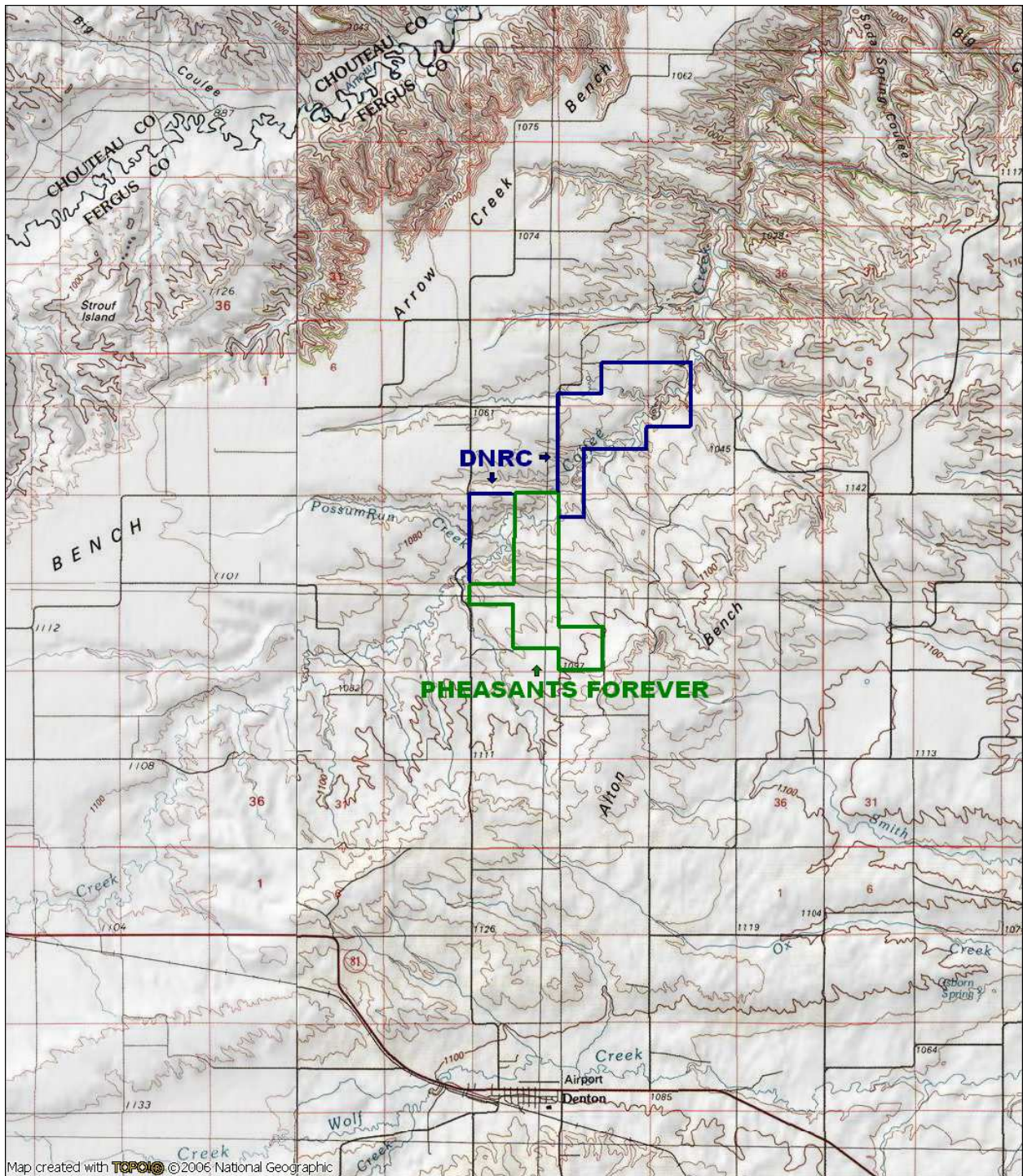
Attn: Pheasants Forever Coffee Creek EA

Comments must be postmarked no later than April 30, 2010 to ensure consideration in the decision-making process.

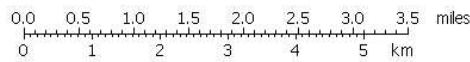
XII. NAME OF PERSON RESPONSIBLE FOR PREPARING EA

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APPENDIX I.



Map created with **TOPOIC** © 2006 National Geographic



TN/MN
13½
12/30/09

Map is Pheasants Forever’s Coffee Creek property north of Denton, Montana.

**Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Wildlife Bureau**

MANAGEMENT PLAN - Draft

For

PHEASANTS FOREVER COFFEE CREEK / FWP CONSERVATION EASEMENT

I. Introduction

The purpose of the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) / Pheasants Forever (PF) Coffee Creek conservation easement is to preserve and protect the conservation values of the Coffee Creek property, particularly the habitat that the property provides for its wildlife species, as well as its agricultural and historic resources into perpetuity. The 800-acre PF Coffee Creek property was purchased in 1998 with funds from numerous Montana chapters of PF, with the Central Montana Chapter of PF (located in Lewistown) being the primary and instrumental chapter. Since being purchased the property has been enhanced to maximize upland bird production as well as free public hunting and recreational access, particularly for upland game birds, which, relative to demand is quite limited in Central Montana.

As a consequence of the Central Montana Chapter's labors the Coffee Creek property now possesses high quality upland bird habitat consisting of 38 acres of shelterbelts and shrub plantings (consisting of more than 47,000 trees and shrubs), 34 acres of food plots, 412 acres of nesting and brood rearing cover, in addition to the 320 acres of native grasses and shrubs and riparian vegetation occurring in the uplands or adjacent to Coffee Creek. These native and enhanced plant communities are important habitats for many wildlife species, including mule deer, white-tailed deer, antelope, ring-necked pheasants, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge, and numerous non-game wildlife species.

The PF Coffee Creek property also lies in between 2 Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) parcels – a 320-acre parcel to the west and an 880-acre parcel to the east. Coffee Creek runs through both DNRC parcels and the northern portion of the PF Coffee Creek property. In all, 3-airline miles of Coffee Creek and a 2,000-acre block of land are open to free, walk-in public hunting and recreation. Approximately 400 hunter days of free public hunting and recreation occurs on the PF Coffee Creek property each year.

The Central Montana Chapter of PF manages the Coffee Creek property utilizing state of the art agricultural techniques in order to meet wildlife habitat goals and objectives. PF is also endeavoring to develop pastures and a winter grazing system on 218 acres of deeded ground and 319 acres leased from DNRC. The better soils located on the property have been identified (206 acres) and will be farmed when Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) contracts expire (scheduled to expire in 2013 and 2019).

This FWP conservation easement is being established utilizing funds from its Habitat Montana Program and its Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program. Total Value of the PF Coffee Creek conservation easement is \$304,000.

II. Goals, Objectives, Concerns and Strategies

Goals: *By implementation of the FWP conservation easement terms, the quantity and quality of upland bird habitats on the PF Coffee Creek property will be maintained and/or enhanced for public benefit. Under the same conservation easement terms, a secondary goal is to provide guaranteed free public hunting access and recreational opportunity on the PF Coffee Creek property. A third goal is to ensure that the current condition of the native vegetation and plant communities is maintained and enhanced by implementation of a winter grazing system. A fourth goal is identification of the better soils located on the property and specifying how they will be farmed when CRP contracts expire. Farming will provide revenue from and for the property, and spilled grain left after harvest will provide winter feed for upland birds and other wildlife, which will be accomplished by implementation of this farming management plan. All other vegetation that isn't naturally occurring on the property occurs on previously cultivated soils. Such vegetation (e.g. shelterbelts, food plots and nesting cover) was planted and/or enhanced for the benefit of upland birds and other wildlife species and will be managed and maintained accordingly via this management plan.*

Objective 1: *Manage native, naturally occurring vegetation (grasslands, shrub lands and riparian habitats) to maintain and improve these plant communities for the benefit of wildlife.*

Management of native vegetation utilizing a livestock grazing system:

To perpetually define and ensure sound grazing practices across time and subsequent landowners, this FWP easement and management plan requires a winter grazing system on approximately 218 acres of PF land. An additional 319 acres of adjoining DNRC lands are currently leased by PF for grazing, which will be used in conjunction with PF deeded pastures as long as PF maintains the DNRC lease and complies with its terms and conditions.

Basically the grazing system and pasture rotation is: north ½ of the DNRC land, 154 acres containing 35 animal unit months (AUMs) referred to as the Northwest Parcel, will be grazed conjointly with the adjacent PF land, referred to as the Northeast Parcel, which is 117 acres containing 41 AUMs. And the south ½ of the DNRC land, which is 165 acres containing 37 AUMs referred to as the Southwest Parcel, will be grazed conjointly with adjacent PF land, referred to as the Southeast Parcel, which is 101 acres containing 38 AUMs. Approximately ½ of the total acres and AUMS in the grazing system will receive winter season grazing use each year, either the 2 northern parcels and associated AUMS or the 2 southern parcels and associated AUMS. The remaining ½ of the grazing system acres and AUMs will be rested from livestock grazing use each year (Exhibits A and B).

Livestock grazing will occur within a 60-day period from January 2 through March 2 each year. During the 60-day grazing/use period the total number of AUMs scheduled for grazing each year will not exceed 75 or 76 (Exhibit B). The desired management practice would be 75 or 76 cows or yearlings grazed for 30 days within the 60-day period, depending on scheduled year (Exhibits A and B). The number of livestock and days grazed within the 60-day period could differ from 75 or 76 cows or yearlings and 30 days, if prior approval from FWP is obtained and total, specified AUMs are not exceeded.

During the 60-day grazing/use period, should winter weather necessitate supplemental feeding of livestock, only weed seed free hay or other supplemental feed may be fed inside PF pastures (on PF deeded land), but not on the DNRC land. The hay that is to be fed, and the location where the hay is to be fed, requires prior approval from FWP. For pasture/parcel names and

delineations, AUMs and seasons of use, see attached grazing plan map and schematic (Exhibits A and B).

FWP, or its contractor, will monitor this winter grazing system plan to assess landowner compliance and grazing system effectiveness. Livestock use and distribution will also be assessed. The grazing system plan will be reviewed every 5 years for functionality, and FWP and the landowner will then identify any needed improvements. Fence and water improvements, for example, will be recommended if deemed necessary and cost effective. Construction of approximately 4.25 miles of new fence is needed before the grazing system can become operable and implemented. FWP will share in the cost of this fence construction. No stock-water improvements are planned at this time.

Should the owner of the PF Coffee Creek property ever not renew the grazing lease with DNRC, for whatever reason, then the owner of the property may continue to operate the winter grazing system on the PF Coffee Creek property according to the PF Coffee Creek Grazing Formula, but minus the DNRC land and their corresponding AUMs (Exhibit C). The owner of the property would also be responsible for any additional costs and/or efforts associated with implementing the grazing system minus the DNRC land.

FWP or its contractor will monitor livestock use of pastures and changes in vegetation condition.

After the initial fence construction for implementing the winter grazing system is completed, land maintenance, including but not limited to fence and water development construction and repair, noxious weed control and necessary road construction and repair, shall be the responsibility of the landowner.

Livestock grazing is not allowed on the PF Coffee Creek property, except within the grazing system pastures (Exhibit A).

Management of native vegetation outside the grazing system:

There are other native, naturally occurring vegetation areas (grasslands, shrub lands and riparian habitats) on the PF Coffee Creek property that lie outside the grazing system pastures, primarily in the coulees that were never farmed, that are adjacent to those areas that were historically farmed, which are now managed as CRP nesting cover, food plots and shelterbelts for the benefit of wildlife. As a consequence, these native pockets of vegetation will not be grazed by livestock but will be managed in association with the vegetation on the property that is not naturally occurring (such as CRP nesting cover, food plots and shelterbelts).

Virtually all shrub and tree species on the PF Coffee Creek property, whether naturally occurring or not, are important to wildlife. The removal, control or manipulation of any shrub or tree species deemed important to wildlife, by any means, is prohibited within the terms of the FWP conservation easement document, including but not limited to burning, plowing, chemical treatment or removal of such tree and shrub species. These species include without limitation: silver sage, rose, hawthorn, snowberry, chokecherry, buffalo berry, skunk-bush sumac, willow and juniper. These prohibitions do not apply to the routine clearing or control of brush in connection with the construction and maintenance of trails, roads, fences and structures permitted under this FWP Easement.

Objective 2: *Manage the vegetation that is not naturally occurring -- that was planted and nurtured on the previously farmed soils -- in order to maintain and improve these plant communities and habitats for the benefit of wildlife.*

Management of Shelterbelts:

There is a 12-row 6.6-acre oval-shaped shelterbelt that's inside a deer-proof fence surrounding the barn and equipment shed in the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 21, T19N, R14E; there is also a 3-row 1.5-acre shelterbelt located just west of the oval-shaped shelterbelt in Section 21; and 2 6-row shelterbelts, totaling 16.2 acres, located on the north and south side of the drainage that flows west northwesterly across section 21 into Coffee Creek. These 24.3 acres of multiple row shelterbelts will be mechanically cultivated as necessary to prevent grass and weed establishment, propagation, and competition with trees and shrubs (cultivated at least 3 times per growing season, at least once in May, once in June, and once in July). Each side of the tree and shrub rows will be cultivated at least 7 feet out from the edge of each tree and shrub row. The deer-proof fence that surrounds the oval-shaped shelterbelt will also be maintained by the landowner to effectively keep deer out at all times.

There is a 7-row 7.0-acre shelterbelt in the east $\frac{1}{2}$ of Section 16, T19N, R14E that was planted and established utilizing a fabric mulch weed barrier. Within the next 10 to 15 years the fabric mulch weed barrier will deteriorate, and need to be picked up and disposed of, and encroachment of grass and weeds will ensue. At that time it will be the landowner's responsibility that these tree and shrub rows be mechanically, or chemically, cultivated as necessary to prevent grass and weed establishment, propagation, and competition with trees and shrubs (at least 3 times per growing season, at least once in May, once in June, and once in July). Each side of the tree and shrub rows will be cultivated at least 7 feet out from the edge of each tree and shrub row.

The PF Coffee Creek property also has 20,000 silver sage plants that were planted in single or double rows (over 9 miles in length) along the edges of, or in a mosaic pattern within, fields of nesting cover in sections 21 and 22, T19N, R14E. There is no maintenance required for these single and double row silver sage plantings. Furthermore, when CRP contracts expire (existing contracts expire in 2013 and 2019) some of these silver sage plants will be within 2 of the fields identified for conversion back to small grain farming (fields 7 and 10 in sections 21 and 22, Exhibit E). The conversion of these fields to farming, and the resulting loss of these silver sage shrubs are here permitted, and thus an exception to the prohibition on removal of trees and shrubs mentioned above under Objective 1.

Management of Food Plots:

There are 6 food plots totaling approximately 34 acres that are scattered across the PF Coffee Creek property. Winter wheat will be seeded for food plots, unless the landowner and FWP mutually agree on some other plant species and farming schedule, and landowner obtains prior approval from FWP.

Every fall, prior to the opening of pheasant season, $\frac{1}{2}$ of each food plot will be planted to winter wheat. The other $\frac{1}{2}$ of each food plot will have a matured crop of winter wheat that will be left standing (not cut) for wildlife. The following year the $\frac{1}{2}$ of each food plot that had been seeded to winter wheat the previous fall will grow to maturity and be left standing, while the fallow side of the food plot will be prepared and seeded to winter wheat by early fall, prior to the opening of pheasant season.

The food plots will be seeded and cultivated in a “husbandman-like manner” and weeds will be controlled in accordance with approved farm methods to prevent grass and weed establishment and propagation and competition with crop.

Management and use of food plots will continue until each CRP contract expires and the farm fields (as identified in this Management Plan, Exhibit E) that overlay 5 of the food plots are eventually farmed. Two food plots in section 16 are scheduled for conversion to farm fields in fall 2013 (when converted to a farm field a small portion of the northwest food plot in section 16 will have to be seeded to nesting cover), and 3 more food plots are scheduled for conversion to farm fields in fall 2019. The 1 food plot located inside the deer-proof fenced area that encloses the equipment shed will remain a food plot.

Management of Nesting Cover (CRP):

Currently the PF Coffee Creek property contains 480 acres of CRP that is managed as nesting cover for upland birds. Each year approximately 50 acres of CRP nesting cover have been renovated to a more preferred mixture of plant species to benefit wildlife, particularly upland birds. Said acres were chemically fallowed one growing season and then inter-seeded the following spring. This procedure of renovating nesting cover in old CRP stands will continue – for as long as Farm Services Agency (FSA) approves the practice while CRP contracts remain current -- until PF and FWP mutually agree the total establishment of a better plant species mixture for nesting cover is complete. Seed mixtures to be planted for the renovation of nesting cover will require approval from FWP.

When PF and FWP mutually agree that the desired plant composition of the CRP nesting cover has been achieved, management will shift to stand maintenance – for enhancing nesting and brood rearing cover. Maintenance will occur on approximately 10% of the nesting cover each year (not to exceed 20%). Maintenance practices will include strip disking, strip spiking, strip chisel plowing or prescribed burning. Nesting cover maintenance will not be performed during the April 15 through August 1 period. A nesting cover maintenance plan must be submitted to and approved by FWP before annual maintenance can occur.

(Prior to any prescriptive burning the landowner is responsible for securing a written burn plan developed by a qualified individual. The landowner is also responsible for adhering to the burn plan, as well as all applicable local, state and federal laws. The landowner is responsible for confining the prescribed burn to the Coffee Creek property and is liable for damages and costs to others should the fire escape from the designated area.)

Management of Cropland:

The PF Coffee Creek property contains 480 acres that were historically farmed and cropped, which are currently enrolled in CRP. Of these 480 acres the better soils (206 acres) have been identified as future farm/cropland, to be farmed when CRP contracts expire (scheduled to expire in 2013 and 2019). These acres constitute 11 different fields ranging in size from 5.6 to 29.4 acres (Exhibit E). Approximately ½ of these acres will be seeded to winter wheat each year (fall), prior to the opening of pheasant season, and the other ½ will be left fallow (in stubble through the winter, not seeded until fall). The fields that will be farmed concurrently are Fields 1, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 and 10 (total of 107 acres), and Fields 2, 7, 8 and 11 (total of 99 acres).

The fields/acreages will be seeded and cultivated in a “husbandman-like manner” and weeds will be controlled in accordance with approved farm methods to prevent grass and weed

establishment and propagation and competition with crop. Seeding a crop other than winter wheat will require mutual agreement of landowner and FWP.

When harvesting the winter wheat crop the height of the cut grain stubble should be left as tall as is practical. One combine header width, or a 35 foot strip, whichever is greater, will be left uncut around the outside perimeter of each field for wildlife.

Additional sod busting or tilling of previously undisturbed vegetation is not permitted under this FWP Easement.

Objective 3: Maintain wildlife use of the property.

As per conservation easement terms, the Landowner has the right to “construct, remove, maintain, repair, or replace fences, and other livestock handling and farming structures provided the structures or their removal or alterations do not significantly impact wildlife habitat or wildlife migration on and through the Land.

Current big game population estimates on PF Coffee Creek property include approximately 75-100 mule deer, 10-20 white-tailed deer and 10-20 antelope, depending on time of year. On the PF Coffee Creek property and adjacent properties, game damage problems will be managed through hunting whenever possible during general hunting season frameworks. Game damage materials will be provided on an as needed basis to the property, and adjacent landowners who allow reasonable free public hunting.

In order to document changes in vegetation and wildlife habitat on the PF Coffee Creek property, FWP will monitor vegetative communities and their distribution over time.

There may be other habitat enhancement opportunities for upland birds and other wildlife, which are not addressed in the FWP easement. FWP will periodically review the property’s potential for additional habitat enhancements and possibly pursue projects, which may be of interest to the landowner.

Objective 4: Provide guaranteed public hunting access and opportunity.

The PF Coffee Creek property is currently enrolled in the FWP Block Management Program, and has been for the past 11 years, which provides the public a mechanism to know of the hunting opportunities available and how to access the property. At this time the landowner intends to continue in the Block Management Program. Should the landowner decide not to participate in Block Management, the landowner must develop an equally effective system for handling hunter requests pursuant the FWP easement terms.

At this time the landowner has chosen to allow public access, as they have in the past, by allowing unlimited walk-in hunting and wildlife viewing, year round, from a designated parking area that is located just off the N. Denton (county) Road in DNRC Section 16, T19N, R14E. The landowner agrees to allow a minimum of 400 hunter days annually. Hunter and recreational use will be documented by way of a sign-in box located in the parking area. Rules pertaining to hunting are defined in the PF Coffee Creek Management Plan (Exhibit F) and may be altered upon mutual agreement between FWP and the landowner. The landowner may also deny access to, or expel from the Land, any person for cause, including (but not exclusively) the following: intoxication or use of illegal substances; reckless behavior that jeopardizes human life, wildlife habitat, or Landowner’s property, or is in violation of law or regulation applicable to

public use of the Land; or misconduct under or violation of the terms of public access provided in this Easement, including any plan of access adopted and implemented under this Easement.

As per FWP easement terms, the landowner may not charge fees or outfit on the property or lease the property for hunting.

III. Overall FWP / PF Coffee Creek property Conservation Easement Compliance

Monitoring will be conducted to determine compliance with the FWP easement terms on the entire property. FWP, and/or FWP's contractor will visit the PF Coffee Creek property to conduct this assessment, with the landowner, and to assess Management Plan effectiveness and to review landowner compliance with easement terms. The landowner is encouraged to become thoroughly familiar with easement terms, Management Plan and grazing system and refer to the Deed of Conservation Easement and Management Plan documents, and/or to contact FWP with any questions or concerns in order to avoid non-compliance.

IV. Summary of Management Plan Actions that require FWP Approval

Grazing System

- ✓ Changing the number of livestock, whether cows or yearlings, and the number of days they're grazed, within the 60-day winter grazing period, requires prior approval.
- ✓ The weed seed free hay, or other weed seed free supplemental feed, that is to be fed during severe winter periods, and where it is to be fed, requires prior approval.

Management of Nesting Cover

- ✓ Renovation of nesting cover in CRP will continue until landowner and FWP mutually agree improvements to nesting cover are complete.
- ✓ Plant seed mixture to be planted for renovation of nesting cover in CRP, requires prior approval.
- ✓ Application of nesting cover maintenance practices requires a maintenance plan and prior approval.

Management of Food Plots

- ✓ Winter wheat will be seeded for food plots, unless landowner and FWP mutually agree on some other plant species and farming schedule, and prior approval is obtained.

Management of Cropland

- ✓ Winter wheat will be seeded on croplands, unless landowner and FWP mutually agree on some other plant species, and prior approval is obtained.

Management of Public Hunting

- ✓ Changes to public hunting rules in Exhibit F can be made if landowner and FWP mutually agree, and prior approval is obtained.

- ❖ All management actions within this Pheasants Forever Coffee Creek Management Plan that require mutual agreements between landowner and FWP, and prior approvals from FWP, can be agreed on and approved for a 5-year period.

Management Plan Attachments

- *PF Coffee Creek Grazing System Pasture Map (Exhibit A)
- *PF Coffee Creek Grazing Formula, with DNRC lease (Exhibit B)
- *PF Coffee Creek Grazing Formula, minus DNRC lease (Exhibit C)
- *PF Coffee Creek Tree, Shrub and Food Plot Plantings (Exhibit D)
 - *PF Coffee Creek Cropland Fields (Exhibit E)
 - *PF Coffee Creek Hunting Rules (Exhibit F)
 - *PF Coffee Creek Access Map (Exhibit G)

Exhibit A. PF Coffee Creek Grazing System Pasture Map, red dashed lines are fences.

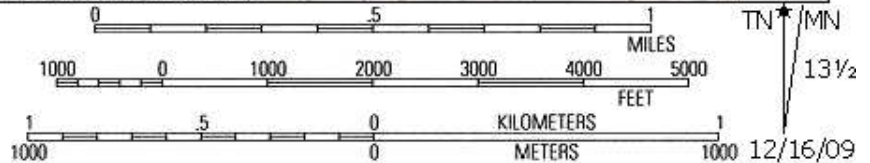
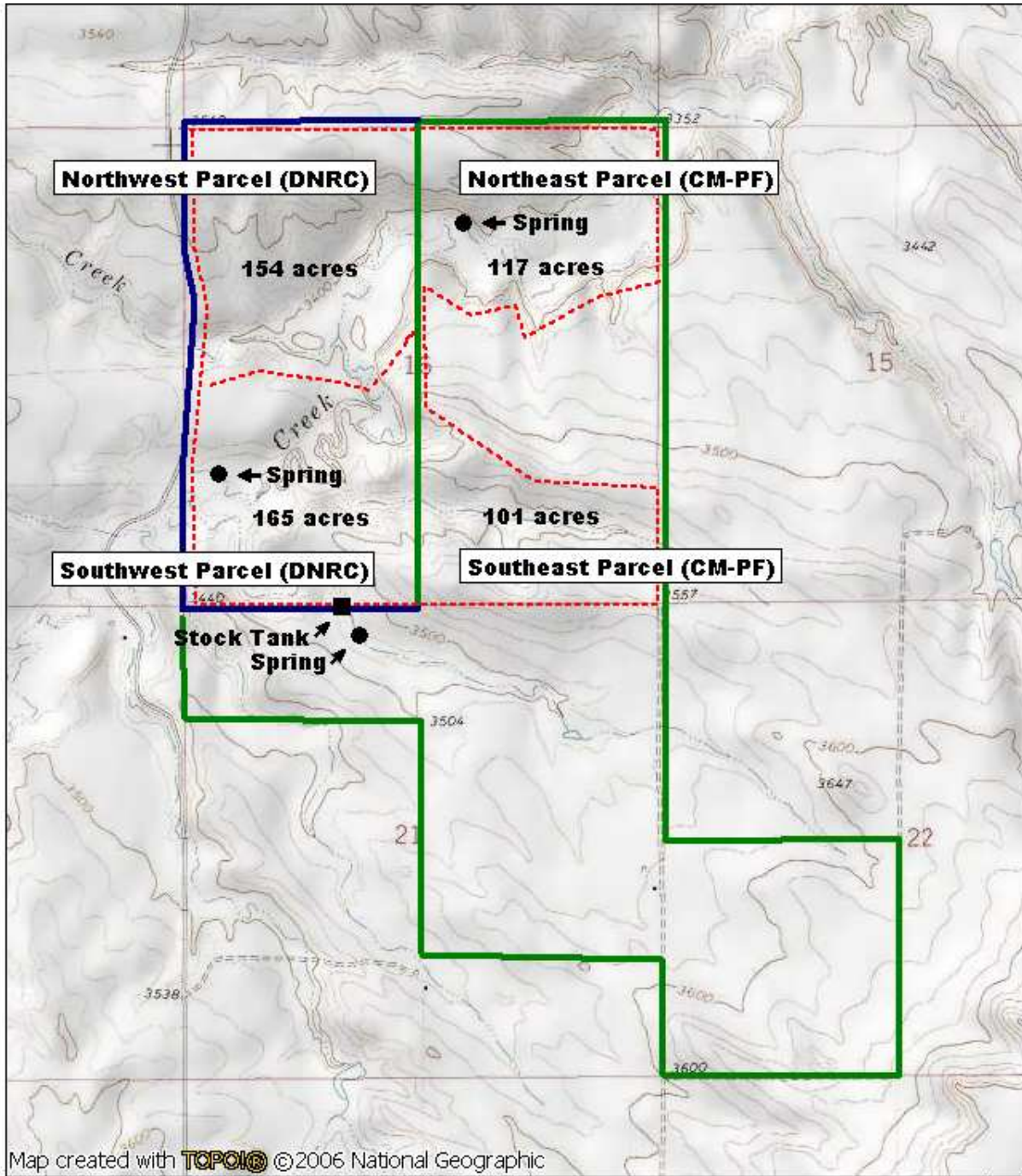


Exhibit B. PF Coffee Creek Grazing Formula, with DNRC lease.

Years	Parcels (Owner)	Acres	AUMs* per Pasture	Animal numbers	30 days grazing in 60-day period January 2 - March 2
Odd Numbered Years	Northeast (PF) Northwest (DNRC)	117 <u>154</u> 271	41 <u>35</u> 76	76 cows or yearlings	Graze both parcels together as one pasture
Odd Numbered Years	Southeast (PF) Southwest (DNRC)	101 <u>165</u> 266	-- --	-- --	Rest both parcels as one pasture
Even Numbered Years	Northeast (PF) Northwest (DNRC)	117 <u>154</u> 271	-- --	-- --	Rest both parcels as one pasture
Even Numbered Years	Southeast (PF) Southwest (DNRC)	101 <u>165</u> 266	38 <u>37</u> 75	75 cows or yearlings	Graze both parcels together as one pasture

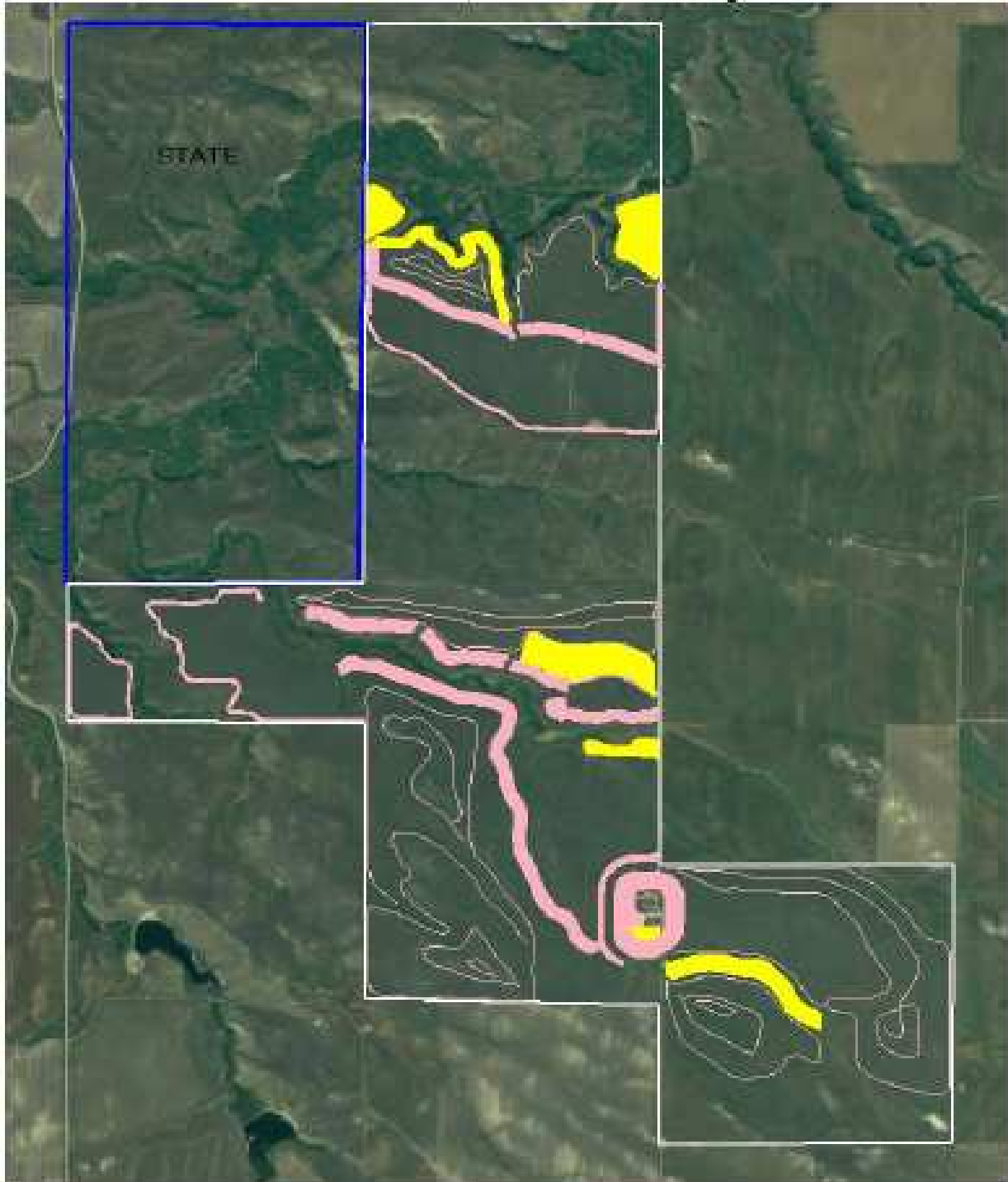
* AUMs = abbreviation for animal unit months. 1 AUM is equivalent to a 1,000-pound cow or long yearling grazing for 1 month. NRCS range evaluation determined an average stocking density of 0.35 AUMS per acre for Northeast Pasture and 0.375 AUMs per acre for Southeast Pasture. DNRC lease has stocking density averaged at 0.225 AUMs per acre on DNRC land on west ½ of section 16, T19N, R14E.

Exhibit C. PF Coffee Creek Grazing Formula, without DNRC lease.

Years	Parcels	Acres	AUMs per pasture	Animal numbers	30 days grazing in 60-day period January 2 - March 2
Odd Numbered Years	Northeast	117	41	41 cows or yearlings	Graze
Odd Numbered Years	Southeast	101	--	--	Rest
Even Numbered Years	Northeast	117	--	--	Rest
Even Numbered Years	Southeast	101	38	38 cows or yearlings	Graze

* AUMs = abbreviation for animal unit months. 1 AUM is equivalent to a 1,000-pound cow or long yearling grazing for 1 month. NRCS range evaluation determined an average stocking density of 0.35 AUMS per acre for Northeast Pasture and 0.375 AUMs per acre for Southeast Pasture.

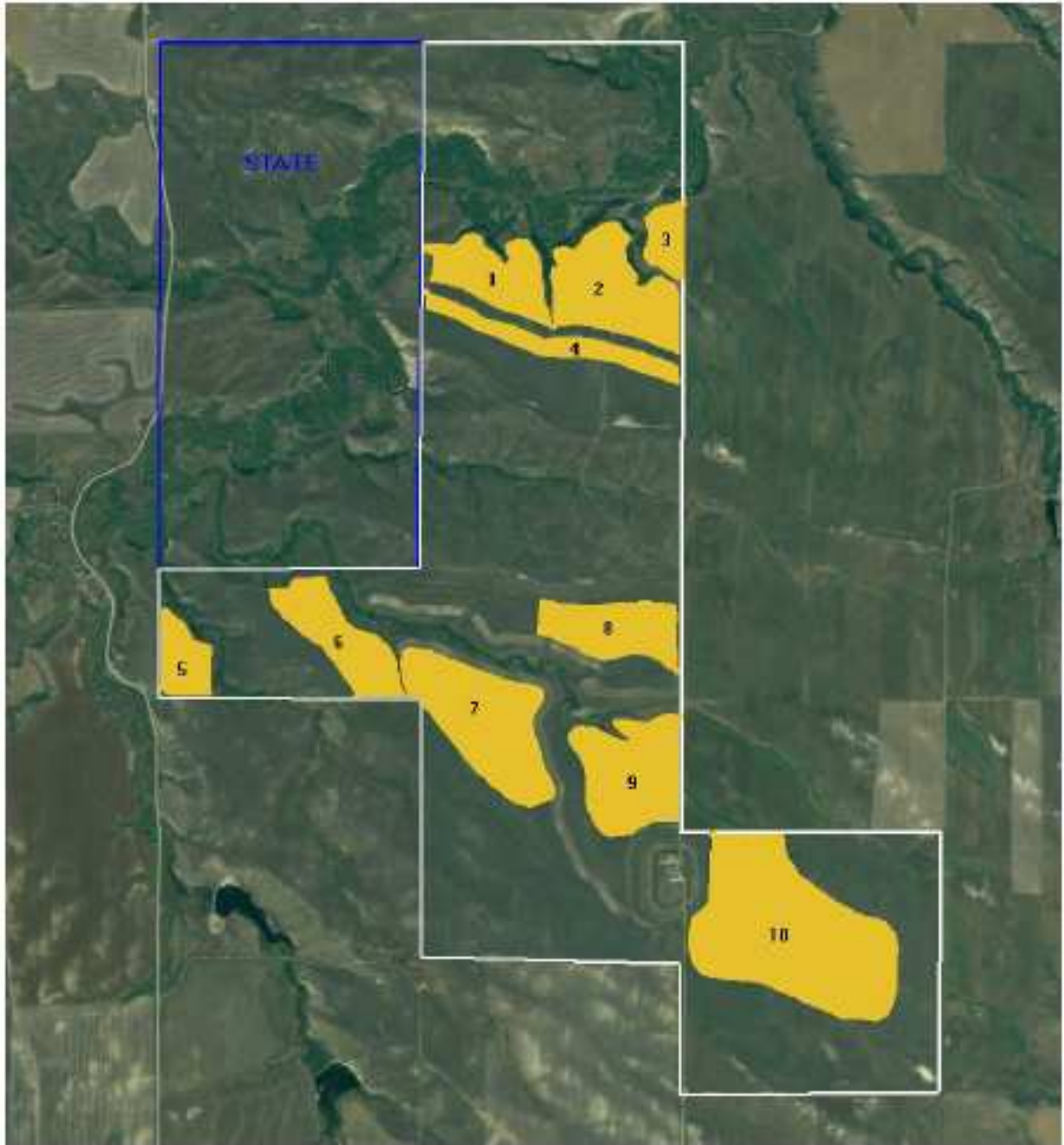
Exhibit D. PF Coffee Creek Tree, Shrub and Food Plot Plantings



- 11 Row Shelterbelt
- 9 Row Shelterbelt
- 6 Row Shelterbelt
- 2 Row Silver Sage Planting
- 1 Row Silver Sage Planting
- Food Plots:



Exhibit E. PF Coffee Creek Cropland Fields



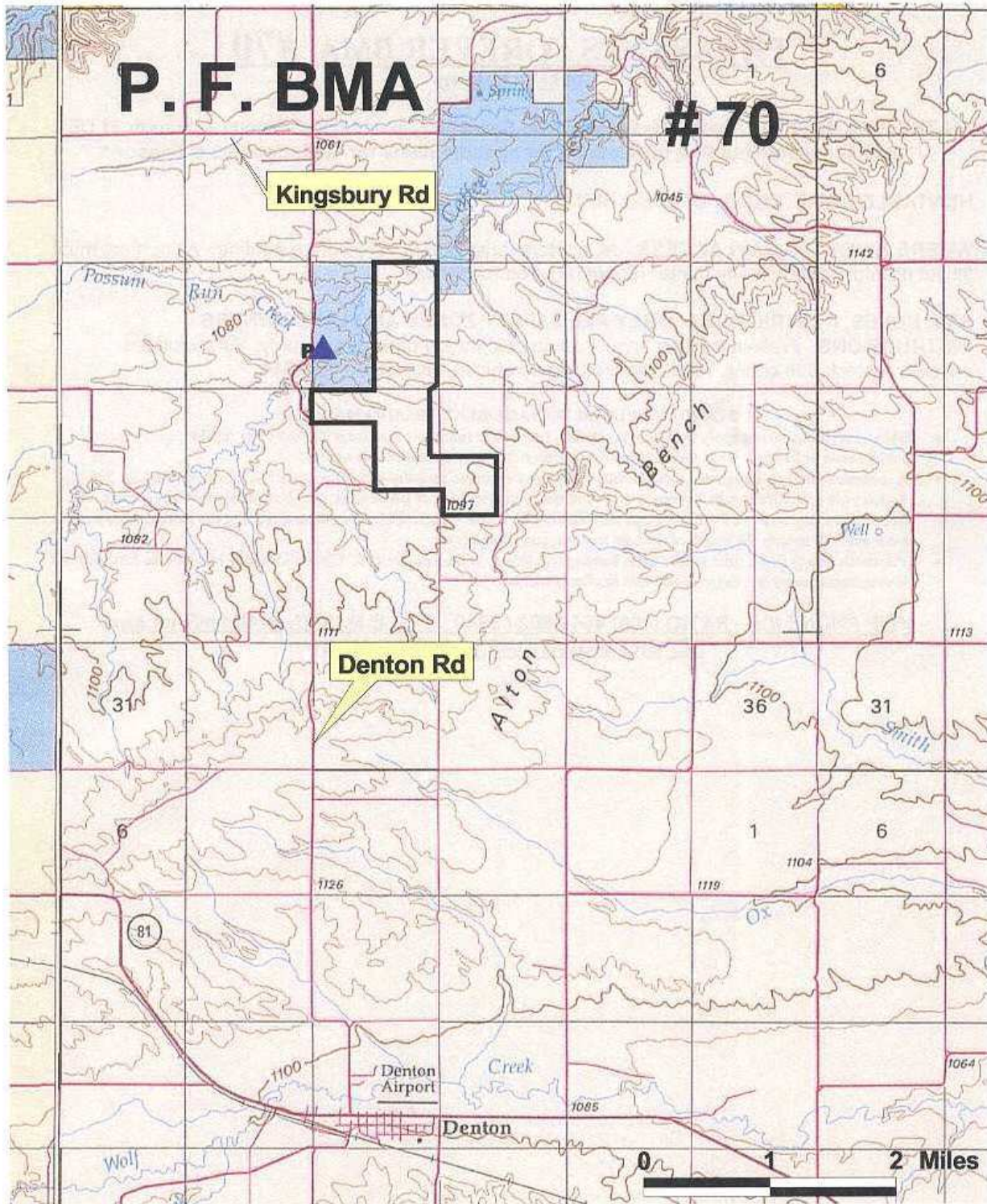
Fields	
1. 15.1 acres	6. 16.0 acres
2. 23.9 acres	7. 29.4 acres
3. 5.6 acres	8. 16.2 acres
4. 10.6 acres	9. 23.6 acres
5. 7.5 acres	10. 58.1 acres

Exhibit F. PF Coffee Creek Hunting Rules

- 1) PF Coffee Creek property is open to public hunting, archery and rifle and upland bird, from the beginning of the archery antelope seasons through the end of upland bird season seasons (August 15 – January 1). The ranch is located within FWP Deer/Elk Hunting District 426 and Antelope Hunting District 471.
- 2) Access to the PF Coffee Creek property for hunting is granted only by entering the property by way of the designated parking area that's located 6.5 miles North of Denton on Coffee Creek.
- 3) All hunters must sign in daily before hunting and fill out all information on any hunter record that's required for access.
- 4) All hunters must have an area map and rules in his/her possession at all times.
- 5) All hunting is walk-in hunting only from the designated parking area on the N. Denton County road (see map). Come prepared to retrieve harvested game (i.e. drag rope, game cart, backpack, etc).
- 6) No motorized vehicles are allowed on the PF Coffee Creek property.
- 7) At the end of the hunt, please drop off the stub portion of the permission slip with the completed hunter survey, in the sign-in box.
- 8) No open fires are permitted on the PF Coffee Creek Property.

Report violations to 1-800-TIP-MONT

Exhibit G. PF Coffee Creek Access Map



Disclaimer - This Map is only intended to depict property ownership within the Block Management Area. Contact the appropriate land management agency for information on public land ownership and travel guidelines.
 Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Region 4
 BLM 100K Map: Lewistown

-  Sign-In Box
-  Parking Area
-  Block Management Area Boundary



PHEASANTS FOREVER BMA #70

DEER/ELK HD 426

DATES BMA IS OPEN: Archery Seasons / Rifle Seasons / Upland Bird Seasons – through 31 DEC
**** See applicable hunting regulations for specific dates for each Species & Season****

HUNTABLE GAME: DEER / UPLAND BIRDS

WHERE & HOW TO GAIN ACCESS: All hunters must sign in daily before hunting. All hunters must fill out all information on any hunter record required for access.

BMA RULES, RESTRICTIONS: OBEY ALL SAFETY ZONES AND LANDOWNERS INSTRUCTIONS. Walk-in hunting only. Park in designated parking area only. All motorized vehicles restricted to county road. No motorized vehicles allowed on the BMA.

STANDARD BLOCK MANAGEMENT PROGRAM RULES:

- BMA restrictions do not apply to legally accessible, (via public roads and watercourses, and other legal means of access) public (State or Federal) lands unless specifically authorized in by the applicable agency.
- A cooperator or their designated representative may deny access to an individual “for cause” IAW, ARM rule 12.4.205 (d). An example - intoxication, belligerence or violent behavior, violation of BMA rules, muddy/excessively filthy vehicle, etc. Cooperators may also ask FWP to ban an individual(s) for cause. This will be via a formal letter to the individual(s) from FWP and will specify the length of the ban, reasons, and complainant.
- Violations of any BMA rules and/or State hunting regulations will be prosecuted. Convictions may result in the loss of Block Management access privileges in addition to other penalties.

FWP PHONE #'s – R4 HQ (406) 454-5862 / 5840 E-MAIL (fwpr4bmp@ mt.gov)

REPORT VIOLATIONS: 1-800-TIP-MONT

Management Plan Approved By:

Howard Vincent, CEO Pheasants Forever, Inc.

Date

Graham Taylor, Region 4 FWP Wildlife Manager

Date

Ken McDonald, FWP Wildlife Division Administrator

Date

Darlene Edge, FWP Lands Division

Date

**COFFEE CREEK
CONSERVATION EASEMENT
SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT**

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

Prepared by:
Darlene Edge
March 2010

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) to acquire an interest in land for the purpose of protecting and improving wildlife habitat. These acquisitions can be through fee title, conservation easements, or leasing. In 1989, the Montana legislature passed House Bill 720 requiring that a socioeconomic assessment be completed when land is acquired for the purpose of protecting wildlife habitat using Habitat Montana monies. These assessments evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and impacts on local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the purchase of a conservation easement on property currently owned by Pheasants Forever (PF). The purchase is intended to protect approximately 800 acres in perpetuity. This report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed conservation easement.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description

The Pheasants Forever property is located in Fergus County about 6 miles north of Denton, Montana in Fergus County, Montana. A detailed description of the property location is provided in the environmental assessment.

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

The subject property supports a host of wildlife species including white-tailed deer, mule deer, antelope, pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, and Hungarian partridge, along with numerous non-game wildlife species, including species of concern such as bobolink, chestnut-collared longspur, long-billed curlew, northern leopard frog, and plains spade-foot toads.

C. Current Use

Pheasants Forever is currently doing extensive upland gamebird habitat enhancement work on the property.

D. Management Alternatives

- 1) Purchase a conservation easement on the property by FWP
- 2) No purchase

FWP Purchase of Conservation Easement

The primary purpose of this action is to preserve the upland bird habitat on the property acquired by PF in 1998 and has since enhanced, and the integrity of the associated native habitats, while maintaining traditional agricultural land uses and public hunting.

No Purchase Alternative

The second alternative, the no purchase option, does not guarantee protection of the upland bird habitats nor protect this land from changes in land uses.

This alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what the current owners decide to do with the property if FWP does not purchase a conservation easement.

The economic impacts associated with this alternative are beyond the scope of this assessment and have not been estimated.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Section II D identified the management alternatives this report addresses. The purchase of a conservation easement will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat and keep the land in private ownership. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the two management alternatives following two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the conservation easement to FWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provide information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e. income and employment).

A. Financial Impacts

The conservation easement proposed on the Pheasants Forever property will be secured by funding through the Upland Game Bird Program and Habitat Montana Program, in the amount of \$304,000. The purchase price is based on an appraisal of fair market fee value, and will not exceed 40% of that value.

Maintenance/management costs related to the easement are associated with monitoring the property to ensure the easement terms are being followed.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the purchase of the conservation easement. The conservation easement will not change the ownership of the property nor will it change the type or level of agricultural use on the property.

Therefore, the purchase of a conservation easement on this land will not impact the current level of taxes paid to Fergus County.

B. Economic Impacts

The property would continue to be operated as is for the short-term (CRP, upland bird habitat enhancements, with public hunting) -- with additional farming and grazing practices implemented in the near-term future. The better soils, of the acreage currently enrolled in the USDA Conservation Reserve Program, will be farmed when those contracts expire (current contracts expire in 2013 and 2019), which would increase the agricultural productivity and profitability of the property. Implementation of the rest and rotational grazing plan will also increase agricultural productivity and profitability of the property. Such foreseen changes in the management of the property should not conflict with existing land uses in the area. The purchase of a conservation easement and implementation of the Management Plan will maintain or improve the economics of the property.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The acquisition of a conservation easement on the Pheasants Forever property will provide long-term protection for the wildlife habitat and maintain the agricultural integrity of the land.

The purchase of a conservation easement by FWP will not cause a reduction in tax revenues on this property from their current levels to Fergus County.

The agricultural operations will continue at their current levels or improve on this property. The financial impacts of the easement on local businesses will be neutral to slightly positive in both the short and long run.