

## **State commission endorses Stillwater easement**

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### **Body**

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During a meeting on Thursday, the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Commission endorsed a new 1,000-acre conservation easement project along the **Stillwater** River, located about 10 miles north of Whitefish.

The **Stillwater** Conservation Easement Project is part of an ongoing 20-year multi-partner conservation initiative that includes Fish Wildlife and Parks, the Trust for Public Land, multiple timber companies, and other federal, state and private funding sources to protect large landscapes of working forest and fish and wildlife habitat.

The private property is currently owned by the nonprofit organization, Trust for Public Land, which plans to put an easement on the 1,000 acres and then gift that easement to FWP free of charge. The two entities will then seek a conservation buyer to own and maintain the lands under guidance from FWP.

"It's a donated piece of land so it won't cost FWP anything, which is fantastic," Kris Temple, a habitat conservation biologist for Region 1 of Fish Wildlife and Parks, said in an interview prior to the meeting. "We are excited to move forward with this. It's a really important wildlife area."

One person at the commission meeting described the project as "a win-win for a lot of people."

The property is rich in recreational opportunities, making it appealing, and thus vulnerable, to a private buyer "looking for a trophy land asset or potential subdivision into several lots," according to a supporting document on the project.

"Growth in Flathead County places pressure on all pristine parcels in close proximity, such as the **Stillwater** Conservation Easement Project," the document states.

The land is an "important riparian and lowland forestland in Northwest Montana." A conservation easement will protect habitat for 42 species of "greatest conservation need as identified in Montana's 2015 State Wildlife Action Plan," including wolverine, northern goshawk, great blue heron, great gray owl and western toad. The property is also habitat for federally listed grizzly bears and is considered by Fish, Wildlife and Parks to be "consistently occupied habitat," supporting populations of mule and white-tailed deer, elk, moose, wolves and other animals.

Approximately 840 acres of the property are forest and woodland systems and about 140 acres are open water/wetland and riparian systems. The property also contains approximately 1 mile of the **Stillwater** River itself, which contributes to an estimated 60 percent of the property that is "probable fisher habitat."

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According to an overview of the project, the habitat on the property is in good condition and is not in need of any restoration. Under the terms of the conservation easement, the property would be managed under an approved forest management plan. By eliminating future housing development, the project is "likely to reduce ongoing FWP obligations by reducing future wildlife/human conflicts in an area that is highly prone to such conflicts. It would help reduce the need for additional time, effort and funding spent in wildlife conflict, which would likely offset the increased need to monitor our growing portfolio of conservation easements," the overview states.

The **Stillwater** Conservation Easement Project also checks all the boxes for Habitat Montana -- a program established by FWP to protect and enhance wildlife habitat across the state while also supporting conservation-minded ranchers and other landowners.

The **Stillwater** project satisfies three main goals for Habitat Montana by conserving wildlife populations by requiring the property to be managed to protect its wildlife habitat, adding to a larger landscape of conservation and allowing forestry practices to occur while preserving wildlife habitat and a key connectivity corridor. The project also includes benefits required of the program, including providing hunting and fishing opportunities and protecting open space and scenic views.

Moving forward following the endorsement, FWP will "proceed with due diligence and public process," meaning the property will undergo environmental assessments and the agency will eventually begin accepting public comment on the project.

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