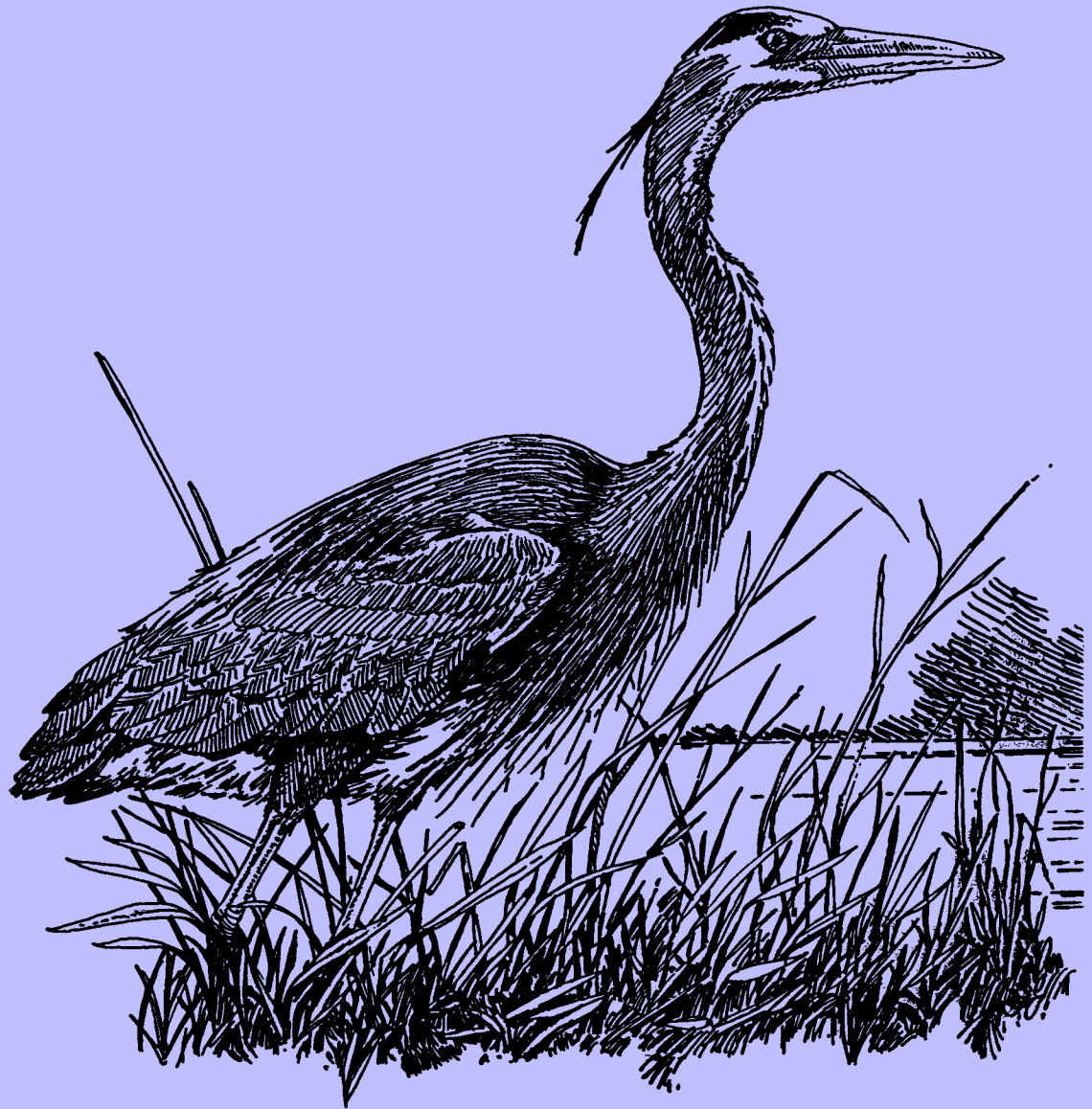


U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Proposed
Lost Trail

National Wildlife Refuge



***Environmental Assessment and
Conceptual Management Plan***

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Proposed
Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge
FLATHEAD COUNTY, MONTANA

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1. PROPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION	
Introduction and Background	1
Proposed Action	1
Purpose of and Need for Proposed Action	2
Project Area	2
Decisions to be Made.....	5
Issues Identified and Selected for Analysis	5
Biological Issues	6
Social and Economic Issues	6
Issues Not Selected for Detailed Analysis	7
Related Actions and Activities	8
National Wildlife Refuge System and Authorities.....	9
The Habitat Protection and Land Acquisition Process	12
CHAPTER 2. ALTERNATIVES, INCLUDING THE PREFERRED ACTION	
Alternative A. No Action	15
Alternative B. Mitigation Lands as a National Wildlife Refuge	15
Alternative C. Mitigation and Fee Title Acquisition of Lands as a National Wildlife Refuge (Preferred Alternative).....	16
Alternative Considered but not Studied	16
CHAPTER 3. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT	
Biological Environment	21
Social and Economic Considerations	22
Cultural Resources	25
CHAPTER 4. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES	
Effects on the Biological Environment	27
Effects on the Social and Economic Environment	28
Unavoidable Adverse Impacts	33
Irreversible and Irretrievable Commitments of Resources	33
Short-term Uses Versus Long-term Productivity	33
Cumulative Impacts	33
CHAPTER 5. COORDINATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW	
Agency Coordination	35
National Environmental Policy Act.....	35
Other Federal Laws, Regulations, and Executive Orders.....	35
Distribution and Availability	36
List of Preparers and Reviewers	36
References	37

FIGURES

Figure 1. Project Location Map, Lost Trail Ranch, Montana	3
Source: FWS 1998.	
Figure 2. Alternative B. Mitigation Land as a National Wildlife Refuge	17
Source: FWS 1998.	
Figure 3. Alternative C. Mitigation and Fee Title Land, proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge (preferred alternative)	19
Source: FWS 1998.	
Figure 4. National Wetland Inventory Map	23
Source: FWS 1998.	

TABLES

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Environmental Consequences by Alternatives	32
Source: FWS 1998.	

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Endangered, Threatened, and Candidate Species; Lost Trail Project Area	39
Appendix B. Distribution List for the Environmental Assessment	41
Appendix C. Mitigation Settlement Agreement	47

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Proposed

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge
Flathead County, Montana

Chapter 1. Propose of and Need for Action

Introduction and Background

Since 1960, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has been protecting wildlife habitat that includes wetland and upland habitats in the Flathead Valley of Northwest Montana. These parcels of unique habitat have been acquired as Waterfowl Production Areas using Migratory Bird Conservation Funds under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. In addition, the Service acquired the National Bison Range, Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge, Pablo National Wildlife Refuge and the Swan River National Wildlife Refuge under a variety of authorities and fund sources. The Service has always recognized the significant and diverse wildlife values associated with the Flathead Valley.

In 1985, the Service identified the need to evaluate the future of land acquisition in Flathead and Lake Counties, Montana. This need resulted from pending mitigation due to habitat losses and impacts to wildlife resulting from past and future operations of Hungry Horse, Libby, and Kerr Dams and limited funding from the Service Small Wetland Acquisition Program. In 1986, the Service prepared a *Land Acquisition and Development Plan*. This document delineated over 11,000 acres of potential wetland/upland tracts in the Flathead Valley that would be suitable for wetland dependent wildlife production and management.

This document addresses the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's proposal to accept partial management of mitigated wetland habitat for past habitat losses and protect additional lands through acquisition of the Lost Trail Ranch. It is proposed that the lands that currently form the Lost Trail Ranch be established as a National Wildlife Refuge.

Proposed Action

The Service proposes the transfer and acquisition of the Lost Trail Ranch, which is in part a result of a Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) approved settlement between the Department of the Interior, Montana Power Company (MPC) and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CS&KT). The land transfer mitigates for

habitat and wildlife losses on the Flathead Waterfowl Production Area (WPA) caused by past and future operations of Kerr Dam by the MPC. Approximately 3,112 acres of the Lost Trail Ranch will be transferred in fee title to the Service as partial mitigation for habitat and wildlife losses associated with the operation of Kerr Dam. The Service proposes to acquire the remaining 4,773 acres of the Ranch in fee title. MPC has approached the Service and the Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS), to incorporate a wetland conservation easement and potential sale of these lands upon completion of a suitable appraisal. The adjacent 1,440 acres of Montana Department of State Lands will be lease transferred from the Montana Power Company to the Service. The total size of the proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge would be approximately 9,325 acres.

The Montana Department of State Lands (school trust lands) owns 1,440 acres of timber and grazing land which is leased by the Montana Power Company within the proposed Refuge boundary. Montana Power Company has agreed to transfer the lease on these lands to the Service in conjunction with the acquisition of Lost Trail Ranch.

Therefore, this Environmental Assessment addresses the establishment of a Refuge boundary with the transfer of 3,112 acres of mitigative-conveyed lands, the acquisition of the 4,773 acres in fee title, and the transfer of 1,440 acres of State lease lands. The total size of the proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge is approximately 9,325 acres.

The approval of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge boundary would allow the Service to negotiate with the willing landowner within this boundary to acquire land and accept lands as a transfer. Lands acquired by and transferred to the Service would be managed as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Purpose of and Need for Proposed Action

The purpose of the proposed action is to: 1) fulfill the settlement in the FERC order between the Department of the Interior, MPC and the CS&KT, and resulting mitigation for losses to the Flathead WPA attributed to past and future operations of Kerr Dam, and 2) to protect and maintain wetland habitat for migratory birds, waterfowl and other species of animals and plants; to restore floodplain acreage to its historic role; and to enhance the survival prospects of endangered and threatened species in the area. This could be accomplished by modifying existing valley drainage system of the project area, restoring historic floodplain width and restoring wetland and riparian corridor.

Project Area

The Lost Trail Ranch is located in the west-central portion of Flathead County approximately 25 air-miles west of Kalispell, Montana (see figure 1). The Ranch is located in a geographic drainage known locally as the Pleasant Valley. The Ranch can best be described as a long valley in which Pleasant Valley Creek flows south out of the

PROPOSED LOST TRAIL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Flathead County, Montana

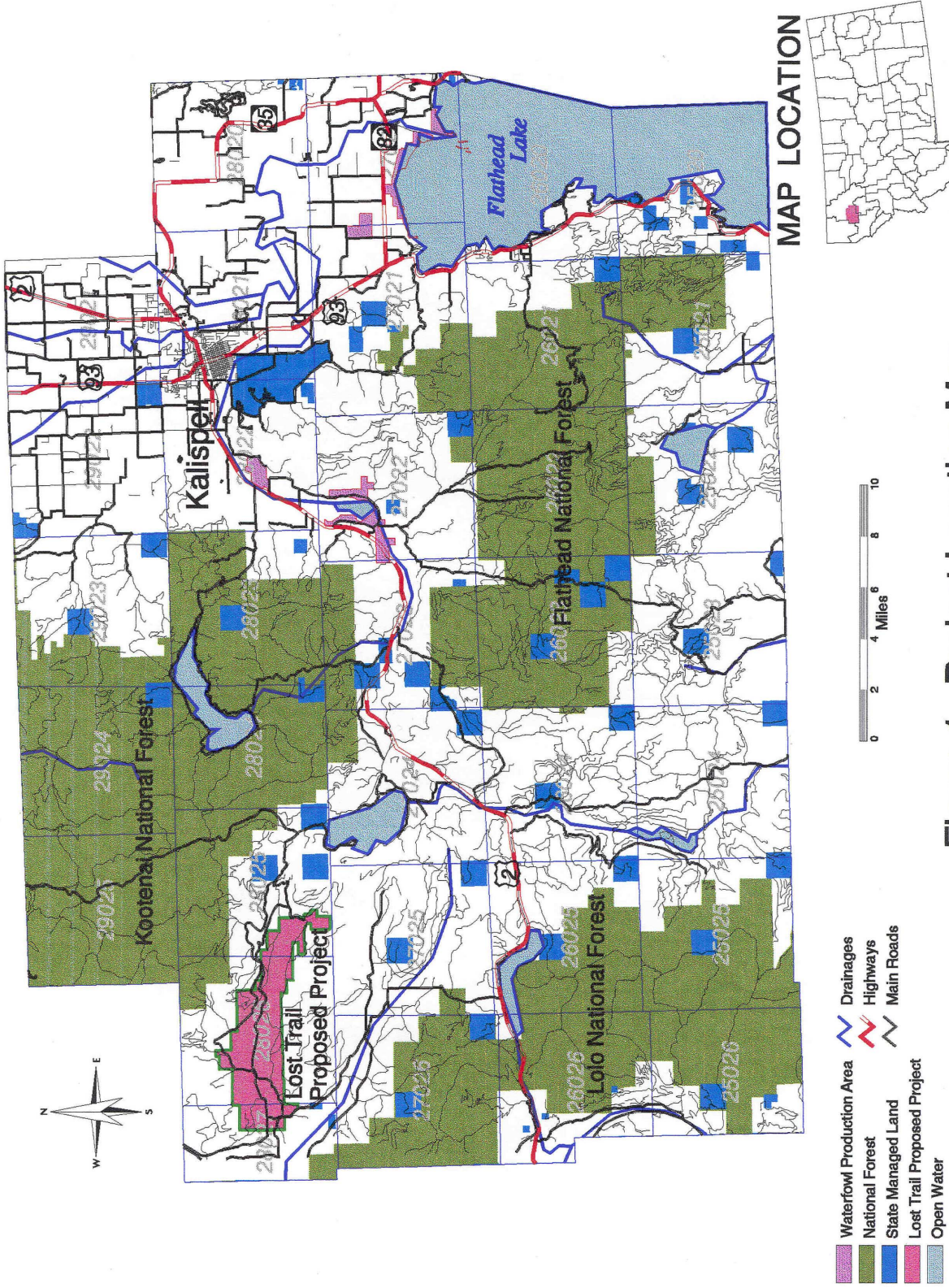


Figure 1. Project Location Map

State of Montana

mountains on the north side of the Valley adjoining Meadow Creek, a tributary of Dahl Lake which lies near the eastern boundary of the Ranch. The Ranch also encompasses the 160-acre Dahl Lake, a partially drained shallow lacustrine wetland system maintained by several watersheds. Water levels within the lake are subject to seasonal fluctuations; however, during high water levels, the lake develops into a very large wetland. Elevations range from 3,488 feet to 4,600 feet. The Ranch is bordered by Montana Department of State Lands as well as lands owned by the Plum Creek Timber Company, Monk Ranch and Big Meadows Grazing Association.

Decisions to be Made

Based on the analysis provided in this Environmental Assessment, the Regional Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 6 - Mountain Prairie Region, will make three decisions.

1. Determine whether the Service should establish a boundary of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge. If yes,
2. Select an alternative acreage figure for establishment of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge.
3. Determine whether the selected alternative will have a significant impact upon the quality of the human environment. This decision is required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969. If the quality of the human environment is not affected, a Finding of No Significant Impact will be signed and will be made available to the public. If the alternative will have a significant impact, then an Environmental Impact Statement will be prepared to further address those impacts. If the Regional Director's decision is to establish the 9,325 acres as the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, he will formally declare his decision by signing a Decision Document.

Issues Identified and Selected for Analysis

A scoping meeting was conducted on May 20, 1998, to receive comments from the public on issues and concerns regarding the proposed establishment of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge. Approximately 22 people attended this meeting. During the scoping period, the Service received approximately 48 written comments concerning the proposed Refuge establishment from landowners, conservation groups, and interested citizens. Based on these comments, the Service identified biological, social and economic concerns. Major issues were selected for analysis in this Environmental Assessment. The EA focuses on biological issues related to protection of wetland and upland habitat and rare and sensitive wildlife species; social and economic issues related to land ownership and uses, water rights, property taxes, public uses and rural lifestyles.

Biological Issues

Wildlife Habitat Protection

- The Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge should be established to protect and enhance wetland and upland habitat and provide a corridor for wildlife use and dispersal. The proposed Refuge would add to the biological diversity and aid the recovery of endangered and threatened species. This establishment and subsequent habitat restoration and enhancement would also increase habitat, the abundance of game wildlife species, migratory birds, waterfowl, shorebirds, raptors and neotropical birds.

Social and Economic Issues

Land Ownership/Land Use

- Some individuals were concerned about the economic consequences of removing grazing land from production. Some feel that Lost Trail Ranch should stay in private ownership, provide jobs and support for the area.
- Some individuals are concerned that housing development will replace grazing/open space land. It has been commented that in the last five years, habitats within the Pleasant Valley and adjacent valleys have been fragmented into small (less than 20 acres) “ranchettes” and seasonal residences that provide secluded living with attractive vistas. Little Bitterroot Lake, which lies three miles to the southeast, is currently undergoing subdivision development.
- As a result of development pressure, the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks has undertaken efforts to exchange lands in and around the Thompson Chain of Lakes, 10 miles southwest of the project area, in an effort to preserve and protect habitat and wildlife resources in the area.

Water Rights Issues

- Some individuals are concerned over water rights and how they are currently being utilized as opposed to future use.

Property Tax

- Some individuals were concerned that lands acquired by the Service would be removed from the property tax base, thereby hurting local units of government dependent on County financial support.

- An analysis of tax revenues indicates that Service ownership of the Ranch will result in approximately 78 percent annual increase in County “tax” revenues through the Refuge Revenue Sharing Program if all lands and improvements are required.

Public use

- Some groups and individuals expressed a need for protecting wildlife lands for public recreational use. It has been noted that the population of Flathead County has increased 21 percent in the last seven years bringing in additional outdoor enthusiasts that will continue to seek varied utilization of Refuge lands. Groups feel that the proposed Refuge offers a wide diversity of habitats and wildlife species that makes environmental interpretation and education ideal benefits for the visiting public. Preliminary indications are that the public desires to have an active hunting program.
- Conservation groups and local citizens expressed a desire that certain compatible uses be allowed on the proposed Refuge that are now restricted from public access. Such uses would include hiking, bird watching, hunting and fishing.

Effects on Rural Lifestyle

- Some groups and individuals expressed concern over the recent fragmentation of open space and grazing land into small (less than 20 acres) “ranchettes” and seasonal residences that provide secluded living with attractive vistas.
- Some individuals expressed a concern that ranches are being bought by the Federal government and the ranch/rural lifestyle will be lost by the local community.
- Public input indicates a high desire for preservation of Ranch lands and open space. Under Refuge management, haying and grazing practices will be designed to enhance wildlife resources.

Issues Not Selected for Detailed Analysis

The following concerns have been noted by the Service. However, because they are not within the scope of project, or the action proposed by the Service would have slight or no impact on these concerns, these topics are not evaluated further in this EA.

Endangered Species Reintroduction

- Some individuals expressed concern regarding using Federal money for reintroducing wolves and grizzlies which is hurting the game population of the State of Montana.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the primary Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing endangered plants and animals and their habitats within the United States and will use whatever resources are needed and available to achieve those goals and objectives.

Federal Funding

- Some individuals expressed a concern that the establishment of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge would not reduce the size of the Federal Government.

The mission of the Service is to conserve, protect and enhance the Nation's fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service is aware of the resources needed to establish a National Wildlife Refuge and will work within its funding limitations.

This EA addresses the proposed means for habitat protection and land acquisition. Management opportunities are further addressed in the Conceptual Management Plan, which gives a general overview of how the proposed Refuge could be operated and managed. A Comprehensive Conservation Plan would be developed with additional public input in the future.

If the proposed action is approved, the Service would initiate acquisition during Fiscal Year 1999. Payments to the landowner for rights acquired would be based upon a real estate appraisal to determine fair market values as set forth in the Uniform Appraisal Standards for Federal Land Acquisition (1992).

Related Actions and Activities

The National Bison Range Complex administers over 30,000 acres of lands in both Flathead and Lake Counties. These include the Ninepipe, Pablo and Swan River National Wildlife Refuges, eight Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA) in Lake County and four additional WPAs in Flathead County. In addition, under terms of the Settlement Agreement, the Service would also assume administration of 799 acres of the McGregor Lake Ranch, located approximately 10 miles south of Lost Trail Ranch. The McGregor acreage is to be conveyed to the Service as partial mitigation. The area will be an entity of the National Wildlife Refuge System and will be managed as a WPA.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS) is actively pursuing 4,001 acres of conservation easements in the Pleasant Valley area under the Wetland Reserve Program (WRP). Two landowners adjacent to the Lost Trail Ranch have tentatively agreed to these easements. With the proposed transfer and acquisition of Lost Trail Ranch, an inter-agency land steward partnership may be formed that will protect habitat totaling over 13,000 acres.

Plum Creek Timber Company (PCTC) owns the majority of land surrounding the Lost Trail Ranch. PCTC is utilizing an active logging and thinning program on these lands. The Ranch currently has easements with PCTC which allow for administrative use of roads adjacent to the Ranch. The Service may effect additional easements with PCTC in order to protect wildlife resource values as well as timber habitats which surround the Ranch.

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) and the PCTC have recognized the need for resource protection on lands surrounding the Thompson Chain of Lakes 10 miles southwest of Lost Trail Ranch. The FWP and PCTC have agreed to exchange selected land parcels surrounding Thompson Lakes in order to protect wildlife resources and provide greater public use facilities.

Partners for Wildlife Program (PFW), administered by the Service, has recently enacted a private lands program involving the restoration of wetland and stream corridors in Flathead and Lincoln counties. PFW projects are conducted in cooperation with private landowners, State and county agencies, Natural Resource and Conservation Service and other various non-governmental organizations focusing on a healthy ecosystem.

The local public has also assisted in the protection of wildlife resources. Local agricultural communities and individuals are often receptive to wetland and wildlife conservation practices. In addition, wildlife represents a land-use priority to a substantial and growing number of private landowners. They expressed a continued interest in assisting the Service and all partners in reaching habitat protection goals that will decrease the threat of subdivision and suburbanization of their community.

National Wildlife Refuge System and Authorities

The mission of the Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance the Nation's fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service is the primary Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing migratory birds, anadromous fishes, certain marine mammals and endangered plants and animals and their habitats within the United States. This responsibility to conserve our Nation's wildlife resources is shared with other Federal agencies and State and Tribal governments.

As part of the responsibility, the Service manages a national network of protected lands and waters dedicated to the conservation of wildlife. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System 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.

Unlike other Federal lands that are managed under a multiple-use mandate (i.e., national forest administered by the U.S. Forest Service, and public lands administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management), the National Wildlife Refuge System is managed

specifically for the benefit of fish, wildlife and plant resources and their habitats. Hunting and fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation are priority public uses of the Refuge System. These uses must receive enhanced consideration over other uses in refuge planning and management.

Before any uses are allowed on national wildlife refuges, Federal law requires that they be formally determined to be “compatible.” A compatible use is defined as a use that, in the sound professional judgement of the refuge manager, will not materially interfere with or detract from the fulfillment of the Refuge System mission and refuge purposes. Sound professional judgement is defined as a decision that is consistent with the principles of fish and wildlife management and administration, available science and resources (funding, personnel, facilities and other infrastructure), and adherence with law. If financial resources are not available to design, operate and maintain an activity, the refuge manager will take reasonable steps to obtain outside assistance from the State and other conservation interests.

Guiding Principles of the National Wildlife Refuge System

1. **Habitat.** Fish and wildlife will not prosper without high-quality habitat, and without fish and wildlife, traditional uses of refuges cannot be sustained. The Refuge System will continue to conserve and enhance the quality and diversity of fish and wildlife habitat within refuges.
2. **Public Use.** The Refuge System provides important opportunities for compatible wildlife-dependent recreational activities involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation.
3. **Partnership.** America’s sportsmen and women were the first partners who insisted on protecting valuable wildlife habitat within national wildlife refuges. Conservation partnership with other Federal agencies, State agencies, Tribes, organizations, industry and the general public can make significant contributions to the growth and management of the Refuge System.
4. **Public Involvement.** The public should be given full and open opportunity to participate in decisions regarding acquisition and management of our National Wildlife Refuges.

Goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System

- A. To preserve, restore and enhance in their natural ecosystems (when practicable) all species of animals and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered.
- B. To perpetuate the migratory bird resource.

- C. To preserve a natural diversity and abundance of fauna and flora on refuge lands.
- D. To provide an understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology and the human's role in the environment.
- E. To provide refuge visitors with high quality, safe, wholesome and enjoyable recreational experiences oriented toward wildlife, to the extent these activities are compatible with the purpose for which the refuge was established.

The proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge would be managed as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, Refuge Recreation Act of 1962, Executive Order 12996 (Management and General Public Use of the National Wildlife Refuge System), National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, and other relevant legislation, executive orders, regulations and policies.

Purpose of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge

National Wildlife Refuge System lands have been acquired under a variety of legislative acts and executive orders. Over time, an individual refuge may acquire lands under different transfer and acquisition authorities with different purposes.

The purpose for which a refuge is established, therefore, has special significance. A refuge proposed may be specified in or derived from Federal law, proclamation, executive order, agreement, public land order, donation document or administrative memorandum (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Manual, 602 FW 1.4M). In addition to providing a basis for making compatibility determinations, a refuge's purpose also serves as a vision or mission statement for refuge managers and the public. It provides a broad, long-term statement of management direction and priorities.

The Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge is proposed to be established under two legislative authorities: Migratory Bird Conservation Act and the Refuge Recreation Act. Under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act, the Refuge is managed for migratory birds. Under the Refuge Recreation Act, the Refuge is managed for one or more of the following; 1) incidental fish and wildlife-oriented recreational development, 2) the protection of natural resources, and/or 3) the conservation of endangered or threatened species.

Goals of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge

The following goals of the proposed Refuge reflect the core mission of the Service to protect fish and wildlife resources of natural importance while providing opportunities for the public to appreciate and enjoy the natural heritage of the region.

- Provide optimal feeding and resting habitat for waterfowl, cranes and other migratory water and shorebirds.
- Manage for the conservation, enhancement and recovery of endangered, threatened and sensitive species and the habitats on which they depend.
- Preserve a natural diversity and abundance of flora and fauna, with emphasis on neotropical migrants.
- Provide compatible wildlife-dependent recreational uses.

Conservation of wildlife habitat in the Pleasant Valley area would also continue to be consistent with the following policies and management plans:

1. *Five Valleys Joint Venture Project (FVJVP 1992)*
2. *North American Waterfowl Management Plan (USFWS 1994)*
3. *Conservation of Avian Diversity in North America (USFWS 1990)*
4. *Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (USFWS 1993)*
5. *Peregrine Falcon Recovery Plan (USFWS 1984)*
6. *Gray Wolf Recovery Plan (USFWS 1987)*

The Habitat Protection and Land Acquisition Process

Once a refuge boundary is approved, various means could be used for habitat protection through the purchase of fee title or conservation easements, no-cost transfer, long-term lease, donation or exchange. It is the established policy of the Service to acquire land or interest of land from willing sellers.

The authorities for the acquisition of the proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge are the Migratory Bird Conservation Act of 1929 (16 U.S.C. 715-715d, 715e, 715e, 715f-715r), as amended; Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742 f (a) (4), as amended; and the Refuge Recreation Act of 1969 (U.S.C. 460k-460k-4), as amended. Acquisition funding is made available through the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund and the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965. Additional funds could be made available through Congressional appropriations, Natural Resources Conservation Service's Wetland Reserve Program, or other sources to acquire lands, waters, or interest therein for fish and wildlife conservation purposes.

The basic considerations in acquiring land are the biological significance of the land, existing and anticipated threats to wildlife resources, and landowner's willingness to sell, or otherwise make property available to the project. The purchase of Refuge lands proceed according to availability of funds.

Under provisions of the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act (Public Law 95-469), the Service would annually reimburse Flathead County to offset revenue lost as a result of acquisition of private property. This Law states that the Secretary of the Interior (Secretary) shall pay to each county in which any area acquired in fee title is situated, the greater of the following amounts:

1. An amount equal to the product of 75 cents multiplied by the total acreage of that portion of the fee area which is located within such county.
2. An amount equal to $\frac{3}{4}$ of 1 percent of the fair market value, as determined by the Secretary, for that portion of the fee area which is located within such county.
3. An amount equal to 25 percent of the net receipts collected by the Secretary in connection with the operation and management of such fee area during such fiscal year. However, if a fee area is located in two or more counties, the amount for each county shall be apportioned in relationship to the acreage in that county.

The Refuge Revenue Sharing Act also requires that Service lands be reappraised every five years to ensure that payments to local governments remain equitable. Payments under this Act would be made only on lands that the Service acquires in fee title. On lands where the Service acquires only partial interest through easement, all taxes would remain the responsibility of the individual landowner.

Chapter 2. Alternatives, Including the Preferred Action

Chapter 2 describes three alternatives: a no action alternative, a mitigation lands alternative, and a proposed action alternative that would establish a Refuge boundary and provide the Service authority to acquire and accept transferred lands as the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge. Under the no action alternative, the Service would accept the lands identified as mitigation under the FERC order but would only be managed as a WPA rather than a National Wildlife Refuge.

Lands acquired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are administered in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act, Refuge Recreation Act, Executive Order 12996 (Management and General Public Use of the National Wildlife Refuge System), National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, and other relevant legislation, executive orders, regulations and policies. Management activities would include monitoring the status and recovery of endangered, threatened and sensitive species; controlling nonnative species; restoring native habitats; developing and providing wildlife-dependent recreational, interpretive and educational opportunities; and coordinating with State and Federal agencies. The Conceptual Management Plan (see attached) for the proposed establishment of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge contains a general description of the proposed management program. A Comprehensive Conservation Plan would be developed at a later date to provide detailed management guidance. Payments to the County under the terms of the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act are applied to all lands acquired in fee title (see Chapter 1, The Habitat Protection and Land Acquisition Process). Public use would be authorized only when it is compatible with the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and Refuge purposes.

Alternative A. No Action

Under a no action alternative, the Service would accept the mitigation land identified in the FERC order. However, only WPA management would be applied to the lands. Wetland management activities would also include maintenance of fences and provisions for minimum health and safety.

Alternative B. Mitigation Lands as a National Wildlife Refuge

Alternative B would result in the Service managing 3,112 acres of mitigative lands as a National Wildlife Refuge (see figure 2).

This alternative further results in inherent difficulties in managing two separate tracts and also eliminates the potential for inter-agency partnering with NRCS for the protection of an additional 1,687 acres of wetland habitat as well as protection, restoration and enhancement of the remaining 4,773 acres of the Ranch. It is probable that MPC would sell the remaining portion of the Ranch to the first acceptable buyer. Subdivision and development of these acres is a distinct possibility, hence wildlife values of the Ranch as a whole would be severely compromised.

Long-term benefits to wildlife and the public would be lost, and the protection of habitat through NRCS conservation easements would be a lost opportunity.

Alternative C. Mitigation and Fee Title Acquisition of Lands as a National Wildlife Refuge (Preferred Alternative)

Under Alternative C, the Service would establish a National Wildlife Refuge on 9,325 acres (see figure 3). This alternative, which includes the 3,112 acres of conveyed mitigative lands and the remaining 4,773 acres of the Ranch and have been determined to be a suitable, and perhaps necessary, addition for proper management of those lands, would be acquired in fee title. The Montana Department of State Lands (school trust lands) owns 1,440 acres of timber and grazing land leased by the Montana Power Company. Montana Power Company has agreed to transfer the lease on these lands to the Service with the acquisition of Lost Trail Ranch. These lands are included in this preferred alternative to provide contiguous and functional habitat management capabilities. Fee title acquisition would be the preferred protection method although lease or perpetual conservation easements would be an effective conservation tool. The NRCS has entered into negotiations with MPC to place 1,687 wetland acres of the Ranch under a perpetual Wetland Reserve Easement (WRP); the Service would assume management of this easement.

Therefore this alternative addresses the 3,112 acres of conveyed mitigative lands, fee title acquisition of 4,773 acres, and the lease of 1,440 acres of State lands for a total of 9,325 acres for the establishment of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge.

Alternative Considered but not Studied

The Service considered mitigation transfer with the combination of conservation easement on the rest of the Lost Trail Ranch. However, MPC would not consider selling conservation easements to the Service on the remaining 4,773 acres of the Ranch and subsequently retaining it in fee ownership. Therefore, MPC intends to sell the remaining 4,773 acres in its entirety after transferring the 3,112 acres to the Service for mitigation purposes.

PROPOSED LOST TRAIL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Flathead County, Montana

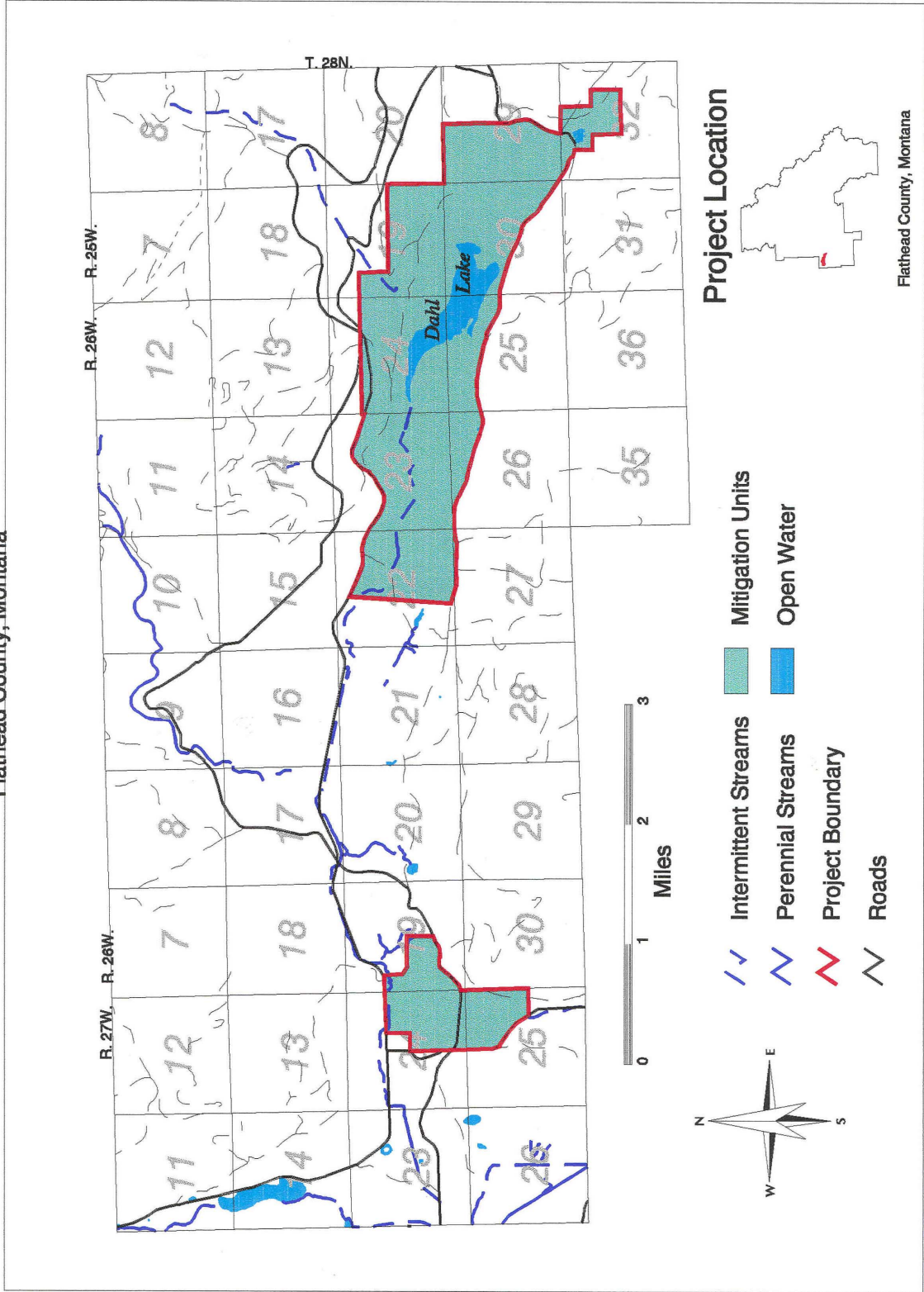


Figure 2. Alternative B, Mitigation Land as a National Wildlife Refuge

PROPOSED LOST TRAIL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Flathead County, Montana

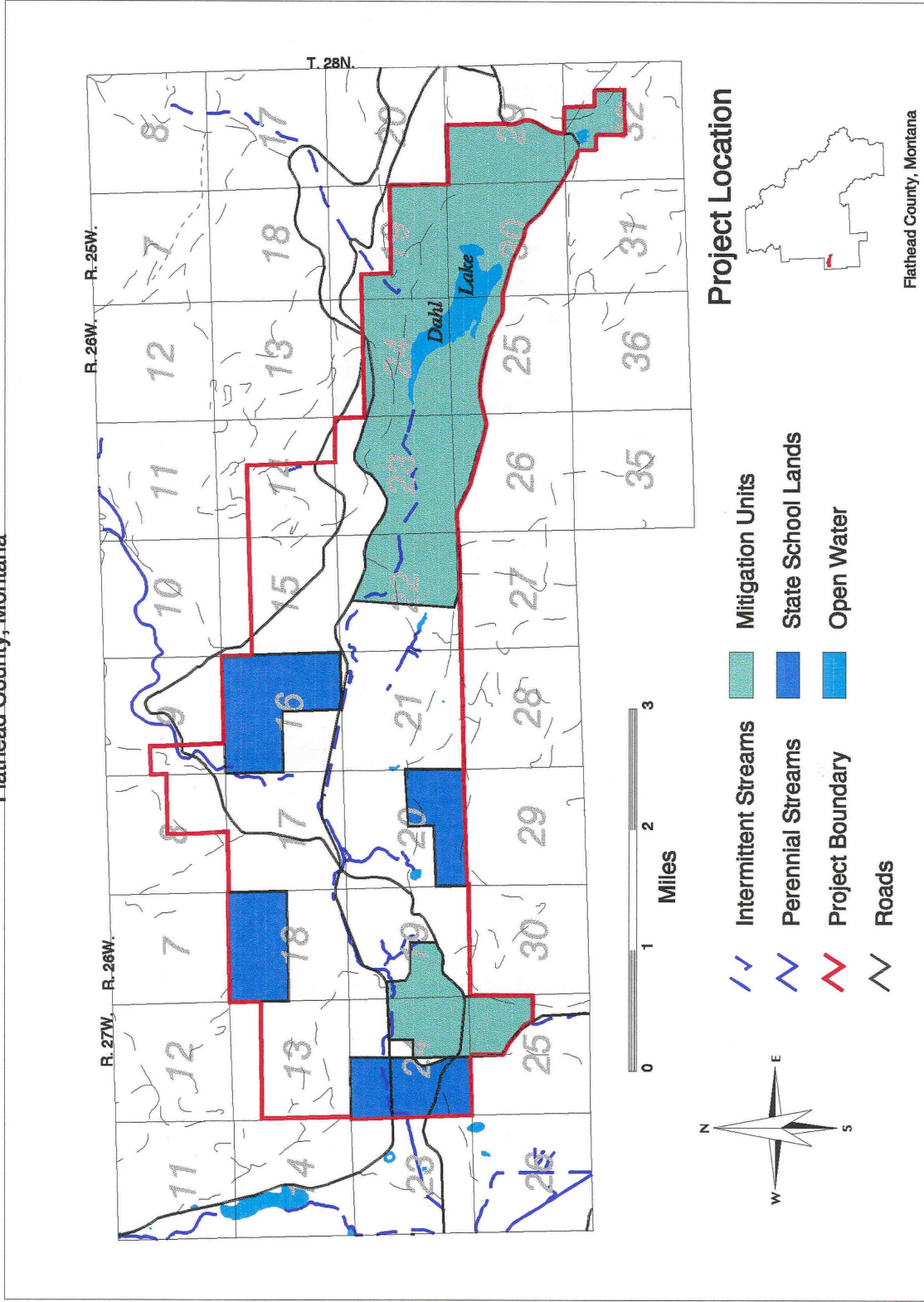


Figure 3. Alternative C, Mitigation and Fee Title Land

Chapter 3. Affected Environment

This chapter describes the existing biological, social, economic and cultural resources that would most likely be affected by this acquisition.

Biological Environment

The Lost Trail Ranch is located approximately 25 miles west of Kalispell in a geographic drainage known locally as Pleasant Valley. The Valley was formed during the Pleistocene Period by glacial and sedimentation activity. The glacial deposits sit on top of the older Belt Rock formation, which in turn has faulted over younger Paleozoic rocks which are thought to contain oil and gas. A deep well was drilled a few miles northwest of the Ranch; no significant mineral deposits were found. The Ranch displays an exceptional diversity of palustrine wetlands and sloping upland areas dominated by timber.

Habitat types consist of sub-irrigated wet meadows composed primarily of reed canary grass, introduced meadow grass mixes, cattails, rushes and sedge (see figure 4). A portion of the Valley has been subjected to pivot and wheel-line irrigation. Emergent wetlands have been altered by a 5½ mile ditch, referred to as Meadow Creek and several smaller drains and subsequent water impoundments which created additional cropland and grazing opportunities. Wetland sites also contain scattered aspen/cottonwood groves.

Upland areas are a mosaic of prairie grasslands dominated by a mix of cool season native grass species (rough fescue, Idaho fescue and blue bunch wheatgrass), nonnative species such as smooth brome and a mix of native wild flowers. Coniferous and deciduous timber areas occupy surrounding slopes: timber species include larch, subalpine fir, Douglas fir, grand fir, spruce, cedar, aspen, lodgepole pine, ponderosa pine, black cotton wood and white birch. Elevations range from 3,488 feet to 4,600 feet.

The habitat diversity of the area supports a wide variety of wildlife species. Wetland habitat areas support 14 migratory and breeding species of waterfowl including mallard, gadwall, cinnamon teal, blue-wing teal, lesser scaup, bufflehead, wood duck, ruddy duck, common goldeneye, common merganser, shoveler, redhead, widgeon, tundra swan and Canada geese. Many species of marsh and shorebirds are also present during the summer months. These include various species of grebes, herons, gulls, killdeer, sandhill cranes, dowitchers, sandpipers, snipe, bitterns and black terns. In addition, many raptor species have been observed including northern harriers, red-tailed hawks, Swainson's hawks, American kestrel and great-horned owls.

The diversity of habitat and elevation changes attract resident wildlife species to the area on a year-round basis. White-tailed deer, mule deer, elk and moose have been observed on the Ranch; approximately 115 elk were observed on the Ranch during the winter of 1996-1997. Black bears and mountains lions are also common residents within surrounding Plum Creek Timber lands. Upland game bird species known to inhabit the

area include pheasant, spruce grouse, blue grouse and ruffed grouse. The project area is also a historic range of the Columbian sharp-tailed grouse, a U.S. Forest Service listed "sensitive species." Other forest-dependent species known to occur in the project area include the fisher, pine martin, lynx, wolverine and bobcat.

Native fish species that have been identified include redbside shiners and Columbia River squawfish; nonnative species include yellow perch and pumpkinseed. These species were observed during a 1996 survey of the pond near the Ranch headquarters as well as two streams near the headquarters. No fish species were found in Dahl Lake due to low oxygen levels.

Wildlife species of special concern that are known to inhabit the project area include the threatened grizzly bear and endangered gray wolf. In 1997, Plum Creek Timber Company personnel reported sighting a grizzly bear one-half mile south of the Ranch. In 1989, a pair of wolves denned one-quarter mile from the southeast corner of the Ranch boundary. These wolves and subsequent pups were eliminated in 1990 due to depredation on local livestock herds. In 1996, another wolf pack established a den on adjoining Plum Creek lands approximately two miles west-northwest of the original den site and one-quarter mile south of the proposed Refuge boundary. In 1996, this wolf pack raised one pup. In 1997, the wolf pack reared an additional five pups; all eight wolves are presently within the vicinity of the project site.

Social and Economic Considerations

The Lost Trail Ranch lies within the Pleasant Valley, eight to nine miles northwest of the small, rural community of Marion, Montana. The population of Marion is estimated to be 400-500. Most area residents live in the surrounding countryside. Residents are served by a local volunteer fire department, a post office and a small rural school. Cattle ranching and logging are the main economic practices within the area. Many local residents commute to the Kalispell area for employment. Big game hunting is the most popular activity during the fall months. Bitterroot Lake lies three miles northwest of Marion. The Lake is a popular summer destination. Many summer residences and camp sites surround the lake and attract thousands of recreationists during the summer months.

Agricultural Resources

Agricultural practices in the Pleasant Valley area are less intense than in other areas of Montana. The majority of lands within the Valley consist of timber interspersed with large open hay meadows and pasture for cattle production. Many pastures and haylands are irrigated. Minimal dryland grain production exists. Hay and pasture lands are in private ownership and are often several hundred or thousands of acres in size. The majority of timber lands are owned by the Plum Creek Timber Company or are public lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service. The combination of hay, timber and pasture lands attracts a wide variety of resident and non-resident wildlife species.

PROPOSED LOST TRAIL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Flathead County, Montana

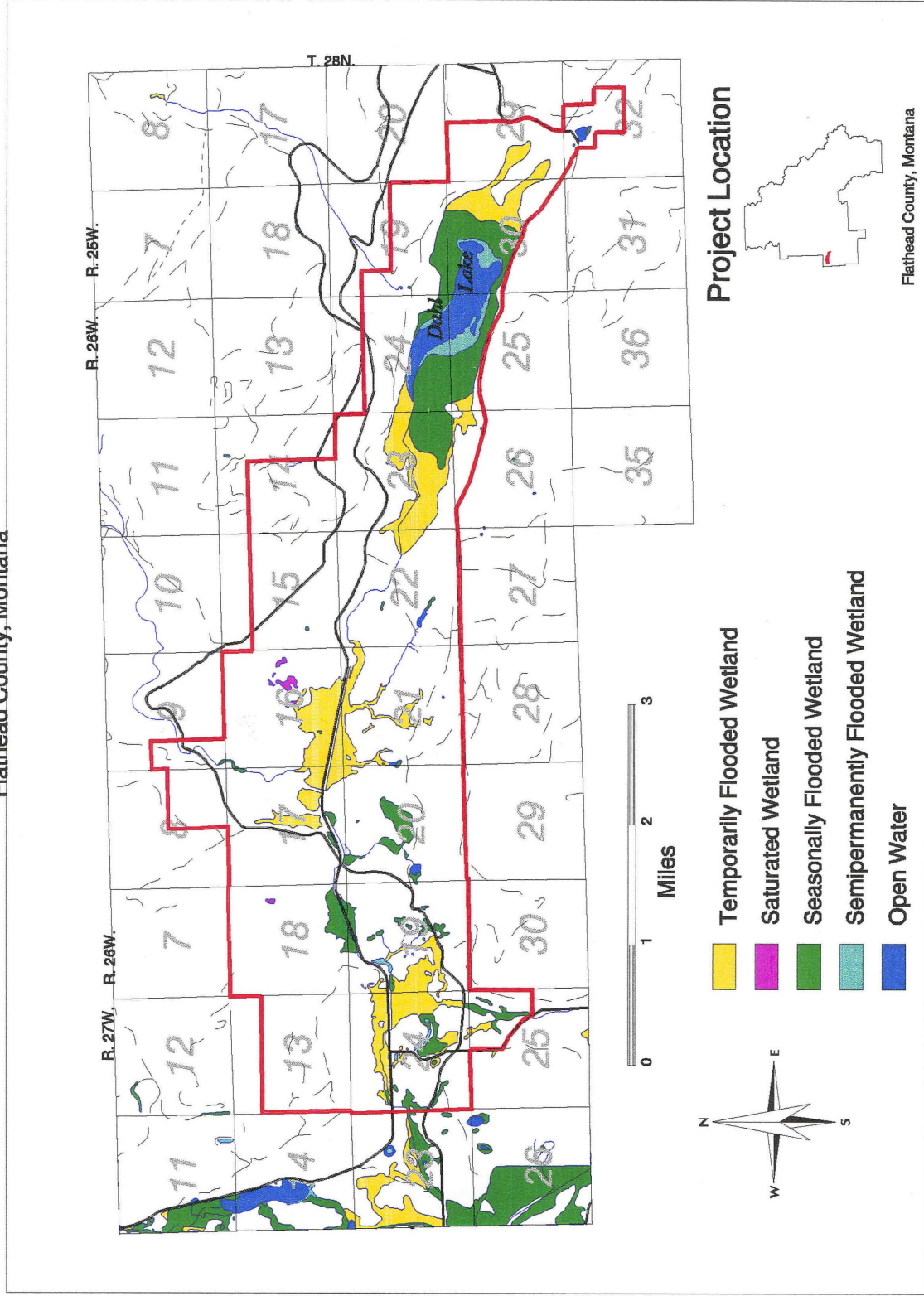


Figure 4. National Wetland Inventory Map

Land Ownership

Lost Trail Ranch is currently owned by the Montana Power Company and is operated as a cattle ranch which includes hayland production. Plum Creek Timber Company owns the majority of land neighboring Lost Trail Ranch which is managed for timber production. The State of Montana owns land that is intermixed between Lost Trail Ranch and Plum Creek Timber Company. The State of Montana leases grazing rights to MPC in connection to the grazing operation of Lost Trail Ranch. No new or additional zoning or land-use regulations would be created by the Service within the approved proposed Refuge boundary or to neighboring landowners. The land use would change from agricultural grazing land to wildlife preservation with various recreation use.

Property Tax

Flathead County collects property taxes on private lands within the proposed boundary of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge. The private property tax is based on the assessed value of the agricultural grazing land. As part of the County planning process, local jurisdictions have made projections on the amount of revenue that would be generated. With the purchase of private land by the Service, property tax revenues to the Flathead County would increase. This is due to mitigated payments that Flathead County would receive from the Service in lieu of property taxes under the Refuge Revenue Sharing Act (see Chapter 2).

Public Use and Wildlife-Dependent Recreational Activities.

Recreational use within the Valley centers on many outdoor activities. Big game hunting and fishing are the most popular, consumptive, seasonal public use activities. Snowmobiling, cross-country skiing and ice-fishing are popular winter recreational activities. Non-consumptive seasonal uses include camping, hiking and bird watching.

Cultural Resources

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as a Federal agency, has a trust responsibility to Tribal governments that includes identification and protection of archeological tribal resources. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CS&KT) are co-signers of the partial settlement which will result in the conveyance of mitigative lands of the Lost Trail Ranch. The staff of the National Bison Range Complex routinely coordinate with the CS&KT and have established a good resource working relationship. The Service will work closely with the CS&KT to identify cultural resources associated with the acquisition of mitigative lands.

Archeological and historical resources within any fee title and mitigation lands would receive protection under Federal laws mandating the management and protection of cultural resources. These laws include, but are not limited to, the Archeological Resources Protection Act, the Archaeological and Historic Preservation Act, the Native

American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Native American Religion Freedom Act and the National Historic Preservation Act.

Currently the Service does not propose any project, activity, or program that would result in changes in the character of, or would potentially adversely affect any historic cultural resource or archaeological site. When such undertakings are considered, the Service would take all necessary steps to comply with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA) of 1966, as amended. The Service would also pursue pro-active compliance with section 110 of the NHPA to survey, inventory and evaluate cultural resources.

Chapter 4. Environmental Consequences

This section assesses the environmental impacts expected to occur from the implementation of Alternatives B or C as described in Chapter 2. Environmental impacts are analyzed by issues for each alternative and appear in the same order as discussed in Chapters 1 and 3. Table 1 provides a summary of environmental consequences by alternative.

Effects on the Biological Environment

Wildlife Habitat Protection

Alternative B (Mitigation Lands) - This alternative results in the transfer of 3,112 acres of the Ranch which would be conveyed to the Service in two separate and distinct tracts. Management of the Ranch's natural resources would be inherently limited and fragmented. The opportunity to protect all resources would be lost. Unprotected wetlands, grasslands and associated resources lying between the two conveyed parcels and surrounding uplands would remain in private ownership; these lands may be subject to invasive plant species; potential residential development may further degrade resources on the Ranch. Restoration and protection of grasslands, riparian woodlands, wetlands, etc., would be incomplete.

Alternative C (Mitigation and Fee Title - Preferred Alternative) - This alternative would result in the acquisition and protection of the entire Ranch through conveyance of mitigated lands, the possibility of establishment of conservation easements and additional fee title purchases. This alternative would provide a high degree of conservation planning, administration, management and preservation of a wide variety of wildlife habitats. Alternative C would provide protection, potential enhancement and restoration of 9,325 acres of essential wetland, grassland and timber habitat, thus maintaining and improving the biological diversity of the Valley. The alternative provides the optimum benefits for the natural environment associated with the Pleasant Valley Area.

This alternative would allow the Service, in partnership with NRCS, to enhance and possibly expand the floodplain surrounding Dahl Lake and to restore associated wetlands through the construction and installation of appropriate water control structures. Waterfowl habitat and fisheries habitat is expected to improve. Waterfowl use would increase. The potential for re-introducing the red-banded trout and other native fish species may occur. Where feasible, adjacent upland floodplains may be planted to a variety of grasses, shrubs and riparian woodland species, thereby further improving habitat for neotropical and migratory birds, resident big game and non-game species, as well as other resident wildlife species. By incorporating alternate rest and rotation schemes, haying and grazing practices can be applied to maintain and improve the vegetative vigor of grasses, forbs and shrubs on surrounding upland areas.

Effects on the Social and Economic Environment

Land Ownership/Land Use

Alternative B (Mitigation Lands) - Under this alternative the conveyed Ranch lands would be administered as two separate land entities. The opportunity for hunting, hiking, environmental education and interpretation would remain but to a limited degree. If residential development occurs on adjacent, non-conveyed lands, conflicts with other public use activities such as hunting and bird watching could occur. In general, the visiting public may be confused with the administration and boundaries of two separate tracts; trespass on private lands may be a common occurrence; enforcement would be difficult.

Further, under this alternative, the contiguous biological and habitat diversity of the Ranch would be broken up between the two parcels, thereby affording the visiting public less opportunity to enjoy all consumptive and non-consumptive uses that are associated with a larger land base.

Alternative C (Mitigation and Fee Title - Preferred Alternative) - Under this alternative the Service administers, manages and protects a larger, contiguous land base. A larger land base would provide a “more diverse, encompassing picture” to develop a broad public use program. Through careful, large scale planning, public use issues such as hunting, fishing, environmental education and interpretation could be expanded to include all diversified lands of the Ranch, thereby offering the public a greater opportunity to enjoy many consumptive and non-consumptive recreational activities. The visiting public would not be exposed to potential confusion over boundaries; subsequently, trespass onto private lands may be avoided.

Economic studies on national wildlife refuges throughout the United States showed that fragile ecosystems, wildlife and preserved lands are important economically (*The Economic Impact of Birding Ecotourism On Communities Surrounding Eight National Wildlife Refuges*). The actual economic impact in 1994 of visitors to the communities surrounding refuges range from over a half-million to several millions of dollars, which included lodging, meals, gasoline and ancillary purchases (*Birders And National Wildlife Refuges Mean An Economic Bonanza For Local Communities U.S.*).

In the State of Montana, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge’s economic values were evaluated during the 1995 fiscal year. Total expenditures as a result of the Refuge were \$4,842,000, with non-resident expenditures accounting for about 87 percent of the total. Total hunting expenditures were \$3,296,200, and total fishing expenditures were \$1,507,700. The total final demand associated with visitor spending was \$3,481,000. In turn, this final demand generated 102 jobs (both full-time and part-time) with total employment income of \$1,186,600. For this particular National Wildlife Refuge in the State of Montana, the economic gains for every \$1 of budget expenditures was \$5.60 of total economic effects generated (*Banking on Nature: The Economic Benefits to Local Communities of National Wildlife Refuge Visitation*).

It is important to note that hunting has not been allowed on the Ranch since the early 1970's. In recent years, Ranch managers have allowed only coyote hunting as a means of controlling coyote populations and protecting cattle herds. Ground squirrel shooting has also been allowed during the last five years. Currently, the Ranch has a cooperative agreement with Plum Creek Timber Company allowing for "walk-in" or horseback access across the Ranch to surrounding Plum Creek Timber lands.

The Service has received public comment regarding the issue of hunting. The Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge will be established under public law as an "inviolate sanctuary for migratory birds." Hunting of migratory game birds may be allowed on no more than 40 percent of the area of any Refuge that is an "inviolate sanctuary for migratory birds" unless it is determined that the taking of any such species in more than 40 percent of the area would be beneficial to the species. Big game hunting opportunities may be allowed if determined to meet the compatibility requirements of the Refuge Recreation Act and the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act. The following criteria and standards will be used to initiate, administer and evaluate public hunting programs on units of the National Wildlife Refuge System: 1) compatibility with refuge programs; 2) biological soundness; 3) economic feasibility; 4) relationship with other refuge programs; and 5) recreational opportunities. Establishment of a hunting program will include consultation and coordination with the state; endangered species consultation; preparation of an Environmental Assessment; preparation of an approved hunting plan; *Federal Register* publication; and development of refuge-specific regulation (if necessary).

The above listed Service policies and regulations pertaining to establishment of hunting programs on Service lands will be adhered to under either Alternative B or C, both of which call for the establishment of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge.

Effects on Water Rights

Alternative B (Mitigation Lands) - This alternative would result in a more restrictive wildlife, water-use right primarily because less land and associated water rights would be acquired. Optimum, potential wetland restoration activities on conveyed lands would not be realized due to decreased water rights. Under this alternative, lands not acquired may be subject to development and subsequent differing water uses. Potential development often results in a manipulation and/or degradation of creeks, streams and surface water. Development may bring additional questions and challenges to existing water rights. Groundwater aquifers may decline and become polluted with increased subdivision septic systems and with the loss of natural filtering systems of larger, restored wetlands and grassland plant communities. Tracts that adjoin conveyed lands may be subject to over-utilization including intensive farming and livestock grazing practices, feedlot development and agricultural herbicide contamination, all of which may impact the water rights on non-conveyed lands. Due to these reasons, wetland enhancement/ restoration and management of mitigated lands may be less than optimum.

Alternative C (Mitigation and Fee Title - Preferred Alternative) - Water resources on the entire project area would be protected from potential subdivision, other types of

development and differing water uses. Proposed wetland enhancement activities, within an estimated nine miles of the floodplain, would allow for the greatest amount of restoration and water impoundment. Biological productivity and diversity of water impoundments within the floodplain would increase, thereby benefitting wetland dependent wildlife. The additional, restored wetland base will also provide a larger nutrient sink area thereby improving water quality on the area and for downstream use.

Effects on Property Tax

Alternative B (Mitigation Lands) - Ranching and logging are the main economic returns to local residents in the Pleasant Valley Area. The loss of tax revenues from lands transferred to the Service is always a concern under any Federal or State acquisition proposal. The Federal government, like city, county, and state governments, is exempt from taxation. However, under provisions of the Service's Refuge Revenue Sharing Act, (Public Law 95-469), it has been determined annual tax revenues reimbursed to Flathead County would total \$9,861.00 for the 3,112 acres of conveyed mitigation lands.

Alternative C (Mitigation and Fee Title - Preferred Alternative) - A degree of public concern has been expressed concerning the expected loss of tax revenues upon Service acquisition of Lost Trail Ranch. This alternative would have the largest and most beneficial impact upon local tax revenues. In 1997, MPC paid a total of \$16,082.00 in property tax for Lost Trail Ranch. This amount included real property tax on 7,885 acres and personal property tax on agricultural equipment and livestock. If, under this alternative, the Service acquires the entire 7,885 acre Ranch with improvements, the estimated annual payment would be \$28,613.00, or a net increase to Flathead County of \$12,532.00.

Effects on Public use

Alternative B (Mitigation Lands) - Use of private lands would be controlled by the private landowner. The 3,112 acres of conveyed mitigation lands is expected to have limited public use, due to the size of the two parcels. A Conceptual Management Plan would be completed for this alternative.

Alternative C (Mitigation and Fee Title - Preferred Alternative) - The Service would protect wildlife resources and their habitats while providing limited educational and recreational opportunities to the visiting public (see Conceptual Management Plan). It is the Service's hope that volunteer conservation groups and local educational institutions would become active in restoration and educational programs.

Certain public uses on lands acquired by the Service would not be allowed. To protect sensitive wildlife species and their habitats, certain areas within the Refuge may not be open to the public. Activities that would result in significant adverse environmental impacts, conflict with the primary purposes of the Refuge, or conflict with other uses of Refuge lands would not be permitted.

Effects on Rural Lifestyle

Alternative B (Mitigation Lands) - Ranching and logging are the main lifestyle issues of concern to local residents in the Pleasant Valley Area. A no action alternative would result in little, if any, change of identified lifestyle. Administration of 3,112 acres of the Ranch would not impact local timber harvest or surrounding ranch operations. Management planning may call for temporary rotational grazing and haying on selected areas of conveyed lands; however, the majority of these lands have been identified as wetlands and will be enhanced through construction of water control structures and subsequent impoundment of water. Planned short-term grazing and haying practices may offer some economic relief to individual permittee's but are considered to be of limited economic value when compared to larger, surrounding private Ranch operations.

On adjacent, non-conveyed private lands, grazing and haying practices would presumably continue. Habitat would be compromised for economic gain. Wildlife values and interests would be secondary, thus impacts may occur to many resident and migratory species such as loss of nesting and security habitat.

The possibility of residential development may take place on the private acreage. In the last five years, habitats within the Pleasant Valley and adjacent Valleys have been fragmented into small (less than 20 acres) "ranchettes" and seasonal residences that provide secluded living with attractive vistas. The aesthetic aspect of an open, less-developed Valley with ranchettes decreases the value of wildlife habitats; subsequent wildlife hunting and viewing opportunities will diminish with additional subdivision resulting in a potential loss of ecotourism dollars in the local communities. Residential development often fragments important habitat and migration corridors, increases human and domestic pet disturbance to sensitive wildlife species, accelerates the spread of noxious weeds, changes predator/prey structures and often results in wildlife/human conflicts in which wildlife values and needs are often compromised

Alternative C (Mitigation and Fee Title - Preferred Alternative) - This alternative provides continuing optimum lifestyle to the people of Marion and the surrounding countryside. With the exception of displacement of the current Ranch manager and his family, little, if any, change in ranching lifestyles and subsequent economic livelihood within the area would be noticed. Adjacent, local residents would have the opportunity to continue haying and grazing practices on an additional 6,168 acres of lands that would be acquired. Haying and grazing may be allowed through prescribed rotational practices that would benefit the habitat and subsequently, a variety of wildlife resources.

Service jurisdiction of the Ranch and potential easements on surrounding State and Plum Creek Timber Company lands could provide perpetual subdivision protection. It is also anticipated that an increase in consumptive and non-consumptive recreational uses of the Ranch will be realized. Economic benefits to local businesses should occur through an increase in public visits associated with hunting programs, environmental interpretation, wildlife observation, wildlife

photography and educational programs. Increased Federal expenditures for Refuge operations and maintenance will contribute to the economy.

Table 1. Comparative Summary of Environmental Consequences by Alternatives

Issue	Alternative B (Mitigation Lands)	Alternative C (Mitigation and Fee Title Lands)
<i>Wildlife Habitat Protection</i>	Protection on 3,112 acres of wetland mitigation land. No additional protection on remaining Ranch acreage.	Protection of wetland and upland ecosystem. Potential protection of 9,325 acres.
<i>Land Ownership/Land Use</i>	Transfer of 3,112 acres of wetland mitigation land to the Service. Remaining land in private ownership.	Approximately 7,885 acres of private land become public land. No new zoning or land use regulations.
<i>Water Rights</i>	Transfer of water rights associated with 3,112 acres of mitigation land. Restrictive wildlife, water-use on transferred land due to less land and associated water rights would be acquired.	Transfer of water rights on approximately 7,885 acres. Water rights would result in the greatest amount of restoration and water impoundment and biological productivity.
<i>Property Taxes</i>	County continues to collect taxes on privately owned portion of Ranch at lower rate than Refuge payments. An estimated annual tax revenue reimbursed to Flathead County for the 3,112 acres of conveyed mitigation lands would total \$9,861.00.	Private property acquired would be removed from tax roll. Loss of tax revenue mitigated by Refuge Revenue Sharing Act payment account for an estimated annual payment of \$28,613.00, or a net increase to Flathead County of \$12,532.00 on entire 7,280 acre Ranch.
<i>Public Use</i>	Private lands would be controlled by the private landowner. Limited public use on the 3,112 acres of conveyed mitigation lands.	Increase in recreational opportunities to the visiting public while protecting wildlife resources and their habitats.
<i>Effects on Rural Lifestyle</i>	Possible fragmentation of open space and grazing land into housing development or ranchettes on areas not protected by wetland mitigation.	Lost Trail Ranch will remain as open space with the use of agricultural practices, such as haying and grazing, as a means for enhancing wildlife habitat.

Unavoidable Adverse Impacts

No direct or indirect unavoidable adverse impacts to the environment would result from the selection of Alternative C. The identification of an approved boundary for the establishment of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge would not result in unavoidable adverse impacts on the physical and biological environment. The selection of an approved Refuge boundary does not, by itself, affect any aspect of land ownership or values. Once land is acquired, the Service would prevent incremental adverse impacts, such as degradation and loss of habitat over time, to the lands with their associated native plants and animals.

Irreversible and Irrecoverable Commitments of Resources

No irreversible or irretrievable commitments of resources associated with the selection of an approved Refuge boundary would exist. Under Alternative B, if wetland and upland habitats are not protected habitat and continue to be fragmented and vegetation alteration continues, some plant and animal species could be extirpated over time, causing an irreversible and irretrievable loss. Once lands are acquired and are actively managed by the Service, irreversible and irretrievable commitments of funds will exist to protect these lands (such as expenditure for fuel, fences and staff).

Short-term Uses Versus Long-term Productivity

The proposed Refuge is intended to maintain the long-term biological productivity of the complex wetland, riparian, timber and grassland ecosystem of Flathead County. The local short-term uses of the environment following acquisition include managing wildlife habitats and increasing limited public use. The resulting long-term productivity includes increased protection of migratory species, endangered and threatened species, and maintenance of biological diversity. The public would gain long-term opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreational activities.

Cumulative Impacts

The proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge would have long-term positive cumulative impacts on wildlife habitats within the Pleasant Valley region. The protection of wildlife habitats within the proposed Refuge would represent a cumulative benefit to the long-term conservation of migratory species, endangered and threatened species, and biological diversity. The proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge would protect a broad spectrum of native habitats and conserve important populations of migratory species and other native plants and animals.

Chapter 5. Coordination and Environmental Review

Agency Coordination

The proposal for the establishment of Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, through the authorization of an executive boundary consisting of 9,325 acres, has been discussed with landowners, conservation organizations, Federal, Tribal, State and county governments and other interested groups and individuals.

This project was first proposed in July 1996. Through a long and complicated legal negotiating process, as well as a biological determination of the wetland base located on the Ranch, this project was formally undertaken in January 1998. This Environmental Assessment addresses the acquisition of Lost Trail Ranch by the Service for future management as a National Wildlife Refuge.

This project has been coordinated closely with NRCS. NRCS is currently negotiating over 4,000 acres of conservation easements with private landowners within the same drainage; wetland enhancements and related management practices on the Ranch and on private lands under the proposed easements will affect nearly 13,300 acres of the Pleasant Valley ecosystem.

Partnership endeavors include: NRCS; Ducks Unlimited; Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks; Flathead Wildlife Inc.; and Partners for Wildlife.

Funding for acquisition of lands will be provided by the Migratory Bird Commission, NRCS Wetland Reserve Program and the Montana Power Company through compliance with the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission Order (copy attached-see Appendix C).

National Environmental Policy Act

As a Federal agency, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service must comply with provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). An Environmental Assessment is required under NEPA to evaluate reasonable alternatives that will meet stated objects and to assess the possible impacts to the human environment. The Environmental Assessment serves as the basis for determining whether implementation of the proposed action would constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment. The Environmental Assessment also facilitates the involvement of government agencies and the public in the decision making process.

Other Federal Laws, Regulations, and Executive Orders

In undertaking the proposed action, the Service would comply with a number of Federal laws, executive orders and legislative acts, including: Floodplain Management (Executive

Order 11988); Intergovernmental Review of Federal Programs (Executive Order 12372); Protection of Historical, Archaeological and Scientific Properties (Executive Order 11593); Protection of Wetlands (Executive Order 11990); Management and General Public Use of The National Wildlife Refuge System (Executive Order 12996); Endangered Species Act of 1973, as amended; Comprehensive Environmental Responses, Compensation and Liability Act of 1980; Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policy Act of 1970, as amended; Refuge Recreation Act, as amended; Refuge System Administration Act, as amended; National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended.

Distribution and Availability

Copies of this Environmental Assessment and Conceptual Management Plan were sent to Federal and State legislative delegations, Tribal Councils, agencies, landowners, private groups and other interested individuals (see appendix B). Additional copies of these documents are available at Northwest Montana Wetland Management District located at 780 Creston Hatchery Road, Kalispell, Montana, 59901 (telephone 406-758-6879; fax 406-758-6877); and at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Office in Denver, Colorado (telephone 303-236-8145 extension 658; fax 303-236-4792).

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Richard Johnson, Realty Specialist, Charles M. Russell NWR Complex, Lewistown, Montana.

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Kerlinger, Paul, Ph.D. 1995. The Economic Impact of Birding Ecotourism On Communities Surrounding Eight National Wildlife Refuges. 14pp.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1984. American Peregrine Falcon Recovery Plan (Rocky Mountain/ Southwest Population). Denver, Colorado 105pp.

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Bulletin. Birders And National Wildlife Refuges Mean An Economic Bonanza For Local Communities

APPENDIX A
Endangered, Threatened, and Candidate Species
Lost Trail Project Area

Mammals:

Grizzly Bear	<i>Ursus arctos horribilis</i> (E)
Gray Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i> (E)
Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i> (T)
Bald Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus leucocephalus</i> (T)
Canada Lynx	<i>Lynx canadensis</i> (C)

Fish:

Bull Trout	<i>Salvelinus confluentus</i> (T)
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Key:

- (E) Endangered Listed (in the *Federal Register*) as being in danger of extinction.
- (T) Threatened Listed as likely to become endangered within the foreseeable future.
- (C) Candidate Candidate to become a proposed species.
- (P) Proposed Officially proposed (in *Federal Register*) for listing as endangered or threatened.

* The species listed here are those reported in the vicinity or surrounding vicinity (counties), not necessarily in the proposed project area.

APPENDIX B
Distribution List for the Environmental Assessment

Federal and State Congressional Offices

U.S. Congressman Rick Hill
U.S. Senator Max Baucus
U.S. Senator Conard Burns

Federal Agencies

U.S. Department of Agriculture

APHIS PPQ
Farm Service Agency-FMHA
Flathead National Forest
Lolo National Forest
Natural Resources Conservation Service

U.S. Department of Interior

Bureau of Indian Affairs, Flathead Agency
Bureau of Indian Affairs, Irrigation Division
Bureau of Land Management
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 USFWS, Benton Lake NWR
 USFWS, Charles M. Russell NWRC
 USFWS, Director
 USFWS, Ecological Services
 USFWS, External Affairs, Native Amer. Prog.
 USFWS, External Affairs R6
 USFWS, Grizzly Bear Recovery Office
 USFWS, Lee Metcalf NWR
 USFWS, National Bison Range Complex
 USFWS, Northwest Montana WMD
Glacier National Park
USGS-National Biological Service

Tribal Councils

Tribes

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
Nez Perce Tribe

State and Local Agencies

State Representatives

Adams, Darrel, MT Representative
Baer, Larry, MT Senator
Bankhead, Paul, MT Representative
Bitney, Rod, MT Representative
Boharski, William E., MT Representative
Bookout-Reinicke, Sylvia, MT Representative
DePratu, Bob, MT Senator
Dowell, Tim, MT Representative
Harp, John, MT Senator
Jore, Rick, MT Representative
Keenan, Bob, MT Representative
Lawson, Bob, MT Representative
Mercer, John, MT Representative
Mohl, Arnie, MT Senator
Sliter, Paul, MT Representative
Spoklie, Robert, MT Representative
Stang, Barry, MT Senator
Taylor, Mike and Janna, State Senator/State Congress
Wagner, Douglas, MT Representative

State of Idaho

University Idaho, Department of Biological. Science

State of Montana

Department of Environmental Quality Council
Department of Entomology, MSU
Montana Coop Wildlife Research Unit
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Montana Environmental Information Center
Montana Historical Society, State Historic Preserv. Office
Montana Natural Heritage Program
Montana State Library
MT Assoc. Cons. Dist.
Northwestern Ag. Res. Cntr.
Spencer Neal, Ag. Research Service
State of Montana, Office of the Governor
University of Montana, Flathead Lake Biological Station
University of Montana, Dept. OBE

State of Utah

Utah State Univ., Coll. Nat. Res., Fish., & Wildl. Dept.

Flathead County

Flathead Co. Commissioners
Flathead Co. Planning
Flathead Co. Weed Department
Flathead Joint Board of Control

Lake County

Lake County Commission
Lake County Community Development
Lake County Conservation District
Lake County Extension Office
Lake County Land Services-Planning
Lake County Weed Office

Lincoln County

Lincoln County Commission
Lincoln County Weed Control

Sanders County

Sanders County Commission
Sanders County Weed Control

City Government

City Council of Polson
City of Ronan
City of St. Ignatius

Groups

Alliance for the Wild Rockies
American Lands Exchange
American Wildlands
Audubon Society, Five Valley Chapter
Audubon Society, Flathead Chapter
Big Meadows Grazing Association
Big Sky Upland Bird Assoc.
Carhart Wilderness Training Center
Citizens for Better Flathead
Citizens for Scenic Lake Co.
Citizens of Lost Prairie and Surrounding Area
Craighead Wildlife-Wildlands Inst.

Defenders of Wildlife
Dublin Gulch Weed Control
Ducks Unlimited
Ducks Unlimited, Great Plains Research Office
Ducks Unlimited, Kalispell Chapter
Ecology Center
Five Valleys Land Trust
Flathead Lakers
Flathead Land Trust
Flathead Res. Human Rights Coal. and Neighbors
Flathead Resource Organization
Flathead Wildlife, Inc.
Friends of the Wild Swan
Glacier Natural History Assoc.
Intertribal Bison Coop.
Mission Rangers Saddle Club
Mission Valley Wildlife Foundation
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Chapter TWS
Montana Ecosyst. Def. Council
Montana Land Reliance
Montana Loon Soc.
Montana Power Company
Montana Riparian & Wetland Assoc.
Montana Wilderness Assoc.
Montana Wilderness Assoc., Flathead Chapter
Montana Wildlife Federation
Montanans for Multiple Use
NW Montana Woolgrower's Assoc.
National Bison Assoc.
National Wildl. Refuge Assoc.
Native Plant Society
Nature Conservancy, Big Sky Field Office
Nature Conservancy, Western MT Field Office
Northern Lights Res. & Educ. Inst.
Owl Research Inst.
Partner's for Wildlife
Pheasants Forever
Pheasants Forever, Kalispell Chapter
Plum Creek Timber Company
Polson Outdoors, Inc.
Public Land Access Assoc.
Ravalli Co. Fish & Wildlife Assoc.

Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Safari Club International, Five Valley's Chapter
Sierra Club, Bitterroot/Mission Group
Sierra Club, Flathead Group
Swan Citizens Ad Hoc Committee
Trout Unlmted. MT Council
U.S. Citizens Desiring to be Treated as Such
Virginia Commonwealth Univ.
Vital Ground Foundation
Western Ag. Resource Center
Western MT Fish and Game Assoc.
Western MT Stockman's Assoc.
Wilderness Society

APPENDIX C
Mitigation Settlement Agreement

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
FEDERAL ENERGY REGULATORY COMMISSION

Project No. 5-036

-2-

Interior filed a broad series of conditions, including both operational measures, such as minimum flows, ramping rates and a requirement that the project be operated as a baseload facility, and non-operational measures, including habitat acquisition and development and the construction of erosion control structures. The Commission found that because it was required to treat Interior's conditions as if they had been submitted pursuant to Section 4(e), it was required to include them in the license, leaving to a court of appeals any determination of whether the conditions are reasonable and otherwise lawful. 4/

Montana Power, Interior, and the Tribes filed timely requests for rehearing, taking issue with various aspects of the June 25, 1997 order.

On December 12, 1997, Interior, on behalf of itself, Montana Power, and the Tribes, filed a settlement agreement. According to the parties, they have agreed on measures to address the impacts of Project No. 5 on wildlife at the north end of Flathead Lake. Pursuant to the agreement, Montana will convey to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 3,911 acres of land north of Flathead Lake, to be used as replacement habitat. The parties intend that this land not be included within the project boundary. Further, Montana Power will fund, in the amount of \$750,000 in 1996 dollars, habitat development measures on the conveyed land. Finally, Montana Power will construct and maintain specified erosion control structures (called revetments) at the north end of the lake.

As a consequence of the agreement, Montana Power will no longer be required to construct five islands at the north end of Flathead Lake, and will not be required to construct some of the revetments off-shore, as was originally the case.

The parties propose to revise Articles 68, 70, 71, and 72 of the project license, and to delete Articles 69 and 78. These articles all embody various of Interior's requirements regarding the north end of Flathead Lake. The parties state that the settlement agreement resolves only those issues specifically addressed therein.

- 1/ (...continued)
States, the license shall contain "such conditions as the Secretary of the Department under whose supervision such reservation falls shall deem necessary for the adequate protection and utilization of such reservation."
- 4/ See 79 FERC ¶ 61,376 at p. 62,613.

Before Commissioners: James J. Hoecker, Chairman;
Vicky A. Bailey, William L. Massey,
Linda Breathitt, and Curt Hebert, Jr.

The Montana Power Company)
)
Confederated Salish and)
Kootenai Tribes of the)
Flathead Reservation)
Project No. 5-036

ORDER APPROVING SETTLEMENT

(Issued February 3, 1998)

The United States Department of the Interior, Montana Power Company, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation (Tribes) have filed a proposed settlement that resolves certain issues arising from the Commission's June 25, 1997 order approving, with modifications, Montana Power's proposed Mitigation and Management Plan for the 170.875-megawatt Kerr Project No. 5. 1/ For the reasons discussed below, we approve the settlement.

BACKGROUND

By order dated June 25, 1997, the Commission approved, with modifications, Montana Power's proposed Mitigation and Management Plan for the Kerr Project, located in northern Montana, and partially on lands within the Flathead Indian Reservation. The Plan was filed pursuant to a Commission order approving a 1985 settlement between Montana Power, Interior, and other parties, including the Tribes, and issuing the Kerr Project a new license in accord with the terms of that settlement. 2/ The 1985 license order provided that Interior could, after the license was issued, submit conditions for the protection of fish and wildlife and related environmental concerns affected by the project, which the Commission was to include in the project's license, as if they had been submitted pursuant to Section 4(e) of the Federal Power Act. 3/

- 1/ See 79 FERC ¶ 61,376.
- 2/ See 32 FERC ¶ 61,070 (1985).
- 3/ 16 U.S.C. § 797(e). Section 4(e) provides that, in the case of any project located on a reservation of the United States, the license shall contain "such conditions as the Secretary of the Department under whose supervision such reservation falls shall deem necessary for the adequate protection and utilization of such reservation." (continued...)

No comments have been filed regarding the settlement. 5/
DISCUSSION

The Commission strongly encourages settlements. In this case, the parties have resolved a number of contested issues regarding environmental measures at the north end of Flathead Lake. Pursuant to the settlement, Montana Power will purchase approximately 500 additional acres of replacement habitat, as compared to current license requirements, and will fund specified habitat development activities. Montana Power will be no longer be required to build off-shore erosion control structures or five islands in the lake. Commission staff has calculated that the settlement will reduce both Montana Power's initial capital outlay on mitigation costs and its annualized mitigation costs by close to 25 percent. Thus, the settlement achieves the dual objectives of environmental protection and increased economic efficiency. We find the settlement to be in the public interest, and we will approve it.

The Commission orders:

(A) The settlement agreement, filed on December 12, 1997, by The U.S. Department of the Interior, Montana Power Company, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation, is approved.

(B) Article 68 of the license for Project No. 5 is revised to read as follows:

Article 68. The licensee, in consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, shall construct a shore aligned north shore erosion control project and associated habitat development features, as provided in Section 3 of the Stipulation and Agreement. The erosion control project shall be located on the Flathead Waterfowl Production Area and consist of two revetments on the north shore of Flathead Lake, one on either side of the Flathead River confluence, and a third revetment along the west river bank of the Flathead River. For the two segments on the north shore of Flathead Lake the erosion control project shall consist of a buried rock revetment with a gravel/cobble equilibrium beach face, unless otherwise agreed to by the parties to the Stipulation and Agreement. On the east side of the Flathead River the revetment shall consist of a shore

5/ Pursuant to the Commission's regulations, comments on the settlement were due by January 2, 1998. See 18 C.F.R. § 385.602(f).

aligned structure extending from the river mouth eastward for a length of approximately 4,400 feet tapering to the Flathead Waterfowl Production Area boundary on shore. On the west side of the Flathead River the revetment shall consist of a shore aligned structure extending from the river mouth to the northwest lake shore for a length of approximately 4,300 feet. Habitat development on the Flathead Waterfowl Production Area during the construction of the shore aligned structures shall consist of 37 acres of wetland habitat as provided in Section 3 of the Stipulation and Agreement. Construction and habitat development costs shall be borne by the Montana Power Company and shall not be borne by the Fund. The cost of such habitat development shall not exceed \$6,600 per acre.

The licensee, in consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, shall provide for river bank protection on the Flathead Waterfowl Production Area's west bank of the Flathead River extending north from the river mouth to the Flathead Waterfowl Production Area boundary. All shore-aligned structures shall be appropriately engineered and tied to the shoreline to withstand conditions in Flathead Lake and the upper Flathead River. Final design, construction methods and timing of construction activities shall be approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service prior to the start of each construction activity. Construction of the north shore erosion control project, including west river bank stabilization measures, shall, unless otherwise agreed to by the parties to the Stipulation and Agreement, begin within one year of incorporation of this article in the license and shall be completed within three years after commencement of construction. The licensee shall acquire special use permits from the Fish and Wildlife Service, which will be issued at no charge to the licensee, prior to any activities on Fish and Wildlife Service lands. The structures, while located pursuant to a special use permit on Fish and Wildlife Service lands, shall be considered "project works" owned by the licensee and shall be maintained by the licensee, at its cost. The licensee, in cooperation with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the Service, shall conduct annual inspections of all the structures to determine and implement appropriate maintenance requirements in a timely manner and will monitor the east Flathead River shoreline of the Waterfowl Production Area for erosion. The licensee shall include in all planning and permitting activities, appropriate representatives of

the Flathead County Commissioners and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and any other pertinent permitting agencies.

(C) Article 70 of the license for Project No. 5 is revised to read as follows:

Article 70. The licensee shall acquire, in fee simple, for the benefit of the Fish and Wildlife Service 2,366 acres of nearby habitat as replacement habitat for the Flathead Waterfowl Production Area lands that are precluded from waterfowl and wildlife management or utilization because of Kerr Dam operations. The acreage shall be transferred to the United States to be managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service and shall otherwise be free of all liens, clouds on the title and other encumbrances. Acquisition and conveyance shall be completed within one year of issuance of this order or as otherwise agreed to by the Fish and Wildlife Service. Parcel selection and documents providing flood easements and release of liability on lands not conveyed to the Service, provided pursuant to Section 2 of the Stipulation and Agreement, shall be approved by the Fish and Wildlife Service prior to any transaction. Parcels shall be acquired and conveyed to the Service as provided by Sections 1 and 2 of the Stipulation and Agreement. Such acquisition, approvals and conveyance shall be in full satisfaction of the licensee's obligations under this Article. Habitat acquisition and conveyance costs shall be borne by the Montana Power Company and shall not be borne by the Fish and Wildlife Implementation Strategy Fund.

(D) Article 71 of the license for Project No. 5 is revised to read as follows:

Article 71. The licensee shall contract for the design, procurement, permitting, and construction of habitat development measures as provided by Section 5 of the Stipulation and Agreement, on the Flathead Waterfowl Production Area and on the fee lands conveyed by the licensee to the Service. MPC will fund a total amount of \$750,000 in 1996 dollars appropriately adjusted by reference to the Consumer Price Index at the time of expenditure to current dollars, for such habitat development measures. These measures shall be implemented in accordance with a habitat development plan developed by the Fish and Wildlife Service, in consultation with the MPC and the Tribes. The habitat development measures may include, but are not limited to, construction of goose/osprey nesting structures, pair open water channels through cattail barriers, duck pair

ponds and preparation of bald eagle nest site management plans, or other measures. The licensee shall file the habitat development plan, and any modifications or amendments thereto, with the Commission for its records. The licensee shall acquire special use permits, which shall be issued at no charge by the Fish and Wildlife Service, prior to any activities on Fish and Wildlife Service lands. Costs of habitat development provided in this Article shall be borne by the MPC to the extent provided in this Article 71, above, and shall not be borne by the Fish and Wildlife Implementation Strategy Fund.

(E) Article 72 of the license for Project No. 5 is revised to read as follows:

Article 72. The licensee shall, on behalf of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), acquire in fee simple title and develop 1,545 acres of nearby habitat as replacement wildlife production areas to mitigate for the loss of wildlife due to Kerr Project operations as provided in Sections 1 and 2 of the Stipulation and Agreement. The acreage shall be transferred to the United States to be managed by the Fish and Wildlife Service and shall otherwise be free of liens, clouds on the title and other encumbrances. Acquisition and conveyance shall be completed within one year of issuance of this order or as otherwise agreed to by the Fish and Wildlife Service. Parcel selection and documents providing flood easements and release of liability, on lands not conveyed to the Service, provided pursuant to Section 2 of the Stipulation and Agreement shall be approved by the Service prior to any transaction. Parcels shall be acquired and conveyed to the Service as provided in Sections 1 and 2 of the Stipulation and Agreement. Such acquisition, approvals and conveyance shall be in full satisfaction of the licensee's obligation under this Article. Habitat acquisition and conveyance costs shall be borne by the Montana Power Company and shall not be borne by the Fish and Wildlife Implementation Strategy Fund.

(F) Articles 69 and 78 are deleted from the license for Project No. 5.

Project No. 5-036

-7-

(G) This order is final unless a request for rehearing is filed within 30 days from the date of its issuance, as provided in Section 313 of the Federal Power Act. The filing of a request for rehearing does not operate as a stay of this order or of any date specified in this order, except as specifically ordered by the Commission.

By the Commission.

(S E A L)

David P. Boergers

David P. Boergers,
Acting Secretary.

Conceptual Management Plan

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge
Flathead County, Montana

Prepared by

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Northwest Montana Wetland Management District
780 Creston Hatchery Road
Kalispell, Montana 59901

and

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
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134 Union Blvd., Suite 350
Lakewood, Colorado 80228-1807

September 1998

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
National Wildlife Refuge System	1
Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System	2
Goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System	2
Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge Purpose	5
Interim Goals - Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge	5
Refuge Administration	6
Key Areas of Management Focus	6
Habitat Management	6
Resource Monitoring	7
Public Use Activities	7
Refuges are Primary-Use Areas	8
The Compatibility Standard	8
Interim Compatibility Determination	8
Law Enforcement	9
Facilities Development and Management	10
Interagency, Tribal and Public Coordination, Partnerships	10

Figures

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge	3
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Tables

Table 1. Interim Compatibility Determination Matrix	9
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CONCEPTUAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

LOST TRAIL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Flathead County, Montana

Introduction

This Conceptual Management Plan provides a general description of the operations and management of the proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge, (see figure 1) as outlined in the Preferred Alternative of the *proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge Environmental Assessment*.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is developing this Conceptual Management Plan during the acquisition planning process to provide local landowners, governmental agencies and the interested public with a general understanding of the anticipated management approaches for the proposed Refuge. The purpose of the Conceptual Management Plan is to present a broad overview of the Service's proposed management approach to wildlife and associated habitats, public uses, facilities, interagency coordination, public outreach and other operational needs.

The Service has prepared an Environmental Assessment for the establishment of Lost trail National Wildlife Refuge. The EA analyzes the environmental effects of establishing an approved Refuge boundary, through land transfer and land acquisition, to protect wildlife and native vegetation habitat. The Conceptual Management Plan describes the operational and management needs for the proposed action, as detailed in the Environmental Assessment. When lands are acquired, the Service will prepare a Comprehensive Conservation Plan for the Refuge. The Plan will detail Refuge operations and will specify the types and locations of public activities, the monitoring and recovery of endangered and threatened species, migratory birds, and other operational needs. The Comprehensive Conservation Plan will be developed with public input in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge Administration Act, and National Environmental Policy Act.

National Wildlife Refuge System

The National Wildlife Refuge System is a national network of lands and waters where the needs of fish and wildlife come foremost. The System's inception originated in 1903, with establishment of the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge in Florida. Soon thereafter, the National Bison Range in northwest Montana was established in 1908 with the first congressional appropriation of funds to purchase lands for the benefit of wildlife. By the end of 1997, the System has grown to 512 Refuges, with at least one refuge in every State.

Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System

The mission of the Service and the Refuge System is to conserve, protect, and enhance the Nations' fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service is the primary Federal agency responsible for migratory birds, endangered plants and animals, certain marine mammals, and anadromous fish.

The guiding principles for the management and general public use of the System pursuant to Executive Order 12996 are:

- **Habitat.** Fish and wildlife will not prosper without high quality habitat, and without fish and wildlife, traditional uses of refuges cannot be sustained. The Refuge System will continue to conserve and enhance the quality and diversity of fish and wildlife habitat within refuges.
- **Public Use.** The Refuge System provides important opportunities for compatible wildlife dependent recreational activities involving hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and environmental interpretation.
- **Partnerships.** America's sportsmen and women were the first partners who insisted on protecting valuable wildlife habitat within wildlife refuges. Conservation partnerships with other Federal, State, and local government agencies, Tribes, private organizations, industry, and the general public can make significant contributions to the growth and management of the Refuge System.
- **Public Involvement.** The public should be given a full and open opportunity to participate in decisions regarding acquisition and management of our national wildlife refuges.

Goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System

The goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System are to:

- preserve, restore and enhance in their natural ecosystems (when practicable) species of animals and plants that are endangered or threatened with becoming endangered;
- perpetuate the migratory birds resource;
- preserve a natural diversity and abundance of fauna and flora on refuge lands;
- provide an understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology and man's role in the environment; and

LOST TRAIL NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Flathead County, Montana

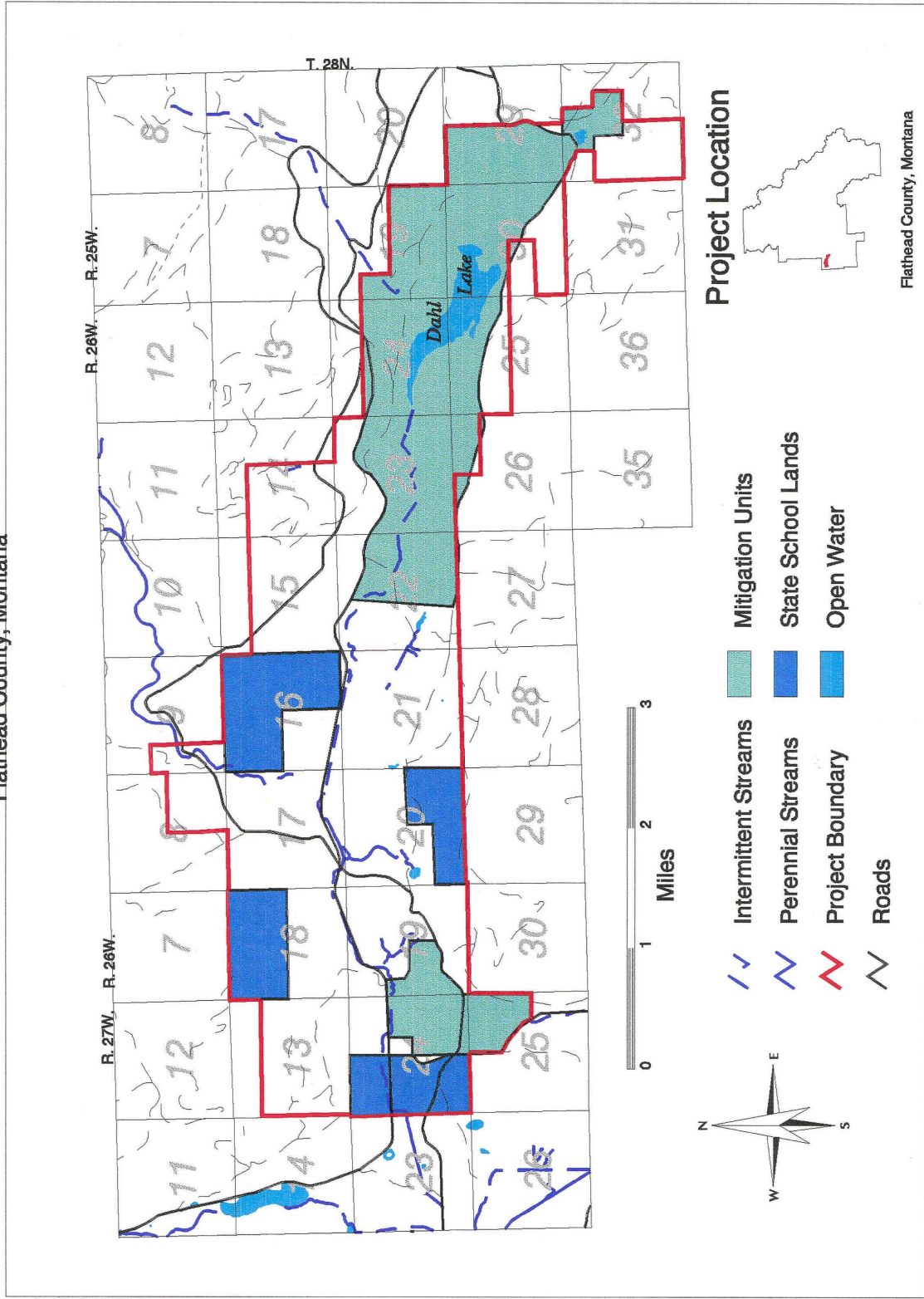


Figure 1.

- provide refuge visitors with high quality, safe, wholesome and enjoyable recreational experiences oriented toward wildlife to the extent these are compatible with the purpose(s) for which the refuge was established.

The proposed acquisition of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge would be managed as part of the Refuge System in accordance with the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 (as amended), Management and General Public Use of the National Wildlife Refuge System (Executive Order 12966), and other Service and Federal land management policies.

Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge Purpose

Refuge System lands have been acquired under a variety of legislative acts and executive orders. The purpose(s) for which a refuge is established has special significance. A refuge purpose may be specified in or derived from Federal law, proclamation, executive order, agreement, public land order, donation document or administrative memorandum (Fish and Wildlife Service Manual, 602FW1.4M). Besides providing a basis for making compatibility determinations, a refuge's purpose also serves as a vision or mission statement for refuge managers and the public. It provides a broad, long-term statement of management direction and priorities.

The proposed acquisition and establishment of the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge will be derived from the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. Under the MBCA, the Refuge is managed as an inviolate sanctuary for migratory birds or for any other management purpose(s). However, the original inviolate provisions of the MBCA have been modified by subsequent acts to provide for compatible consumptive and non-consumptive public uses.

Interim Goals - Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge

The interim goals of the proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge reflect the core mission of the Service—to protect fish and wildlife resources of national importance while providing opportunities for the public to appreciate and enjoy the natural heritage of the area. Interim goals to accomplish this mission are to:

- acquire, manage, and restore a diversity of habitats ranging from wet meadow/wetland complexes, mixed grass upland areas, and surrounding timber lands totaling 9,325 acres.
- maintain and promote the long-term viability of wildlife benefits and values of the Pleasant Valley ecosystem.
- facilitate compatible, wildlife-dependent recreational and educational opportunities on refuge lands to foster public awareness and appreciation of our wildlife heritage.

- coordinate and promote working relationships with other Federal, State, and county agencies, landowners, community groups, and non-governmental conservation organizations interested in refuge management planning, biological research, and public outreach.

Refuge Administration

The proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge would be administered as a unit of the National Bison Range Complex, Moiese, Montana. Daily operations would be the responsibility of the on-site refuge operations specialist that will be moved from the Creston Fish and Wildlife Center, Creston, Montana to the Lost Trail Ranch NWR. Supervision would be afforded by the project leader of the Bison Range Complex.

Acquisition of the Refuge may result in increased staffing in the form of biological, maintenance, public use, and administrative support. However, increased staffing is not a certainty due to budget constraints and the priority funding needs of other management operations on the proposed Refuge.

Existing buildings and storage facilities would be used by the Service for operation, maintenance, and administration of the Refuge. Construction of new, additional buildings is not anticipated. Several existing sheds and buildings are expected to be excess to Refuge needs. These will be disposed of by Montana Power Company before acquisition or by the Service after acquisition according to government regulations and policy.

Initial costs for administration, operations and maintenance (O&M), and developments are estimated at \$250,000. Annual costs for the same items are estimated at \$225,000.

Key Areas of Management Focus

Wildlife habitat, public use, and environmental interpretation are the key focus areas for the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge. In general, management will allow for natural processes that benefit a wide diversity of wildlife species. Land management activities may include manipulation of habitats through the use of haying, grazing, burning, and control of noxious weeds.

Habitat Management

The boundary of the proposed Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge lies within the Pleasant Valley area 25 air miles west of Kalispell, Montana. The area is composed of a diversity of riverine, lacustrine, and palustrine wetland systems including the 160-acre Dahl Lake, a partially drained shallow lacustrine system maintained by several watersheds. Habitat types consist of sub-irrigated wet meadows composed primarily of reed canary grass, introduced meadow grass mixes, cattails, rushes, and sedges.

Upland areas consist of a mosaic of prairie grasslands dominated by a mix of cool season native grass species, nonnative species and a mix of native wild flowers. Coniferous and deciduous timber areas occupy surrounding slopes.

The Service recognizes the need to periodically manipulate habitat to provide for optimum wildlife habitat while attempting to maintain natural processes that further benefit wildlife. Upland and wetland management tracts will be identified, mapped and subsequently managed utilizing appropriate management tools. Haying, grazing, burning, and integrated pest management are management tools that are anticipated to be used on wetland and upland sites within Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge. Haying and grazing of wetlands and wet meadows may be needed to maintain vegetative quality for priority wildlife species and noxious weed control. Upland areas may be grazed to maintain plant health and vigor and control noxious weeds. Herbicide application and use of beneficial insects will also be tools used in habitat management. Upon completion of a topographic survey of existing wetlands, enhancement designs will be developed to restore wetlands where feasible. Existing water rights associated with the Refuge are currently being evaluated. Refuge water rights and those of adjoining landowners may prescribe the extent of wetland development and subsequent ponding.

Timbered tracts will be managed to benefit a diversity of wildlife including neotropical birds and indigenous resident wildlife. The use of prescribed fire and grazing will be evaluated to accomplish this objective. No commercial timber harvest is anticipated in the near future.

Resource Monitoring

The high diversity of species found within the valley area compels the need for an extensive monitoring program. Adaptive Resource Management techniques will be used to assess existing natural resources and monitor effects of management tools to accomplishment of Refuge objectives. Priority resources to be evaluated utilizing ARM prior to development of the Comprehensive Conservation Plan include: wetland habitats, grassland habitats, threatened and endangered species, migratory birds, and aquatic vertebrates. Potential restoration of fish populations will be evaluated in coordination with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks including the possibility of restoring and/or enhancing populations of red band rainbow trout.

Resource surveys may be conducted in cooperation with non-governmental organizations, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, National Biological Survey, Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, universities, and volunteers.

Public Use Activities

The Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 establishes public use priorities of access to NWRS lands. Fish and wildlife-dependent public use activities are generally encouraged on national wildlife refuges so long as those activities are compatible with the primary

purpose of the refuge, adequate funds and staff are available to administer the activity, and those uses are consistent with other management programs and operations. Lands within the proposed Refuge are presently in private ownership and are not open for use by the general public.

Refuges are Primary-Use Areas

Units of the National Wildlife Refuge System are managed as primary-use areas; that is, primarily for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and their habitats. In addition, refuges are closed to other uses unless specifically and formally opened (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966 [NWRRA of 1966, 16 U.S.C. 668dd]). This contrasts with units of other Federal land management systems managed under a multiple-use mandate (i.e., national forests administered by the U.S. Forest Service and public lands administered by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management).

The Compatibility Standard

Before activities or uses can be allowed on a national wildlife refuge, Federal law requires that they be formally determined to be “. . . compatible with the major purposes for which such areas were established . . .” (NWRRA of 1966). A compatible use is “an allowed use that will not materially interfere with or detract from the purposes for which the unit was established” (Fish and Wildlife Service Manual, 602 FW1.4A).

For recreational uses to be allowed, it must be determined that the uses are “. . . practicable . . .,” that they “. . . will not interfere with the primary purposes for which the areas were established . . .,” and that “. . . funds are available for the development, operation, and maintenance of these permitted forms of recreation . . .” (Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 [10 U.S.C. 460k]).

Interim Compatibility Determination

The Service is required by Executive Order 12996 of March 25, 1996, to identify, prior to acquisition of new refuges or refuge additions, existing owner-authorized, wildlife-dependent recreational activities that would be allowed following Service acquisition. Wildlife-dependent recreational activities within the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge are identified in Table 1.

Accordingly, for the purposes of interim compatibility determinations, wildlife observation, environmental interpretation, wildlife photography, and environmental education have been determined to be compatible and would be allowed on a managed basis.

Proposed Refuge lands are currently in private ownership and hunting is not allowed; however, public access to surrounding Plum Creek Timber Company lands is allowed via walk-in or horse back across Ranch lands. The Service recognizes that hunting is a favored tradition for many residents of Montana. Many national wildlife refuges across

the country are open to limited sport hunting. Future hunting opportunities on the Lost Trail National Wildlife Refuge will be assessed during this interim period of Refuge establishment. Hunting will be based on compatibility, wildlife population stability, administrative staffing, and funding for the operation of hunting programs. A hunting program will be initiated after one year of land purchase, with the availability of funding. During the one year planning phase, the Service will develop a hunting plan and evaluate the environmental effects with public input of a hunting program through an Environmental Assessment. A notice will be published in the *Federal Register* of the findings. Additional hunting opportunities for game species will be further assessed in consultation with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and public input and may be allowed in the future. Waterfowl hunting may be allowed on up to 40 percent of the Refuge lands. Ground squirrel and coyote shooting, which is currently permitted on the Ranch, would not be allowed.

Table 1. Interim Compatibility Determination Matrix				
Wildlife-dependent Recreation Activity	Existing Activity	Funds and Staff Available to Manage	Compatible for Interim Period	Interim Use Allowed?
Wildlife Observation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Environmental Interpretation	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wildlife Photography	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Environmental Education	No	No	No	No
Hunting *	No	Yes	No	No
Fishing **	No	No	No	No
* One year after land acquisition and upon completion of coordination and consultation with the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the public, sporting hunting will be open on a restrictive basis. ** No sport fishery currently exists within the proposed boundary.				

Law Enforcement

Enforcement of Federal laws on Refuge lands is a necessary element of refuge management. It is important to safeguard visitors, protect public property, and to conserve and protect natural resources. A good working relationship has been established with Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks game wardens, the Flathead County Sheriff's Department, and other State and local enforcement agencies to control trespass, violation of wildlife laws, and other violations on other Service lands within Flathead County.

Facilities Development and Management

Four main facilities with associated structures exist on the proposed Refuge lands. Removal of some structures by the Montana Power Company is likely prior to Service acquisition of the property.

The present Ranch “headquarters” facility would be used as the Refuge headquarters. The existing house may be occupied by an employee, maintenance person, or volunteer. The present shop and vehicle storage facilities would serve as the Refuge shop area and equipment storage facility for daily, ongoing Refuge field activities.

The present “horse ranch” residence area may be used to house other permanent or temporary employees and/or volunteers. Existing smaller shed/facilities at the “horse ranch” area will likely be excess to Service needs and removed according to Service guidelines. The indoor horse arena metal building may be used for maintenance, storage and/or compatible community uses or removed if determined to be excess to Service needs. The two modular homes remaining on the Ranch property could be used to house volunteers, students, or temporary employees. Those structures may be sold through an auction if the need for use/occupancy does not materialize. The Montana Academy, a private facility that offers schooling, training and occupational therapy for disadvantaged kids, has expressed an interest in occupying these two facilities to accommodate increased enrollment in the Academy. Academy officials have expressed a strong interest in volunteer participation in selected Refuge work programs. The Academy headquarters is approximately seven miles from the proposed Refuge.

Boundaries of any lands acquired by the Service would be posted with appropriate Refuge signs at regular intervals to allow the public to identify the specific boundary location(s). Additional boundary fences may be constructed for management purposes. Rehabilitation of existing stock dams and/or water control facilities will be dependent upon the need to facilitate habitat management.

The Service intends to continue the existing right-of-way road agreement with the Plum Creek Timber Company on the south side of the Refuge. This road would be owned by both the Service and PCTC and would be used for Refuge administration purposes only. PCTC would continue to use the road for forestry operations. Road maintenance would be shared equally and has totaled approximately \$1,500/year. The road would not be open to public access unless agreed upon by the Service and PCTC.

Interagency, Tribal and Public Coordination, Partnerships

The majority of proposed Refuge lands lie adjacent to lands owned and managed by the Plum Creek Timber Company. Private tracts lie to the south/southwest along the western boundary of the proposed Refuge. State lease lands encompass approximately 1,440 acres within the proposed Refuge boundary. Leases for these lands may be

transferred to the Service with the acquisition of the Refuge. The opportunity for coordinated resource management exists with these two organizations. A cooperative agreement could be developed that provides for mutually beneficial management of resources, public access and associated recreational uses.

Appropriate consultation and coordination with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes will be maintained. This effort is to insure proper communication relative to Service responsibilities and Native American Policy. The Lost Trail Ranch lies within the aboriginal homeland of the Kootenai peoples.

The Service may also seek partnerships with governmental and non-governmental agencies such as the local chapter of the Audubon Society, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Flathead Land Trust, the Nature Conservancy, the University of Montana, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, various sportsmen's organizations and others. These Partnerships may include cooperative efforts involving biological data collection and population monitoring, environmental education and interpretive project assistance, facility maintenance and various other field work projects.

Northwest Montana Wetland Management District
780 Creston Hatchery Road
Kalispell, MT 59901
406/758 6879
r6ffa_cre@fws.gov

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service
<http://www.r6.fws.gov/>

For Refuge Information
1 800/344 WILD

September 1998

