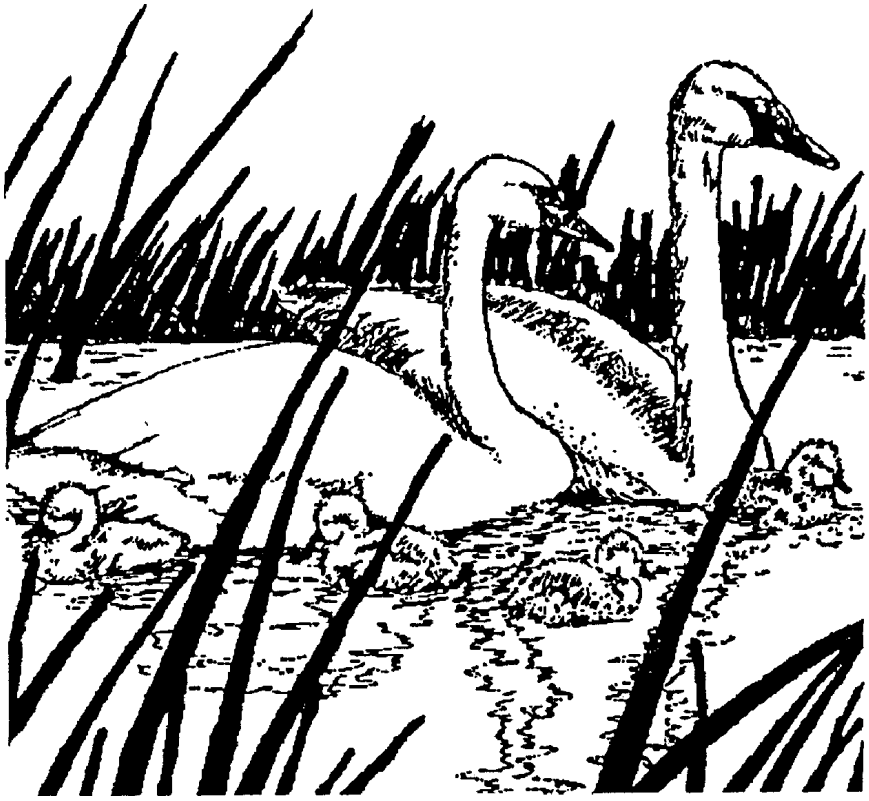
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Red Rock Lakes

National Wildlife Refuge

Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program



Environmental Assessment and Land Protection Plan

Environmental Assessment

Centennial Valley
Conservation Easement Program

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Chapter 1. Purpose of and Need for Action

Introduction and Background

"In Beaverhead County, when someone refers to the 'Valley,' chances are they mean the Centennial." (Beaverhead County History Book Association, 1990). In 1876 one of the partners in the P&O Ranch and from the original ranching community, Mrs. William C. Orr, named this 60-mile long, east-west running Valley as the Centennial Valley, to commemorate the nation's Centennial. Along with other ranches, the P&O Ranch summered livestock in the Valley. The Valley was then homesteaded in the late 1890s. Along with ranching, the Valley was used by hunting clubs for people who traveled by train to hunt waterfowl in the area (see photo insert 1).

The Valley, however, was well known to Native Americans long before the homestead era.

> "Upon entering the Centennial Valley in 1835," Osborne Russell wrote that the Valley, from which ". . . flows the head stream of the Missouri . . ." ". . . was full of Buffaloe when we entered it and large numbers of which were killed by our hunters we repeatedly saw signs of Blackfeet about us to waylay the Trappers. 27th we stopped at this place to feast on fat Buffaloe."
>
> Osborne Russell, September 1835

In addition to providing good seasonal trapping and hunting grounds, the Centennial Valley was a favored route between the headwaters of the upper Bighole River and the Yellowstone area.

The long winters and great distances to market made subsistence difficult at best, with few homesteaders remaining after the Great Depression and many selling their land back to the Federal Resettlement Administration during the 1930s.

From these lands, and with the population of trumpeter swans dwindling across the continent, President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge on April 22, 1935 under Executive Order 7023 ". . . as a Refuge and breeding ground for wild birds and animals . . . ."

The Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge (Refuge) is located 28 miles east of Monida, Beaverhead County, southwestern Montana (Figure 1), and managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), an agency of the Department of Interior. This 44,157-acre Refuge sits at 6,670 feet above sea level in the Centennial Valley (Valley). Lying east of the Continental Divide, it is near the uppermost reach of the Missouri River drainage. Its 69 square miles of habitat comprise one of the most naturally diverse areas in the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Refuge headquarters is located 28 miles from the nearest paved road and 45 miles from Yellowstone National Park. About 15,000 people visit the Refuge annually, primarily to engage in various wildlife related recreational activities. The mission of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge is to protect, restore, and manage the Refuge in as natural a state as possible, as part of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (Figure 2) in order to optimize wildlife resources.

Management of the Refuge has always focused on protecting a remnant population of rare trumpeter swans. About 300 trumpeter swans are currently in the tri-state (Idaho, Montana, Wyoming) population. Over 200 species of birds have been recorded on the Refuge with peregrine and prairie falcons, bald and golden eagles, hawks and owls, sandhill cranes, waterfowl and sage grouse being the most notable. Common mammalian species include antelope, Shiras moose, elk, mule and white-tailed deer, badger, coyote, and red fox.

While wildlife represents a significant portion of the area's history, archaeological and cultural sites document the use by early peoples. Occasional artifacts and explorer accounts demonstrate use of the area by early Native Americans. The present day settlement era is represented by the numerous historical structures which attest to the rough country lifestyle of the homesteaders. Such history is blended with the modern day use of such technologies as electric fencing and fire by prescription.

Along with many other people, the Service has been working since 1935 to preserve and restore waterfowl and wildlife habitat within the Centennial Valley, primarily by designating the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge as a breeding ground for wild birds and animals. More recently, the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program is working with several landowners to help enhance habitats, such as wetlands and riparian corridors, to provide a continuing and improved habitat for wildlife.

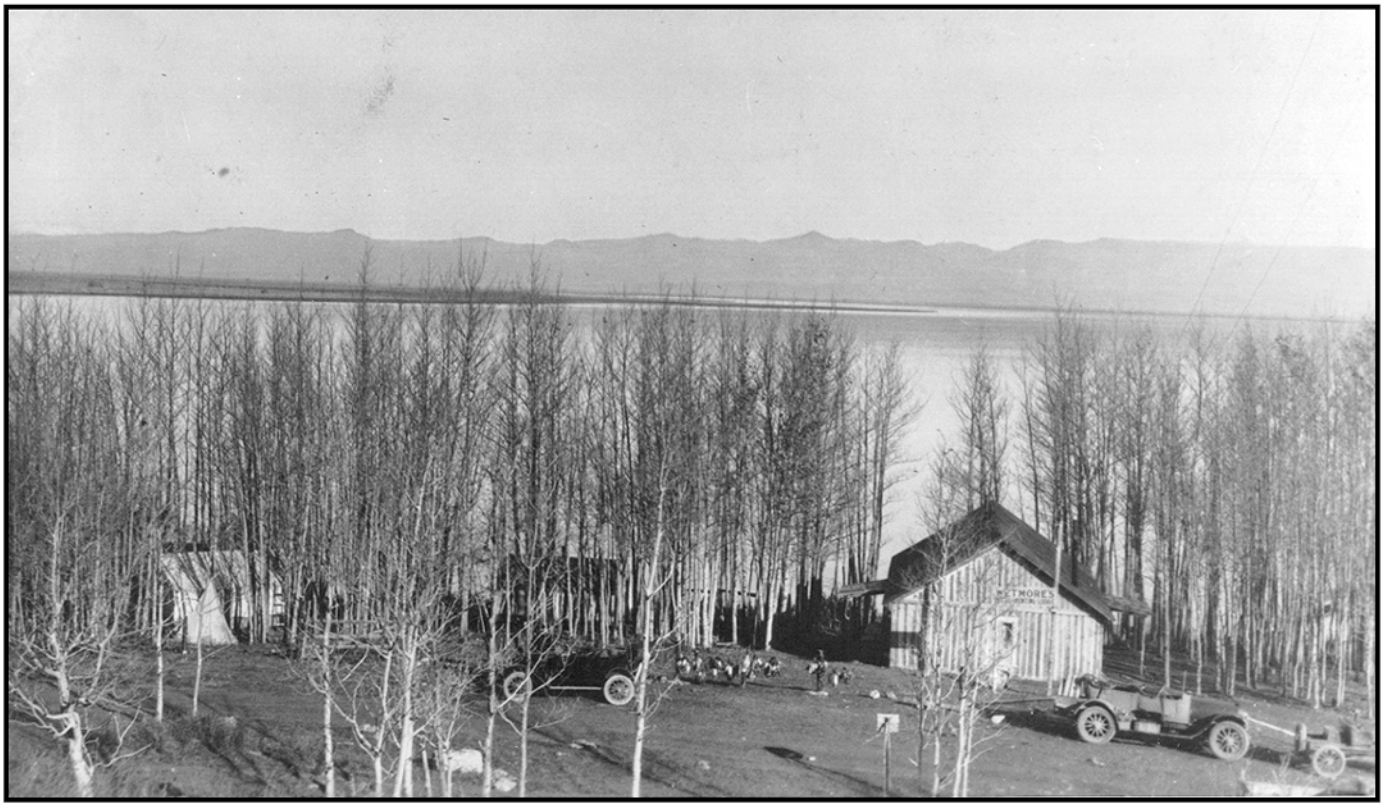
Proposed Action

The Service is proposing to establish the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program by purchasing or receiving in donation conservation easements from willing landowners, consisting of approximately 42,000 acres of private land adjacent to or in proximity to the Refuge (Figure 3). The proposed easement acreage is devised to link nearby protected areas, such as TNC easement tracts, to create a relatively large, unfragmented blocks of habitat for large mammal movement and migratory bird protection, within the targeted project area. The Service proposes to purchase conservation easements primarily on high quality wetland, grassland, and mountain frontage not only for waterfowl, but also for the myriad of other bird species, plants, and mammals that rely on this habitat as well as the overall protection of the critically declining intact intermountain landscapes. The Service views agriculturally-based and rural settings of the Centennial Valley as a mainstay in maintaining habitat integrity for wildlife. This habitat integrity would be changed dramatically if residential or commercial development began to take hold. Such changes have occurred elsewhere in Montana and the rural west. This type of development tends to fragment wildlife habitat and generally increases costs to counties which have to provide services to remote developments. The development can also lead to water quality issues, change big game migration patterns, and degrade wetlands. The goal of this project is to maintain wildlife habitat integrity on a large landscape scale by helping to maintain open space in a rural setting.

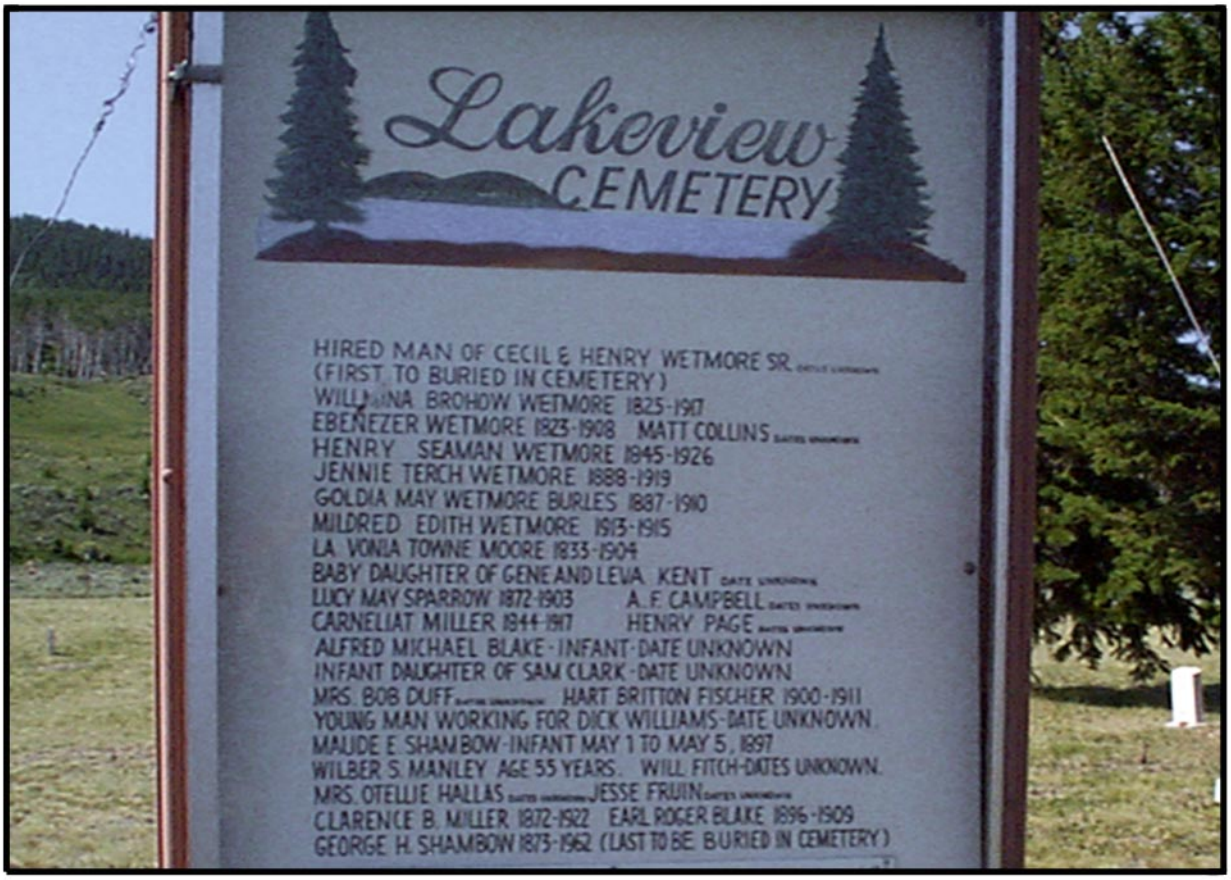
The Service views the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program as compatible with current ranching management practices, such as grazing. Thus, the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program can help protect the perpetual maintenance of the rapidly disappearing agricultural way of life.

The rural character of the Refuge and the Centennial Valley as a whole is likely to undergo substantial change in the next 10 to 20 years. The proposed conservation easement initiative is the next step towards perpetual support of wildlife values by protecting large tracts of private lands from the type of housing development that would undermine these values and fragment habitats.

Because the Centennial Valley can be thought of as interconnected habitats, lands not adjacent to the Refuge would be evaluated based on their relationship to key habitats or wildlife use patterns. The proposed easement program would prevent extensive residential development, protect wetland values, and secure open space. In so doing, the easements would also help protect air and water quality and maintain a large landscape which provides key wildlife habitats. Maintaining these habitat values also helps preserve the interconnected wildlife values of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and the upper Centennial Valley.



Wetmore Hunting Lodge, USFWS



Lakeview Cemetery, USFWS

Photo Insert 1

Project Area

The project area extends from the upper headwaters of the Centennial Valley to the western downstream end at Lima Reservoir (Figure 3). The Service proposes to purchase conservation easements on 42,000 acres of private land within a project boundary of 158,972 acres. These private lands harbor miles of riparian (river) corridors and critical acres of wetlands that make up a core component of wildlife habitat, especially for trumpeter swans and other waterfowl and birds. The private lands lay primarily along the valley bottom and low foothills, while public land makes up more of the mid-to-upper slopes of the Centennial Mountains to the south and Gravelly Mountains to the north. The Refuge protects and manages valley-bottom wetlands, meadows, and uplands which make up a key habitat component at the upper end of the Valley.

The elevations in the project area range from over 6,400 feet at Lima Reservoir, to 6,600 feet at the Lower Lake Dam, to over 6,800 feet at the upper end of the Valley in Alaska Basin. The project area is primarily a mixture of grassland, sagebrush-grassland, wetlands, and mountain foothills (Figure 4). The public land is primarily owned by the State of Montana and the Federal government. Agencies within the Federal government that manage lands are the Bureau of Land Management (Dillon Resource Area) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge).

Purpose of and Need for Proposed Action

The Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program encompasses some of the highest quality remaining intermountain wet meadow and wetlands within the western states. The Centennial Valley remains biologically intact and has not been converted to housing development. Given the diversity of plants and animals that rely on this habitat, the ability of this project to protect the habitat integrity in perpetuity is critical (see photo insert 2). However, most valleys and foothills in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Area and near the Centennial Valley are being developed or subdivided to provide second homes. During the 1960s demographers documented that for the first time in American history, higher proportions of people were leaving cities for parts rural than were making the return trip (Fuguitt 1985). "Exurbanization" only accelerated in the 1990s, drawing people still further out into the rural West. In the 1990s, the West's "beach front property" - rural lands adjacent to National Parks and Forests - are the fastest growing areas (Rudzitis 1996). In the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, fully one-third of all private lands have already been subdivided for development, with a majority of new lots locating outside existing towns (Harting and Glick 1994). In Gallatin County, 17,000 acres of farmland were subdivided between 1993 and 1999 alone. Madison County, not far behind, subdividing 16,000 acres into 685 lots between 1994 and 1998, most of this into 20 acre "ranchettes" (Johnson, V.K. 1999). Even in counties with slow growth rates, loss of agricultural land continues apace. The State of Montana, as a whole, is consuming land four times faster than the population growth rate (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1999).

The purposes of the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program are:

- to protect native wet meadows, wetlands, uplands, and mountain foothills from future conversion to second and recreational home uses,
- to protect habitat integrity by preventing fragmentation,
- to preserve key wilderness values and viewshed throughout and adjacent to the Red Rock Lakes Refuge,
- to promote landscape integrity in order to maintain, sustain, and enhance the historic plant, animal, and insect biodiversity of native prairie habitats, and associated ranching heritage,
- to minimize noxious weed infestations from soil disturbance, road building, and increased traffic resulting from rural housing development,
- to a lesser extent, to minimize future demands on local government resources necessitated by providing services associated with increasing rural development.

Proposed Project Area, USFWS

Cluster Development, USFWS

Key Wetlands, USFWS

Photo Insert 2

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, with the concurrence from the Director, will make three decisions.

1. Determine whether the Service should establish the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program Area. If yes,
2. Select an approved Conservation Easement Area boundary that best fulfills the habitat protection purpose.
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 significantly 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.

Issues Identified and Selected for Analysis

An open house was held in Lima, Montana on December 9, 1999. Approximately 20 landowners, citizens, and elected representatives attended. Most people expressed positive comments towards the project which would maintain the present landscape and the rural lifestyle. Through a partnership with the Service, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a private non-profit organization, has contacted landowners, outdoor users, other public and elected persons, and many have expressed interest and a desire to protect the Centennial Valley from the pressures brought about by housing development.

For the last three years, TNC has been working in the Centennial Valley with the goal of purchasing conservation easements for the protection of the Valley's biodiversity. To this end, TNC has also performed some baseline work on plant and animal inventory of the landscape. No major issues have surfaced to-date. However, people typically express concerns about the role the Service will have in the conservation easement, the need to keep private land in private ownership, and issues concerning access or other public uses.

The primary goal of the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program is the maintenance of key habitat and landscape values by precluding development of the area as recreational homes sites. As such, the Service's role is to monitor the purchased easements to ensure that landowners maintain these characteristics and that the property is not subdivided or developed for home sites.

The Service, as well as local conservation groups, and people in the region have voiced concern with the fragmentation of habitats in other areas of Montana. This loss is due primarily to the conversion of lands, once significant to wildlife, to summer homes and associated human use pressures. For example, residential development in the Valley presents a potentially significant threat to the aquatic ecosystem. Sewage-derived nutrient additions to streams and lakes could have devastating effects on the aquatic ecology. Housing developments also can bring wetland drainage, water diversion, artificial ponds and introduction of nonnative fish and plants.

Another key result is habitat fragmentation caused by land subdivision and residential development. Almost 100,000 acres in the Centennial Valley are privately-owned, and the majority of this land remains as large ranches. However, given the current trends of low cattle prices and a strong market for scenic western properties, Centennial Valley ranches can be vulnerable to sale and subdivision for recreational development. The subdivision process is not difficult; under Montana law, land may be split into lots of 160 acres or greater without local review or approval. Moreover, with no county zoning in place, small-lot subdivisions are possible. In 1993, for example, the Beaverhead County Commissioners approved a controversial 5-lot subdivision adjacent to the headquarters of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

A conservation easement keeps land in private ownership and maintains its direct economic value to an area and protects the landscape integrity through conservation easements. Under a Service conservation easement, the landowner continues to use the land for ranching or similar agricultural purposes.

Public access to private lands covered by a Service conservation easement remains at the discretion of the landowner. Our focus again, is on protecting landscape integrity, not in attempting to manage private land uses. However, several ranches in the Valley participate in the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Block Management Program - a program which provides for hunter access to private lands, while accommodating landowner concerns with off-road vehicle travel and other trespass issues.

Biological Issues

Wildlife Habitat

- In addition to direct loss of habitat, subdivision brings human presence in the form of roads, fences, snowmobiles, pets and other sources of disturbance that can disrupt wildlife movement patterns and render habitat unusable. Key geographic linkages can be lost, and wildlife populations isolated. Increased human settlement can also result in actions to control important natural ecological events, such as fire and seasonal floods.

Water Resources

- Loss of wetland quality due to draining, filling, or building of structures along the shorelines is a concern in the project area. Historically, wetlands in the Valley have been key to nesting and brood-rearing of trumpeter swans. While private landowners venture near these wetlands, and cattle graze along the shorelines and water in the ponds, these patterns of use are predictable and trumpeter swans co-exist and carry out successful nesting and brood-rearing of young cygnets. Significant changes in this pattern of predictability could lead to trumpeter swans abandoning key wetland nest sites which has occurred in other areas, such as Henry's Lake, Idaho, where traditional trumpeter swan nesting sites have been lost to increased water-based recreational use and human presence.

Grassland Habitat

- While unlikely, possible conversion of grasslands to croplands could also increase sedimentation and pesticide runoff into wetlands. Tillage increases the sediment load into wetlands when compared to grasslands (Gleason and Euliss 1998, Kantrud *et al*. 1989), primarily due to wind erosion (NRCS 1992b).

Social and Economic Issues

Landownership/Land-Use:

The Service has been contacted by many landowners who support the project and are interested in enrolling their land in the easement program. A few individuals expressed interest in selling their lands to the Service. Additional issues of concern were:

- Several individuals believed that perpetual easements would negatively affect future generations of landowners. They were concerned that the easements would limit the choices of future landowners, even though they may have paid as much for the land as if it had no restrictions. Others were concerned that perpetual easements would lower the resale value of the land.
- Comments were received that the process would favor landowners whose land was viewed as more threatened with development than others. Or, that the larger open expanse of sagebrush-grassland along the northern slopes of the Valley would carry lesser priority.
- Some verbal comments indicated the scope of the project should be increased and that additional management provisions such as weed control, habitat management for wildlife and hunting and fishing access should be included in the easement.

Public Use:

- The Service received comments concerning the use of the public on purchased conservation easement lands. Landowners were concerned that they would be forced to allow the public and other activities on their land.

Issues Not Selected for Detailed Analysis

Historically, concern has been expressed about the amount of tax generated to the counties when such land protection programs take place. Since this is a conservation easement program, the land enrolled in the program does not change hands and, therefore, the taxes paid by the landowner are not affected. Since development of rural landscapes often leads to increased demand for services and higher costs to rural counties, any perceived reduction in the tax base would be offset since the county would not incur the expense of providing services to rural developments. The use of conservation easements serves an additional function as easements preclude the necessity for county zoning in the program area.

Related Actions and Activities

Several other entities are participating in cooperative habitat conservation programs in Centennial Valley. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, Beaverhead County Government, the Bureau of Land Management, and landowners are working together to manage noxious weeds in Beaverhead County.

The Beaverhead Wetland Protection Project II grant, funded by North American Wetland Conservation Act, is focused on wetland and upland habitat conservation in a much larger area of southwestern Beaverhead County. The grant was awarded to The Nature Conservancy for purchasing conservation easements to protect wetlands within a much larger area in Beaverhead County. The conservation easement program proposed is designed to complement on-going private and public landscape conservation efforts in southwestern Montana. The greatest benefit will be the long-term habitat integrity that will be preserved at a time when rural housing development elsewhere in the State is resulting in fragmentation of key habitats.

The **North American Waterfowl Management Plan** was enacted in 1986 to address declining waterfowl populations. Under this Plan, the Intermountain West Joint Venture Implementation Plan (1994) was created to coordinate the efforts of Montana, Idaho, Utah, and adjacent mountain states. A local project within the Joint Venture, the Beaverhead Wetland Protection Project II proposal, encompasses the Centennial Valley. The funding and efforts for these projects represent partnerships from many groups including the private entities and landowners such as The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, Montana Audubon Society, National Park Trust, Trailsend Ranch, Arrow Land and Livestock, LaSalle Adams Fund, Willow Springs Foundation, Steve Liebmann (Morse Land and Cattle Company LLC), Beaverhead County, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. This funding will be used for the protection and enhancement of approximately 17,000 wetland and upland acres in southwestern Montana.

Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) manages over 57,450 acres of State lands in the Centennial Valley. The State land is used for ranching, timber, and recreational purposes. It is likely that the land will remain in its primitive rural setting into the future.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest borders the Centennial Valley to the north and east. While forest lands are used for multiple purposes, they will likely remain in a rural, primitive setting as well.

Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program (PFW), administered by the Service, began working in the Centennial Valley in 1994 at the request of then Director, Mollie Beattie. This program provides a tool to work cooperatively with landowners to voluntarily improve habitat. Habitat restoration to-date in the Valley has included 130 wetland acres, 3,300 acres of grazing management, and 8 miles of stream/riparian restoration. Habitat restoration projects to-date have been funded by Partners for Fish and Wildlife, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Arctic Grayling Recovery Program, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, Bureau of Land Management, The Nature Conservancy, and private landowners.

Red Rock Watershed Weed Project, fortunately, infestations of noxious weeds (spotted knapweed, houndstongue, henbane, etc.) are relatively limited throughout most of the Valley. However, they are present in the west end of the Valley and most surrounding valleys. In an effort to contain the current problem, Beaverhead County, The Nature Conservancy, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Bureau of Land Management, PFW, Forest Service and private landowners started a weed district in 1998, and intensive control efforts were started in 1999. Two TNC interns coordinated the work and succeeded in securing four-year contracts on 90 percent of the land base in the District in 1999. Current tools being used include; education, mechanical, biological, and chemical.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has been working in the Centennial Valley over the past three years with other conservation organizations, agencies, and ranching families with the common goal of protecting the Valley from development for the benefit of agriculture and biodiversity. TNC owns a small tract of land in the project area, and they also hold and monitor one conservation easement to-date and expect to help other landowners protect as much as 10,000 acres of private land through donation and purchase of conservation easements. The Nature Conservancy has also helped in the public and private effort to control noxious weeds in the Red Rock Watershed.

Private landowners own over 25 percent of the project area, including several important wetland acres and miles of river frontage. At least two landowners have previously donated conservation easements to the Montana Land Reliance. Some landowners have already enhanced wetlands and protected riparian through their own efforts or by working with the Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program. Many landowners in the area are concerned with protecting the primitive landscape and its rural, ranching heritage, and support this conservation easement initiative.

National Wildlife Refuge System and Authorities

The Service proposes to help maintain the rural character of the Centennial Valley through conservation easements to enhance the survival prospects of key mammalian species in the area, such as wolverines, and to protect and maintain grassland and wetland habitat for migratory birds, such as trumpeter swans, and other species of animals, such as moose and elk, and sensitive plants.

The proposed resource protection actions would be consistent with the mission and guiding principles for the National Wildlife Refuge System. The Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program would continue to assist landowners with livestock operation enhancements such as water development and fencing with the companion goal of enhancing wildlife habitat and use on private lands.

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 partnerships 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.

The Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program would be monitored as part of the Refuge System and operated under a Conservation Easement Project Area. The program would further the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to preserve a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management and, where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. The broad goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System describe the conservation of the nation's wildlife resources for the ultimate benefit of people.

Goals of the National Wildlife Refuge System

1. 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.
2. To perpetuate the migratory bird resource.
3. To preserve a natural diversity and abundance of fauna and flora on Refuge lands.
4. To provide an understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife ecology and the human's role in the environment.
5. 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.

To the extent consistent with the easement language, the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Project Area would be monitored 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. That is, the authority of the Service to monitor the easement is provided by these laws. However, landowners retain any rights not expressly conveyed in the conservation easement, such as the right to regulate public access onto their private property and to manage their lands for agricultural purposes such as ranching.

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

1. Intermountain West Joint Venture Implementation Plan (1994)
2. North American Waterfowl Management Plan (USFWS 1994)
3. Peregrine Falcon Recovery Plan (USFWS 1984)
4. Bald Eagle Recovery Plan (Northern states) (USFWS 1983)
5. Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1918)
6. Grizzly Bear Recovery Plan (USFWS 1993)
7. Migratory Nongame Birds of Management Concern in the U.S. (USFWS 1995)

The Habitat Protection and Land Acquisition Process

Once a project area boundary is approved, habitat protection will be through the purchase of conservation easements. It is the long established policy of the Service to acquire minimum interest in land from willing sellers to achieve our habitat acquisition goals.

The authorities for the acquisition of the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Project Area are the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 (16 U.S.C. 742 f (b) (1), as amended), and the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (16 U.S.C. 715-715r, as amended). Acquisition funding is made available through the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1965. The Federal monies used to acquire conservation easements on private lands through the Land and Water Conservation Fund are derived primarily from oil and gas leases on the outer continental shelf, motorboat fuel tax revenues, and sale of surplus Federal property. Additional funds could be made available through Congressional appropriations, Migratory Bird Conservation Account Funds, North American Waterfowl Conservation Act Funds, donations from non-profit organizations or other sources to acquire lands, waters, or interest therein for fish and wildlife conservation purposes.

The basic considerations in acquiring interest in lands are the biological significance of the land, existing and anticipated threats to wildlife resources, and landowner's willingness to sell conservation easements, or otherwise make property available to the project. The purchase of conservation easements will proceed according to availability of funds. Lands already within the Executive Order boundary of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge would continue to be purchased from willing sellers as opportunities arise.

Chapter 2. Alternatives, Including the Preferred Alternative

This Chapter describes the two alternatives identified for this project: a No Action Alternative and an alternative giving the Service the authority to create the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program in the vicinity of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The Alternatives consider the effects of a Conservation Easement Program within the project area boundary identified in this Environmental Assessment.

If the preferred alternative is selected, current and future conservation easements acquired by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are administered in accordance with Executive Order 12996, *Management and General Public Use of The National Wildlife Refuge System* (1996) and the *National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act* (1997). Monitoring consists of periodically reviewing land status to ensure that the non-development goal of the conservation easement is being achieved according to the terms of the easement. The Service would continue to monitor the status and recovery of endangered, threatened, and candidate species, conduct other activities for enhancing wildlife habitat and restoring native species with landowners permission and coordinate with private organizations, and State and Federal agencies.

Alternative A. No Action

Under the No Action Alternative, the 158,972-acre boundary for the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program would not be established and, therefore, funds from the Land and Water Conservation fund would not be used to purchase perpetual conservation easements on 42,000 acres. Lands in the Centennial Valley may be developed as second or recreational home subdivisions or isolated housing or commercial uses as the agricultural economy changes or when the land changes ownership. Conservation easements could still be secured through private efforts, including efforts by The Nature Conservancy and other entities. Habitat enhancement or restoration projects on private lands, such as water developments, grazing systems, and riparian management exclosures, would also continue through landowner efforts or other partnerships.

Lands already within the Executive Order boundary of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge would continue to be purchased from willing sellers as opportunities arise.

Alternative B. Establish the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program (Preferred Alternative)

Under Alternative B, the Service would establish the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program within the Centennial Valley of southwestern Montana. The Conservation Easement Program will be part of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge staff will manage the conservation easement program and will monitor the easements. The executive boundary consisting of 158,972 acres, of which 42,000 acres is proposed for conservation easements extends from the eastern and upper end of the Centennial Valley (Alaska Basin) west to Lima Reservoir (Figure 3). The easement program would preserve approximately 42,000 acres of privately-owned mountain foothills, wetlands, stream courses, grasslands, sagebrush-grassland, and sandhills habitat. The habitat would be perpetually protected from conversion to home, industrial, or commercial building sites. The goal of the project is to preserve habitat that will protect vegetation of high quality foothills, wetlands, and upland habitat sagebrush-grasslands, or land in lower priority zones with other types of cover, may be purchased to connect and round-out larger tracts of high quality grasslands. To meet this goal, priority areas have been identified within the project area. Within these focus areas, tracts will be given priority for purchase (see attached Land Protection Plan) which depend on impacts to water quality, threats of development, riparian habitat quality, and vegetation significance (Figure 5). Priority areas were also devised to link nearby protected areas, such as TNC easement tracts, to create a relatively large, unfragmented block of habitat for large mammal movement and migratory bird protection.

Lands already within the Executive Order boundary of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge would continue to be purchased from willing sellers as opportunities arise.

The easement program would rely on voluntary participation from landowners. Grazing would not be restricted on the land included in the easement contract. Cultivation of the land would not be permitted. Neither would game farms, oil and gas drilling, and wetland drainage. All land would remain in private ownership and, therefore, property tax and weed control would remain the responsibility of the landowner. Control of public access to the land would also remain under control of the landowner.

Alternatives Considered but not Studied

Voluntary Landowner Zoning

Under this alternative, landowners can voluntarily petition the county commissioners to create a zoning district to direct the types of development that can occur within an area. This type of voluntary zoning is considered a "citizen initiated" zoning. For example, landowners could petition the county government to zone an area as agricultural, precluding certain types of non-agricultural development, such as residential subdivision. "Citizen initiative" is rarely used, and this alternative was not studied further.

County Zoning

This alternative would involve a traditional approach used by counties and municipalities. The local government would use zoning as a means of designating what type of development can occur in an area. Beaverhead County officials prefer not to use this method, and the alternative was not studied further. The county commissioners, however, expressed support instead for the conservation easement alternative as a means of maintaining rural area values and perhaps reducing the need for future zoning.

Chapter 3. Affected Environment

This Chapter describes the biological, social, economic, and cultural resources that would most likely be affected by establishing the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program.

Biological Environment

The project area is centered on the Centennial Valley, located 20 miles from Yellowstone's western boundary in Montana's southwestern corner. The oblong Valley stretches east to west for about 40 miles and north to south for 8 miles between sharply rising 10,000 foot peaks of the Centennial Mountains to the south and the rolling foothills of the Gravelly Range to the north. The Valley floor is a network of grasslands, wetlands, and riparian habitats. The average elevation is 6,600 feet above sea level, and the watershed encompasses 385,000 acres (Locke, 1990).

The Valley area exhibits excellent species diversity, from waterfowl to great gray owls, grizzly bears, moose, Franklin's gulls, long-billed curlews, Arctic grayling, peregrine falcons, westslope cutthroat trout, and ferruginous hawks (see Appendix C for scientific names). Two hundred sixty-one birds species, or approximately 70 percent of those found in Montana, inhabit the Valley. At least 150 species of birds breed in the Valley.

Habitat

The combination of numerous wetlands, riparian areas, sandhills, and grass/sagebrush uplands creates the diversity for which this area is considered so valuable. The wetlands and riparian areas support an entire suite of plants and animals, while the grassland/sagebrush and sandhills support yet another suite of plants and animals and, in many cases, the biodiversity of this area relies on a combination of resources from wetlands and uplands.

Uplands

The proposed project area lies in an intermountain grassland/sagebrush habitat type with interspersed wetlands. Mean minimum and maximum temperatures are wide ranging (minus 9 degrees to 76 degrees Fahrenheit), and mean precipitation is 20 inches per year. The vegetation correlates with topographic variations in microclimate, with Big sagebrush and Idaho fescue predominating the Valley floor. North-oriented mountain slopes commonly support shrubs, aspen, and coniferous forests.

The Valley soils give rise to a diverse array of plant communities, including some of considerable scientific importance. Location records from the *Montana Natural Heritage Program* (1996) indicate 41 species of special concern, including 5 that may be globally rare and 7 that are known in Montana only from the Valley (Povilitis and Mahr, 1998). Vegetation in the Valley sandhills represents one of Montana's most intact native plant associations and includes at least five state-rare species: Sand wildrye, Platte cinquefoil, Mealy primrose, Wolf's willow, and Letterman's needlegrass. No plant species within the Valley are currently on the Federal threatened or endangered list.

Wetlands
Approximately 10 percent of the project area is covered by wetlands, primarily palustrine emergent (Cowardin *et al*. 1979). The Valley wetland complex (Figure 6) is the largest in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). The length of time water persists in these wetlands varies and this variation results in different types of vegetation. Ephemeral, temporary, and seasonal wetlands that have water for several weeks support vegetation comprised of wetland low prairie, wet meadow, and shallow marsh zones. Vegetation common to these zones include bluegrass, sedges, tufted hairgrass, and Rocky mountain iris. Other temporary and seasonal wetland plants include rushes and reed canary grass. Semipermanent or permanent wetlands have water present through most or all of the year. These wetlands may have any of the vegetation zones already mentioned, as well as deep marsh zones with pondweed and milfoil, shallow marsh zones with bulrush and cattails, and open water areas with no vegetation. Riparian areas found along perennial streams in the Valley support willows, aspen, *Ribes*, and sedges.

Wildlife

The Centennial Valley supports a wide variety of animal life. Assemblages of amphibians and reptiles, mammals, birds, and fish can all be found in the project area.

Amphibians and Reptiles
A 1996 survey of the Valley documented nine species of amphibians and reptiles; long-nosed salamander, spotted frog, western chorus frog, western toad, painted turtle, gopher snake, western terrestrial garter snake, common garter snake, and western rattlesnake (MNHP 1997).

Mammals
Uplands provide habitat for many small mammals including shrews, mice, voles, and ground squirrels in the Valley. These mammals, in turn, provide critical food sources and nesting habitat for prairie raptors, such as ferruginous hawks, northern harrier, and short-eared owls. Coyotes, red foxes, badgers, striped skunks, and long-tailed weasels are examples of carnivores that are widespread throughout the area. Big game animals such as mule deer, elk, and pronghorn also utilize the upland habitat. Wetlands provide cover and/or food for several of terrestrial or semiaquatic mammals including muskrat, beaver, river otter, and mink. The riparian and forested areas of the Valley also support a significant moose population.

Three federally listed mammals are recorded in the project area. Sightings of gray wolf occur periodically, and a pack of Yellowstone wolves visited the Valley in 1998. The gray wolf is a federally listed endangered species. Grizzly bear, a federally listed threatened species, regularly visits the mountains surrounding the Valley. Canada lynx, a threatened species, also inhabit the mountains surrounding the Valley. The Valley represents a potentially important corridor between GYE and Salmon/Selway Ecosystem for these animals. Other mammals of special concern found within the Valley include: pygmy rabbit, Townsend's big-eared bat, spotted bat, fisher, fringed myotis, wolverine, Preble's and Merriam's shrew.

Birds
The project area has recorded 261 species of birds or approximately 70 percent of those found in Montana. At least 150 bird species breed within the project area. The Valley has been the base for regional trumpeter swan recovery efforts. The Valley hosts the densest breeding populations of peregrine falcons, ferruginous hawks, and trumpeter swans in Montana. The Valley also contains two bald eagle nests and hosts many more during migration.

Approximately 20 species of waterfowl regularly use the project area for nesting, and more than 30 species use the area during migration. Mallard, gadwall, northern pintail, lesser scaup, and northern shoveler are the most common nesting ducks. Trumpeter swans use wetland habitat throughout the Valley. The Valley also hosts regionally significant populations of raptors, nesting and migrating shorebirds, neotropical migrant birds and sandhill cranes. Historically, the Valley provided habitat for significant numbers of sage grouse, a species in decline across much of its range. Other species of special concern within the Valley include: Boreal owl, black tern, Franklin's gull, black-crowned night-heron, white-faced ibis, and Forster's tern.

Fishes
The Centennial Valley contains one of the only native lacustrine Arctic grayling populations in the lower 48 states. This population spends most of the year in Upper Red Rock Lake and each spring spawns upstream in Red Rock Creek. Also of significance are several genetically pure populations of westslope cutthroat trout found within the project area. Other native fish within the project area include: burbot, white sucker, longnose sucker, and mottled sculpin. Nonnative fish that have been introduced to the Valley in the past include rainbow trout, brook trout, brown trout, and Yellowstone cutthroat trout (Brown 1971).

Social and Economic Considerations
Lakeview is the only community within the project area and consists of approximately 10 people, and another two communities (Monida and Lima) of approximately 100 people border the project area. Dillon, the county seat of Beaverhead County, lies 60 miles to the north of the project area and has a population of about 4,000. Much of the rural population is involved in hay and livestock production. Private lands are also used for hunting a wide variety of game species, with elk hunting season bringing the most people to the Valley. A seasonal influx of eco-tourists occurs in the summer that birdwatch, bicycle, horseback ride, camp, canoe, and fish throughout the Valley.

Agricultural Resources
The Centennial Valley is notable for its historical and social context. First settled by cattlemen in America's 1876 centennial year, the Centennial remains one of the few western Montana valleys where large ranches still dominate the landscape.

The majority of land-use within the project area is summer cattle grazing. Ranchers start to bring cattle to the Valley in April and move them out of the Valley by December. Most ranches are owned by individuals or families whose principal occupation is ranching. Small areas are irrigated throughout the Valley to increase grass production of pastureland. Little or no hay is currently produced in the Valley. Historically more haying occurred in the Valley; these former hayfields are now pastureland dominated by introduced grasses.

Landownership
Within the project area, approximately 25 percent of the land is privately-owned and 75 percent is public land.

Property Tax
Property taxes on private land are currently paid to the counties by the landowners. Under the preferred alternative, purchasing easements does not result in a transfer of land title; private landowners would continue to pay property taxes. The conservation easement program is expected to be revenue neutral to the county treasury.

Public Use and Wildlife-dependent Recreational Activities
Hunting throughout the project area is very popular. A variety of wildlife are hunted including waterfowl, antelope, elk, moose, deer, and furbearers. Private landowners often give permission for hunting on their land, and they will retain full control over hunting on their property under the easement program. Several landowners currently participate with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Block Management program to provide hunter access. Since most potholes are not suitable for sustaining fish populations, most fishing occurs on Elk Lake and streams, generally on public land.

Cultural Resources

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, as a Federal agency, has a trust responsibility to Tribes which includes the protection of the sovereignty of the Tribal government and preservation of Tribal culture and other trust resources. The easement program does not compromise Tribal jurisdiction or Tribal rights because it deals only with willing easement sellers. The protection of trust resources is enhanced with the easement program by conservation of wildlife habitat and protection of resources from land conversion and development.

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 proactive compliance with section 110 of the NHPA to survey, inventory, and evaluate cultural resources.

Contaminants and Hazardous Materials
Fieldwork for the pre-acquisition contaminant surveys will be conducted prior to the purchase of any land interest on a tract-by-tract basis. Any suspected problems or contaminants requiring additional surveys would be referred to the Contaminants Specialist located in the Service's Helena Ecological Services Office.

Chapter 4. Environmental Consequences

Effects on the Biological Environment

This Chapter assesses the environmental impacts expected to occur from the implementation of Alternatives A or B as described in Chapter 2. Environmental impacts are analyzed by issues for each alternative and appear in the same order as discussed in Chapter 1.

Wildlife and Grassland Habitat

Alternative A (No Action)

Under this alternative, no conservation easements on private lands would be acquired for protection, restoration, or management in the study area. No action would result in loss of opportunity to protect an historically important upland and wetland habitat. Because of the Valley's proximity to Yellowstone National Park and the heavily developed Henry's Lake, Idaho area, 10 miles to the east, private lands within the Valley are increasingly threatened by subdivision and development for recreational and second home residential use. Degradation of resources on unprotected private lands would continue. Private lands, where these resources occur, would remain in private ownership and would continue to receive varying degrees of protection. These potential impacts could result in the further decline of game, nongame, and listed species. The Service's existing partnership to enhance habitat on private lands would continue.

Without the perpetual protection from easements created through the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement area, the future of wildlife habitat in the project area would be uncertain. Habitat in many surrounding valleys is being subdivided for summer homes. These smaller and smaller ownerships bring many problems for wildlife; increased dogs and cats, overgrazing, noxious weeds, increased vehicle traffic, etc. Lands adjacent to natural wetlands, often seen as "choice homesites," are particularly impacted by development activities. Trumpeter swans during some years have more nests on private land than on public land in the Valley. If subdivided, private land nesting sites would probably be lost. Trumpeter swans readily abandon nests if disturbed. For upland nesting waterfowl, in particular, habitat fragmentation often leads to a decrease in nest success resulting from a shift in the predator community (Ball et al. 1995)

Elk and pronghorn summer in the Valley and migrate out of the Valley due to harsh winters. They may disappear from the Valley if it were subdivided to the point of disrupting their current migration corridor. Loss of the corridor linkage for wolverine, fisher, lynx, grizzly bear, gray wolf between GYE and Salmon/Selway in Idaho could lead to the listing of additional species.

Alternative B (Preferred)

Establishing the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement area would enable up to 42,000 acres of habitat to be protected in perpetuity. This would help maintain the uniqueness of the Centennial Valley that harbors a wide variety of wildlife species. Through the easement, cultivation would be prohibited, thus protecting grassland habitat for wildlife species. This 42,000 acres would complement The Nature Conservancy's conservation effort and other protected lands, especially the 45,000-acre Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. These areas of protected habitat would exist regardless of changes in agricultural policy or economy, which are known to affect the rate of development.

The Montana Natural Heritage Program has rated the Centennial Valley as one of the most significant natural landscapes in the State, a tribute to its intact ecological systems, expansive wetlands and diverse native fauna and flora, including a concentration of rare species. This habitat protection proposal would also help maintain the abundant diversity of animals and plants, while providing a greater potential for resource restoration.

Water Resources

Alternative A (No Action)

Under No Action, groundwater could be polluted with increased subdivision septic systems and loss of natural filtering systems of wetlands and grassland plant communities. When increased numbers of landowners manipulate or degrade creeks and streams, surface water would decrease in quality and quantity. Subdivision is considerably more hazardous to wetland resources than other land uses, such as agriculture. Habitat restoration will have no chance if the land base is sold in small tracts and houses are built. Development could also change drainage patterns or rate of surface runoff increasing soil erosion and nonpoint pollution. As more people move into an area and land is subdivided, water rights could be questioned and challenged to a greater extent than presently. Groundwater aquifers would receive more demand, possibly lowering the water levels.

The prospect of residential development in the Valley represents another potentially significant threat to the aquatic habitat. Sewage-derived nutrient additions to streams and lakes could have devastating effects on the aquatic ecology. Housing developments also can bring wetland drainage, water diversion, artificial ponds and introduction of nonnative fish and plants.

Alternative B (Preferred Alternative)

Under the Preferred Alternative, water resources would be protected from increased nonpoint pollution from subdivision, development, and draining of wetlands which are prohibited under conservation easements. Compatible agricultural practices such as livestock grazing or haying would continue while sodbusting would be prohibited. Landowners who voluntarily agree to restoration strategies could improve water quality through changes in livestock management. Water rights would remain with the landowner.

Effects on the Social and Economic Environment

Landownership/Land-use

Alternative A (No Action)

Under No Action, the resources studied by the Service for conservation easements in the Centennial Valley would remain in private ownership with no restrictions. Ranching opportunities could be reduced with landowners selling tracts in subdivided lots. Landowners that subdivide could increase their revenue by developing housing. With subdivision, tracts would potentially increase in value if there is desire to cluster housing or to keep open space for future housing development. The community will lose open space and aesthetic aspect of an open, less developed Valley. Subdivision and development will decrease land available for ranching and wildlife, and lead to reduced hunting and wildlife observation opportunities, and reduced eco-tourism dollars to local communities.

Alternative B (Preferred Alternative)

Under the Preferred Alternative, no new or additional land-use regulations would be created by the Service within the approved boundary of the conservation easement. Land under easements would be monitored to assure that habitat protected by the easement was not destroyed. The easement program would allow for compatible ranching to continue.

The Service views agriculturally-based and rural settings of the Centennial Valley as a mainstay in maintaining habitat integrity for wildlife. This habitat integrity would be changed dramatically if residential or commercial development began to take hold. This type of development tends to fragment wildlife habitat and generally increases costs to counties which have to provide services to remote developments. Under the Preferred Alternative, this proposal would maintain wildlife habitat integrity on a large landscape scale by helping to maintain open space in a rural setting.

Preventing subdivision and development could decrease the tax base. However, open space could be a net saver of tax dollars when compared to the revenues generated and costs of services associated with residential development (Haggerty 1996). The proposed action would affect location and distribution but not rate or density of human population growth. Positive effects may occur to eco-tourism from increased opportunities for wildlife viewing and hunting pursuits. Open space also may enhance the property value of adjoining land. Open space and undeveloped lands will become more valuable in the future as residential development encompasses more rural lands.

Once a project area boundary is approved, habitat protection will be through the purchase of conservation easements. It is the established policy of the Service to acquire interest in land from willing sellers. The conservation easements would be monitored pursuant to the National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act and other Federal laws and regulations as described in Chapter 1.

Effects on Public Use

Alternative A (No Action) Conservation easements would not be purchased and public use will be managed by the landowner.

Alternative B (Preferred Alternative) Conservation easements that are purchased on private tracts would not change the landowners right to manage public use.

Unavoidable Adverse Impacts

No direct or indirect unavoidable adverse impacts to the environment would result from the selection of Alternative B. The identification of an approved boundary for the conservation easement program would not result in unavoidable adverse impacts on the physical and biological environment. The selection of an approved boundary does not, by itself, affect any aspect of landownership or values. Once easements are 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 Irretrievable Commitments of Resources

Irreversible or irretrievable commitments of resources associated with the selection of an approved conservation easement program boundary would be nonexistent. Under the No Action Alternative, if grassland and wetland habitat were not protected and continue to decline, some plant and animal species could disappear over time, causing an irreversible and irretrievable loss. Once easements are acquired, irreversible and irretrievable commitments of funds to protect these lands (such as expenditure for fuel and staff for monitoring) would exist.

Short-term Uses Versus Long-term Productivity

The proposed conservation easement program is intended to maintain the long-term biological productivity of the grassland and wetland ecosystem of the Centennial Valley. The local short-term uses of the environment following acquisition include managing wildlife habitats and maintaining compatible agricultural practices. The resulting long-term productivity includes increased protection of endangered and threatened species and maintenance of biological diversity. The public would gain long-term opportunities for wildlife-dependent recreational activities.

Cumulative Impacts

Alternative A (No Action) Without the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program, current Service programs would continue such as the Partners for Wildlife Program. The Service would continue to work cooperatively with landowners to voluntarily improve habitat. However, the Service would not establish an easement program and the additional protection of grassland and wetland habitats would not be realized.

Alternative B (Preferred Alternative) With the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program, approximately 42,000 acres of privately-owned mountain foothills, wetlands, stream courses, grasslands, sagebrush-grassland, and sandhills habitat is projected to be perpetually protected. The proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program would have long-term positive cumulative impacts on wildlife habitats within the Valley. The protection of wildlife habitats within the proposed easement area would represent a cumulative benefit to the long-term conservation of migratory species, endangered and threatened species, and biological diversity. The proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program would protect a broad spectrum of native habitats and conserve important populations of migratory species and other native plants.

Chapter 5. Coordination and Environmental Review

Agency Coordination

The proposal for the establishment of the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program, through the authorization of an executive boundary consisting of 158,972 acres, of which 42,000 acres is proposed for conservation easements, has been discussed with landowners, conservation organizations, Federal, State and county governments, and other interested groups and individuals.

This Environmental Assessment addresses the protection of native grasslands through acquisition of conservation easements by the Service under the direction of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Funding for acquisition of conservation easements will be provided by the Land and Water Conservation Fund and, to a smaller degree, the Migratory Bird Conservation Fund.

Management activities associated with easements may be funded through other sources, such as The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, North American Wetland Conservation Act grants, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, and other private and public partners. Other endeavors include the Beaverhead Wetland Protection Project II.

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 objectives 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.

Distribution and Availability

Copies of the Environmental Assessment were sent to Federal and State legislative delegations, agencies, landowners, private groups, and other interested individuals (see Appendix B). Additional copies of these documents are available at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, 27820 Southside Centennial Road, Lima, Montana 59739 (406/276 3536, email: fw6_rw_red_rock_lakes_nwr@fws.gov) and at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Office, Land Acquisition and Planning Branch, P.O. Box 25486-DFC, Denver, Colorado 80225 (303/236 8145 ext. 658; fax 303/236 4792).

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Appendix A. Endangered and Threatened Species

Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program

Mammals:

	Gray Wolf	*Canis lupus* (E)
	Canada Lynx	*Lynx canadensis (T)*
	Grizzly Bear	*Ursus arctos horribilis (T)*

Birds:

	Bald Eagle	*Haliaeetus leucocephalus* (T)
	Whooping Crane	*Grus americanus* (E)

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

Appendix B. Mailing List

State Congressional Officials

Bill Tash
Debbie Barrett

State of Montana

State of Montana, Office of the Governor
Environmental Quality Council
Montana Coop Wildlife Research Unit
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Montana Historical Society
Montana Natural Heritage Program
Montana State Library

US Government

US Congress

Senator Conrad Burns
Senator Max Baucus
Representative Dennis Rehberg

Department of Agriculture

Natural Resources Conservation Service
Farm Service Agency
U.S. Forest Service

Department of the Interior

Bureau of Reclamation
Bureau of Land Management
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- Ecological Services
- Partners for Wildlife
- RE-Benton Lake NWR

County Offices

County Commissioners
Conservation District

Groups

Alliance for the Wild Rockies
Craighead Wildlife-Wildlands Instate
Defenders of Wildlife
Ducks Unlimited
Ecology Center
Montana Audubon Council
Montana Chapter of the Wildlife Society
Montana Wilderness Society
Montana Wildlife Federation
Montana Environmental Information Center
Montana Wilderness Association
National Audubon Society
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation
Sierra Club
The Nature Conservancy of Montana
Trout Unlimited Montana Council

Individuals

Appendix C. List of Scientific and Common Names Used in the Text

Plants

Aspen	*Populous tremuloides*
Big sagebrush	*Artemesia tridentata*
Bluegrass	*Poa spp.*
Bulrush	*Scirpus spp.*
Cattail	*Typha spp.*
Idaho fescue	*Festuca idahoensis*
Letterman's needlegrass	*Stipa lettermanii*
Mealy primrose	*Primula incana*
Milfoil	*Myriophyllum exalbescens*
Platte cinquefoil	*Potentilla plattnesis*
Pondweed	*Potamogeton spp.*
Reed canarygrass	*Phalaris arundinacea*
Rocky mountain iris	*Iris missouriensis*
Rushes	*Juncus spp.*
Sand wildrye	*Elymus flavescens*
Sagebrush	*Artemesia spp.*
Sedges	*Carex spp.*
Tufted hairgrass	*Deschampsia cespitosa*
Willow	*Salix spp.*
Wolf's willow	*Salix wolfii var. wolfii*

Fish

Arctic grayling	*Thymallus arcticus*
Brook trout	*Salvalinus fontinalis*
Brown trout	*Salmo trutta*
Burbot	*Lota lota*
Longnose sucker	*Catostomus catostomus*
Mottled sculpin	*Cottus bairdi*
Rainbow trout	*Oncorhynchus mykiss*
Westslope cutthroat trout	*Oncorhynchus clarki lewisi*
White sucker	*Catostomus commersoni*
Yellowstone cutthroat trout	*Oncorhynchus clarki clarki*

Herptofauna

Common garter snake	*Thamnophis sirtalis*
Gopher snake	*Pituophis catenifer*
Long-nosed salamander	*Ambystoma macrodactlyum*
Painted turtle	*Chrysemys picta*
Spotted frog	*Rana pretiosa*
Western chorus frog	*Pseudacris triseriata*
Western rattlesnake	*Crotalus viridus*
Western terrestrial garter snake	*Thamnophis elegans*
Western toad	*Bufo boreas*

Mammals

Badgers	*Taxidea taxus*
Beaver	*Castor canadensis*
Canada lynx	*Lynx canadensis*
Coyote	*Canis latrans*
Elk	*Cervus elaphus*
Fisher	*Martes pennanti*
Fringed myotis	*Myotis thysanodes*
Grizzly bear	*Ursus arctos horribilis*
Ground squirrels	*Spermophilus elegans*
Long - tailed weasel	*Mustela frenata*
Merriam's shrew	*Sorex merriami*
Mice	*Peromyscus spp.* *Onychomys leucogaster* *Reithrodontomys megalotis*
Mink	*Mustela vison*
Mule deer	*Odocoileus hemionus*
Moose	*Alces alces*
Muskrat	*Ondatra zibethicus*
Gray wolf	*Canis lupus*
Preble's shrew	*Sorex preblei*
Pygmy rabbit	*Brachylagus idahoensis*
Pronghorn	*Antilocapra americana*
Red fox	*Vulpes vulpes*
River otter	*Lutra canadensis*
Striped skunk	*Mephitis mephitis*
Shrews	*Sorex spp.*
Spotted bat	*Euderma maculatum*
Townsend's big-eared bat	*Corynorhinus tonsendi*
Voles	*Microtus spp.*
Wolverine	*Gulo gulo*
Bison	*Bison bison*

Birds

Bald eagle	*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*
Black crowned night-heron	*Nycticorax nycticorax*
Black tern	*Chilidonias niger*
Boreal owl	*Aegolius funereus*
Ferruginous Hawk	*Buteo regalis*
Forster's tern	*Sterna forsteri*
Franklin's gull	*Larus pipixcan*
Gadwall	*Anas strepera*
Great gray owl	*Strix nebulosa*
Lesser scaup	*Aythya affinis*
Long-billed curlew	*Numenius americanus*
Mallard	*Anas platyrynchos*
Northern harrier	*Circus cyaneus*
Northern pintail	*Anas acuta*
Northern shoveler	*Anas clypeata*
Peregrine falcon	*Falco pereginus*
Sage grouse	*Centrocercus urophasianus*
Sandhill crane	*Grus canadensis*
Short-eared owl	*Asio flammeus*
Trumpeter swan	*Cygnus buccinator*
White-faced ibis	*Plegadis chichi*

Land Protection Plan

Centennial Valley
Conservation Easement Program

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Introduction

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) has completed the Environmental Assessment for the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program in Beaverhead County, Montana. The Environmental Assessment evaluates the environmental effects of establishing an approved boundary for acquiring conservation easements in Centennial Valley. The Service selected the Preferred Alternative B establishing the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement boundary of 158,972 acres. The Service intends on purchasing or receiving donated conservation easements from willing landowners of approximately 42,000 acres within the approved boundary (Figure 1). Under the Preferred Alternative, the Service proposes to purchase conservation easements primarily on high quality wetland, grassland, and mountain frontage not only for waterfowl, but also for the myriad of other bird species, plants, and mammals that rely on this habitat as well as the overall protection of the critically declining intact intermountain landscapes. The Service views agriculturally-based and rural settings of the Centennial Valley as a mainstay in maintaining habitat integrity for wildlife. This habitat integrity would be changed dramatically if residential or commercial development began to take hold. Such changes have occurred elsewhere in Montana and the rural west.

This Land Protection Plan provides a general description of the operations and management of the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program, as outlined in the Preferred Alternative of the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program Environmental Assessment.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has developed this Land Protection Plan during the planning process to provide local landowners, governmental agencies, and the interested public with a general understanding of the anticipated management approaches for the proposed easement program. The purpose of the Land Protection Plan is to present a broad overview of the Service's proposed management approach to wildlife and associated habitats, public uses, interagency coordination, public outreach and other operational needs.

Project Location

The Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program area extends from the upper headwaters of the Centennial Valley to the western downstream end at Lima Reservoir. The proposed easement area harbors miles of riparian (river or stream) corridors and critical acres of wetlands that make up a core component of wildlife habitat. Private lands lay primarily along the Valley bottom and low foothills, while public lands make up more of the mid-to-upper slopes of the Centennial Mountains to the south and Gravelly Mountains to the north. The Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge protects and manages valley-bottom wetlands, meadows, and uplands which make up a key habitat component at the upper end of the Valley.

The elevations of the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program area range from over 6,400 feet at Lima Reservoir, to 6,600 feet at the Lower Lake Dam, to over 6,800 feet at the upper end of the Valley in Alaska Basin. The project area is primarily a mixture of grassland, sagebrush-grassland, wetlands, and mountain foothills. The public land is primarily owned by the State of Montana and the Federal government. Agencies within the Federal government that manage lands are the Bureau of Land Management (Dillon Resource Area) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge).

Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program Purpose

The Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program encompasses some of the highest quality remaining intermountain wet meadow and wetlands within the western states. Most valleys and foothills in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem Area and near the Centennial Valley are being developed or subdivided to provide second homes. The Centennial Valley remains biologically intact and its habitats have not been fragmented by housing developments. Given the diversity of plants and animals that rely on this habitat, the ability of this project to protect the habitat integrity in perpetuity is critical. The purposes of this project are:

- to protect native wet meadows, wetlands, uplands, and mountain foothills from future conversion to second and recreational home uses;
- to protect habitat integrity by preventing fragmentation;
- to preserve key wilderness values and viewshed throughout and adjacent to the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge;
- to promote landscape integrity in order to maintain, sustain, and enhance the historic plant, animal, and insect biodiversity of native prairie habitats, and associated ranching heritage;
- to minimize noxious weed infestations from soil disturbance, road building, and increased traffic resulting from rural housing development;
- to a lesser extent, to minimize future demands on local government resources necessitated by providing services associated with increasing rural development.

Threats to and Status of the Resources

The rural character of the Refuge and the Centennial Valley as a whole is likely to undergo substantial change in the next 10 to 20 years. The Service believes that the proposed conservation easement initiative is a positive effort towards perpetual support of wildlife values by protecting large tracts of private lands from the type of housing development that would undermine these values and fragment habitats.

The Service, as well as local conservation groups, and people in the region have voiced concern with the fragmentation of habitats in other areas of Montana. This loss is due primarily to the conversion of lands, once significant to wildlife, to summer homes and associated human use pressures. For example, residential development in the Valley presents a potentially significant threat to the aquatic ecosystem. Sewage-derived nutrient additions to streams and lakes could have devastating effects on the aquatic ecology. Housing developments also can bring wetland drainage, water diversion, weeds, and introduction of nonnative fish into artificial ponds from which they can move into streams.

Another key result is habitat fragmentation caused by land subdivision and residential development. Almost 100,000 acres in the Centennial are privately-owned and the majority of this land remains as large ranches. However, given the current trends of low cattle prices and a strong market for scenic western properties, Centennial Valley ranches can be vulnerable to sale and subdivision for recreational development. The subdivision process is not difficult; under Montana law, land may be split into lots of 160 acres or greater without local review or approval. Moreover, with no county zoning in place, small-lot subdivisions are possible. In 1993, for example, the Beaverhead County Commissioners approved a controversial 5-lot subdivision adjacent to the headquarters of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

Refuge Administration

The proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program would be administered by the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge, 28 miles east of Monida, Montana and adjacent to the conservation easement area. Easements would be monitored by Refuge staff.

Easement monitoring can increase the workload of existing Refuge staffing in the form of biological monitoring and may result in additional costs. However, if most landowners abide by the covenants of a conservation easement, monitoring costs should be minimized. Initial first year oversight and monitoring costs incurred in launching the program will range from $15,000 to $25,000, but should decrease over time to about $10,000 per year.

Areas of Management Focus and Habitat Management

Conservation of existing habitat is the key focus for the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program. In general, the Service views the Centennial Valley easement program as compatible with current ranching management practices, such as grazing. Thus, the Centennial Valley easement program can help maintain the rapidly disappearing agricultural way of life and provide for management practices and natural processes that benefit a wide diversity of wildlife species.

The proposed conservation easement initiative supports the perpetual conservation of wildlife values by protecting large tracts of private lands from the type of housing development that would undermine these values and fragment habitats. Because the Centennial Valley can be thought of as interconnected habitats, lands not adjacent to the Refuge would be evaluated based on their relationship to key habitats or wildlife use patterns. The proposed easement program would prevent extensive residential development, protect wetland values, and secure open space. In so doing, the easements would also help protect air and water quality and maintain a large landscape which provides key wildlife habitats. The combination of numerous wetlands, riparian areas, sandhills, and grass/sagebrush uplands creates the diversity for which this area is highly regarded. The wetlands and riparian areas support an entire suite of plants and animals, while the grassland/sagebrush and sandhills support yet another suite of plants and animals, and in many cases, the biodiversity of this area relies on a combination of resources from wetlands and uplands. Maintaining these habitat values also helps preserve the interconnected wildlife values of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge and the upper Centennial Valley.

Resource Monitoring

With the purchase of conservation easements, the Service's role is to monitor the purchased easements to ensure that landowners comply with the easement agreement so that the property does not undergo subdivision, development for home sites or conversion of native rangeland to cropland.

Other types of resource monitoring surveys will only be conducted with the permission of the landowner. These surveys may be done with the cooperation of the landowner, non-governmental organizations, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, National Biological Survey, universities, and/or volunteers.

The Valley area exhibits excellent species diversity, from waterfowl to great gray owls, grizzly bears, moose, Franklin's gulls, long-billed curlews, Arctic grayling, peregrine falcons, westslope cutthroat trout, and ferruginous hawks. Two hundred sixty-one birds species, or approximately 70 percent of those found in Montana, inhabit the Valley. At least 150 species of birds breed in the Valley. The Valley soils give rise to a diverse array of plant communities, including some of considerable scientific importance. Location records from the *Montana Natural Heritage Program* (1996) indicate 41 species of special concern, including 5 that may be globally rare and 7 that are known in Montana only from the Valley (Povilitis and Mahr, 1998). Vegetation in the Valley sandhills represents one of Montana's most intact native plant associations, and includes at least five state-rare species: Sand wildrye, Platte cinquefoil, Mealy primrose, Wolf's willow, and Letterman's needlegrass. With the high diversity of species found within the Valley, a resource monitoring program will benefit the conservation of the biodiversity of Centennial Valley.

Public Use Activities

Service conservation easements are designed primarily to maintain habitat integrity and not necessarily to change management of private lands. Management improvements can be accomplished on a voluntary partnership basis through the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, a Service program, which assists landowners in implementing and completing habitat restoration and improvement projects. Private lands protected by Service conservation easements remain in private ownership, and public use or other management activities outside the scope of the easement remains at the landowners discretion.

Habitat Protection Methods

The Service is proposing to establish the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program by purchasing or receiving in donation, conservation easements from willing landowners, consisting of approximately 42,000 acres of private land adjacent to or in proximity to the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. The Service proposes to purchase conservation easements primarily on high quality wetland, grassland, and mountain frontage not only for waterfowl, but also for the myriad of other bird species, plants and mammals that rely on this habitat as well as the overall protection of the critically declining intact intermountain landscapes.

The Service views agriculturally-based and rural settings of the Centennial Valley as a mainstay in maintaining habitat integrity for wildlife. This habitat integrity would be changed dramatically if residential or commercial development began to take hold. Such changes have occurred elsewhere in Montana and the rural west. This type of development tends to fragment wildlife habitat and generally increases costs to counties which have to provide services to remote developments. The development can also lead to water quality issues, change big game migration patterns, and degrade wetlands. The goal of this project is to maintain wildlife habitat integrity on a large landscape scale by helping to maintain open space in a rural setting.

The Service proposes to acquire these conservation easements principally by using funds appropriated under the Land and Water Conservation Act, which derives funds from royalties paid for offshore oil and gas leasing. Such funds are intended for land and water conservation projects. The funds are not derived from general taxes.

Planning and Coordination

The proposal for the establishment of the Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program, through the authorization of an executive boundary consisting of approximately 158,972 acres, with the proposed easement acreage of 42,000, has been discussed with landowners, conservation organizations, Federal, State and county governments, and other interested groups and individuals.

The proposal and associated National Environmental Policy Act documentation addresses the protection of native grasslands, primarily through acquisition of conservation easements, by the Service under the direction of the National Wildlife Refuge System.

An open house was held in Lima, Montana on December 9, 1999. Approximately 20 landowners, citizens, and elected representatives attended. Most people expressed positive comments towards the project which would maintain the present landscape and the rural lifestyle. Through a partnership with the Service, The Nature Conservancy (TNC), a private non-profit organization, has contacted landowners, outdoor users, other public and elected persons, and many have expressed interest and a desire to protect the Centennial Valley from the pressures brought about by housing development.

For the last three years, TNC has been working in the Centennial Valley with the goal of purchasing conservation easements for the protection of the Valley's biodiversity. To this end, TNC has also performed some baseline work on plant and animal inventory of the landscape. No major issues have surfaced to-date.

Management activities associated with easements may be funded through other sources, such as The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, North American Wetland Conservation Act grants, Partners for Fish and Wildlife, and other private and public partners. Other endeavors include the Beaverhead Wetland Protection Project II.

Sociocultural Considerations

Lakeview is the only community within the project area and consists of approximately 10 people, and another two communities (Monida and Lima) of approximately 100 people border of the project area. Dillon, the county seat of Beaverhead County, lies 60 miles to the north of the project area and has a population of about 4,000. Much of the rural population are involved in hay and livestock production. Private lands are also used for hunting a wide variety of game species. Most Refuge visitors participate in hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, photography, bicycling, camping and canoeing.

Historically, concern has been expressed about the amount of tax generated to the counties when such land protection programs take place. Since this is an easement program, the land enrolled in the program does not change hands and, therefore, the taxes paid by the landowner are not affected. Since development of rural landscapes often leads to increased demand for services and higher costs to rural counties, any perceived reduction in the tax base would be offset since the county would not incur the expense of providing services to rural developments. The use of conservation easements serve an additional function as easements preclude the necessity for county zoning in the program area. Open space also may enhance the property value of adjoining land. Open space and undeveloped lands will become more valuable in the future as residential development encompasses more rural lands.

Summary of Proposed Action

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposes to acquire conservation easements on approximately 42,000 acres of privately-owned lands within the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement boundary consisting of 158,972 acres. These lands consist of mountain foothills, wetlands, stream courses, grasslands, and sagebrush-grassland and sandhills from willing participants. Table 1 and Figure 2 summarizes the protection priorities. The Service believes these are the minimum interests necessary to preserve the uplands, wetland and riparian habitats for the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement Program.

The properties have been prioritized for conservation easement acquisition using the following criteria:

- biological significance;
- existing and potential threats;
- significance of the area to refuge management and administration; and
- existing commitments to purchase or protect land.

Priority I Lands: Priority I lands (See Table 1 and Figure 2) within the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement boundary identify ownerships that encompass upland drainage and wetland/riparian habitats associated with Red Rock Creek and its tributaries in Alaska Basin.

Priority II Lands: Priority II lands (See Table 1 and Figure 2) within the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement boundary identify ownerships that provide important upland habitat and buffer the core wetland habitat of Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

Priority III Lands: Targeted Priority III lands (See Table 1 and Figure 2) within the proposed Centennial Valley Conservation Easement boundary identify ownerships that provide important upland habitat and wetland/ riparian habitat to the west of the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. Although these habitats are important, they are considered lower in acquisition priority because they do not directly impact water quality and wildlife movement patterns in and around the Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

Table 1 depicts the habitat protection priority (I, II, and III) of properties identified for inclusion in the easement program. It is Service policy to include entire ownerships (mainly for appraisal purposes) in the project area even though only a portion may contain wildlife habitat of interest to the Service.

Table 1 Summarization of Priority I Tracts

Priority	Name	Approximate Tract Acres
I	Alaska Basin Grazing Association	1,488
	Centennial Livestock	4,214
	Gray-Taft, Caroline	45
	Heppenheimer Trust	39
	Huntsman Ranch	2,272
	John Taft Corp	993
	Lee Martinell CO	472
	Matador Cattle CO	156
	Running Deer Ranch	279
	Rush, Keith	357
	Wainwright, Carroll/Nina	393
	Walsh	628
	Walsh	2,386
	Walsh	636

Table 1 Summarization of Priority II Tracts

Priority	Name	Approximate Tract Acres
II	Allen, Paul	2,384
	Centennial Livestock	3,921
	Centennial Livestock	82
	Conservation End Fund	38
	Coppock, Walter/Ruth	40
	Dennis, Daniel	283
	High Mtn Ranches	1,249
	Huntsman Ranches	2,873
	Lee Martinell CO	2,155
	Matador Cattle CO	278
	Matador Cattle CO	4,389
	Matador Cattle CO	8,465
	Matador Cattle CO	465
	Matador Cattle CO	330
	Ruby Dell Ranch	64
	Ruby Dell Ranch	618
	Saier, Volker/Lois	161
	Saier, Volker/Lois	618
	Scheid, Gerald H.	1,997
	Schuelt	539
	Stibal Ranch	3,134
	Stibal Ranch	320
	Stibal Ranch	38
	Stibal Ranch	1,163
	Stibal Ranch	123
	Taft, Melody Ann	411
	Wolf	74

Table 1 Summarization of Priority III Tracts

Priority	Name	Approximate Tract Acres
III	Delany, Peggy	814
	Duffner Ranches	983
	Duffner Ranches	1,456
	Duffner Ranches	1,089
	High Mtn Ranches	256
	High Mtn Ranches	3,200
	Huntsman Ranches	1,292
	J Bar L	410
	J Bar L	736
	Keith Fairbanks Ranches	40
	Lach, Montgomery	634
	Lee Martinell CO	78
	Matador Cattle CO	13,364
	Matador Cattle CO	661
	Munday, James/Elaine	734
	Munday, James/Elaine	963
	Munday, James/Elaine	238
	Raffety, Mike/Mark	305
	Raffety, Mike/Mark	167
	Robison, William/Norma	438
	Schuelt, David	4,870
	Stibal Ranch	1,814
	Thomas Family Trust	633
	Thomas Family Trust	331
	Trapp Livestock	662
	Trapp Livestock	653
	Water Users Irrigation	121

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email: FW6_RW_Red_Rock_Lakes_NWR@fws.gov

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

For Refuge Information
1 800/344 WILD

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