



MONTANA ASSOCIATION OF LAND TRUSTS

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Guest Column
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Key Discussion Coming Up on Important Wildlife Plan

The Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy is a long title for what's probably the most important wildlife management program you've never heard of.

The Strategy is important for what it does and what it represents, and also for how it is intended to work. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has scheduled a meeting to find out how Montana sportsmen and sportswomen, landowners, watershed groups, farm and ranch organizations and others think the Strategy should be implemented and what the Strategy should accomplish, and if you're interested, you're also invited. The meeting will take place on Thursday, Nov. 1, from 9:30 AM to 4:00 PM at the Great Northern Hotel in Helena. Lunch will be provided, but you need to RSVP by Oct. 19. Call Betty Warren at FWP at 444-9089 to get registered.

Before more information is provided about the meeting or the Strategy, a little history is in order.

For years, Congressionally approved federal programs have provided states with funding to help manage wildlife. While those traditional funds are still available, Congress and the federal government recently added an intriguing wrinkle into the equation. In 2001, Congress and the Bush Administration created a State Wildlife Grant program to help fund programs for wildlife needing specific conservation management. To be eligible for a State Wildlife Grant a state had to prepare a Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy. All 50 states have completed state-specific conservation strategies, and the 50 state plans taken as a whole possibly represent the single most important wildlife management plan in U.S. history.

Montana completed its Strategy in late 2005. FWP personnel have done an impressive job of categorizing the 60 state species – birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish and mussels – “of greatest conservation need” for inclusion in the Strategy. Some of these species are iconic in Montana: westslope cutthroat trout, grizzly bear and trumpeter swan. Others are far less known: pearl dace (fish), spiny softshell (turtle) and pygmy rabbit. The FWP report does an excellent job identifying the species, its range in Montana and its habitat. FWP also documents the community types – habitats such as grassland complexes and riparian and wetlands – in greatest conservation need.

There seems to be little doubt there are wildlife species in Montana that need some special attention. We have three Endangered Species Act candidate species, three other species – Yellowstone cutthroat trout, arctic grayling and lynx – have been proposed (and denied) for ESA listing, and other species seem to be in dangerous decline. One recent report indicated Montana populations of killdeer have declined by 80

percent, great blue herons have declined by 81 percent and even the blue-winged teal numbers are down by 72 percent.

Montana's land trusts have volunteered to play a supportive role in implementing the Strategy because a large portion of the Strategy is centered around private land conservation, and private land conservation is basic to the work of land trusts.

If you care about Montana's wildlife and conservation, you should care about this Strategy and this Nov. 1 meeting.

Even if you don't care about wildlife populations or conservation strategies, quite frankly, you should care about the *lack* of wildlife populations and conservation strategies. Economic and state primacy stress and strife and landowner concerns associated with wolves, blackfooted ferrets and grizzly bears has been documented all too well Montana. The best bet Montanans have to avoid future ESA listings – and to avoid the associated federal mandates, uncertainty and frustration – is to properly and comprehensively implement the Strategy.

That's where you, and the Nov. 1 meeting, come in. The Nov. 1 discussion in Helena will be a facilitated conversation to explore options and directions to ensure the Strategy's success. Success comes in many forms. Success means conserved wildlife habitat. Success means stopping decline in wildlife numbers. Success means enhanced state wildlife management primacy. Success means economically healthy communities and industries. Success means landowner and farmer/rancher appreciation, recognition, understanding and involvement. And all this means success is essential.

That's why this Strategy is so important. And that's why you should attend and participate in the Nov. 1 meeting.

(Glenn Marx is the executive director of the Montana Association of Land Trusts)