

# LANDS ADMINISTRATION BRANCH

Lands Administration personnel continued work on several projects initiated under Strategic Habitat Plan (SHP) goals and objectives. Communication and coordination with Aquatic and Terrestrial Habitat Biologists, Habitat and Access Maintenance Section personnel, and personnel from Fish and Wildlife Division continued on several projects. Part of the function of Lands Administration is to acquire property rights by application of various strategies including fee title purchases, conservation easements, grass banks, leases and other agreements. Other Lands duties include property rights monitoring, project coordination with department personnel, land trust organizations, and with other agencies and entities, and landowner contacts.

## Conservation Easement Projects

Interest in conservation easements increased dramatically in Wyoming primarily due to enhanced federal tax laws. Tax benefits were expanded for donors of conservation easements, and the new laws made conservation easements viable options for landowners with more moderate incomes. Individual deductions increased, as did the number of years landowners could claim benefits.

Interest in the Department's conservation easement program also gained momentum over the past several years due in a large part to communication between field personnel and landowners. Lands Administration personnel have considered more than twenty conservation easement proposals in recent years. Several proposals failed to advance beyond landowner discussions due to prohibitive costs or landowner preferences. Other proposals are in various stages of consideration by regional personnel, and the Department is actively pursuing some projects.

## Medicine Lodge Sale and Conservation Easement

The Commission's most recent conservation easement is in place on a portion of what was once part of the Medicine Lodge Wildlife Habitat Management Area. Based on recommendations from Cody region personnel, the Commission declared approximately 209 acres on the periphery of the WHMA surplus and no longer necessary for the wildlife habitat purposes for which it was purchased. The Commission did, however, retain public access rights and a conservation easement on the property. The property was sold through a sealed bid process and the proceeds may be used for conservation purposes.

## Flying A Ranch Conservation Easement

The Flying A Ranch has been participating in the Department's Private Lands Public Wildlife, Walk-in Access Program for several years. Discussions between local game wardens and the Britain family led to a conservation easement project on approximately 3,000 acres of private lands in the southern Big Horn Mountains (Figure 1). The landowners also understood the need for hunter access for elk management in the area, and have agreed to include seasonal public access in the easement. The easement's private lands will provide access to thousands of acres of state and public lands.

The project was the first conservation easement to receive a funding commitment from the Wyoming Wildlife and Natural Resource Trust Account Board (WWNRT). Other contributors include the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), and the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program (FRPP).

- Personnel have considered more than twenty conservation easement proposals.
- Conservation easement project on approximately 3,000 acres of private lands in the southern Big Horn Mountains.
- A coalition of six landowners offered to donate conservation easements.
- The JIO may also consider fee title acquisitions.
- Funding for conservation easements continue.



Figure 1. Britain's Flying A Ranch Conservation Easement.

**North Fork Ranch Conservation Easement**

Negotiations continued with the owners of the North Fork Ranch for a conservation easement. The North Fork Ranch is located approximately 8 miles northwest of Lander in an area rapidly transitioning from traditional agricultural land use practices to rural home site developments (Figure 2). The ranch supports important habitat for mule deer, elk, pronghorn, sage grouse and other wildlife. The property is located about a mile east of the Department’s Mexican Creek Conservation Easement. The project should be completed by the end of the year.



Figure 2. Hansen’s North Fork Ranch Conservation Easement.

**Red Butte Landowner Coalition Conservation Easements**

A coalition of six landowners offered to donate conservation easements on lands situated between the Commission’s Mexican Creek Conservation Easement and the proposed easement on the North Fork Ranch. For a variety of reasons, this progressive group of landowners came together to permanently restrict development on their lands. Among these reasons was concern about the increasing rate of development of private lands along the North Fork of the Popo Agie River. The group was also aware of the development restrictions planned for the North Fork Ranch and those in place at Mexican Creek (Figures 3,4,5).



Figure 3. Red Butte Conservation Easement – View of Red Butte Area.



Figure 4. Red Butte Conservation Easement – View toward Mexican Creek CE.



Figure 5. Red Butte Conservation Easement – View above Mexican Creek.

The RMEF is assisting with the donation process, and it is anticipated the project will be completed by the end of the year. Approximately 1,000 acres of private lands will have permanent development restrictions as a result of the project. A corridor for migrating wildlife will be conserved on the east slope of the Wind River Mountains.

### **Cooperator Funding**

Funding for conservation easements continues to be a primary limiting factor facing the Department and other entities such as The Nature Conservancy, RMEF, and others. Cooperative funding is and will continue to be an important component to the Department's conservation easement efforts. For recent projects, the Commission has been fortunate to have the support and funding assistance from numerous organizations such as TNC, RMEF, the WWNRT, the Wildlife Heritage Foundation of Wyoming, Bowhunters of Wyoming, the Farm and Ranch Land Protection Program, Safari Club International, and the Wyoming Governor's Big Game License Coalition. Additional funding sources are constantly being sought.

The Johan Interagency Mitigation and Reclamation Office (JIO) is charged with the selection and monitoring of offsite mitigation projects in the vicinity of the Jonah Natural Gas Field. The JIO has determined that conservation easements will qualify for funding as wildlife mitigation projects. The JIO may also consider fee title acquisitions. Lands Administration personnel have been assisting the JIO in the development of a property rights strategy to help evaluate, prioritize and select projects.

### **Ongoing Projects**

- Boulder Rearing Station - Supply Ditch Reroute
- Mexican Creek – Landowner Agreements
- Property Rights Monitoring
- Red Canyon Access Road and Exchange of Grazing Leases