

to the newly acquired Whiskey Ridge CE, completed in 2020, and a CE here would further complement improving access and habitat enhancement across this area. In addition to the potential conservation footprint, it facilitates improved recreational and hunting access to ~15,400 acres of DNRC and BLM lands (including the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument),

Most notably, this property and associated breaks provide important habitat and access to the Southern Missouri River Breaks (HD 482) bighorn sheep herd which constitutes an important ecological and recreational resource to Montana. The Missouri Breaks sheep herd comprises of a portion of the state’s largest metapopulation of bighorn sheep (>1,000 individuals estimated between HDs 482 and 680). Like the Whiskey Ridge CE, funding would come from Habitat Montana and potentially the Wild Sheep Foundation, with possible additional partnerships. The CE would include typical terms as other FWP CEs, but also prohibit domestic sheep/goats on the deeded parcels, ensuring conservation and hunting access to these lands in perpetuity.

7. Statewide Habitat Criteria:

- a) Community Types (SWAP 2015) comprising the property and approximate percentage makeup (Tier I Community Types in **Bold**).
 - Developed (Other Roads, Homestead, etc.) – 41 acres or 3%
 - Introduced Upland Vegetation – 2 acres or 0.1%
 - Badlands, Cliffs, and Outcrop – 28 acres or 2.1%
 - **Sagebrush-Steppe/Sagebrush-dominated Shrubland** – 742 acres or 57.4%
 - Greasewood Flat – 23 acres or 1.8%
 - **Lowland/Prairie Grassland** – 38 acres or 2.9%
 - **Conifer-dominated Forest and Woodland** – 309 acres or 23.9%
 - **Floodplain and Riparian** – 8 acres or 0.6%
 - Total % Tier I Community Types: – 1097 acres or 84.9%
- b) The property includes 0.95 miles of Missouri Riverfront, with an additional 1.3 miles of intermittent stream among all three parcels. The property contains approximately 8 acres of riparian habitat and floodplain.
- c) There are 104 acres winter wheat located along the Missouri River bottom portion of the property; due to difficulty of transporting harvest out of the breaks, the landowner would like to convert the entire field to wildlife habitat (i.e., unharvested sainfoin or other forage species, potential upland game bird project, etc.).

8. Project-Level Criteria:

- a) **Site-Specific Wildlife Values:**

As illustrated above, the proposed Stafford Ferry CE is made up of majority Tier I Community Types. As such, it provides important year-round and winter range for a variety of big game species—mule deer, white-tailed deer, pronghorn, elk, and bighorn sheep. Sharp-tailed grouse, mourning dove, wild turkey, and pheasant also inhabit the property. Additionally, the CE would provide potential habitat for the

following species of greatest conservation need: Black-tailed prairie dog, dwarf shrew, Merriam's shrew, Preble's shrew, Townsend's big-eared bat, spotted bat, hoary bat, little brown myotis, fringed myotis, swift fox, American bittern, Baird's sparrow, black tern, black-billed cuckoo, bobolink, Brewer's sparrow, burrowing owl, Cassin's finch, chestnut-collared longspur, Clark's nutcracker, common tern, ferruginous hawk, Forster's tern, golden eagle, Great Blue Heron, Greater sage-grouse, green-tailed towhee, horned grebe, loggerhead shrike, long-billed curlew, McCown's longspur, mountain plover, northern goshawk, peregrine falcon, pinyon jay, red-headed woodpecker, sharptailed grouse, Sprague's pipit, veery, white-faced ibis, Great Plains toad, Northern leopard frog, plains spadefoot, greater short-horned lizard, milksnake, spiny softshell, and western hog-nosed snake.

The majority of sagebrush-grassland habitat in Montana is privately-owned, and the single greatest threat to this habitat is cultivation, which has increased substantially in central and eastern Montana over the past 30 years. Therefore, it is imperative to conserve as much native sagebrush-grassland as possible. Additionally, the primary land use in this area is cattle grazing. Poor grazing management can negatively impact sagebrush-grassland systems, thus responsible grazing is a key management strategy important to maintaining the health of this landscape. A CE management plan would implement a rest-rotation grazing system to ensure healthy long-term range conditions. With the leased lands tied to this CE, the footprint for FWP's Minimum Standards for Grazing could expand to over 5,700 acres managed for habitat conservation, livestock and wildlife forage, and cover.

b) Threat Status:

IMMINENT – Due to the landowner's age, it is more difficult for him to travel from Texas to Montana to manage the property as he wishes. He has expressed interest in selling the property in the next few years. He would like to see the habitat values, particularly for bighorn sheep, conserved in perpetuity.

c) Focal Priority:

- The entire property boundary lies within the 2015 SWAP Tier I Middle Missouri and Lower Missouri Aquatic Focus Areas. The property also contains four Tier I Terrestrial Community Types: Sagebrush Steppe/Sagebrush-dominated Shrubland, Lowland/Prairie Grassland, Conifer-dominated Forest and Woodland, and Wetland/Riparian.
- This project is adjacent to the recently completed Whiskey Ridge CE, purchased in partnership with the Wild Sheep Foundation, Northwest Energy, the Great Falls Chapter Safari Club International, and others. This property has the same potential partners/funding sources.
- This project falls within Priority Area D (which includes Fergus County) of Montana's State Action Plan to protect big game migration routes and winter ranges, particularly for pronghorn, mule deer, and elk, in response to Secretarial Order (SO) 3362, signed in 2018.

d) **Geographic Effectiveness:**

The project encompasses four parcels, but these parcels are connected via adjacent BLM lands. As mentioned previously, a portion of the property is adjacent to the Whiskey Ridge CE. The adjoining BLM lands encompass not only the UMBNM, but two Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs): The Dog Creek South WSA and the Stafford WSA; the latter of which is adjacent to a portion of the proposed project (Figure 1).

e) **Contribute to hunting and fishing opportunity and other recreation:**

The landowners have traditionally allowed very limited public hunting; primarily to friends and few locals. The landowners are open and agreeable to the public access terms of FWP CEs. Adjacent BLM and DNRC lands receive relatively high use from a mixture of deer, elk, bighorn sheep, turkey, and upland game bird hunters, as well as hikers and Missouri River Breaks enthusiasts. Several avenues for legal access exist to these deeded parcels via county roads Stafford Ferry and Whiskey Ridge or via public land. While most of the surrounding public land is already accessible, a CE on this property better facilitates public access to these public lands.

f) **Management Considerations:**

The property is generally well-maintained with few issues. However, the implementation of a new rest-rotation grazing system to meet FWP's Minimum Standards for Grazing may require rangeland infrastructure improvements (e.g., fencing, water development). While additional costs would accrue associated with this infrastructure, these improvements would lead to considerable habitat benefits and improvement as well as conformity to wildlife-friendly fencing, better enabling the Department to meet its obligations associated with the SO 3362 State Action Plan.

The easternmost parcel off Whiskey Ridge is not adjacent to the county road; rather there is an open access easement from the county road to and through the parcel. The access easement would be open to the public with no further steps needed to ensure access.

Figure 1. Location of the proposed Stafford Ferry CE, in relation to Winifred, HDs 417 and 426, and the Whiskey Ridge CE. Also show leased lands associated with each CE and proximity to the Stafford Wilderness Study Area.

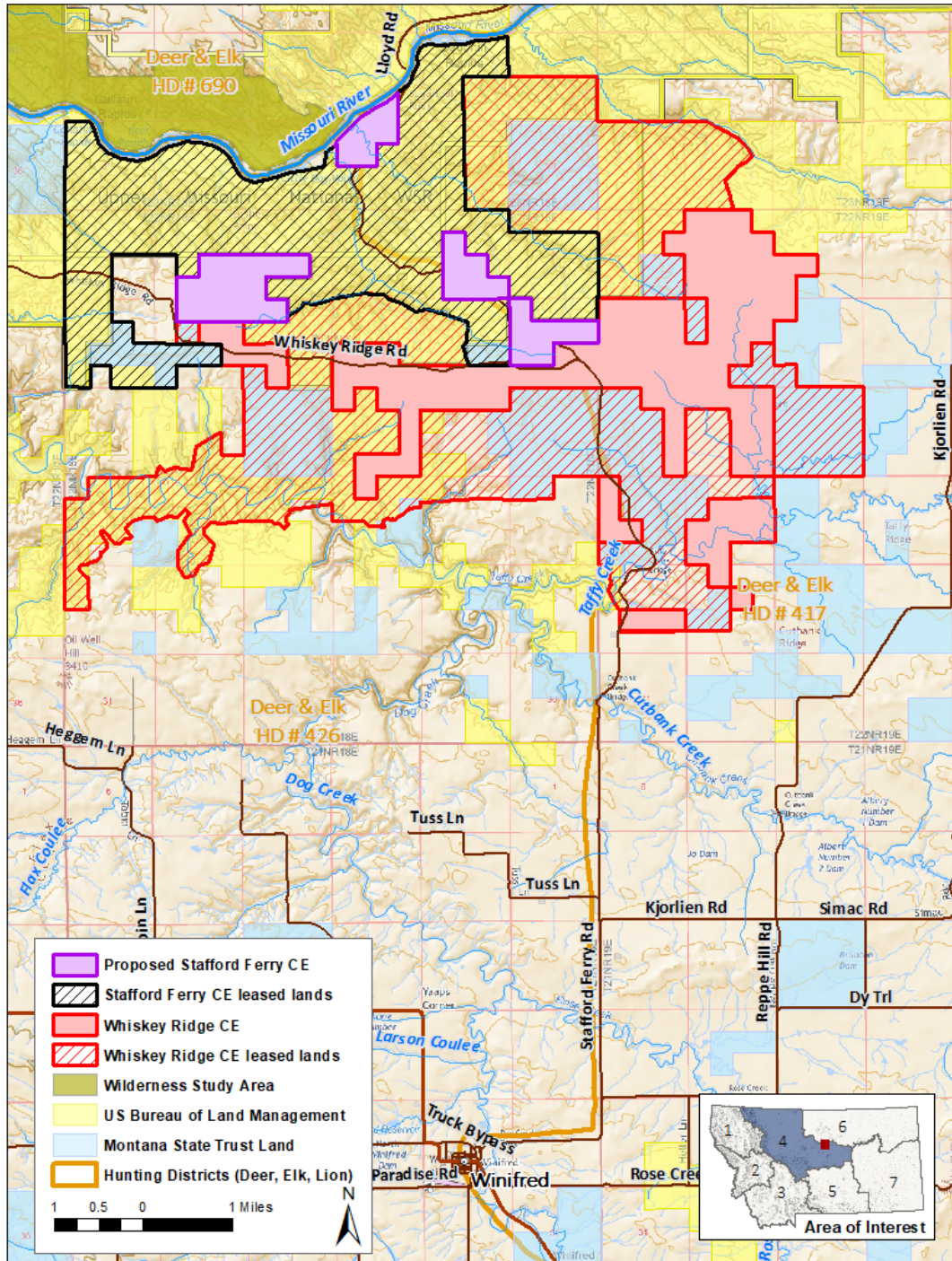
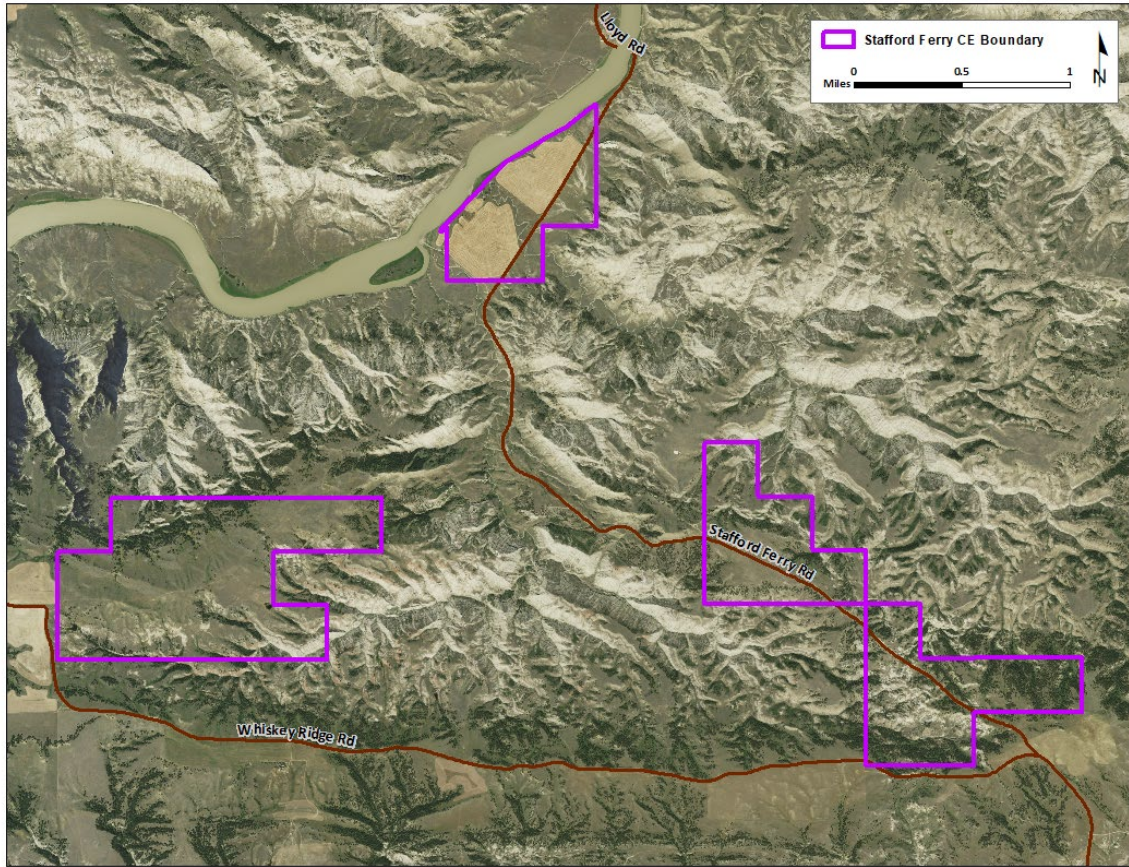


Figure 2. Aerial imagery of the proposed Stafford Ferry CE.



The following pictures illustrate some of the habitat and scenic values of the proposed Stafford Ferry CE.





