

MONTANA SAGE GROUSE HABITAT CONSERVATION PROGRAM



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SCOPING NOTICE

Proposed Sage Grouse Habitat Stewardship Fund Project – Thomas L. Watson Conservation Easement

July 11, 2016

The Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT) is soliciting comments and concerns on requested use of the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Stewardship Fund to support the Thomas L. Watson Conservation Easement Project.

The Montana Land Reliance (MLR), an IRS 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, sponsored and presented an application for the Thomas L. Watson Conservation Easement to MSGOT for funding from the Habitat Stewardship Fund (Fund) (MCA 76-22-101 et seq.) during MSGOT's meeting on May 24, 2016. MLR requested \$162,500 from the Fund, which would be matched with \$487,500 from the Natural Resources Conservation Service Agricultural Land Easement Program, and a \$50,600 donation from the landowner. The estimated value of the easement is \$650,000. MSGOT approved the Thomas L. Watson Conservation Easement proposal to move to the next stages of the granting process, administrative procedures, and preparation of an environmental assessment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act.

MLR is proposing to purchase a 2,833-acre perpetual conservation easement on a ranch owned by the Watsons in Phillips County. The proposed easement is made up of five distinct parcels, all owned by the Watsons. The proposed easement property is located entirely within habitat classified as a core area (South Phillips Core Area), northeast of Sun Prairie, Montana.

The 2,833 acres proposed for easement are a mix of rangeland and grassland. The land is used for livestock grazing, and grass seed is harvested in a meadow in some years. The Watson parcels share common boundaries with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Montana State Trust Lands. The Watsons lease about 3,100 acres of BLM land and 213 acres of state land. The easement would directly or indirectly affect a total of about 5,157 acres of federal land and 640 acres of state land.

The proposed easement area has no known active leks on the parcels. A minimum of six active leks are located within four miles, and 29 are located within 12 miles of the property.



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified the following threats to sage grouse in this part of Montana: conversion of sagebrush grassland to cropland; energy development due to oil and gas and wind; energy development and maintenance related infrastructure, and surface mining.

The terms of the conservation easement would permit the following: one additional residential dwelling unit and associated outbuildings located within a 3-acre building envelope inside the existing 40-acre development area (no residential dwelling units would be constructed within a two mile radius of active sage grouse leks with the exception of the existing 40-acre development area); Resource land and grassland management through a Grasslands Management Plan as required by the Natural Resources Conservation Service Agricultural Land Easement Grasslands of Special Significance Program; and division as two parcels only (any division must be one of the severed parcels).

The Watsons have agreed to observe the 0.6-mile no-surface-occupancy and the sagebrush eradication and treatment stipulations of Executive Order 12-2015. New power and communication infrastructure is required to be buried where possible and economically feasible. The Watsons have also agreed to observe the vegetation removal requirements outside building envelopes and development areas, so long as the activity is not critical to the ag operation.

The easement would prohibit the following: surface mining; commercial gravel operations; conversion of grazing/grassland to crop land; new road construction other than for residential access; turbine-style wind energy development and commercial wind and solar development; and oil and gas development.

This notice has been sent to individuals or organizations who may have interest in the proposal area. In accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, public concerns about the project and potential environmental impacts must be considered and analyzed prior to making the decision of whether to grant the funding to MLR.

Interested parties have until July 21, 2016 to submit concerns or comments relating to this project. Mail written comments to *Carolyn Sime, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, 1625 11th Ave, Helena, MT 59620*. Written comments must be postmarked and mailed on or before July 21. Submit comments electronically and attach documents through the public comment web application tool located on the MSGOT webpage at <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov/msgot.html>. Electronic comments must be received by 11:59 p.m. on July 21, 2016.

To be added to the interested parties list for this project or future, public scoping notices, please call Carolyn Sime 406-444-0554 or submit that request to the public comment web application tool at <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov/msgot.html> during this same period.

To join the list serve and receive notices regarding all activities of the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, visit www.sagegrouse.mt.gov. Subscribe at the bottom of the column on the left side of the webpage.

