

MONTANA SAGE GROUSE HABITAT CONSERVATION PROGRAM



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Public Scoping Notice

Sage Grouse Stewardship Account Grant Application

Proposed Willow Basin Ranch Conservation Easement

June 6, 2019

Dear Interested Party:

The Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program (Program) is soliciting public scoping comments on a grant application submitted to the Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT) for funding from the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Stewardship Account.

The purpose of the Stewardship Account grants is to provide competitive grant funding and establish ongoing free-market mechanisms for voluntary, incentive-based conservation measures that maintain, enhance, restore, expand, and benefit sage grouse habitat and populations on private lands. The majority of Stewardship Account funds must be awarded to projects that generate mitigation credits, which MSGOT makes available to developers to offset the residual impacts of development through compensatory mitigation after developers have already implemented avoidance, minimization, and reclamation efforts.

The Program invited submission of complete applications by May 13, 2019. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) submitted a grant application request for funding to support the purchase of a perpetual conservation easement on the Willow Basin Ranch. TNC is an IRS 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and is qualified private organization. MCA § 76-6-204.

The Willow Basin Ranch is located in the upper Sage Creek watershed, north of Dell in Beaverhead County. The ranch is south and west of the Blacktail Mountains. The proposed easement would include 3,997 acres.



Hosted by the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
Director's Office: (406) 444-2074



The Willow Basin Ranch supports the combination of habitat features that are characteristic of high quality sage grouse habitat in southwest Montana. The ranch spans from 6,800 feet elevation near Sage Creek to over 8,200 feet elevation. Lower elevations are characterized by Wyoming big and basin big sagebrush grasslands, which are interspersed with riparian areas, intermittent creeks, and perennial streams. Upper elevations are characterized by mountain big and three-tip sagebrush, interspersed with riparian areas and perennial springs. The entire ranch is utilized by sage grouse because of the diverse habitats and elevational gradients.

The Willow Basin Ranch is managed for livestock production. In addition to the deeded lands of the ranch, the Willow Basin Ranch family holds the grazing permits on an additional 4000 acres of surrounding U.S. Bureau of Land Management Lands. The ranch also abuts State School Trust Lands.

The proposed easement area has nine sage grouse leks within 12 miles, seven of which are located within eight miles. See figures below. The Willow Basin Ranch also supports a wide variety of other wildlife species due to habitat diversity, mesic habitats, and the elevational zones present on the Ranch.

MSGOT and the Program are required to apply the current designated Habitat Quantification Tool (HQT) to any project that is selected for funding from the Stewardship Account. MCA § 76-6-109(4). The HQT is the scientific method used to evaluate vegetation and environmental conditions related to quality and quantity of sage grouse habitat and to quantify and calculate the number of credits created by a conservation project. MCA § 76-6-103(9). MSGOT approved the current version of the HQT and accompanying Policy Guidance Document in October, 2018.

The HQT considers the many biophysical attributes of Greater sage-grouse seasonal habitats to estimate habitat functionality across multiple spatial and temporal scales. The HQT also accounts for existing human disturbances (e.g. roads, cropland, energy development, etc.). These measures of habitat, expressed as functional acres, are used for calculating conservation benefits (i.e., credits) from mitigation projects. Using habitat quality, expressed as functional acres, provides a common “habitat currency” that can be used for both credit and debit projects to ensure accurate accounting of habitat gains and losses and allows comparisons across projects using a common metric that is calculated in the exact same way.

The HQT starts with a baseline map of habitat quality, or presently existing functional acres on the landscape. Next, the HQT calculates the number of functional acres that would be created (or gained) because of the proposed conservation easement. Applicable policy modifiers are applied, based on the number of functional acres gained and calculated by the HQT. Once a conservation project is implemented, the total functional acres created (after application of policy modifiers) is converted to credits at a 1:1 ratio.

High HQT scores correspond to areas of high quality sage grouse habitat and are shown in warm, red colors on HQT maps. These will typically be areas with high levels of intact sagebrush, good brood-rearing habitat, high densities of breeding male sage grouse (i.e., many leks with strong



numbers of males displaying on them), and low levels of human disturbance. Higher numbers of functional acres gained translates to more credits created per physical acre of conservation.

For purposes of considering the number of credits that might be created by each conservation project proposed for funding from the Stewardship Account, the Program has run the HQT using the spatial data provided by TNC (the grant applicant) for the proposed conservation easement on the Willow Basin Ranch. Results do not include non-deed lands within the perimeter of the proposed easement (i.e. federal, state, and private land inholdings owned by entities other than the Willow Basin Ranch are excluded from results and also from the easement itself).

The HQT results show that the proposed easement on the Willow Basin Ranch would conserve high quality habitat. The functional acres gained per physical acre of the project per year for is 0.569. Higher numbers indicate more functional acres would be conserved and the habitat is of higher quality for the physical acres included in the proposed project. See the HQT figures below.

A perpetual easement on the Willow Basin Ranch would generate 91,029.53 total credits after the 40% baseline. This equates to 0.228 credits created per physical acre of the project per year. Higher numbers indicate more credits are created per year for each physical acre included in the proposed project. Higher numbers are more favorable, and more credits would be created per dollar expended from the Stewardship Account.

The estimated market value of the proposed easement is \$970,000. TNC is requesting \$242,500 from the Stewardship Account to put towards purchasing the easement. State funds would be matched with \$727,500 from the Natural Resources Conservation Service's Agricultural Lands Easement Program and \$34,400 from TNC. TNC is not requesting project-related costs.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identified the following threats of habitat loss and fragmentation in this part of Montana: conversion of sagebrush grassland to cropland, exurban development, mechanical and chemical sagebrush control, improper livestock management, and energy development.

The terms of the conservation easement are expected to permit the following activities, consistent with the conservation values protected by the easement: current agricultural practices and production of livestock, haying and cultivation of previously cultivated land.

The terms of the conservation easement are expected to prohibit the following: subdivision, industrial and commercial surface uses for wind or solar development, surface mining other than small scale use to maintain existing roads on the ranch, new road construction, and land conversion to cultivated crops. Construction of new buildings would be limited to a < 20-acre building envelope established around the existing ranch building improvements.

If selected for funding, MSGOT would own the credits, but TNC would hold the easement. The requirements for mitigation credit sites would be fulfilled through the combined actions of the landowner, TNC, and MSGOT. TNC would monitor the property independently and will work with



land owners to monitor the easement annually into perpetuity. TNC will provide annual monitoring reports to the Program. TNC's stewardship account would provide the financial assurances necessary for the credit site. These funds would be available to restore impaired habitat due to breach of the easement terms. MSGOT's reserve account would be used to replace credits due to unforeseen events. Additionality would be met by protection of the habitat in perpetuity and avoiding loss of habitat that might not otherwise be protected. Duration and durability would be met because the proposed project would protect habitat in perpetuity through the terms of the conservation easement. The site is appropriate given its location in a Core Area and the high HQT results. The site provides suitable breeding, nesting, and brood-rearing habitat.

In accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, public comment and concerns about the project and potential environmental impacts must be considered and analyzed in an environmental assessment. The assessment will be available for public review and comment in the summer of 2019. MSGOT is expected to select grant recipients in the fall of 2019.

Interested parties have until June 24, 2019 to submit concerns or comments relating to this project. Mail written comments to Carolyn Sime, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, 1539 11th Ave, Helena, MT 59620. Written comments must be received on or before June 24, 2019.

Submit comments electronically and attach documents through the public comment web application tool located on the MSGOT webpage at <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov/Team>. Electronic comments must be received by 8:00 a.m. on June 24, 2019.

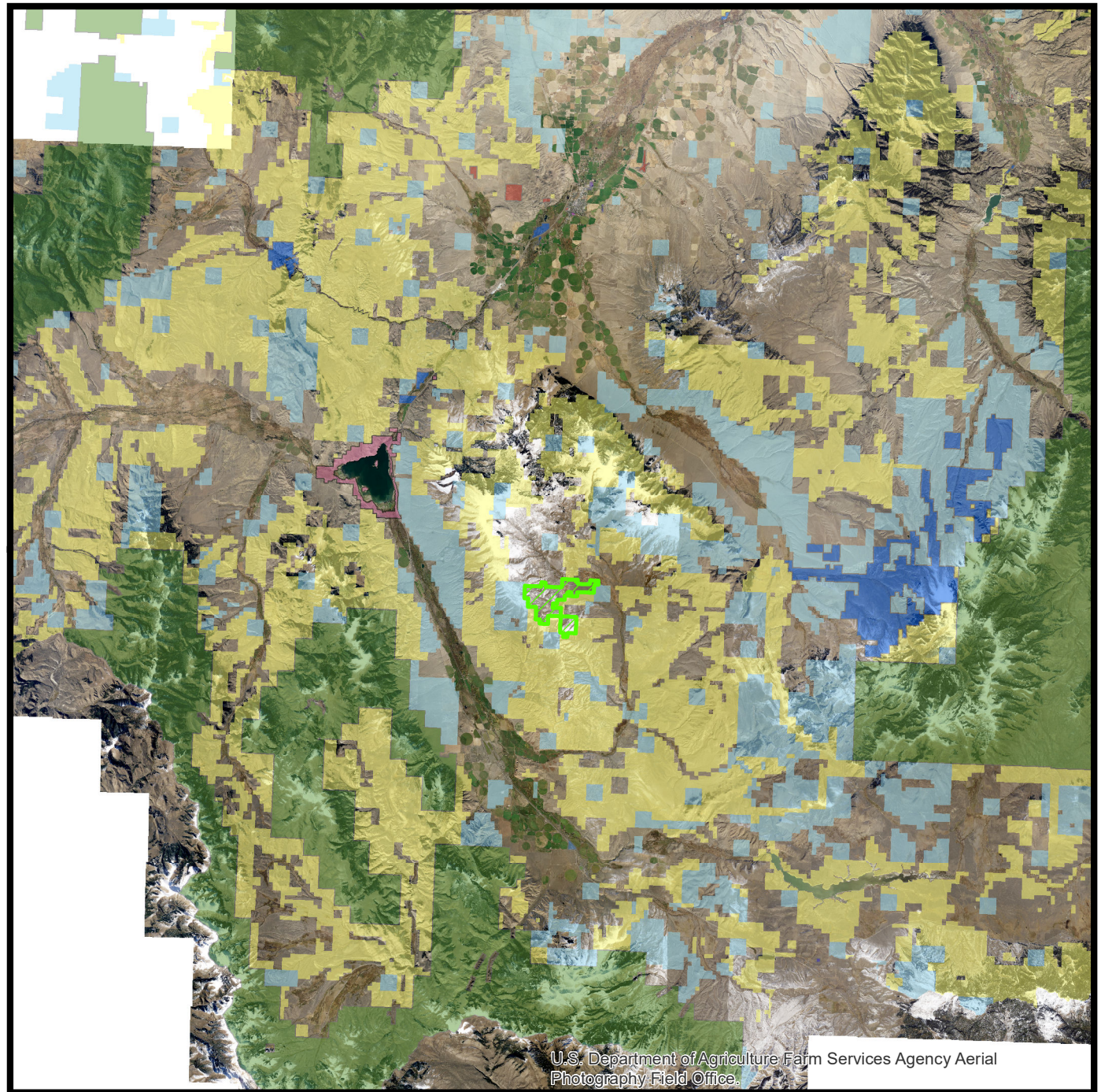
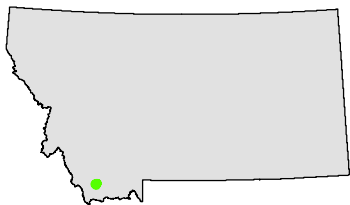


Willow Basin Ranch LLC Conservation Easement - Surrounding Public Lands



MONTANA SAGE GROUSE
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-  **Project Area**
-  **US Bureau of Land Management**
-  **US Fish and Wildlife Service**
-  **US Forest Service**
-  **US Bureau of Reclamation**
-  **Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks**
-  **Montana State Trust Lands**
-  **County Government**



U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services Agency Aerial
Photography Field Office.

Project Information:

Map Date: 28 May 2019
Path File: G:\CARD\10 Sage Grouse HCP\
Grant Program\Second Cycle 2019\Complete
Applications due May 13\ArcMapFiles

Service Layer Credits: U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services Agency
Aerial Photography Field Office.

0 10 20 Miles

Willow Basin Ranch LLC Conservation Easement - Aerial Imagery of Project Area



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Habitat Conservation Program



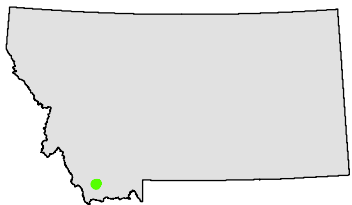
Project Area



US Bureau of Land Management



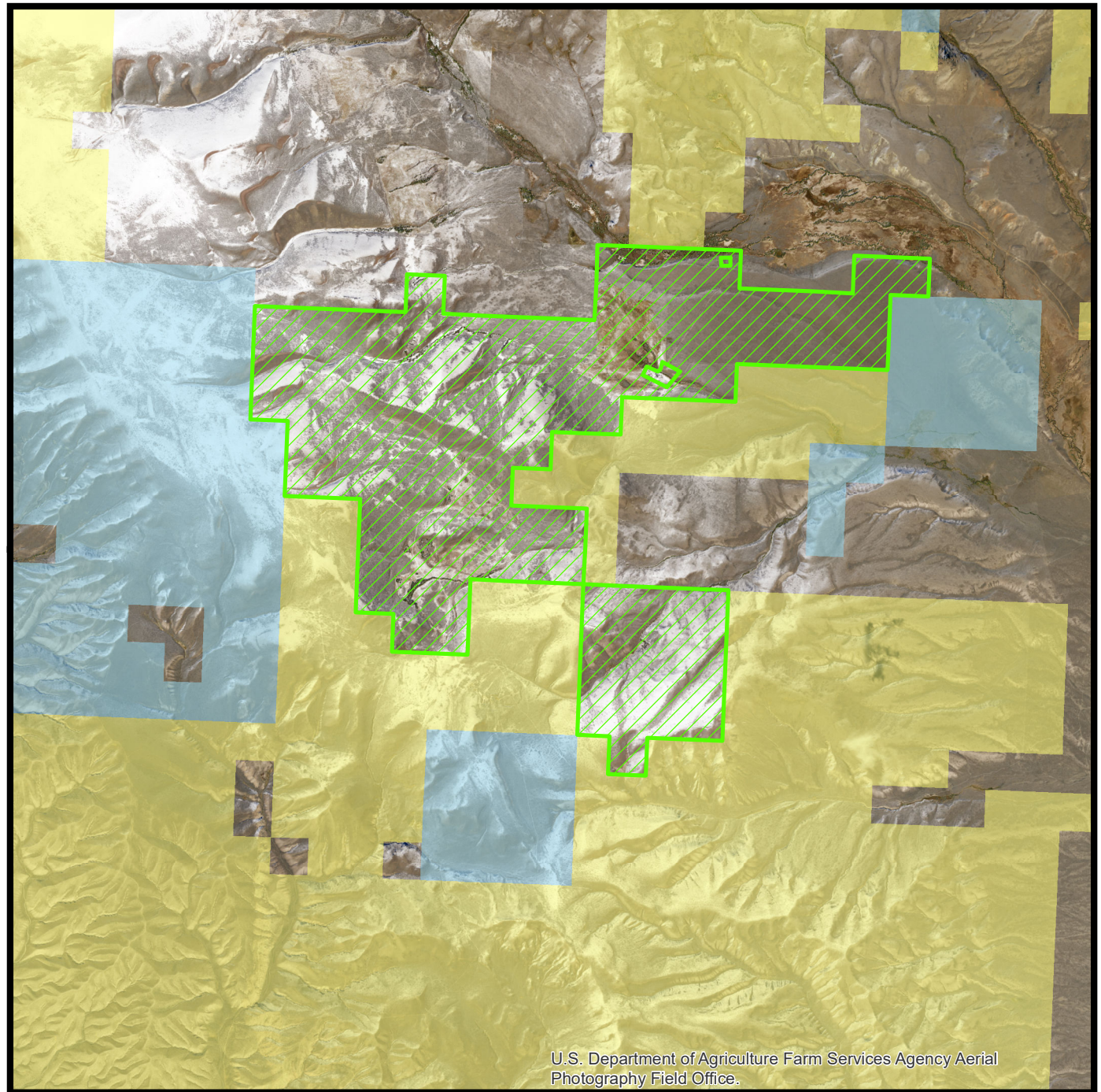
Montana State Trust Lands



Project Information:

Map Date: 28 May 2019
Path File: G:\CARD\10 Sage Grouse HCP\
Grant Program\Second Cycle 2019\Complete
Applications due May 13\ArcMapFiles

Service Layer Credits: U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services Agency
Aerial Photography Field Office.



U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services Agency Aerial
Photography Field Office.

0 1.5 3 Miles

Percentage Conserved Lands within 4 Miles of the Willow Basin Ranch Conservation Easement (The Nature Conservancy)













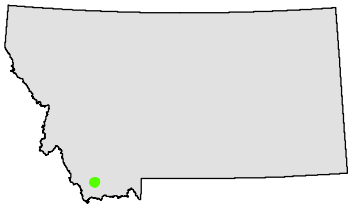
MONTANA SAGE GROUSE
Habitat Conservation Program

Project Information

-  Direct Project Footprint
-  Conserved Lands

Percent of Conserved Lands within 4 Miles of Project Area

-  0% - 10%
-  10.1% - 20%
-  20.1% - 30%
-  30.1% - 40%
-  40.1% - 50%
-  50.1% - 60%
-  60.1% - 70%
-  70.1% - 80%
-  80.1% - 90%
-  90.1% - 100%

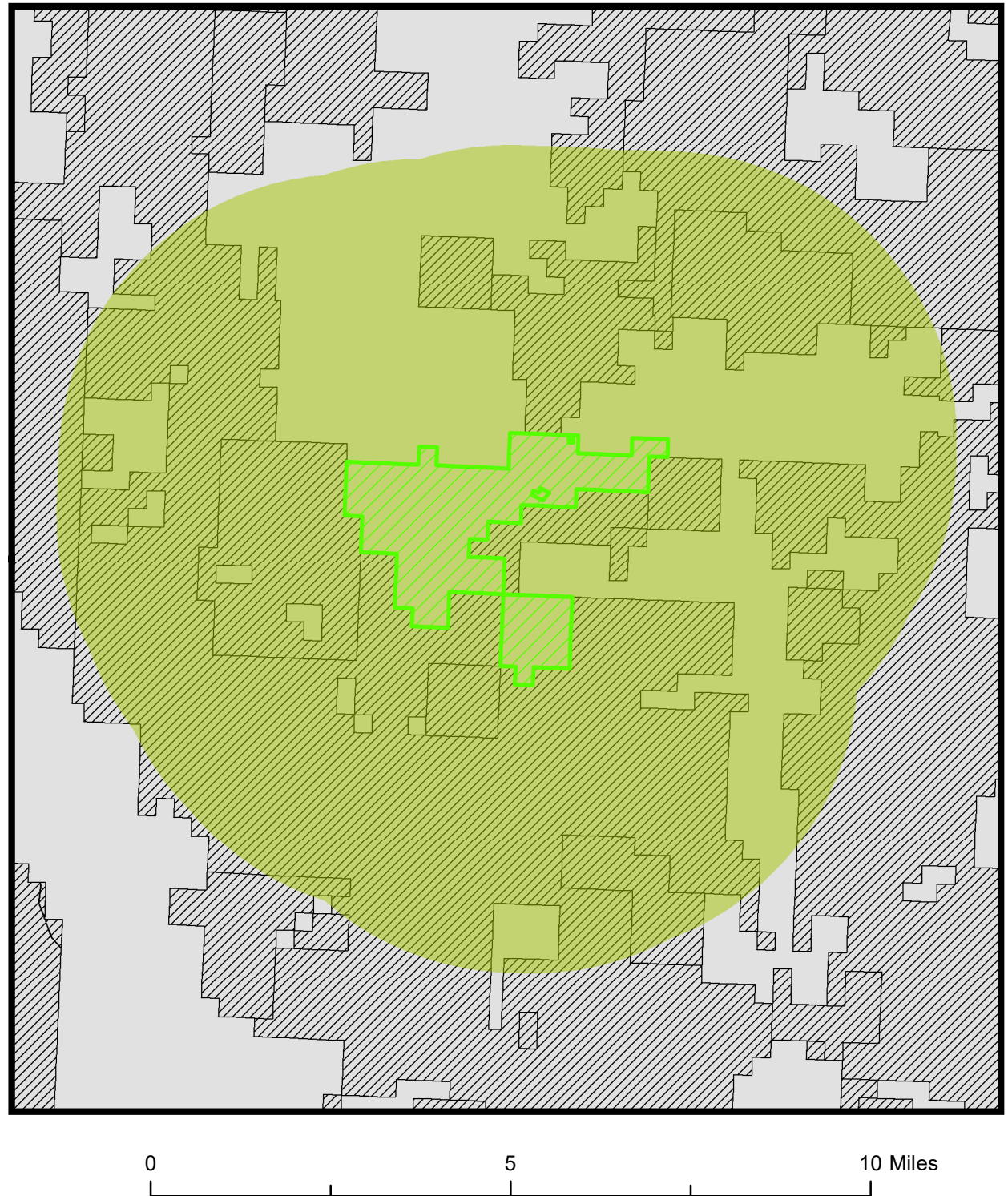


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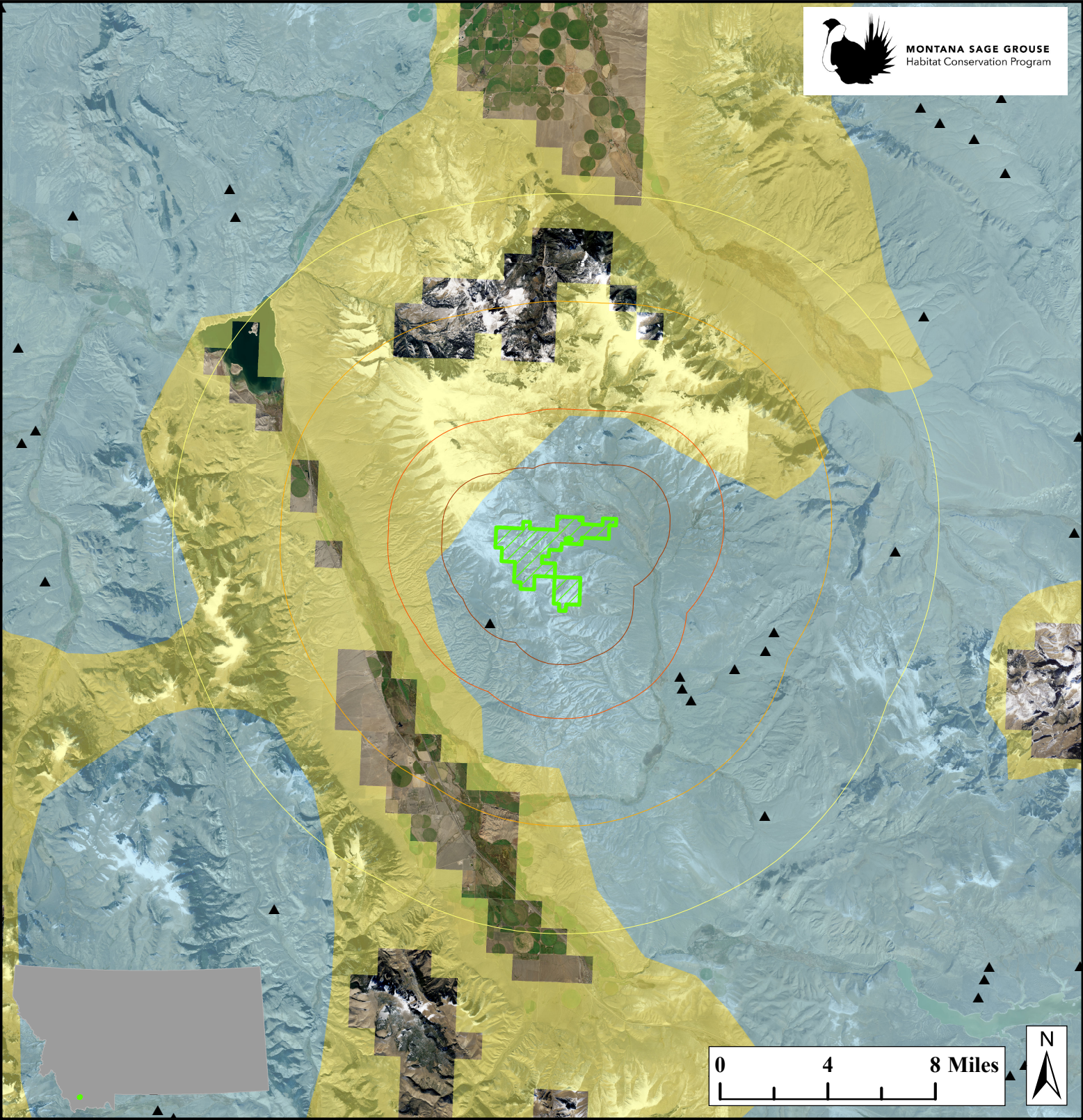
Map Date: 5 June 2019

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Grant Program\Second Cycle 2019\Complete
Applications due May13\ArcMap
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Land Management Dataset from: <http://mtnhp.org/stew.asp>



Willow Basin Ranch LLC Conservation Easement - Lek Proximity



Project Information:

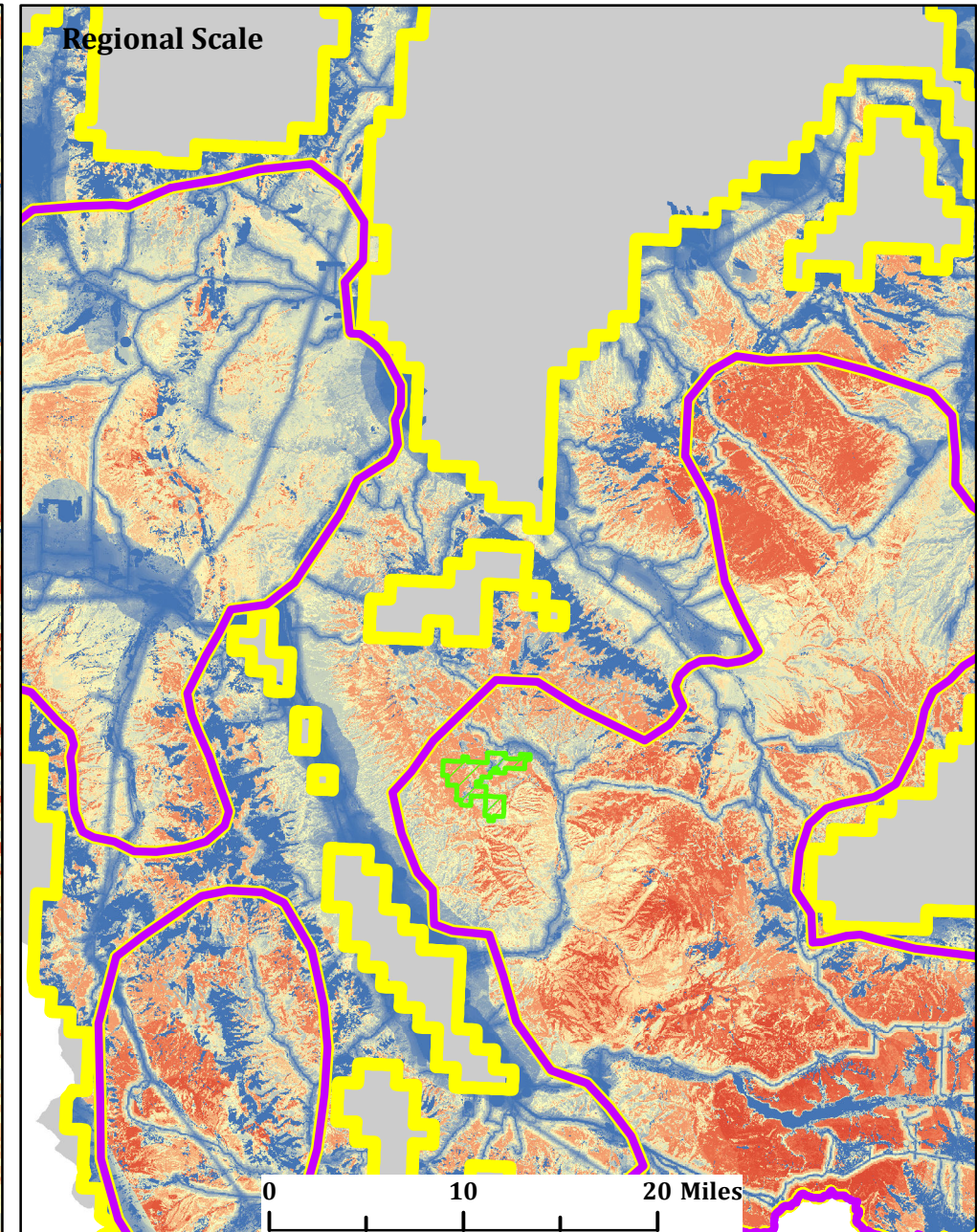
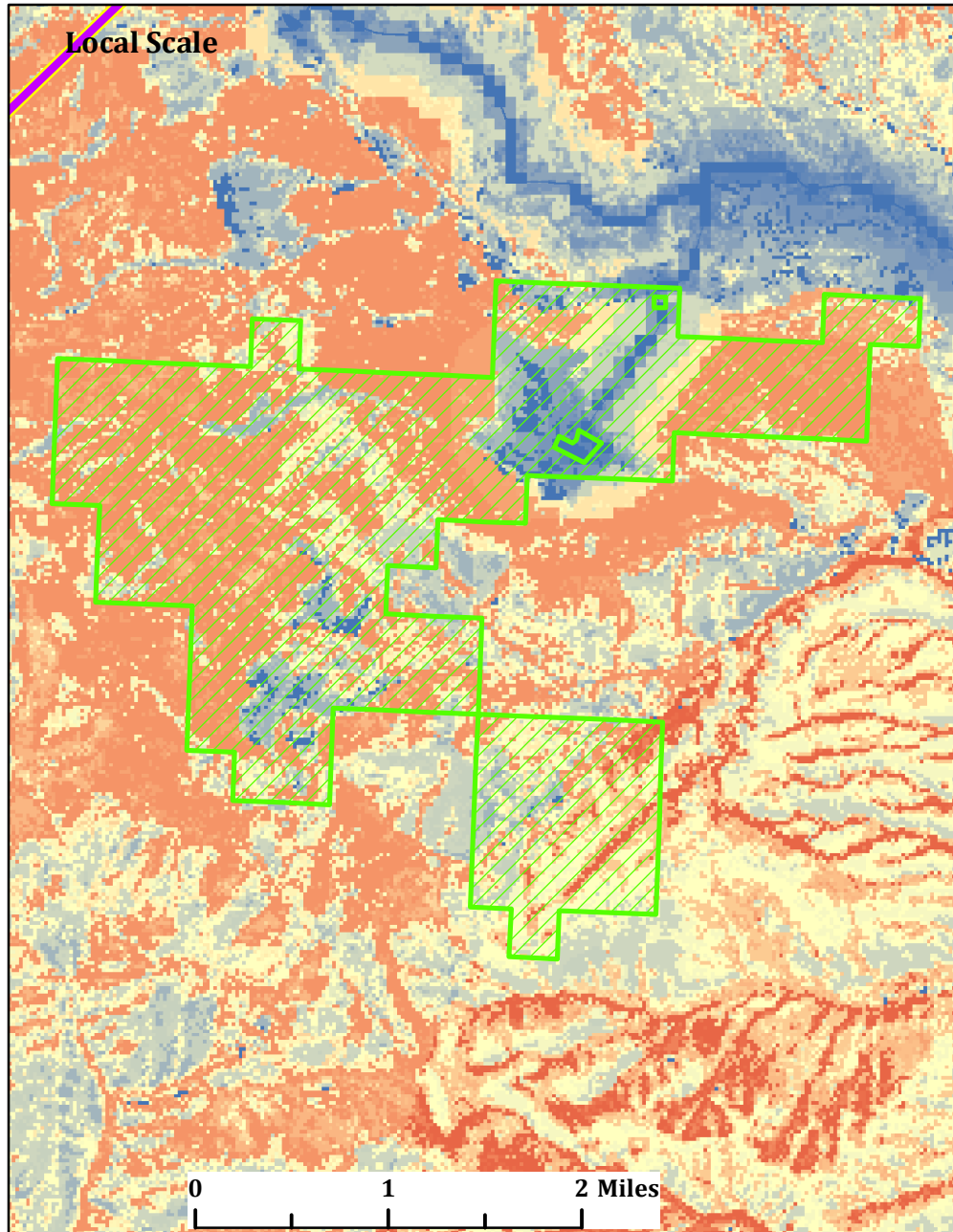
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HCP\Grant Program\Second Cycle
2019\Complete Applications due May
13\ArcMapFiles\ProximityToSGLeks

Service Layer Credits: U.S. Department of Agriculture Farm Services
Agency Aerial Photography Field Office.

- Project Footprint
- Core Area
- General Habitat
- Connectivity Area

	2 Mile Buffer	# Leks Within Buffer
	4 Mile Buffer	2 Mile: 1
	8 Mile Buffer	4 Mile: 1
	12 Mile Buffer	8 Mile: 7
		12 Mile: 9
	Sage Grouse Leks	

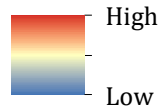
HQT Results: Willow Basin Ranch LLC Conservation Easement






Project HQT Metadata

HQT Date: 28 May 2019
Years Maintained: 100 Years

HQT Pixel Value

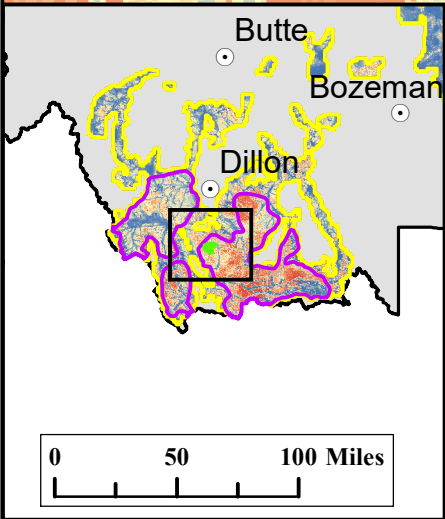
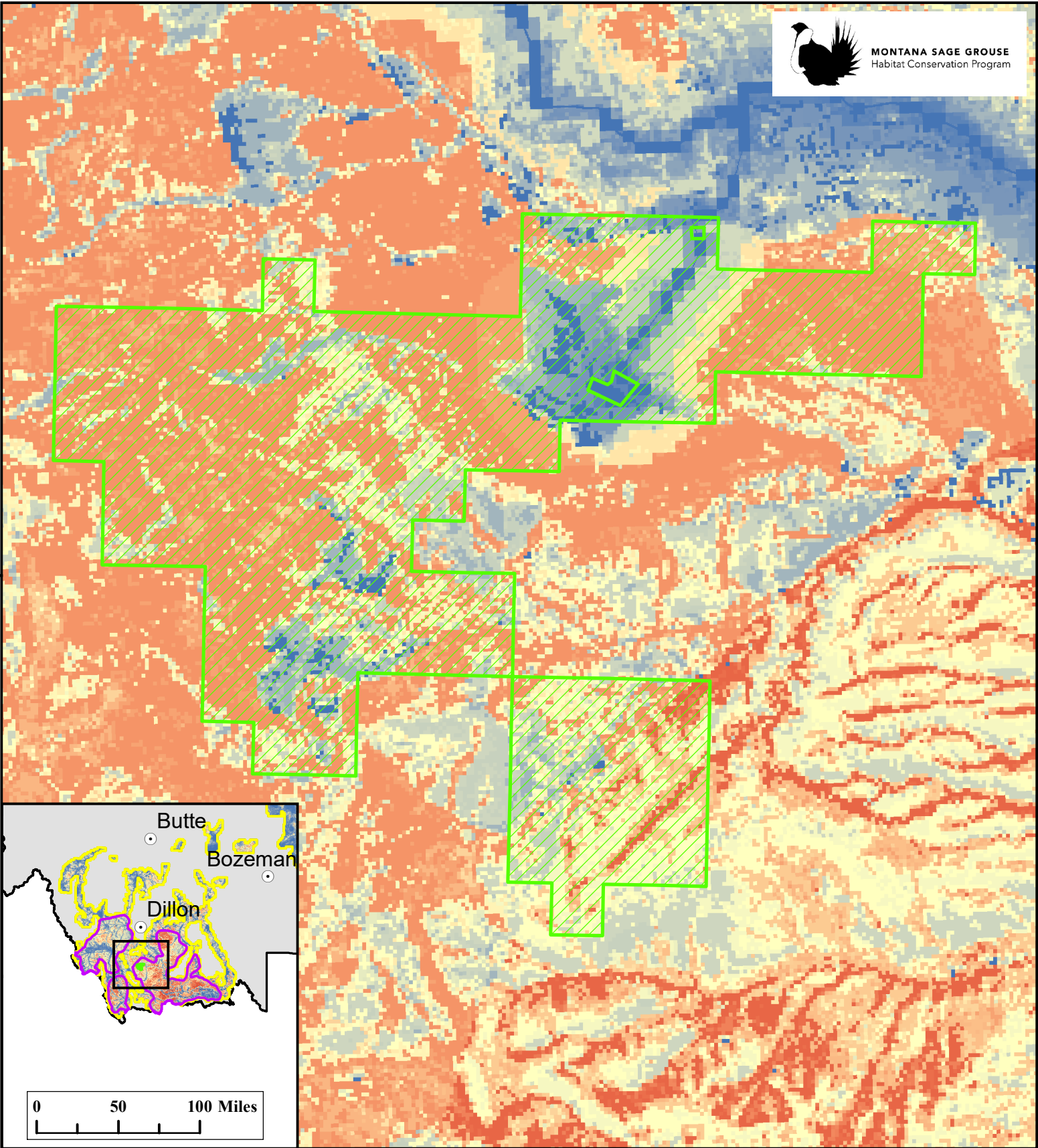


-  Project Direct Impact Footprint
-  Core Area
-  General Habitat



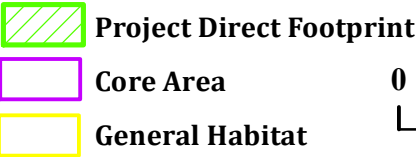
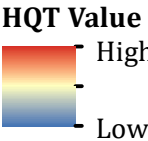
MONTANA SAGE GROUSE
Habitat Conservation Program

HQT Results: Willow Basin Ranch LLC Conservation Easement

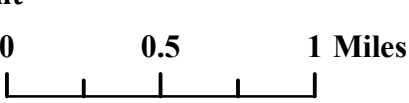


Project & HQT Information

Date of HQT Results: 16 May 2019
Number of Years: 100 years



Major Towns



Project Information						Raw HQT Score		Applicable Policy			Metrics			
Project Name	Project Type	Service Area	# of Years	Price per Credit for Lease Duration	Physical Acres	1 Year	Total (all years)	# of Credits awarded for newly created Fx-A		Baseline at 40%	Total Credits Available / Generated	Fx-A / PA / Yr	Credits / PA / Yr	Request Amount
								Core Area (10%)	General Habitat (5%)					
Willow Basin Ranch LLC Conservation Easement	Presevation (Perpetual)	Southwestern Service Area	100	NA	3,997.34	2,275.74	227,573.83	N/A	N/A	91,029.53	91,029.53	0.569	0.228	\$242,500

Credit results do not include non-deeded lands withn the perimeter of the project area (i.e. State Trust Lands other public lands not included).

6/4/2019