

MONTANA SAGE GROUSE HABITAT CONSERVATION PROGRAM



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SCOPING NOTICE

Proposed Sage Grouse Habitat Stewardship Project – Hansen Livestock Company Conservation Easement

February 14, 2018

The Montana Sage Grouse Oversight Team (MSGOT) is soliciting comments and concerns on requested use of the Montana Greater Sage-grouse Habitat Stewardship Fund to support the Hansen Livestock Company Conservation Easement.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC), an IRC 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization, sponsored and presented an application for the Hansen Livestock Company Conifer Encroachment Reduction and Conservation Easement to MSGOT for funding from the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Stewardship Fund (Fund) (MCA 76-22-101 et seq.) during MSGOT's meeting on May 24, 2016.

During the May 24, 2016, meeting, MSGOT elected to split TNC's Hansen Livestock Company Ranch Conifer Encroachment Reduction and Conservation Easement into two separate proposals. MSGOT awarded funding (\$202,500) for the conifer reduction portion of the proposal, but opted to reconsider the conservation easement portion of the proposal at a later date since matching funds had not yet been secured.

On November 18, 2016, MSGOT awarded \$750,000 for the conservation easement, contingent on TNC securing and documenting matching funds from USDA NRCS or elsewhere by September 30, 2017. See MSGOT's Meeting Archive for meeting materials, Notes, and Minutes for the May 24 and November 18, 2016 meetings, respectively, at: <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov/Team>.

On June 2, 2017, MSGOT approved reallocation of the \$202,500 originally awarded to TNC to implement the conifer encroachment reduction project towards purchase of the conservation easement. TNC had explained that it secured alternative funding for the conifer reduction portion of the overall proposal and that it would proceed without utilizing state dollars from the Fund. See MSGOT's Meeting Archive for meeting materials, Notes, Audio, and Minutes for the June 2, 2017 at: <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov/Team>.

On September 29, 2017, TNC provided written notice to the Program that matching funds from NRCS-Agricultural Land Easement (ALE) Program funds were secured. This letter was provided to MSGOT in conjunction with the December 15, 2017 meeting. Additionally, TNC informed the Program that the appraised value of the easement exceeded preliminary expectations, but that it would secure additional



funds from other matching sources to complete the project and that it would not seek the additional funds from the Stewardship Fund.

Upon notice that matching funds had been secured, MSGOT and the Montana Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program undertook the next steps to develop a grant agreement for the total award amount of \$952,500 (\$202,500 plus \$750,000). TNC is matching the state's contribution towards the purchase price with \$4,950,000 from the NRCS Agricultural Land Easement Program and \$697,500 from other sources.

This scoping notice pursuant to the Montana Environmental Policy Act solicits public comment for preparation of an environmental assessment considering the proposed conservation easement. Information regarding the proposal is as follows.

TNC is proposing to purchase a 13,810-acre perpetual open space conservation easement on a ranch owned by the Hansen Livestock Company in Beaverhead County in southwest Montana. See attached map. The proposed easement property is located entirely within habitat classified as a Core Area for Greater Sage-grouse, southwest of Dillon in the Horse Prairie, Medicine Lodge and Big Sheep Valleys.

In addition to the fee title lands, the Hansen Ranch Company leases approximately 60,000 additional acres in grazing allotments on adjacent BLM, USFS, and DNRC lands.

Lower elevations are characterized by open expanses of sagebrush-grasslands interspersed with intermittent and perennial creeks, seeps and associated wetlands. Lower elevation sagebrush communities are dominated by Wyoming big sagebrush and basin big sagebrush. Mid-and upper elevation sagebrush communities are dominated by mountain big sagebrush and three-tip sagebrush. The portion of the Hansen Livestock Co. land that would be protected by this proposed easement represents the largest, contiguous and uninterrupted block of sagebrush grassland on the ranch.

At least four active sage grouse leks are located on or very close to the parcel. An additional 12 leks are located within 10 miles. Genetic connectivity between sage grouse in southwest Montana and Idaho has been documented.

Approximately 12,029 acres within the proposed easement boundary is grassland/shrubland. Approximately 199 acres is classified as riparian/wetland. Approximately 571 acres is devoted to agriculture, and approximately 1,091 acres are considered forested in the upper elevations within the proposed easement boundary.

In 2017, about 830 acres of the forested area at the southern end of the proposed easement parcel in the Medicine Lodge Valley were mechanically treated to remove the conifer trees encroaching into sagebrush habitat areas. This area was considered a Phase 1 encroachment level before the conifers were mechanically treated by hand crews using chain saws. The treatment took place on the Hansen Livestock Company land, BLM, and DNRC lands. An additional 1,000 acres to the south of the treated acres are planned for mechanical treatment in 2018 to remove encroaching conifer. Both the 2017 and 2018 treatments entail collaborative partnerships and are supported by the Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, but are funded from non-Stewardship Fund sources.



The terms of the conservation would permit the following activities, consistent with the conservation values protected by the easement: current agricultural practices and production (primarily livestock production and haying of previously cultivated land), retention of four existing building envelopes (approximately 100 acres) and buildings can be maintained / repaired or relocated within existing boundaries, minor agricultural structures not to be used for overnight accommodations, production of renewable energy for the agricultural and residential needs of the property, water development, maintenance / replacement of existing fences, new fencing according to the Agricultural Land Easement Plan (ALE), new roads only within existing impervious surface limits, noxious weed control, timber harvest with a plan, limited non-commercial surface mining of gravel or similar mineral substance at existing extraction sites.

The terms of the easement would prohibit the following activities (considered inconsistent with the conservation values protected by the easement): subdivision, creation of new building envelopes or construction of new buildings outside the existing building envelopes, industrial and commercial uses for wind farms or powerlines, conversion of native vegetation to cropland, dumping, new roads, draining/manipulating/altering natural water courses and wetlands, and surface use of the land to extract oil and gas or other mineral exploration/extraction.

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 approve the final terms of the conservation easement and transfer funding to TNC to purchase the proposed easement.

A draft environmental assessment will be completed upon review of the scoping comments and completion of negotiations on the final terms of the proposed conservation. The assessment will be made available for public review and comment at that time.

Interested parties have until March 14, 2018 to submit concerns or comments relating to this project by mailing written comments to *Carolyn Sime, Sage Grouse Habitat Conservation Program, 1539 11th Ave, PO Box 201601, Helena, MT 59620* or by submitting comments through the public comment web application located on the Program's Sage Grouse Stewardship Fund Grants webpage at: <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov/Grants>.

To be added to the interested parties list for this project or future notices of MSGOT meetings or other Program activities, visit <https://sagegrouse.mt.gov/About#mailingList> and join the Mailing List by entering your name and email address in the fields on the right side of the page. You will receive an email confirming you want to be added to the list and receive emails from the Program. You must affirmatively respond to this email and confirm your intention to join the list.

