



U.S. Department of the Interior
Bureau of Land Management

Environmental Assessment

Gold Creek and Twin Creeks Proposed Land Acquisition DOI-BLM-MT-B010-2024-0005-EA April 2024

Case File Number: MTM-112619



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1 Introduction

1.0 Summary of Proposed Project

In late 2000 the Blackfoot Challenge, a local watershed collaborative, began having discussions concerning the future ownership and management of industrial forestland owned by Plum Creek Timber Company in the Blackfoot Valley. These lands have long contributed to wildlife habitat, water, grazing, recreational opportunities, and timber to the people of the Blackfoot Valley and western Montana.

In the past, these lands held highest values for forest management and large corporate timber companies had maintained them in a productive and undeveloped condition. Plum Creek, as well as their predecessors - Champion International Corporation and the Anaconda Company, had generally allowed the public and adjoining private landowners free use of their lands to the extent they became viewed as being de facto public lands. However, the real estate market changed, and these lands' highest value would be to subdivide into smaller parcels and sell for residential or recreational development. Selling of large blocks of corporately owned lands, previously held for their natural resource values, would have resulted in fragmented into small parcels.

As a participant in the Blackfoot Challenge, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) purchased Plum Creek lands in the lower, middle, and upper Blackfoot Valley, as well as adjoining watersheds in western Montana, with the intent to hold them to allow time to shape the future disposition and management of those lands for long term conservation.

The purchase and disposition of the former Plum Creek lands by TNC (and its subsidiary entities) and the Blackfoot Challenge occurred in three large scale projects, referred to as the Blackfoot Community Project, the Montana Legacy Project, and the Clearwater-Blackfoot Project. In the Blackfoot Community Project TNC acquired 89,000 acres of Plum Creek land in the middle and upper Blackfoot Valley. In the Montana Legacy Project, TNC acquired 310,586 acres of Plum Creek land in the lower Blackfoot Valley as well as the Swan Valley, the upper Clearwater Valley near Seeley Lake, the Lolo Creek watershed, the Mill Creek area near Missoula, Fish Creek, Petty Creek, Schwartz Creek, and in the Garnet Mountains between Potomac and Interstate 90. In the Clearwater-Blackfoot Project TNC acquired 117,152 acres of Plum Creek lands in the Belmont Creek, Gold Creek drainages of the Blackfoot Valley and Seeley Lake Area.

The BLM has participated in TNC's community driven process, together with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DRNC), local county governments and local private landowners, in developing a long-term plan for the disposition and management of the lands. To date, BLM has acquired over 45,000 acres within the project area (See Map 1, Appendix E).

The Missoula Field Office is working on the final proposed land acquisition that would complete the BLM acquisitions in the Clearwater-Blackfoot Project. In this final proposal BLM would

acquire approximately 17,000 acres in the Gold Creek and Twin Creek area of the Blackfoot River Watershed. The proposed acquisition would depend on Lands and Water Conservation funding (LWCF) and would likely be done in stages.(See Map 1 Appendix E).

It is BLM policy to acquire lands/or interest in lands needed to implement land use plans and to manage, protect, develop, maintain, and use resources on public land and further provide access for public use and enjoyment of such lands provide such acquisitions are within the limitations for applicable authorities and available funds and are in conformance with land use plans. (H-2100-1 pg. II-12).

1.1 Purpose and Need

The purpose and need for proposed action are to maintain access for public use and enjoyment, while acquiring lands that contain important resource use and resource values in the Gold and Twin Creeks area of the Blackfoot River Watershed. The proposed action would be to acquire 17,000 acres that provides opportunities for continued access, recreation, forest management that provides multiple benefits including climate change mitigation, restoring habitat for Threatened and Endangered species (Canada Lynx, Grizzly Bear, bull trout, wolverine, and whitebark pine), and other wildlife habitat as well as ensuring proper watershed function for aquatic species. It would also maintain access and working lands with active forestry and fuels programs as well as provide greater access to tribal ancestral lands, plant gathering areas, and other important areas for tribes.

1.2 Decision to be Made.

The Decision to be made in this action is to acquire or not acquire non-federal land from Montana Checkerboard LLC. in the Gold Creek/Twin Creeks area of the Blackfoot River Watershed.

1.3 Land Use Plan Conformance

The proposed action is in conformance with the Missoula Resource Management Plan (RMP), approved January 2021. The Missoula RMP establishes Goals, Objectives and Management Actions and allowable uses.

The following are Goals, Objectives, and Management Actions for Land tenure adjustments:

- Goals
 - LT-G-1. *Improve resource management efficiency and provide public benefit as opportunities arise.*
 - LT-G-2. *Continue working with all land management partners (federal, state, private, and tribal) and nonprofit organizations to maintain and improve resource management.*

- Management Actions and Allowable Uses
 - *LT-MA-2. Manage newly acquired lands similar to adjacent BLM lands and the following criteria:*
 - *Lands acquired within special management areas with specific Congressional mandates (such as NHT) will be managed in conformance with established guidelines for those areas.*
 - *Lands acquired adjacent to administratively designated management allocations (such as BCAs or SRMAs) will be managed the same as and become part of the adjacent allocation.*
 - *Lands acquired without special values or management goals will be managed in the same manner as comparable surrounding public lands.*
 - *To the extent possible, management direction would be extended to newly acquired lands through plan maintenance.*

1.4 Relationship to Statutes, Regulations, Other NEPA Documents

The proposed land acquisitions would be conducted under authority of Section 205 and 318 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act (FLPMA) of 1976.

Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies Act of January 2, 1971, (The Uniform Act) as amended (P.L. 91-646), (42 U.S.C. Sec. 4601, et seq.)

The proposed acquisition addresses the following DOI priorities:

- ***Advancing President Biden’s Investing in America*** agenda to strengthen our country’s infrastructure and create good-paying union jobs. The American Rescue Plan, Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, and Inflation Reduction Act – key pillars of the Biden’s economic strategy – contain several provisions that invest in Department initiatives and benefit the communities and areas we directly serve. This historic funding is helping restore critical habitats, address the drought crisis, strengthen wildland fire management, address legacy pollution, invest in Tribal communities, and create good-paying union jobs.
- ***Working to restore and conserve at least 30% of our lands and waters by 2030.*** Through the America the Beautiful initiative, we are working to protect biodiversity, slow extinction rates and help leverage natural climate solutions by. This relies on collaborative locally, state, private, and tribally led nature conservation and restoration efforts that are underway across America.
 - o *Forests provide many benefits and services to society including wildlife habitat, clean water and air, recreation, and forest products. Intact forests play an integral role in the carbon cycle. Specifically, forest loss and degradation are both a cause and effect of our changing climate. By reducing forest loss, we can reduce carbon emissions and climate regulation. In this acquisition, there would be 17,000 acres of forested vegetation acquired. These forests have been degraded by past industrial management; the BLM would focus on forest restoration for multiple benefits including climate change mitigation, restoring habitat for T&E species including Canada Lynx Grizzly Bear, bull trout and wolverine and ensuring proper watershed function for aquatic species.*
 - o *This proposal would maintain access to lands with active Forestry and Fuels programs.*
- ***Strengthening the government-to-government relationship with Tribal Nations.*** We understand that Tribal sovereignty and self-governance, as well as honoring the federal trust responsibility to Tribal Nations, must be the cornerstones of federal Indian policy. The Interior Department is working to invest in Indigenous communities and ensure that they have the support, resources, and infrastructure to thrive.
 - o *Tribal Treaty Rights: The transfer of land from private to public ownership would provide greater access to aboriginal lands, plant gathering areas, and other important areas for tribal groups.*

- *Wildlife Habitat and migration corridors: The acquisition would allow BLM to restore and maintain wildlife habitat and migration corridors.*

1.5 Issues Identified for Analysis

1.5.1 Issue 1 – Would the newly acquired public lands contain important resources and how would these resources be managed; be important to the economy; and enhance access?

1.5.2 Issue 2 – Would the County Tax revenues to local taxing districts be reduced?

2 Alternatives

2.0 Alternative 1 - No Action Alternative

The proposed action would not be implemented, and the BLM would not acquire the subject properties. The properties would remain in private ownership, subject to state and county laws and regulations related to land use, zoning, and development.

2.1 Alternative 2 - Proposed Action Alternative

The proposed action would be to acquire the approximately 17,000 acres of land within the Gold Creek/Twin Creek area of the Blackfoot River Watershed. This acquisition would be by direct purchase from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) at no more than the approved appraised value. Purchase would be funded through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which are appropriated by Congress. Acquisition would include all the owner's interests in the property, including any appurtenant access or water rights.

Development and implementation of site-specific projects on the acquired lands would be subject to the provisions of federal land management regulations for BLM-administered lands and in conformance with the current Missoula RMP. This includes but not limited to review of project proposals under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Endangered Species Act, and applicable public involvement requirements.

The proposed land acquisition would be dependent on funding of Land and Water Conservation funding and would be likely be done in stages, rather than all at once.

2.2 General Setting

The proposed acquisition is in Missoula County approximately 20 miles east of Missoula, Montana. The public can access the proposed acquisition by Twin Creeks Road and Gold Creek Road. The Gold Creek/Twin Creeks area is surrounded by large, protected landscapes in all directions: the Mission Mountains, South Fork Jocko Tribal Primitive Area, and Swan Range to the north; the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex to the east and north, the Rattlesnake Wilderness and to the west and north; the Garnet Range to the southeast; and the Sapphire Range to the south.

2.3 Methodology and Assumptions

The geographic scope is the Clearwater Blackfoot Project Area. The temporal scope is over the next 10-15 years.

2.4 Resource Issue 1

2.4.1 *Affected Environment*

The lands in this acquisition are just north of the Blackfoot River six to ten miles east of its confluence with the Clark Fork River in Bonner, MT extending north approximately ten miles to the high point in the area, Black Mountain at nearly 7,000 feet. Key geographic features of the area include a substantial portion of Gold Creek, a major tributary to the Blackfoot River and East and West Twin Creeks, smaller tributaries to the Blackfoot. For thousands of years, these were the aboriginal lands of the Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille tribes. The Cokahlarishkit Trail (Road to the Buffalo) is within the Lower Blackfoot Corridor and was an important travel route in this area for several tribes to buffalo hunting grounds on the plains. In 1855, the Hellgate Treaty was signed in which lands of the Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille tribes - including all of the lands included in this project- were ceded to the United States Government. In 1864, the General Land Office granted the Northern Pacific Railroad land in this area to build the northern transcontinental railroad. This began the industrial use and intensive timber extraction on these lands passing through several different commercial owners including Big Blackfoot Milling Company, Anaconda Copper Mining Company, Champion International, and Plum Creek Timber Company. Railroad logging started early in the 20th century and was followed by road building and logging in the 1960s that continued up to the last decade of the proposed acquisition.

A century of industrial forest management as well as fire exclusion has resulted in similar forested conditions across the proposed acquisition: young, dense, homogenous forests. Current forest conditions can be summarized as having disproportionately large percentages of seedlings, saplings, and pole-sized trees, relatively small percentages of large and very large trees, and high road densities as compared to conditions that existed prior to Euro-American settlement in the late 1800s and early 1900s. On the south and west aspects, the stands are relatively open and composed of ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir. On the north and east aspects, the stands are dense and composed of ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, western larch, as well as a mix of subalpine fir, Engelmann spruce, and lodgepole pine. Large high intensity wildfires have shifted some of the

forested vegetation to grass and shrublands in the Gold and Twin Creeks areas. Namely the Mineral-Primm fire in 2003 and the Liberty fire in 2017.

A diverse assemblage of wildlife can be found in the area, including but not limited to Threatened and Endangered species such as grizzly bear, Canada lynx, wolverine, and bull trout, as well as BLM Sensitive Species such as American marten, black-backed woodpecker, bald and golden eagles, flammulated owl, northern goshawk, pileated woodpecker, and west-slope cutthroat trout. Important big game species that frequent the area include elk, mule and white-tailed deer, black bear, and mountain lion. In addition to wildlife T&E species, the proposed acquisition has the T&E species whitebark pine.

The Gold and Twin Creeks acquisition parcels include 76 miles of streams, with 20.5 miles of perennial surface waters in the Gold Creek and Twin Creeks watersheds. In total, 7,605 acres will be considered for riparian management based on the InFish Native Fish Strategy Riparian Habitat Conservation Buffers (DOI – USDA 1995). In addition to lotic features, the Gold and Twin Creeks acquisition area also includes 49 acres of wetlands (USDI, National Wetland Inventory, 2015).

Due to prior and present landowners’ “open lands” policies, recreationists have come to view the subject lands similar to public lands. The current landowner, TNC, allows recreation opportunities on these lands, for hunting, hiking, cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, seasonal mountain bike riding, equestrian, and dispersed camping. TNC has several designated trails that offer specific opportunities for Nordic skiing, snowmobiling (on existing trails or roads), and winter fat bike riding. (See Map 2 Appendix E).

2.4.2 Environmental Effects—No Action Alternative

The proposed action would not be implemented, and the BLM would not acquire the subject properties. The properties would remain in private ownership, subject to state and county laws and regulations related to land use, zoning, and development. Continued public access for recreation would be dependent upon the private owner’s willingness.

2.4.3 Environmental Effects—Alternative 2

Access

Approximately 17,000 acres to be acquired would have public and administrative access. Public access for recreation would no longer be dependent on the private landowner’s willingness.

Cultural Resources and Tribal Treaty Rights

The proposed land acquisition would be beneficial for cultural resources that are eligible or unevaluated for inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), as these resources would have protections on federal lands under the Antiquities Act, the National Historic Preservation Act, and the Archaeological Resources Protection Act. Much of the 17,000 acres to be acquired have not been systematically inventoried for cultural resources. Following acquisition, future BLM management actions will require Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act compliance (as amended), including cultural resource inventories, increasing the protection of both known sites and those sites that have yet to be identified. Further, the transfer of land from private to public ownership would restore Tribal Treaty Rights and would provide access to aboriginal lands, plant gathering areas, hunting, fishing access, and other

important areas for tribal groups within these 17,000 acres. These lands have been in private hands for over 100 years, with this land acquisition and effectively the restoration of Tribal Treaty Rights this offers an opportunity for Tribal communities to reconnect to aboriginal territories.

Lands and Realty

When acquiring land any existing authorization that are administratively acceptable will merge with fee title. The original authorizations would be honored and would be replaced with a BLM authorization upon expiration date.

Livestock Grazing

The private landowner, TNC, has no active livestock grazing in the proposed land acquisition. Because these acquired lands are within the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem (NCDE) Zone 1 for Grizzly Bear and do not have existing grazing with TNC, these lands would be unavailable for livestock grazing until the next planning effort.

(Missoula RMP WL-OBJ-23: Allow no new sheep allotments on BLM-managed lands in Zone 1. Allow no new livestock grazing allotments within Zone 1, except on acquired lands that had active cattle grazing at the time of the acquisition).

Mineral and Energy Resources

For the entire proposed acquisition area, the mineral estate has been severed from the surface estate by previous owners or past federal action. No mineral ownership would be reconveyed to the United States (BLM-managed) under the action, creating a reverse split-estate status (public domain surface and private/state subsurface) if acquired. Of the 17,000 acres under proposal, about 363 acres (2.1%) of subsurface estate is currently under ownership of the United States. The following table (**Error! Reference source not found.**) displays a summary of legal land descriptions and approximate acres of the subsurface estate by owner.

Table 1. Summary of Subsurface Estate by Owner

Subsurface Reservation/Owner ¹	Township	Sec.	Subdivision	Acres ²
All minerals except oil and gas and "rock and gravel"/WRH Nevada Properties, LLC Oil & gas/BPX Energy	T. 13 N., R. 17 W.	1	lots 1-4, S½NE¼, S½NW¼, NE¼SW¼, SE¼.	410
		2	lots 2 and 4, S½N½ W½SW¼.	266
		3	lots 3 and 4; S½NW¼.	160
		4	lots 1-3, S½NE¼, S½NW¼, SE¼ SW¼, NE¼SE¼	360
		9	SW¼NE¼, NW¼, N½SW¼.	188
	T. 14 N., R. 16 W.	6	lots 1-6, S½NE¼, SE¼NW¼, NE¼SW¼, NE¼SW¼, N½SE¼, SE¼SE¼.	517
		7	lots 1-4, NE¼, E½NW¼ NE¼SW¼.	455
		18	lot 1.	44
	T. 14 N., R. 17 W.	1	All	629.
		2	lots 1-4, S½N½, SW¼SW¼, N½SE¼, SE¼SE¼.	466
		11	All	640
		12	All	640
		13	All	640
		14	All	640
		22	All	640
		23	All	640
		25	NW¼.	160
		26	W½	320
		27	All	640
		34	All	640
T. 15 N., R. 16 W.	19	E½	320	
	20	All	640	
	29	All	640	
	30	All	652.	
	31	All	654.	
T. 15 N., R. 17 W.	23	W½, N½NE¼, SW¼NE¼, SE¼.	600	
	25	W½, S½NE¼, SE¼.	560	
	26	All	640	
	35	W½W½, SE¼SW¼, S½SE¼.	280	
All minerals/United States (BLM)	T. 13 N., R. 17 W.	2	lot 1.	39.
	T. 14 N., R. 16 W.	4	lot 4, N½SW¼, SW¼SW¼, NW¼SE¼,	200.
All minerals/State of Montana	T. 15 N., R. 17 W.	6	lot 7, SE¼SW¼, SW¼SE¼.	123.
All minerals/Private individual	T. 14 N., R. 17 W.	2	N½SW¼, SE¼SW¼, SW¼SE¼.	160
All minerals/Plum Creek Timber Co.	T. 15 N., R. 17 W.	23	SE¼NE¼.	40
		24	All	640
		25	N½NE¼.	80
		35	NE¼, E½NW¼, NE¼SW¼, N½SE¼, N½SE¼.	360

¹ The subsurface ownership displayed is a simplified summary for the specific purpose of analysis under this document and not intended as a formal legal interpretation of title. If the proposed action was to be approved under this alternative, any future mineral exploration or mining proposals will initiate title adjudication at the project level.

² Areas displayed are approximated and rounded to the nearest acre.

A map displaying the above subsurface estate can be found in (See Map 3, Appendix E)

For the approximately 363 acres of federal subsurface, the management of energy and mineral development would not change under the acquisition. All 363 acres of this current federal minerals are under segregation and closed to entry under the mining laws. In the areas where the mineral estate would be under private or state ownership with federal surface, the BLM still has an obligation under 43 U.S.C. 1732(b) to prevent unnecessary or undue degradation. The owner or operator would need to obtain a special use lease, permit, or easement under 43 CFR 2920 before using the public lands to develop the non-federal mineral estate. Appropriate environmental analysis must be conducted on any special use lease, permit, or easement before it is granted, and the owner or operator may be required to provide a financial guarantee for reclamation before commencing surface-disturbing activity.

Recreation

The proposed land acquisition would ensure that these lands are public and thus would remain available for public recreation opportunities. The 17,000 acres of acquired lands would be added to the adjacent Blackfoot Special Recreation Management Area (SRMA). The SRMA recognizes unique and distinctive recreation values and is managed to enhance a targeted set of activities, experiences, benefits, and recreation setting characteristics, which become the primary management focus outlined in the Missoula RMP. The objective of the Blackfoot SRMA is to provide a wide array of outcome focused recreation opportunities for all skill levels and users while maintaining the scenic values. This may include but is not limited to rafting, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, hunting, science driving and snowmobiling. The desired experiences in this SRMA are developing skills and abilities, enjoying the closeness of friends and family, enjoying easy access to natural landscapes, enjoying access to close-to-home amenities (*see Appendix F: Missoula RMP: Appendix L, Blackfoot SRMA, Approved recreation Management areas*).

The current recreation opportunities allowed by the current landowner, TNC, include hunting, hiking, mountain biking, cross country skiing, dispersed camping, and horseback riding. These uses are aligned with the Blackfoot SRMA. Existing designated trails and authorizations would continue until further site-specific review and associated NEPA is complete. The BLM would pursue a comprehensive recreation management plan for all acquired lands within the Blackfoot SRMA in partnership with Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks and public involvement through the NEPA process.

Travel Management

The proposed parcels would be managed as limited to motorized vehicles similar to the Blackfoot SRMA.

The existing road designations would be retained until the BLM's Travel Management Plan for this area is updated through the NEPA process. Currently, public access is both motorized and non-motorized and several of the main roads in the acquisition area are Forest Service Roads and have Forest Service travel Management.

The existing snowmobile access allowed by the landowner, TNC, and Forest Service travel management would remain until the BLM completed comprehensive travel management planning for this area with public engagement through the NEPA process.

Visuals

A visual resource inventory (VRI) of the area was conducted in 2015. Based on the inventory these lands fall in the VRI class 2 and 3 categories. Upon acquisition these lands would be managed in a manner that maintains the visual values under visual resource inventory classes 2 and 3 until the Missoula RMP is amended or revised; at that time, the plan would establish visual resource management (VRM) categories for these areas and would be managed per the appropriate visual management objectives identified in the RMP.

Forest Vegetation

A century of industrial forest management, fire exclusion and resulting large high intensity wildfires have resulted in similar forested conditions across the acquisition area: young, dense, homogenous forests or areas that are in need of reforestation. These forest conditions have increased the wildfire risk to communities and decreased resilience to disturbance by insects, disease, and wildfire. The private landowner has worked to restore natural forest conditions in the proposed acquisition by reducing tree density, decreasing wildfire risk, and improving forest health. They have applied forest thinning projects that have been implemented in a number of ways ranging from hand thinning with chainsaws to mechanical thinning with heavy equipment in both the Gold and Twin Creeks areas. These thinning projects improved forest health, reduced wildfire risk, provided wood products to local economies, and employed local contractors. The landowner has been working jointly with the BLM to implement cross boundary risk reduction treatments. These burns will improve forest health and reduce the risk of uncharacteristic wildfire.

The BLM would continue similar active vegetation management practices with objectives to reduce wildfire risk, create healthy forests that are more resilient to insects, disease, and wildfire, and to provide benefits to local economies. Treatments would include pre-commercial thinning, prescribed burning, timber harvest, and cut/pile/burn.

Wildlife and Aquatics

Wildlife resources in the acquired lands would be managed consistent with Missoula RMP guidance. Further, these lands would be managed as part of the Blackfoot and Clark-Fork Restoration Landscape, with an emphasis on restoration and improvement of wildlife habitats.

The area serves as a buffer and linkage zone for wildlife moving in and out of the Bob Marshall/Scapegoat Wilderness Complex, along the Continental Divide and between the Clark Fork River drainage and the Garnet Range. BLM management actions following acquisition would require compliance with Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act for listed Threatened and Endangered species. The Missoula RMP objectives include conserving sensitive species and their habitats such that Bureau actions would not contribute to the need to list any of the species. The parcel contains occupied habitat for grizzly bear (threatened), occupied Canada lynx (threatened) habitat, and Canada lynx designated critical habitat, and wolverine habitat. The area also contains whitebark pine (threatened). Gold Creek is occupied bull trout (threatened) habitat and Designated Critical Habitat for bull trout. The plan directs the BLM to follow the NCDE Grizzly Bear Conservation Strategy (2018 ed), the Canada Lynx Conservation Strategy and Assessment (2013 ed.), and the Recovery Plan for the Coterminous United States Population of Bull Trout

(2015) and as amended for those species. The plan also provides management direction to follow any USFWS recovery or conservation plans for all listed species, so the BLM would comply with wolverine and whitebark pine recovery and conversation plans once available.

The BLM also has special status species which include proposed species; listed species and candidate species under the Endangered Species Act; state-listed species; and BLM State Director designated sensitive species. These special status wildlife species, which inhabit the parcel include, but are not limited to westslope cutthroat trout, western toad, gray wolf, great gray owl, flammulated owl, bald and golden eagles. Big game and upland game birds also inhabit the area along with it being summer and winter range for elk, moose, white-tailed and mule deer. Ruffed grouse, dusky grouse, and spruce grouse, migratory birds and other birds and mammal species of Special Concern (Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks) may be found in the project area. Habitat is diverse and includes conifer forests, mountain parks, and riparian communities.

The Gold Creek and Twin Creeks watersheds are considered important habitat and the riparian areas, including several large meadows in the gold Creek drainage have been identified as areas important for riverscape restoration opportunities. Under the Nature Conservancy ownership, riparian restoration projects such as road realignments, stream crossing upgrades, riparian plantings in meadows, and beaver dam analogues were used to restore floodplains and increase habitat complexity in tributary streams to the Blackfoot River. Other projects, including fencing and delineating dispersed camping areas near streams also benefitted riparian recovery from historic disturbances associated with industrial and recreational uses. The proposed action to acquire these lands would allow BLM to pursue future stream restoration treatments similar to The Nature Conservancy's previous work. Projects will be prioritized to reduce sedimentation for roads and erosion sources, increase fish passage by upgrading stream crossings (i.e., culverts) that create habitat barriers, and improving floodplain connectivity using Low Tech Process Based Restoration techniques. These actions will be analyzed in detail related to specific project proposals.

Other

Development and implementation of site-specific projects on the acquired lands would be subject to the provisions of federal land management regulations for BLM-administered lands. This includes review of project proposals under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and applicable public involvement requirements.

2.5 Resource Issue 2

Would the County tax revenues to local taxing districts be reduced?

2.5.1 Affected Environment

The 17,000 acres of lands proposed for acquisition in Missoula County has a 2022 assessed market value of approximately \$3,600,000. These lands generated approximately \$18,500 of tax revenue for local taxing districts in 2023.

2.5.2 Environmental Effects—No Action Alternative

In the No Action Alternative, the lands would not be acquired and revenues to local taxing districts would not change.

2.5.3 Environmental Effects—Alternative 2

In the proposed action tax revenues to local taxing districts would be reduced by approximately \$18,500 per year since lands acquired by the United States are exempt from paying property taxes. Missoula County would receive federal Payments In Lieu of Taxes (PILT).

3 Consultation and Coordination

3.0 Summary of Consultation and Coordination

The BLM consulted with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes on May 23 and 24, 2023.

3.1 Summary of Public Participation

Notice of this project was posted in the NEPA Register on the BLM's ePlanning website on April 30, 2024, at [EplanningUi \(blm.gov\)](https://eplanningui.blm.gov)

Public Engagement

- The Missoula Field Office participated in a TNC open house meeting regarding the BLM Acquisition of Gold/Twin Creek Area in September 2021. The feedback during this meeting was favorable of BLM acquiring the Gold/Twin Creek area.
- The Missoula Field office is currently working on the Lower Blackfoot Ecosystem Analysis at the Watershed Scale. As part of this process the BLM sought input from the public, partners, and tribes through a series of envisioning sessions. The envisioning process took place during the winter of 2023 and included more than 40 partner and stakeholder listening sessions and two public workshops.

The comments from the Envisioning process were documented in the *BLM Missoula Field Office Lower Blackfoot Ecosystem Analysis at the Watershed Scale Public Envisioning Report*. Summary of the comments regarding acquisitions of public lands in the Blackfoot Valley were as follows:

“Input from the public was people were very supportive of the transfer of ownership from TNC to the public lands through the Bureau of Land Management. Stating complimentary alignment between the original goal of TNC to preserve recreational access, conserve the ecological integrity of forests, rivers and wildlife habitat and the purview of the BLM.”

“There is considerable local support for the purchase of the TNC lands by BLM. Numerous people suggest that it represents a once in a lifetime opportunity to create a vision together on new, publicly owned land. The size of the area and the connectivity to the Blackfoot River corridor gives it tremendous potential and possibility for now and future generations.”

4 List of Appendices

Appendix A—List of Preparers

Appendix B—Table of Issues and Resources Considered

Appendix C—Acronyms and Abbreviations

Appendix D—List of References

Appendix E—Maps

Appendix F—Other Documentation

5 Appendix A: List of Preparers

Name	Title	Resource Area
Michael Albritton	Assistant Field Manager	Missoula Field Office
Steve Bell	Rangeland Specialist	Missoula Field Office
Erin Carey	Field Manager	Missoula Field Office
Maria Craig	Outdoor Recreation Planner	Missoula Field Office
Liz Dolinar	Archeologist	Missoula Field Office
Ernie McKenzie	Assistant Field Manager	Missoula Field Office
Mariya Osipchuk	Wildlife Biologist	Missoula Field Office
Claire Romanko	Restoration Landscape Project Manager	Missoula Field Office
Chris Rye	Geologist	Missoula Field Office
Lonna Sandau	Realty Specialist	Western Montana District
Maggie Ward	NEPA Planner	Western Montana District
Jodi Wetzstein	Supervisory Forester	Missoula Field Office

6 Appendix B: Table of Issues and Resources Considered

Determination*	Issue	Rationale for Determination
PI	Access	Issue-1
NI	Air Quality	See notation below**
NP	Areas of Critical Environmental Concern	NA
NP	Backcountry Conservation Areas	NA
NI	Climate	See notation below**
PI	Cultural Resources	Issue-1
PI	Energy and Minerals	Issue-1
NI	Environmental Justice	See notation below**
PI	Fire Management	Issue-1
PI	Fish Habitat	Issue-1
PI	Forests and Rangelands	Issue-1
PI	Forestry Resources and Woodland Products	Issue-1
NI	Human health and safety concerns	See notation below**
PI	Invasive, Non-native Species	Issue-1
PI	Lands and Realty	Issue-1
NP	Lands with Wilderness Characteristics	NA
PI	Livestock Grazing Management	Issue-1
PI	Migratory birds and wildlife	Issue-1
PI	Native American Religious Concerns	See notation below**
NI	Noise Resources	See notation below**
PI	Recreation Resources	Issue-1
PI	Socioeconomics	Issue -2
NI	Soils	See notation below**
PI	Threatened, Endangered or Candidate Plant or Animal Species	Issue-1
PI	Vegetation	Issue-1
PI	Visual Resources	Issue-1
PI	Water	Issue-1
PI	Wetlands/Riparian Zones	Issue-1
NP	Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas	NA
PI	Wildlife	Issue-1

*NP = not present in the area impacted by the proposed or alternative actions.

NI = present, but not affected to a degree that detailed analysis is required.

PI = present and may be impacted. Will be analyzed in affected environment and environmental effects. For consistency, the term 'effects' is used throughout the EA, but we use the term 'impacts' just in this table. (NOTE: PI does not necessarily mean effects are likely to be significant, only that there are effects to this issue, resource, or use. Significance will be determined through analysis and documented in a Finding of No Significant Impact or Environmental Impact Statement.)

**** Proposed Action is the acquisition of land. Development and implementation of site-specific projects on the acquired lands would be subject to the provisions of federal land management regulations for BLM-administered lands. This includes review of project proposals under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and applicable public involvement requirements.**

7 Appendix C: Acronyms and Abbreviations

ATV	All-Terrain Vehicle
BLM	Bureau of Land Management
CBP	Clearwater-Blackfoot Project
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
DM	Departmental Manual
DNRC	Department of Natural Resources
DR	Decision Record
EA	Environmental Assessment
EO	Executive Order
ESA	Endangered Species Act
FLPMA	Federal Land Policy Management Act of 1976, as amended
FONSI	Finding of No Significant Impact
FWP	Fish Wildlife and Parks
GIS	Geographic Information Systems
IDT	Interdisciplinary Team
LWCF	Land and Water Conservation Fund
NCDE	Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NHT	National Historic Trails
OHV	Off-Highway Vehicle
PILT	Payment in Lieu of Taxes
RMP	Resource Management Plan
ROW	Right-of-way
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Office
SRMA	Special Management Area
T&E	Threatened and Endangered
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
USFS	Forest Service
USFWS	Fish and Wildlife Service
U.S.C.	United States Code
VRI	Visual Resource Inventory
VRM	Visual Resource Management
ATV	All-Terrain Vehicle
BLM	Bureau of Land Management
CBP	Clearwater-Blackfoot Project
CFR	Code of Federal Regulations
DM	Departmental Manual
DNRC	Department of Natural Resources
DR	Decision Record
EA	Environmental Assessment
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IDT	Interdisciplinary Team
LWCF	Land and Water Conservation Fund
NCDE	Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem
NEPA	National Environmental Policy Act
NHPA	National Historic Preservation Act
NHT	National Historic Trails
OHV	Off-Highway Vehicle
PILT	Payment in Lieu of Taxes
RMP	Resource Management Plan
ROW	Right-of-way
SHPO	State Historic Preservation Office
SRMA	Special Management Area
T&E	Threatened and Endangered
TNC	The Nature Conservancy
USFS	Forest Service
USFWS	Fish and Wildlife Service

Appendix D: List of References

43 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 2800

2015 Revision by Montana DNRC based on original MSU Extension Forestry publication EB 158.

BLM Missoula Field Office, Lower Blackfoot Ecosystem Analysis at the Watershed Scale Public Envisioning Report 2023.

Bureau of Land Management (BLM). Executive Order 12898 Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations. 1994.

Executive Order 12898 Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations. 1994.

H-1790-1 National Environmental Policy Act Handbook. Washington D.C.; US Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, 2008.

Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). 2015. Web Soil Survey. Online at: <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/HomePage.htm>.

The Nature Conservancy, Clearwater-Blackfoot Project Ecological Assessment, 2017. 92pp.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. 1995. Inland Native Fish Strategy Environmental Assessment Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact. Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management and Office of the Solicitor (editors). 2001. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act, as amended. U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management Office of Public Affairs, Washington, D.C. 69 pp.

U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Land Management (BLM). 2020. Missoula Field Office Resource Area Record of Decision and Approved Resource Management Plan. Missoula Field Office. Missoula, Montana

U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service. Data accessed 2015. National Wetland Inventory Database. Madison, Wisconsin.

8 Appendix E: Legal Description and Maps

Legal Description

Principal Meridian, Montana

T 13 N., R 17 W.,

- sec. 1, lots 1 thru 4, S1/2NE1/4, S1/2NW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, and SE1/4; EXCEPT portion conveyed to the State of Montana Department of Transportation, May 5, 2001, in Book 731 Page 972 Micro Records; EXCEPT portion conveyed to The Nature Conservancy, December 15, 2008, in Book 830 Page 797 Micro Records, corrected in Book 861 Page 844 Micro Records.
- sec. 2, lots 1, 2, and 4; S1/2N1/2; W1/2SW1/4; and Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad Co. right of way and adjunct properties for abandoned railroad across W1/2SW1/4, NE1/4SW1/4, N1/2SE1/4, S1/2NE1/4 as conveyed to Champion International Corp., by Deed recorded in Book 145 Page 2039 Micro Records; EXCEPT portion conveyed to Howard Jewett, May 17, 1954, in Book 182 Page 381 Deed Records; EXCEPT portion conveyed to Layton K. Crane, July 2, 1959, in Book 212 Page 294 Deed Records; EXCEPT portion conveyed to Clarence Nelson, November 18, 1960, in Book 218 Page 384 Deed Records; EXCEPT portion conveyed to Twin Creeks Homeowners Association, Inc., June 28, 1991, in Book 332 Page 1473 Micro Records and corrected in Book 369 Page 506 Micro Records; EXCEPT portion conveyed to Jeffrey T. Johnson, October 26, 2007, in Book 807 Page 1565 Micro Records; EXCEPT portion conveyed to The Nature Conservancy, December 15, 2008, in Book 830 Page 797 Micro Records, corrected in Book 861 Page 844 Micro Records;
- sec. 3, lots 3 and 4, and S1/2NW1/4.
- sec. 4, lots 1 thru 4, S1/2NE1/4, S1/2NW1/4, SW1/4, and N1/2SE1/4.
- sec. 9, SW1/4NE1/4, N1/2SW1/4, and NW1/4; EXCEPT portion conveyed to The Nature Conservancy, December 15, 2008, in Book 830 Page 797 Micro Records, corrected in Book 861 Page 844 Micro Records.

T. 14 N., R. 16 W.,

- sec. 6, lots 1 thru 7, S1/2NE1/4, SE1/4NW1/4, E1/2SW1/4, and SE1/4.
- sec. 7, lots 1 and 2, NE1/4, E1/2NW1/4, and an aggregate parcel described as lots 3 and 4; and NE1/4SW1/4 of Section 7, Township 14 North, Range 16 West, P.M.M. Missoula County, Montana; and lot 1 of Section 18, Township 14 North, Range 16 West, P.M.M. Missoula County, Montana.

T. 14 N., R. 17 W.,

- sec. 1, lots 1 thru 4, S1/2NE1/4, S1/2NW1/4, and S1/2.
- sec. 2, lots 1 thru 4, S1/2NE1/4, S1/2NW1/4, and S1/2.
- secs. 11 thru 14.
- sec. 22 and 23.
- sec. 25, NW1/4.
- sec. 26, W1/2.
- sec. 27.
- sec. 34.
- sec. 35, N1/2, and SW1/4.

T. 15 N., R. 16 W.,

- sec. 19, lots 1 thru 4, E1/2NW1/4, E1/2SW1/4, and E1/2.
- sec. 20.
- sec. 29.
- sec. 30, lots 1 thru 4, E1/2NW1/4, E1/2SW1/4, and E1/2.
- sec. 31, lots 1 thru 4, E1/2NW1/4, E1/2SW1/4, and E1/2.

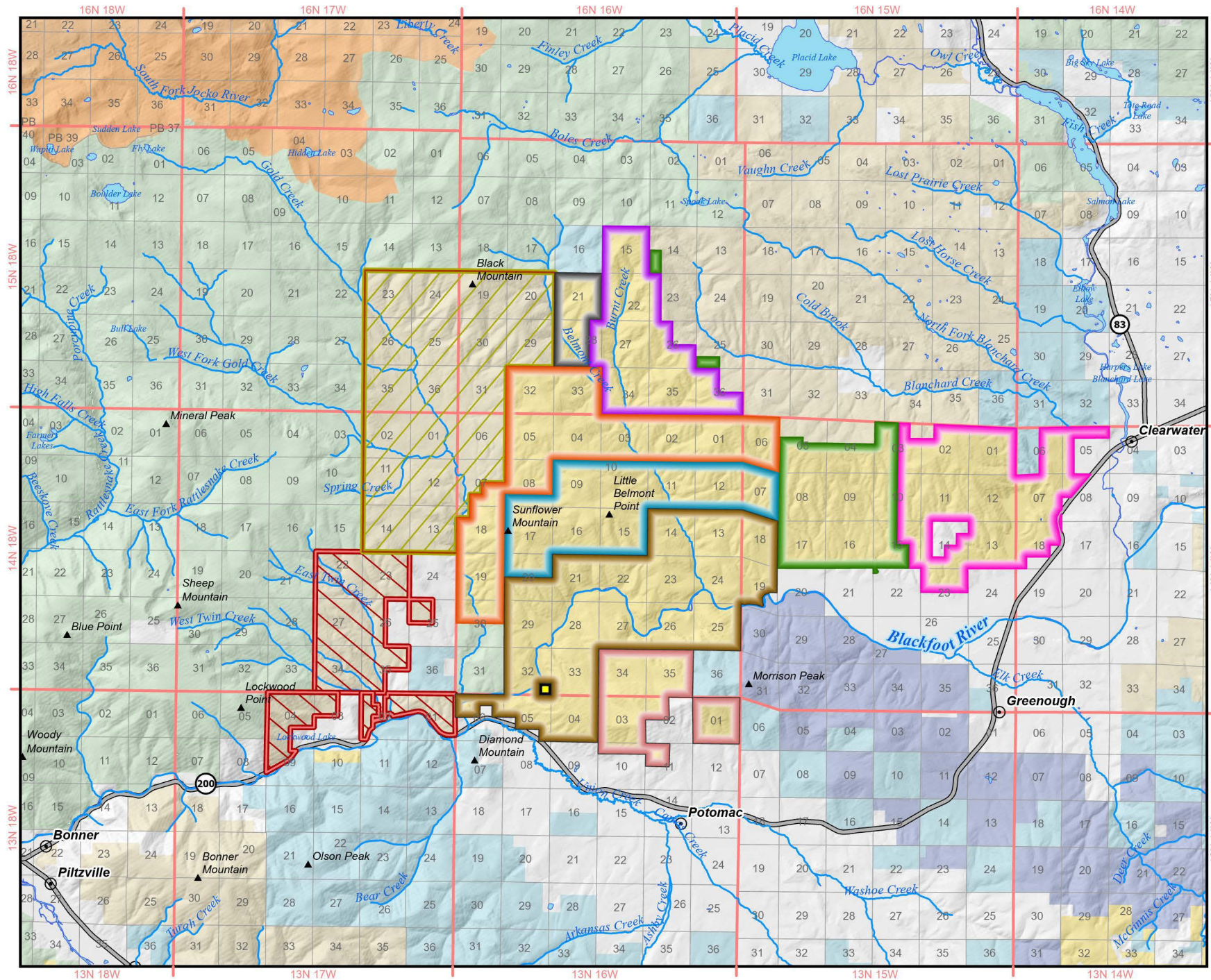
T. 15 N., R. 17 W.,

- secs. 23 thru 26.
- secs. 35 thru 36.

The area described contains 17,174.55 acres in Missoula County, Montana



Gold and Twin Creek Proposed Land Acquisitions Map 1



Legend

Proposed Land Acquisitions

- Gold Creek
- Twin Creek

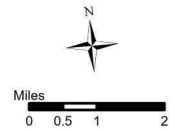
Past Land Acquisitions

- LBC Exchange (1998-2000)
- Morrison Mtn (2014)
- Sunflower-Belmont (2016)
- Middle Belmont (2019)
- Upper Belmont (2020)
- Upper Belmont West (2020)
- Ninemile (2022)
- Woodchuck (2022)
- Original BLM 40 ac

Ownership

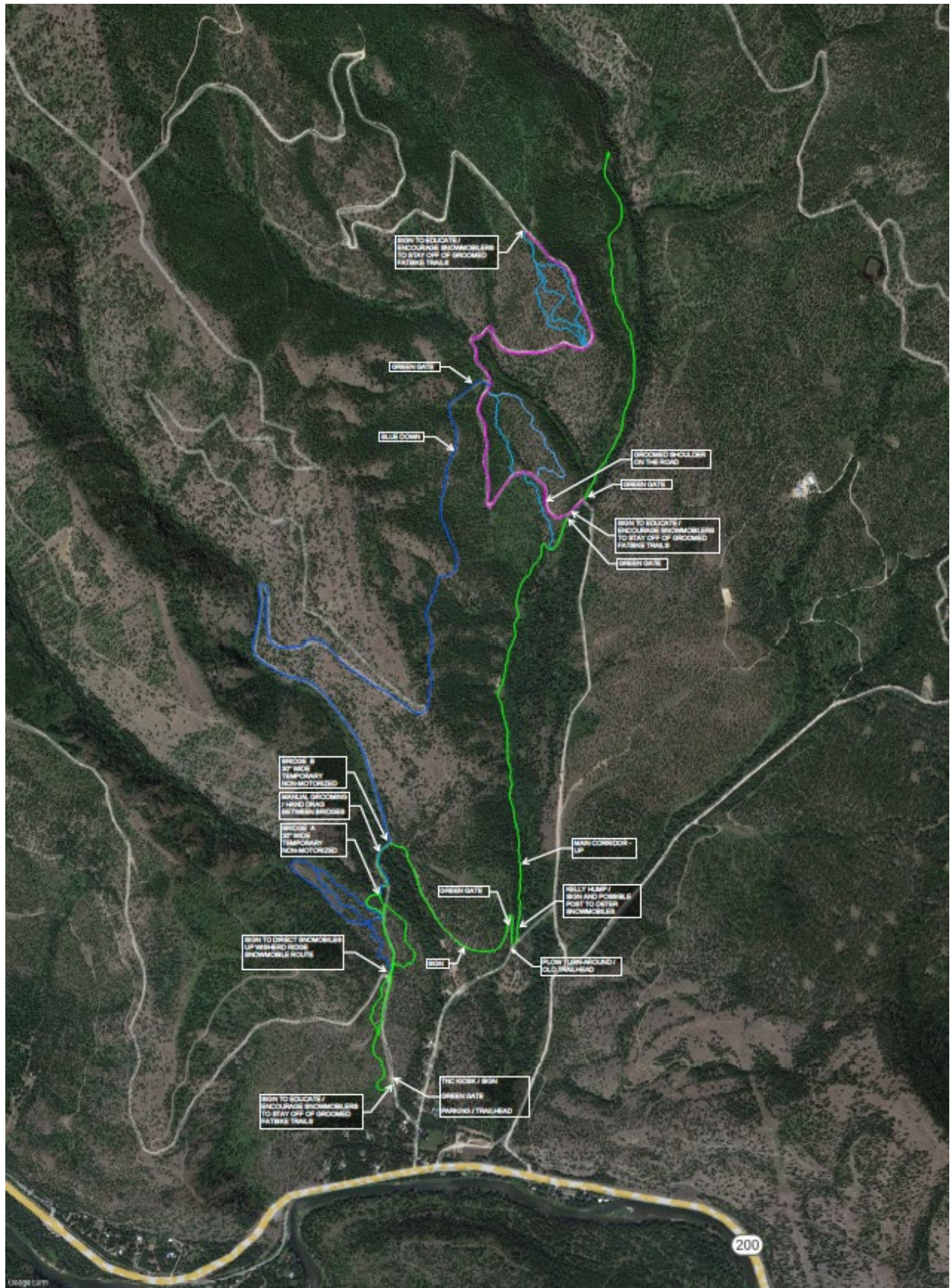
- BLM
- Forest Service
- Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation
- State
- State- Lubrecht Experimental Forest
- The Nature Conservancy
- Private

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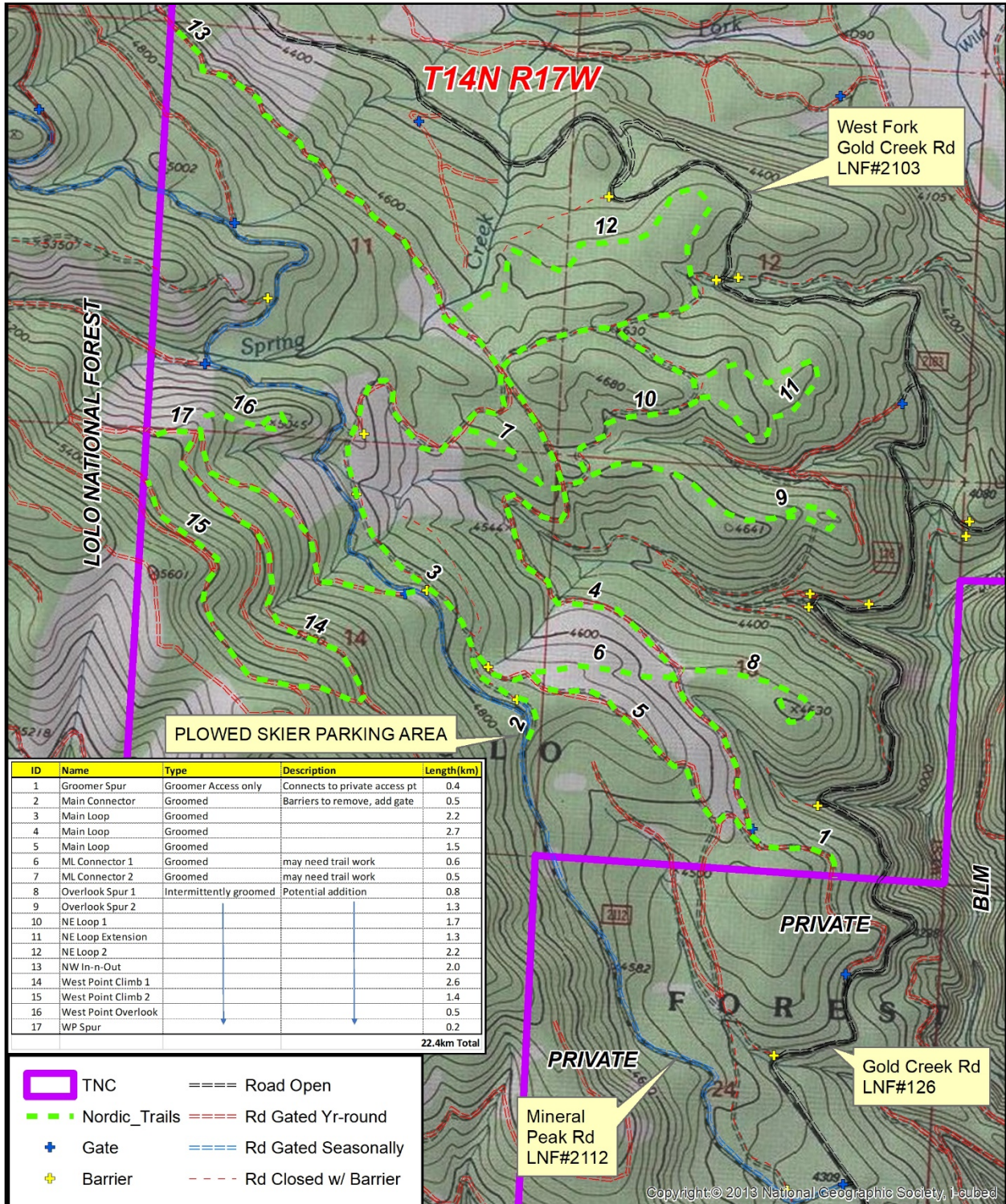


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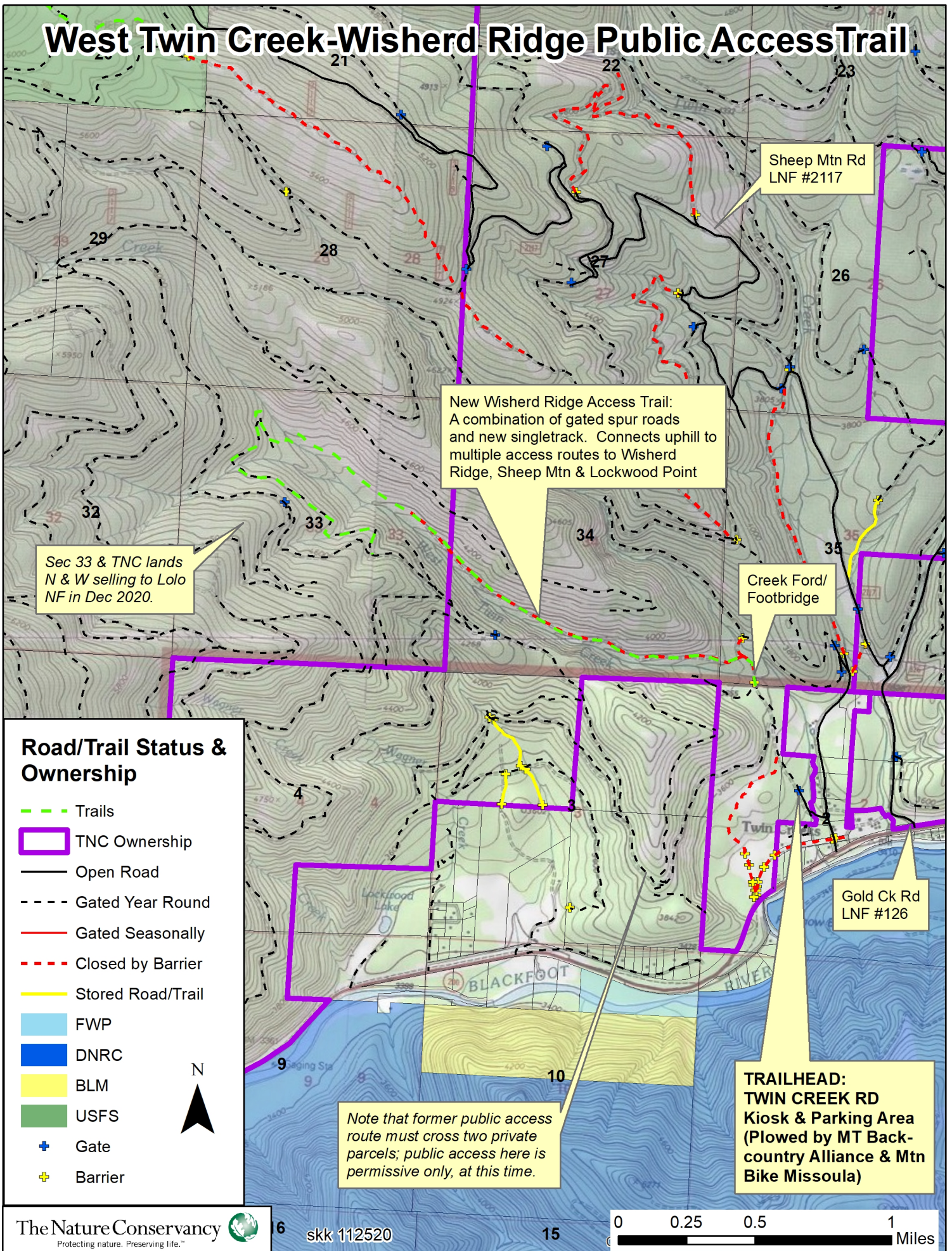
Appendix E: Map2 TNC Current Conditions: Winter Fat Bike Trails



Appendix E: Map of TNC Current Conditions: Nordic Ski Trails



West Twin Creek-Wisherd Ridge Public Access Trail



West Twin Creek – Wisherd Ridge Public Access

This parking area provides access for year-round non-motorized use, as well as snowmobiling and non-motorized winter sports from December 1-April 1.

This area is comprised of private property, lands owned by The Nature Conservancy (a private non-profit), and the Lolo National Forest. Uses and Regulations vary by ownership. Know the Rules!

Respect Private Property: do not trespass. All Users (Snowmobilers and Non-Motorized) MUST stay on the designated road while traveling through private property.

Snowmobiles are requested to stay on roads on The Nature Conservancy property.

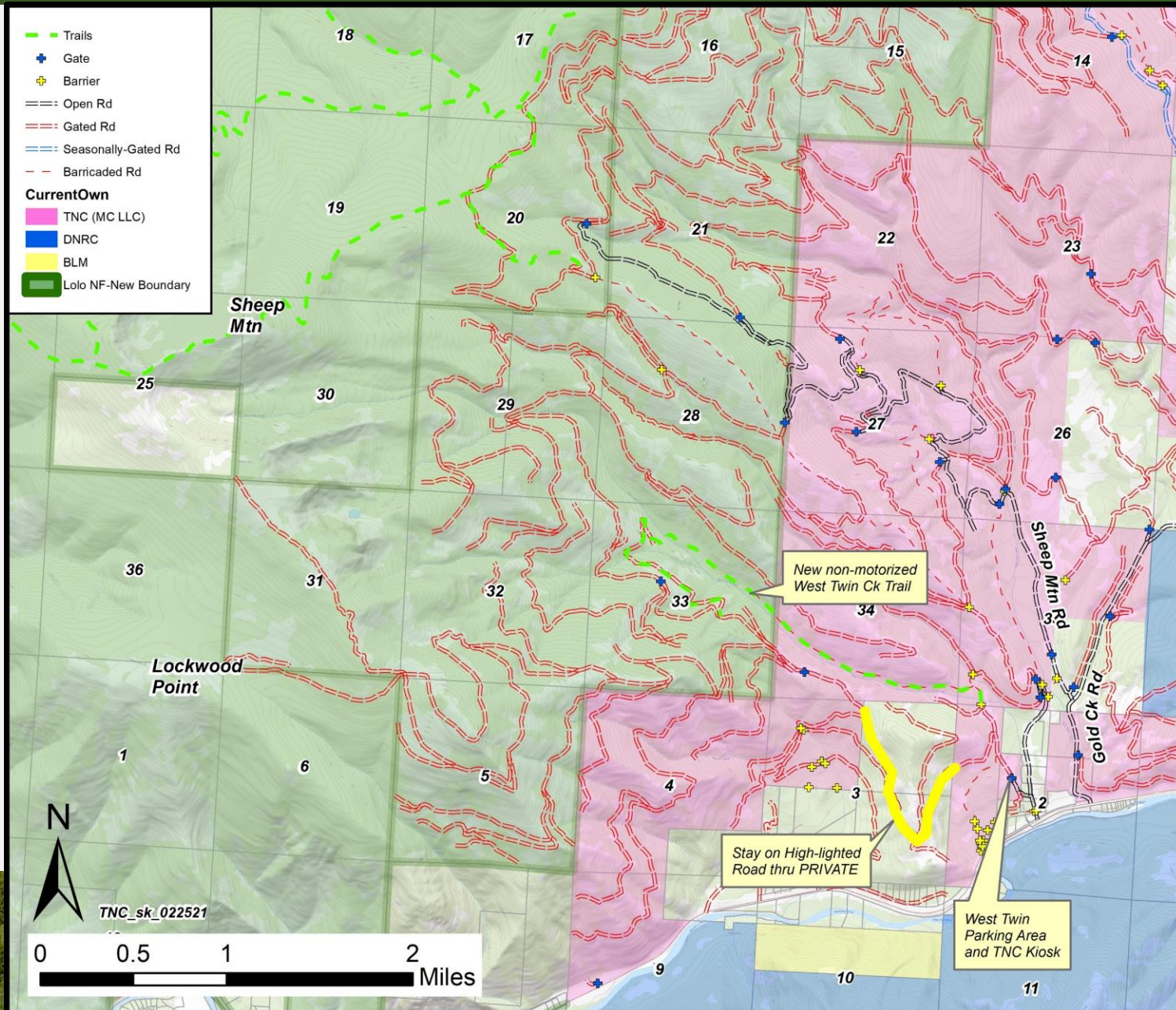
This is a Multiple-Use Area - Please respect other users. Travel safely and respectfully.

This parking area is plowed in winter through a partnership between Montana Backcountry Alliance, Mountain Bike Missoula, Missoula County, and The Nature Conservancy.

Follow The Nature Conservancy's posted public use regulations.

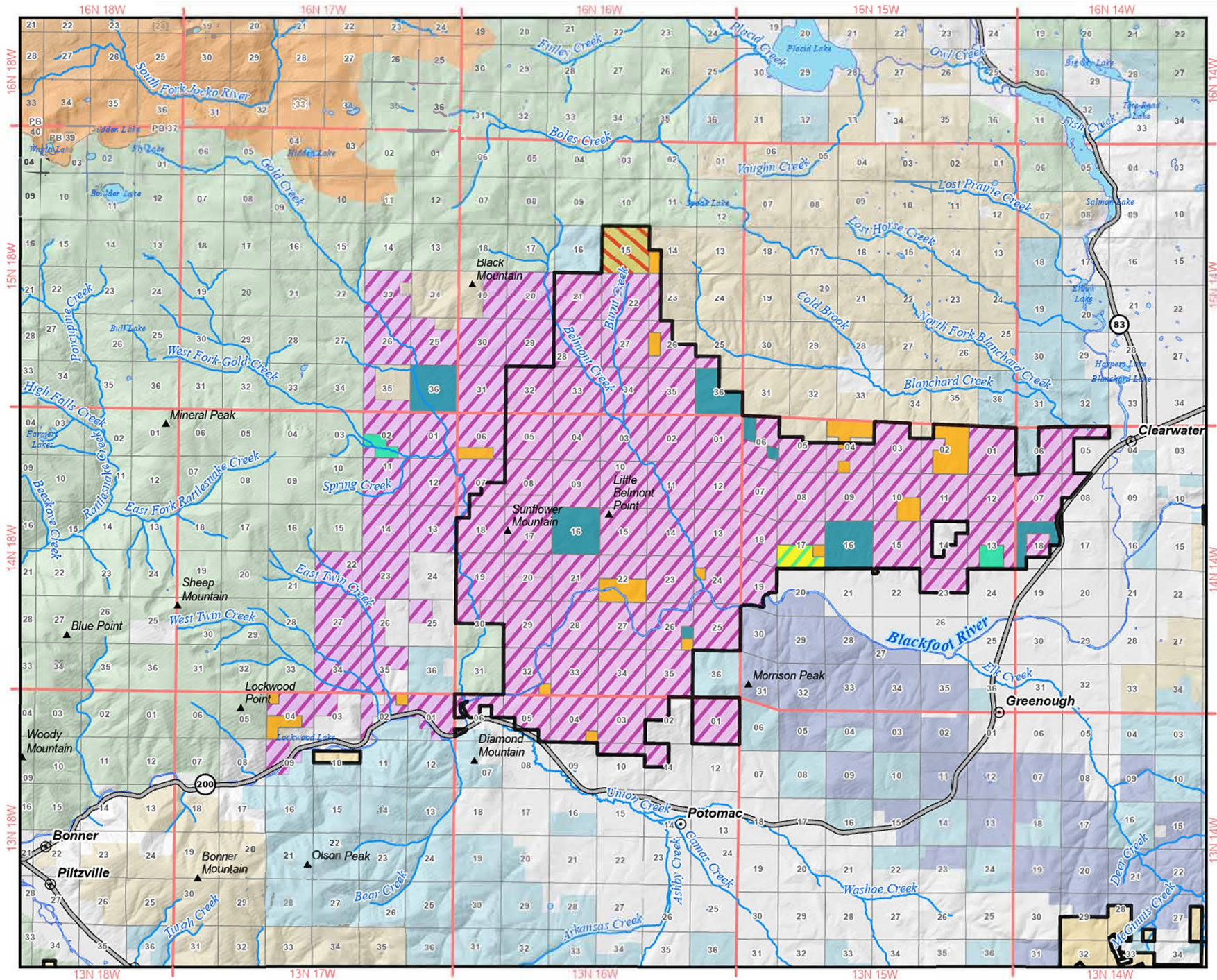
Land ownership patterns are dynamic and will change over time. This map is current as of February 2021.

Respectfully Use Private Lands, including The Nature Conservancy Lands – ABUSE IT, YOU LOOSE IT.





Gold and Twin Creek Subsurface Ownership Map 3



Legend

Subsurface Ownership

- All Minerals
 - United States (BLM-managed)
 - State of Montana
 - Meridian Minerals Co.
 - WRH Nevada Properties, LLC
 - Western Energy
 - Private Individual
- Oil & Gas
 - BP America Production Co.
 - Meridian Oil, Inc.
 - Private Individual
- Surface Ownership**
 - BLM
 - Forest Service
 - Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of the Flathead Reservation
 - State
 - State- Lubrecht Experimental Forest
 - The Nature Conservancy
 - Private

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9 Appendix F: Other Documents

BLACKFOOT SRMA

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

The Blackfoot area contains outstanding opportunities for river related and land-based recreation as well as high scenic values. Over 40,000 visitors frequent this area to enjoy the camping, boating, rafting, kayaking, and other river-related opportunities in addition to the hunting, mountain biking, and hiking. Visitors can also experience the Lewis and Clark National Historic Trail in this area.

RECREATION SETTING CHARACTERISTIC DESCRIPTIONS

The following physical, social, and operational recreation setting qualities will be maintained or enhanced:

Physical Components

- Remoteness: Backcountry, middle country, and front country
- Naturalness: Backcountry and middle country
- Facilities: Backcountry and rural

Social Components

- Contacts: Backcountry and front country
- Group size: Primitive, backcountry and middle country
- Evidence of use: Backcountry and middle country

Operational Components

- Access: Backcountry, middle country, and front country
- Visitor service: Backcountry and middle country
- Management controls: Front country

OBJECTIVE(S)

Objective Statement: Provide a wide array of outcome focused recreation opportunities for all skill levels and users while maintaining the scenic values. May include but not limited to rafting, fishing, hiking, mountain biking, hunting, scenic driving, and snowmobiling.

Visitor's targeted: local and regional

Activities: Rafting, fishing, camping, hiking, biking, hunting, scenic driving, and snowmobiling.

Experiences: Developing skills and abilities, enjoying the closeness of friends and family, enjoying easy access to natural landscapes, enjoying access to close-to-home outdoor amenities

Benefits: Restore mind from unwanted stress, greater sensitivity to/awareness of outdoor aesthetics, nature's art and its elegance, a more outdoor oriented lifestyle, more positive contributions to local and regional economy.

MANAGEMENT ACTIONS AND ALLOWABLE USES

Recreation and Visitor Services Program:

- Continue working with partners to manage recreation and to develop recreation opportunities; continue working with landowners in management of the River Recreation Corridor;
- Continue support of Block Management with MT FWP;
- Consider developing a Scenic Driving loop;
- Work with partners to develop a regional connecting trail or trails; work with partners to develop biking trails; Consider developing float in camp sites;
- SRPs: No outfitter and guide permits will be issued for hunting except in conjunction with adjoining Forest Service lands. Otherwise, issue special recreation permits, as appropriate and on a case by case basis, for commercial, competitive, and special events subject to guidelines in BLM Handbook 2930, resource capabilities, social conflict concerns, professional qualifications, public safety and public need. Water based SRPs continue working with MFWP to administer the SRP program including determining numbers and group sizes

Other Programs:

- VRM Class: Class II and III
- Lands and Realty: avoidance area, consider whether the function or suitability of the recreation experience and benefits will be impaired
- Minerals: Leasable – Open; Locatable – Open;
- Mineral Materials – Open, consider whether the function or suitability of the recreation experience and benefits will be impaired
- TTM: Limited Motorized
- Forestry – Utilize forest management practices including but not limited to commercial timber harvest, prescribed burning, pre-commercial thinning, and planting to accomplish SRMA goals and objectives related to vegetation management and to maintain the recreation setting characteristics. Determine timing restrictions as the project level if needed to accomplish SRMA goals and objectives.
- Grazing – To provide visitors with a quality recreation experience and for public safety, no grazing within the River Recreation Corridor.

Implementation decisions are actions to achieve or implement land use plan decisions. •

- Continue existing supplementary rules and no jumping off of bridges;
- No collection of firewood for other than on site use with the River Recreation Corridor and only dead and down wood can be burned; In the River Recreation Corridor, no discharging of firearms or projectiles (except for legal game hunting purposes as established by MFWP) or engaging in other recreational shooting including, but not limited to, plinking, target shooting, or shooting varmints, etc.;
- Outside of the River Recreation Corridor, no firearm restrictions; Improve access to the river at the day use sites.
- *Administration:* Supported by MFWP, pursue partnerships to develop and maintain trails