

Meeting Date: May 16, 2024

Agenda Item No.: 5D

Agenda Item: Helmick Ranch Conservation Easement
(ACTION)

Bureau Chief Approval: SR

Prepared by: Casey Pozzanghera, Natural Resources Program Coordinator

Background:

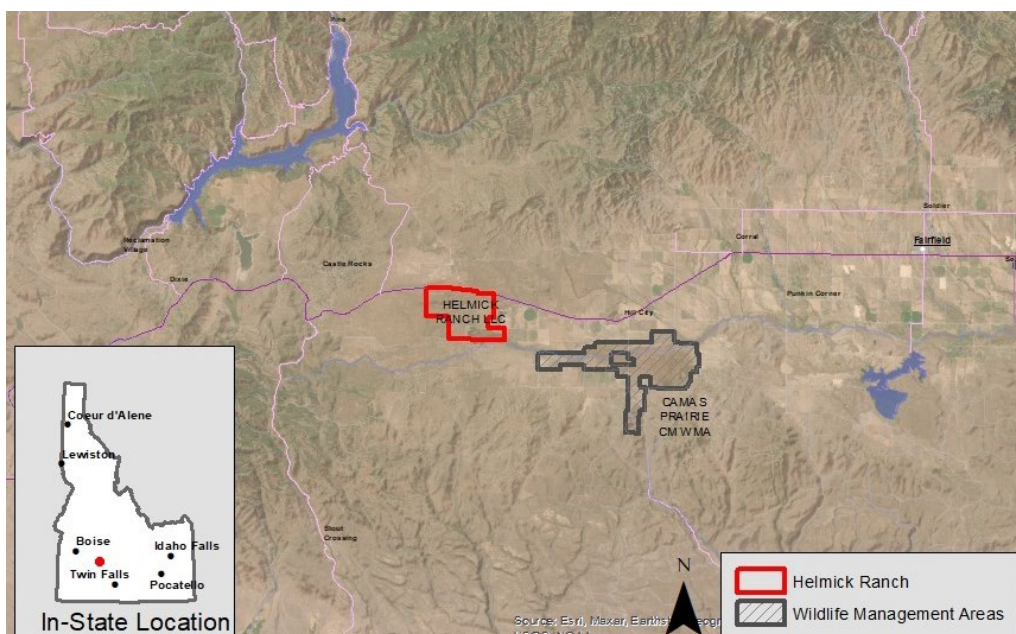
The Department is proposing to purchase a conservation easement on 3,476 acres of land in Elmore County owned by Helmick Ranch LLC. The property is located on the south side of Highway 20 near Hill City, in the heart of an important big game migration area.

Mule deer, elk, and pronghorn use the Highway 20 corridor to migrate between summer range in the Soldier Mountains to the north and winter range in the Bennet Hills to the south. Movement maps of mule deer from the Smokey-Bennett DAU highlight a few, very specific areas that deer use during their migrations and the Helmick Ranch sits squarely in the center of one of those areas. Department data suggest that as many as 12,000 mule deer migrate across Highway 20 each year and roughly 45% of those deer travel through the Helmick Ranch.

Smokey-Bennett mule deer are the second most heavily hunted population in the state and provide both general hunting opportunities in GMU 43 as well as coveted trophy hunting opportunities in GMUs 44 and 45. Protecting migrating deer on private land along the Highway 20 corridor will help to ensure these deer continue to thrive and provide these valuable hunting opportunities on the surrounding public lands.

The easement will grant the Commission development rights to the property, ensuring that it will remain in its current undeveloped state in perpetuity, while continuing to allow the landowners to run their ranching operation. Public access is not included with this easement.

This easement was previously presented to the Commission during Executive Session in July 2023 and January 2024. The appraised value of the easement is \$1,580,000. IDFG lands acquisition funds (commonly referred to as HB 530 funds) would be used for the purchase.



Statutory Authority and/or Policy issues:

The Idaho Fish and Game Commission has the authority to acquire land (Idaho Code 36-104(b)(7)). Land acquisition is in accordance with Commission land acquisition policy.

Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommend purchasing the 3,476-acre Helmick Ranch conservation easement.

Suggested Motion: I move the Commission purchase the 3,476-acre Helmick Ranch conservation easement.