

Meeting Date: May 11, 2023

Agenda Item No. 5G

Agenda Item: Moyie River Corridor Forest Legacy Project Contribution (**ACTION**)

Bureau Chief Approval: JR

Prepared by: Casey Pozzanghera, Natural Resources Program Coordinator

Background:

The Moyie River Corridor Forest Legacy Project is an Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) project to acquire a group of conservation easements on industrial timber company land north of Bonners Ferry in Boundary County. The Forest Legacy Program is funded by the Land and Water Conservation Fund and administered by the U.S. Forest Service in partnership with State agencies to encourage protection of privately owned forest lands. The total land area covered under these 7 easements is approximately 4,648 acres. This project was funded in FY20, however the significant increase in property values since the application has resulted in a funding shortfall for the multimillion-dollar project. The Department was not directly involved in the initial project proposal but has since been approached by The Nature Conservancy and IDL about contributing toward the estimated \$1M dollar funding shortfall. As the state administrator of Forest Legacy Program funds, IDL will hold and manage the conservation easements.

Manulife Investment Management and Molpus Woodlands Group wish to convey these easements to IDL to conserve forest lands in perpetuity. The land parcels included are checkerboarded and interspersed with U.S. Forest Service and smaller private parcels. They are in an area that provides quality habitat for big game, furbearers, and small game and provide hunting and trapping opportunities. IDFG already has a vested interest in maintaining access for sportsmen and women on these properties. Several of the proposed easements are located on parcels that are currently enrolled in the Large Tracts program. All easements will allow public access for hunting, fishing, and trapping, will keep these properties as productive timber lands, and will prevent them from being developed.

This is an opportunity for the Department to be a small but meaningful contributor to a large project with a biologically relevant scale. The project has a roughly \$17M dollar estimated cost, with IDL contributing most of those funds. The Department has identified \$300K of access funds that can be used to contribute toward this project in FY23. Due diligence on these easements is still on-going. Appraisals and draft conservation easement documents have been completed for 3 out of the 7 parcels. Department funds are intended to move the entire effort forward but need to be spent within the current fiscal year and will therefore go directly toward acquisition of the individual easement IDL plans to close on first. The Curley Creek Easement totals roughly 300 acres of timber land and is in the final stages of due diligence. The Department has entered an agreement with IDL outlining our intent to contribute the funds contingent upon Commission approval, and this agreement gives the Department the ability to review all documentation relevant to the acquisition prior to the funds being released from escrow.

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 recommends the disbursement of \$300,000 of access (license) funds to an escrow account set up by the Idaho Department of Lands for completion of the Moyie River Corridor Project and the acquisition of the Curley Creek Conservation Easement.

Suggested Motion: I move the Department deposit \$300,000 of access funds into an escrow account to be used by the Idaho Department of Lands for acquisition of the Curley Creek Conservation Easement contingent upon the terms identified in the associated agreement.