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Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area Palmer Property Acquisition

May 2001



Wetland Habitat



Upland Habitat

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Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Region One Headquarters
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, Montana 59901
1-406-752-5501



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PROPOSED PALMER PROPERTY ACQUISITION ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

**MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS
490 N. MERIDIAN ROAD
KALISPELL, MT 59901
(406) 752-5501**

**Public Comment Period
May 1 – May 31, 2001**

**Public Hearing:
7:00 pm
May 15, 2001
Ninepipes Lodge (Allentown)**

Address Comments to:

**Jim Williams
Wildlife Program Manager
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901**

(406) 752-5501

**John Grant
Ninepipe WMA Manager
5791 Ninepipe Road
Charlo, MT 59824**

(406) 644-2510

INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to acquire approximately 116 acres of land in the NW1/4 of Section 33 and NE1/4 Section 32, T20N R20W, in Lake County, Montana. The acquisition will be fee title and is for the purpose of preserving habitat for a variety of avian and mammalian wildlife. The acquired lands would become part of the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and would be managed to provide a public recreation resource associated with the wildlife populations.

Beginning in 1953, the Montana Fish and Game Department (now Fish, Wildlife & Parks) began acquiring parcels in this area with important wetland complexes because of the important wildlife values of the Ninepipe area. Acquisitions continued as key parcels became available through 1997 when the 320 acre Herak/Myhre tracts were added with state and federal funds. These acquisitions brought FWP's total land holding at the Ninepipe WMA to over 3,400 acres.

The Ninepipe WMA area includes the glaciated pothole portion of the Mission Valley from Ronan to Post Creek. (See area map included as Appendix 1). Prairie pothole habitat in the Ninepipe area is limited by the geographic extent of glaciation and topography to an area of approximately 13,000 acres.

The Palmer property is approximately 116 acres in size and includes several wetland basins, ¾ miles of riparian habitat associated with irrigation canals, and mixed grass/alfalfa plantings. Current overall condition of the habitat is relatively good given decades of good stewardship under current management and low intensity of utilization of forage during the past 3 years. Irrigation of the pastures has kept grasses vigorous enough to resist extensive invasion by noxious weeds.

Ring-necked pheasants and migratory birds are the principal wildlife utilizing the site in its current condition, and their numbers vary widely. Most North American dabbling duck species occasionally use the wetlands, many species of raptors are often seen there, as are shorebirds, and occasionally sandhill cranes. The area is also used periodically by such Threatened and Endangered species as bald eagles, trumpeter swans, and peregrine falcons. Habitats for ring-necked pheasant, waterfowl, non-game birds, mammals, and reptiles/amphibians would be maintained and preserved with acquisition by FWP.

Short-term objectives of enhancing wetland condition, maintaining vigor of upland herbaceous vegetation, and establishing food plots, and long-term potential activities of wetland creation and enhancement of woody cover would protect soil, water, and wildlife resources. Management costs would be minimal because the property is near the WMA headquarters and adjacent to current holdings thus it would easily be incorporated into the current management program at Ninepipe. Boundary fences and flood irrigation system are in good condition, and perennial grasses and forbs along with a riparian deciduous forest are growing on the entire acreage.

Land Ownership

The Ninepipe WMA surrounds the Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge and is bounded by US Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) Waterfowl Production Areas (WPA's) and private lands. Many of the private lands surrounding Ninepipe are being developed as homesites. As subdivision increases, adjoining private lands that were formerly devoted to compatible agricultural uses are now being converted to hobby farms and rental housing units. With subdivision comes an increased housing density and increases in the number of feral or semi-feral house pets, particularly dogs and cats. These can be a serious threat to upland nesting waterfowl and upland game birds. Increased housing densities increase conflicts with both consumptive and non-consumptive wildlife recreationists.

Location/Legal Description

The location of the Palmer property is shown on the attached map (Appendix 1). The property is located in the NW1/4 of Section 33 and NE1/4 Section 32, T20N R20W, in Lake County, Montana. The property is generally located about one mile northeast of the town of Charlo.

PURPOSE AND NEED

This parcel is in a high priority area identified in the Five Valleys Prairie Pothole Joint Venture of the North American Waterfowl Plan. It is situated amid a complex of tribal, state, and federally managed wildlife habitat protection sites. This is a critical piece of real estate in helping to block up the portion of the valley identified by state, tribal, and federal biologists as having exceptional wildlife values. It is strategically located immediately adjacent to the Ninepipe WMA and contiguous to the Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge.

This extremely productive upland bird and waterfowl habitat supports a great diversity of other wildlife species, including wetland and other birds, small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. The general area supports one of the highest recorded densities of redhead ducks, short-eared owls, rough-legged hawks, and northern harriers. Bald eagles and peregrine falcons visit the site. Trumpeter swans, which are being reintroduced into the valley, may utilize the property. A whooping crane spent a couple of days in the vicinity in 1993.

The Palmer family has retired from the agricultural business and will dispose of the agricultural property. This property has been on the market previously and all inquiries have been from developers and private hunt clubs. The current threat status is imminent. If homesite development occurs, the capacity of the area to support wildlife and wildlife-related recreation will likely be diminished. The real estate trend in the Mission Valley is for buyers from out of the area wanting to relocate to the valley. Therefore, the land will probably not continue to be used exclusively for agriculture. The higher probability is that one or more dwellings will be constructed, thereby diminishing the capacity to support wildlife and reducing recreational potential.

Importance of Acquisition

The value of this land as wildlife habitat, because of its upland nesting cover and existing wetlands and its proximity to wildlife habitat management areas, is exceptional. Private development would result in a significant reduction in the value of the habitat for upland game birds, waterfowl, and songbirds. The free-roaming pets often associated with rural subdivisions pose a threat to ground nesting birds of all types. Opportunity for quality pheasant and waterfowl hunting on adjacent WMA properties could be significantly reduced if the Palmer property were developed as a residential neighborhood.

The Ninepipe WMA, Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge, and associated WPAs comprise the most productive waterfowl and upland game bird habitat in the Flathead River drainage. This proposed addition of property to the WMA will provide habitat and recreational benefits of greater proportion than simply the additional acreage. The project area is also becoming increasingly popular with local and regional bird watching organizations.

OBJECTIVE

The objective is to acquire in fee title an additional 116 acres of upland nesting cover, wetlands, and riparian habitats adjacent to the Ninepipe WMA for upland game bird, waterfowl, songbird, raptor, and small mammal conservation consistent with the management objectives of the Ninepipe WMA.

SCOPE OF PROJECT

The proposed acquisition will eliminate the subdivision development threat to this parcel and thereby preserve important avian and mammalian habitat, including key nesting, brood rearing, and winter habitat for waterfowl and upland game birds.

The property is bordered by State Highway 212 which provides easy access for hunters and promotes numerous nondisruptive wildlife viewing opportunities. The property will be used by hunters essentially every day of the waterfowl and pheasant seasons. On opening weekends up to 200 people may hunt on the property once acquired.

An estimated 500 hunter-day opportunities would be provided annually on this property. By dispersing hunting pressure, the quality of recreational experience for all hunters at Ninepipe would be enhanced. About 3,000 hunter days currently occur annually on the entire Ninepipe WMA. Most pheasant and waterfowl hunters use several portions of the WMA on a given day.

Hiking, bird watching, photography, dog training, horseback riding, and nature study would all occur on the property. Some form of wildlife-oriented recreation occurs on the Ninepipe WMA virtually every day of the year, and this level of use is expected to occur on the Palmer property as well. About 400 nonhunting, recreational days per year would be likely on the new property.

MANAGEMENT APPROACH

The primary focus of management will be to maintain the diversity of wildlife, their habitats and compatible public recreation (see attached Management Plan). Spring and summer recreation, including wildlife viewing and hunting-dog training will be restricted in a manner to prevent disruption of nesting and brood-rearing activity. General public hunting of waterfowl and upland game birds will be coordinated with the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes under the auspices of the State/Tribal Hunting and Fishing Agreement.

A minimal amount of earth work would be proposed to increase wetland size and number. Flood irrigation to manage water levels in wetlands would be accomplished such that condition of upland habitats would be maintained.

Noxious weed control efforts would involve spot spraying, clipping, and pulling.

Similar to other Ninepipe WMA parcels, annual farming activity for upland game bird and migratory waterfowl food plots would be planned.

DISCUSSION OF ALTERNATIVES

Alternative A - No Action

FWP would forego acquisition of the Palmer property to preserve wildlife habitat. The land would most likely be sold for rural subdivision. The current agricultural use would be converted to either custodial care or a hobby farm raising livestock as pets (horses) or for food. Current wildlife values could not be assured into the future.

The No Action Alternative (Alternative A) would result in the Palmers retaining fee title to the 116 acres of agricultural lands in Lake County. This alternative would provide for the maintenance of private ownership of the land, but the land use may change from agricultural to rural residential. This alternative would provide for continued contributions of personal and property tax to local, state, and federal governments, but would also increase service expenses for local governments. Contributions to the local economy would change from primarily agricultural to those associated with rural residences. In this alternative FWP would lose the opportunity to pursue other strategies to maintain habitat for upland, and wetland-related wildlife species. The Palmers would have the opportunity to sell the land to other interested individuals. Under this alternative, current wildlife values related to the land and the ongoing agricultural practices could not be assured into the future.

Alternative C - Fee Title Acquisition

Acquisition of the Palmer property by fee title (Alternative C) would give the state of Montana (FWP) ownership of the land, the opportunity to initiate implementation of a Management Plan, and the opportunity to conduct planned management activities to affect habitat enhancement for a variety of seasonal and yearlong wildlife and recreational uses. Under this alternative, FWP would maintain the vegetative condition of existing habitats, explore opportunities to create new or improved wildlife habitat, and allow existing perennial vegetation to maintain vigor. In addition, FWP would plant cover and food plots and allow public access for various recreational activities. FWP would pay in-lieu-of taxes equal to the real estate taxes paid by the Palmers. Enhanced wildlife populations and increased public recreation opportunities would be realized.

The Palmers have expressed interest in selling their land to FWP as an addition to the Ninepipe WMA. For this reason primarily, the owners were not interested in a conservation easement. The proposed action is designed to be responsive to the interests of both the Palmer family and the sportsmen and women of Montana. Alternative C represents a role FWP would assume in the maintenance of prime agricultural lands that have high habitat values for upland birds, watchable wildlife, and

waterfowl. Alternative C also considers the value of these habitats on lands that are adjacent to one of the more popular WMAs in western Montana.

Alternative C supports the acquisition by fee title of 116 acres of irrigated hay/pasture land that will compliment FWP's management effort at Ninepipe WMA to produce and maintain habitats for a variety of wildlife and for a variety of compatible public uses. Alternative C would allow FWP to implement management strategies and management activities on the Palmer property that have been successfully employed on the Ninepipe WMA. Alternative C would result in significant increases in production of and seasonal use by ducks, geese, and pheasants thereby creating an estimated 500 additional hunter days recreation each year.

AN ALTERNATIVE CONSIDERED BUT REJECTED

Alternative B - Conservation Easement.

The Palmer family was not interested in selling or granting the Department a conservation easement.

ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS

This section of the environmental assessment presents an evaluation of the impacts of the alternatives including secondary and cumulative impacts on the physical and human environment:

PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

Land Resources:

Alternative A: No action would not ensure that soil stability would be maintained in the future.

Alternative C: Acquisition of the Palmer property will maintain or improve soil stability and reduce erosion.

Air Quality:

Alternative A: No action would not ensure that current air quality would be maintained in the future.

Alternative C: No negative impacts on current air quality in the project area are anticipated.

Water:

Alternative A: No action would not ensure that wetland and water resources would be maintained or enhanced in the future.

Alternative C: The restoration of shoreline vegetation on natural wetlands would have a beneficial effect on the quality of surface and ground water.

Vegetation:

Alternative A: No action would not ensure that current vegetation structure or quality would be maintained in the future.

Alternative C: Shoreline vegetation on wetlands would be maintained or restored. This project would maintain the diversity, quantity, and quality of upland and wetland vegetation in the project area. Approximately 10 to 30 acres would be converted from tame grass hay/pasture to small grain production to provide food for resident pheasants and migratory waterfowl. Because the sites to be converted are already in exotic species, this would have no adverse effect on native vegetation. The project, if accomplished, would have the potential to maintain the form and function of existing natural wetlands and improve the vegetative condition on 116 acres of irrigated hay/pasture land.

Fish and Wildlife:

Alternative A: No action would not ensure that current fish and wildlife values would be maintained in the future.

Alternative C: Maintained upland and wetland habitat condition and restoration of perennial vegetative cover in an area previously committed to agricultural production would positively influence the diversity and abundance of game birds, primarily ring-necked pheasants and migratory waterfowl, nongame or watchable wildlife, and small mammals.

Threatened and endangered species which occasionally use the area include bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and grizzly bear. The projected improvements in the condition of wetlands and upland vegetation would increase the production of forage and prey for all those species.

HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

Noise/Electrical Effects:

Alternative A: No action would not ensure that current noise and electrical levels would be maintained in the future.

Alternative C: This project would not have any effect on noise or cause any electrical disturbance.

Land Use:

Alternative A: No action would not ensure that current land uses would be maintained in the future.

Alternative C: Current agricultural uses would be maintained. Increased recreational use of the area would partially offset the economic benefits derived from the current agricultural operation (see attached socio-economic review).

Risk/Health Hazards:

Alternative A: No action would probably maintain the status quo associated with risks and health hazards that are typical of most agricultural operations. If residential subdivision were to occur, local automobile traffic levels would probably increase.

Alternative C: The proposed action includes the likelihood of chemical noxious weed control. Whenever chemicals are used, there is some potential for a small scale spill. To reduce that potential, herbicides would only be applied by a licensed applicator following label instructions and taking all precautions to prevent an accidental discharge.

Community Impact:

Alternative A: No action would not ensure that the current agricultural and recreational nature of the property would be maintained in the future.

Alternative C: The proposed action will maintain about 116 acres in an agriculture/wildlife base and will alter a growing trend toward rural residential development. The proposed action will affect location and distribution but not rate or density of human population growth. There would be positive effects to tourism, primarily in wildlife viewing and hunting opportunities. Open space and undeveloped lands will become more valuable in the future as residential development encompasses more and more rural lands. Any reduction in the vitality of the local economy would be at least partially offset by increases in retail merchandise, food, lodging and travel supplies associated with wildlife-related recreation. See attached Socio-Economic Review for further detail.

Public Services:

Alternative A: No action would not prevent residential subdivision and subsequent home-site development from occurring. An increased public services demand on local governments would then be anticipated.

Alternative C: The proposed action includes a commitment by the State to pay in-lieu-of taxes on the land equal to that paid by the private landowner. Residential subdivision and associated costs in public services would not occur under this alternative. The estimated average annual maintenance costs to FWP for fence maintenance, irrigation, and weed management is approximately \$1,000.00.

Aesthetics/Recreation:

Alternative A: No action would not ensure that current aesthetics and recreational values of the property would be maintained in the future.

Alternative C: The proposed action will increase the quality and quantity of recreational opportunities by providing more abundant and diverse wildlife populations for hunting, photography and viewing pursuits. Existing open space related to the current agricultural operations would be maintained rather than converted to rural housing.

Cultural/Historic Resources:

Alternative A: No action would not ensure that current cultural or historic resource values of the property would be maintained in the future.

Alternative C: This project would not result in the destruction of any known site, structure, or object of prehistoric or paleontological importance, nor would it interfere with any unique cultural or religious use of the site. Because the project does not include the disturbance of native sod or structures, it should not affect cultural or historic resources.

Summary Evaluation of Significance:

Based upon evaluation of potential impacts related to the proposal, a determination has been made that an EIS is not required. The EA is an appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action because: 1) No endangered or threatened plant or animal species will be significantly affected; 2) there are no long term or irretrievable impacts to the physical environment; and 3) there are minor impacts to the human environment in the form of increased recreational use, but all can be mitigated to acceptable levels.

List of Agencies Consulted During Preparation of the EA:

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
National Resource Conservation Service
US Fish and Wildlife Service

Public Involvement

The Region and FWP have received considerable support for the proposal during project exploration and development. The Region will make the EA available to interested individuals, groups, and agencies, and will facilitate a public hearing at 7:00 pm on May 15, 2001, at Ninepipes Lodge (Allentown) to discuss the proposal and receive public comment.

COST

The negotiated price of the property is \$452,000 for all 116 acres. The cost of this acquisition will be shared between Mission Valley Chapter of Pheasants Forever, the Big Sky Upland Bird Club, state of Montana (MFWP) hunting license dollars, MFWP duck-stamp dollars, MFWP Wildlife Mitigation Program, and Montana Department of Transportation Funds.

NINEPIPE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

Palmer Property Management Plan

May 2001

The Palmer property will be incorporated into the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area and managed in accordance with the Management Plan. As stated in the plan, the goal of FWP's habitat management will be to conserve and enhance wildlife habitat for the purpose of producing pheasants and waterfowl while providing year-round, wildlife-related recreational opportunities.

Objectives

Objectives will be to:

1. provide and protect habitat for a diversity of wildlife species;
2. provide attractive and secure nesting conditions for pheasants and waterfowl;
3. provide adequate food for wildlife;
4. optimize overwinter survival of pheasants;
5. maintain and enhance soil productivity; and
6. provide year-round public access for compatible recreational opportunities.

Development and Management

The property will be posted with Wildlife Management Area signs. Boundary fence separating the Palmer property from current FWP property will be removed. Several parking areas will be constructed along the bordering roads to allow easy year-round access for pheasant and migratory waterfowl hunters.

Noxious weed infestations will be mapped and an integrated pest management program will be implemented to comply with state and county regulations. At the present time, weeds are not considered a major problem on this property. The weed management plan will include an appropriate mix of agricultural practices, mowing and pulling, herbicide applications, and biological weed control where agents are available.

Approximately four 5-10 acre cereal grain plots will be established to provide a food supply for pheasants, migratory waterfowl, and other wildlife. These plots will be cropped and fallowed in alternate years to aid in weed management. Food plots will be developed and maintained by project personnel at first, but may be incorporated into existing sharecropper agreements if feasible. Periodically, fallow fields will be planted with a green manure crop to enhance soil productivity. Leguminous companion crops (peas, alfalfa, and sweet clover) will be planted with cereal grains in some years to increase vegetative diversity and enrich soils.

About 20-25 acres of hay will be harvested each year after the peak nesting season. This will improve condition of nesting cover by removing decadent grasses, maintain vigor of alfalfa, and minimize invasion of noxious weeds.

The water delivery system will be maintained in a fashion that will allow periodic refilling of the existing wetlands. Ditches will be pulled every few years as needed to allow free water flow. Ditch banks will be treated to prevent the establishment and spread of noxious weed communities.

PALMER PROPERTY
FEE TITLE ACQUISITION
SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASSESSMENT

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

Prepared by:
Rob Brooks
May, 2001

I. INTRODUCTION

House Bill 526, passed by the 1987 Legislature (MCA 87-1-241 and MCA 87-1-242), authorizes Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) to acquire an interest in land for the purpose of protecting and improving wildlife habitat. These acquisitions can be through fee title, fee title purchases, or leasing. In 1989, the Montana legislature passed House Bill 720 requiring that a socioeconomic assessment be completed when wildlife habitat is acquired using Habitat Montana monies. These assessments evaluate the significant social and economic impacts of the purchase on local governments, employment, schools, and impacts on local businesses.

This socioeconomic evaluation addresses the fee title purchase of property presently owned by the Palmer family. The report addresses the physical and institutional setting as well as the social and economic impacts associated with the proposed fee title purchase.

II. PHYSICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

A. Property Description

The 116-acre Palmer property is located 1 mile northeast of Charlo, Montana, in Lake County. A detailed description of this property is included in the environmental assessment (EA).

B. Habitat and Wildlife Populations

Migratory birds and pheasants are the two main species utilizing the area although there are a host of nongame wildlife that also depend on these types of habitats. A complete list of species is available in the environmental assessment.

C. Current Use

The Palmer property is currently used for hay production.

D. Management Alternatives

- 1) Fee title purchase on the property by MFWP
- 2) No purchase

MFWP Fee Title Purchase

The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection for the wetlands this prairie pothole area supports, as well as conservation and enhancement of the extremely productive upland bird/waterfowl habitat and wildlife that this land sustains. In addition, public recreation opportunities including hunting, birdwatching, and educational trips will be maintained.

No Purchase Alternative

This alternative requires some assumptions since use and management of the property will vary depending on what the current owners decide to do with the property if MFWP does not purchase the land by fee title.

Subdivision or development of the land is a possibility. Public access may not be allowed depending on who purchases the property. The economic impacts associated with this alternative have not been estimated.

III. SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Section II identified the management alternatives this report addresses. The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection of important wildlife habitat, help maintain the integrity of the adjacent WMA and provide for public access for hunting and other recreational opportunities. Section III quantifies the social and economic consequences of the fee title purchase from two basic accounting stances: financial and local area impacts.

Financial impacts address the cost of the fee title purchase to MFWP and discuss the impacts on tax revenues to local government agencies including school districts.

Expenditure data associated with the use of the property provides information for analyzing the impacts these expenditures may have on local businesses (i.e., income and employment).

A. Financial Impacts

The financial impacts on MFWP are related to the purchase price of the fee title purchase and maintenance/management costs. The Palmer property fee title purchase will cost MFWP \$452,000. Maintenance/management costs related to the purchase are associated with maintaining fences, weed control, and irrigation. These costs are estimated to be \$1000 annually.

The financial impacts to local governments are the potential changes in tax revenues resulting from the fee title purchase. There will not be any significant changes in tax revenues to local governments including schools due to the purchase. Taxes on this property were \$2,777 in 1999. Montana Code 87-1-603 states “the treasurer of each county in which the department owns any land shall describe the land, state the number of acres in each parcel, and request the drawing of a warrant to the county in a sum equal to the amount of taxes which would be payable on county assessment of the property were it taxable to a private citizen.”

B. Economic Impacts

The fee title purchase will not significantly affect the agricultural activities on the Palmer property. MFWP is planning to develop share-cropping arrangements on the hay land and acreage where grain is planted for food plots for waterfowl and upland birds. Consequently there will not be any significant financial impacts to local businesses associated with the ranching/farming activities in the long term.

The fencing, weed control, and irrigation work will provide positive financial impacts to local businesses supplying the materials for these projects.

Currently the Ninepipe WMA provides about 3,000 hunter days per year. It is anticipated that the acquisition will improve the quality of the hunting experience by spreading these hunters over a larger area. In addition, nonhunting use such as wildlife viewing is expected to provide about 400 days of use. This activity will have a positive economic impact to the local business community of approximately \$16,000 - \$20,000 annually.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

The fee title purchase will provide long-term protection for wildlife habitat, maintain the agricultural integrity of the land, ensure public access for hunting and other recreational/educational opportunities, and help to ensure the overall integrity of the Ninepipe WMA.

The purchase of a fee title purchase by MFWP on this property will not cause a reduction in tax revenues from their current levels to Lake county.

Agricultural activities will continue on this property. Hunting and other recreational activities will continue at their present levels and in some cases increase. The financial impacts of the this acquisition on local businesses will be neutral to positive in both the short and long run.



Pheasant Heaven

Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area

by JOHN FRALEY and JOHN GRANT

JUST EAST OF CHARLO in the morning shadow of the Mission Mountains, there's an oasis of bird habitat like no other in western Montana. Formed by glaciers that scoured the landscape some 12,000 years ago, enriched early this century by construction of the Flathead Irrigation Project, and modified by decades of agricultural activity, the wetland, grassland, and cropland habitats forming the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (WMA) are home to a great variety of wildlife species.

Because the WMA was purchased with sportsmen's dollars primarily as a place for hunting, managers have focused on improving habitats required by pheasants and waterfowl. The success of this management is reflected in the number of hunters returning year after year to pursue the area's abundant game birds.

According to pheasant hunters—a philosophical, dog-loving lot—Ninepipe WMA is nothing short of heaven. Jim Rogers, a long-time businessman from Missoula, came to love the area so much that when he retired, he packed up and moved there. "If there's a better place for pheasant hunting, I'd like to see it," says Rogers, who has hunted the WMA for 34 years. "Where else do you have this kind of scenery and these numbers of pheasants, geese, and ducks? When I walk along and look up at the mountains it doesn't matter if I see a bird or not."

The 1,142-acre WMA, comprised of blocks of land surrounding Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge, may be the most heavily hunted property in Montana. It's not unusual to see 200 vehicles parked around the area on opening day of pheasant season. Even though hunting pressure is heavy all season long, bird numbers remain high. "The pheasants are here because the cover is here," says Rogers. "A lot of the cover on other lands has disappeared, but the habitat on the management area has gotten better and better. On the last day of hunting season, I put up over 200 birds in one field. In my

opinion, Ninepipe has given hunters more bang for their buck than any other area in Montana."

The WMA's proximity to the national wildlife refuge, which is closed to hunting, is also a boon to the pheasant population. The canny birds quickly learn that hunters can't pursue them there. Once hunting season is underway, many wise old roosters feed in the grain fields scattered throughout the WMA, but return to the secure habitat of the refuge when the pressure is on.

"I like to look out my window and watch folks hunt," says Dwight Stockstad, another adjacent landowner who has hunted the area for 43 years. "The pheasants will often be running for the refuge a quarter-mile ahead of the guns and dogs."

Stockstad, who managed the WMA from 1954 to 1963, had a hand in acquiring most of the property that it now encompasses. "Practically all the land bordering the refuge was owned by private hunting clubs or leased by a small group of hunters," he says. "Public hunting areas had to be provided if the average hunter was going to have a place to hunt, and habitat had to be protected if there was going to be any game."

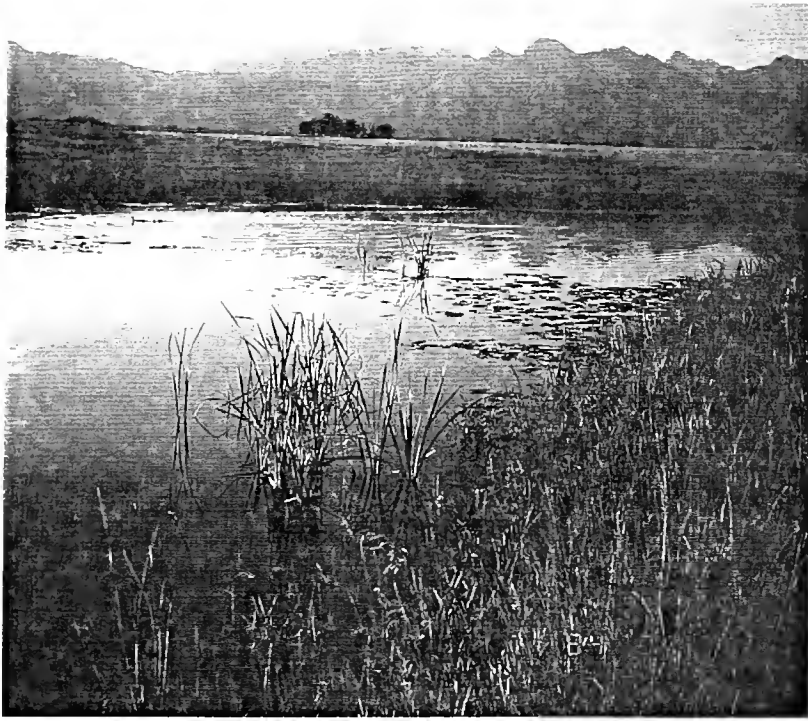
Not everyone supported the land

purchases at first. "Some hunters were against buying the land," he says. "They thought it wouldn't be worth the money and that the cost of their hunting licenses would go up to pay for it. Now, without the management area, I don't know where people would hunt. In a time when there are fewer and fewer places to hunt and fish, this place is a jewel."

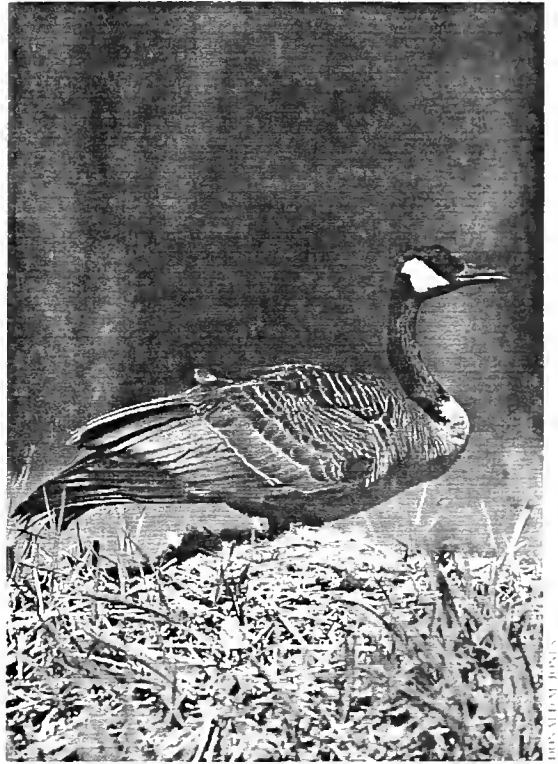
Although pheasant hunting is now the major activity at Ninepipe WMA, waterfowl hunting predominated early on. Years ago, recalls Stockstad, hundreds of people would show up for the limited number of goose hunting pits provided there. To cope with the heavy demand, managers eventually adopted a lottery system so blinds could be allocated equitably. In the last two years, however, some pits have remained unoccupied on opening day. Stockstad theorizes that this may be partially due to hunters using grain fields on private land in other parts of the valley more than they used to, but it also reflects a general decline in waterfowl hunting across the state. Steel shot requirements, increased license costs, pesticide warnings in the 1980s, more complex regulations, societal changes, and low duck populations have all contributed to the waning interest.

Ninepipe WMA is one of the state's most popular—and productive—upland bird hunting areas. Due to good habitat management, pheasant numbers remain high despite heavy hunting pressure.





Dollars from the Montana Waterfowl Stamp program and Ducks Unlimited have financed 32 wetland improvements (left) at the WMA in the past two years alone. Wood ducks (left, below) and Canada geese (below) are just a few of the species benefiting from these projects.



"It's certainly not for a lack of geese," says Bill West, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) biologist stationed at the nearby National Bison Range. "Canada goose populations have been steadily increasing and are as high as they've been in the valley since records have been kept."

Duck populations, too, are thriving, after many years of decline. Last summer, biologists from FWP, USFWS, and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes banded ducks on the WMA and on nearby USFWS waterfowl production areas as part of a multi-state effort to identify migration patterns of western ducks. More ducks were banded in the Ninepipe area than on any equivalent area in Montana. "About 95% of them were young birds

that probably hatched locally," says West. "We were done trapping by Labor Day, before southward migration generally begins."

Joe Ball of the Montana Cooperative Wildlife Research Unit began supervising graduate student research at Ninepipe in 1986. That year only 20% of duck nests on the study areas hatched successfully, compared with rates of about 50% for similar areas in the 1930s. His students also found far fewer nests than in earlier studies. "It was a worrisome situation," says Ball, "because nesting cover was in excellent condition."

Ball and his students learned that skunks and ravens, existing in unnaturally high numbers due to food and breeding sites provided by human

settlement, were responsible for 90% of the nest losses. Because skunks were causing the biggest problem, they were trapped intensively between 1988 and 1993. Many artificial denning sites in irrigation culverts and old foundations were removed or obstructed in an attempt to keep skunk populations closer to natural levels. Duck nest success has since rebounded to nearly 50% and the number of nests has increased about 300%. "If skunk populations do return to their pre-trapping density, the higher number of nesting ducks may be able to sustain the nest predation that formerly caused problems," says Ball.

Intensive vegetation management initiated on the WMA about 12 years ago undoubtedly also helped boost



Sharefarming agreements require that farmers leave a portion of their crops standing in the fields to provide food and cover for game birds.

duck populations. The local agricultural community had become outraged by a steady increase in noxious weeds on the WMA in the 1970s and early 1980s. To resolve the conflict, FWP adopted a more aggressive approach to managing weeds. Part of the solution involved sowing seed mixes of desirable, competitive grasses and legumes that grow into dense, durable stands providing cover for pheasants and many waterfowl species.

The WMA incorporates hay cutting in its management scheme as a way of keeping these fields in vigorous condition while at the same time benefiting local ranchers. To protect nests, time of cutting is delayed until after the peak nesting period. Although the hay crop is past its prime, most of the eggs are hatched. Late season regrowth is then left to provide fall, winter, and spring cover.

Another cooperative management practice that helps keep noxious weeds in check—sharefarming—has been a big plus for local landowners as well as hunters. Farmers grow barley and winter wheat on WMA lands and, as rental payment, leave FWP's share of the grain standing in the fields. The farmer is able to enhance his operation, FWP gets a lot of necessary work accomplished at someone else's

expense, birds have an abundant and nutritious food source, and hunters are afforded a great opportunity to kick up a rooster or decoy some ducks or geese.

Water management, too, is a key component in maintaining Ninepipe's productivity. Irrigation rights on about a third of the WMA allow managers to supplement natural wetland recharge and regulate water levels in some of the area's approximately 800 natural glacial wetlands as well as in its man-made wetlands. Thus, regardless of local precipitation, resident and migratory wildlife species always find plenty of wetland habitat.

Restoration of wetlands drained while the land was in private ownership, creation of new wetlands, and enhancement of others continues to increase the productivity of the WMA. Dollars from the Montana Waterfowl Stamp program and from Ducks Unlimited have financed 32 wetland improvements in the past two years alone. Through contributions to these programs, hunters are helping offset the destruction of wetlands that has occurred nationwide and ensuring that waterfowl will always fill October skies over Ninepipe.

Hunters are not the only people benefiting from these wetland developments, however. Birdwatchers, photog-

rappers, anglers, artists, and others are rewarded by the wildlife and natural splendors that abound all year long. "Schools and colleges bring their kids here by the busload," says Jim Rogers, whose wrap-around picture windows look out on nearly every corner of the WMA. "There's geese, redheads, wood ducks, whatever waterfowl you want to name. There's loggerhead shrikes, kestrels, and shorebirds like avocets."

In 1994, some visitors were rewarded with a special—though unusual—viewing treat. Between spring and fall, five different grizzly bears were seen on the WMA at various times. A female and her three cubs were occasionally sighted from Highway 93, and a young male was seen in several places. Although the nearby Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness and adjacent foothills and creek bottoms are well known for their grizzlies, the bruins rarely venture into the open valley bottom.

Winter, too, has great potential for wildlife viewing. The WMA and surrounding areas provide one of the best opportunities to view raptors in the Northwest. Five species of falcons can be seen at Ninepipe, plus a variety of hawks, eagles, and owls. "You can see birds here that are not usually seen in other parts of the state," says Denver Holt, founder of the Owl Research Institute in Missoula. "The diversity and productivity of the area, coupled with its location on a major migration route, is what makes it so incredible. In the Ninepipe area in 1990, we found the highest density of nesting short-eared owls ever recorded in the literature."

Vole populations are the principal factor determining raptor numbers. "When they're here, everything eats them," says Holt. Vole numbers fluctuate wildly; some years it's impossible to walk into a field without sending a dozen or more scurrying with nearly every step.

Voles impact the WMA in more ways than the number of raptors that winter there. They dig shallow burrows and devour grass, and at high densities turn productive fields into bare, loose soil, temporarily eliminating nesting

cover. "When they peaked in 1990," says Holt, "there may have been 1,000 or 1,200 per acre." They died off suddenly in February of 1991, and many hungry predators that had survived the winter on a diet of voles turned to the poorly concealed eggs of early-nesting ducks.

The tie between vegetation, voles, raptors, and ducks illustrates just one of the unique interactions that take place on Ninepipe WMA. The opportunities for scientific inquiry—or simply pondering the wonders of nature—are unlimited. For preserving this valuable resource, we have to thank those who

recognized its potential and made the effort to purchase the land for all to enjoy. Most of the thanks, though, should go to hunters who have paid almost the entire cost of purchasing, improving, and maintaining the property that is now the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area. ■

Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area

Location: In Lake County about 20 miles south of Polson and 50 miles north of Missoula. The area is FWP-owned, and lies within the exterior boundaries of the Flathead Indian Reservation.

Size: 3,142 acres.

Acquisition Date: Parcels acquired between 1953 and 1962, in 1974, and in 1993 (28 transactions overall).

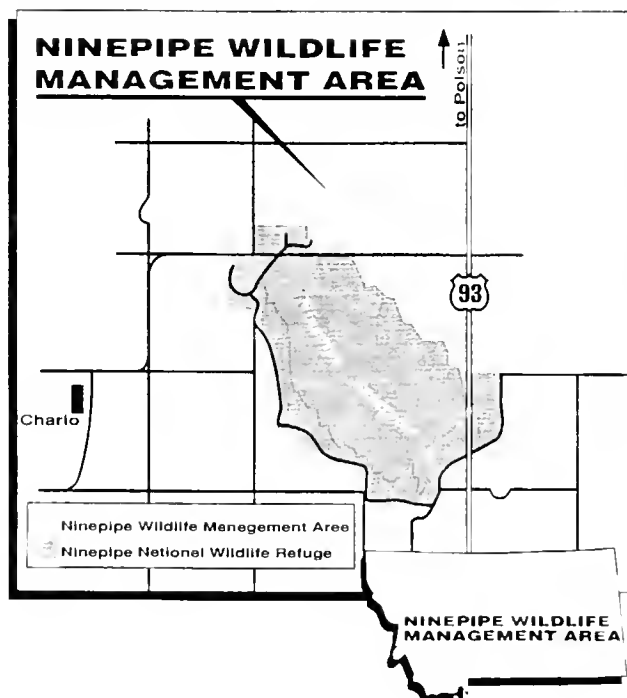
Access: The area lies on both sides of Highways 93 and 212, and is criss-crossed by several county roads. Signed parking areas are located along many of the roads.

Management Goal: To conserve and enhance upland and wetland habitats for a variety of wildlife species, and to provide quality upland bird and waterfowl hunting and wildlife viewing.



GEORGE WUERTEINER

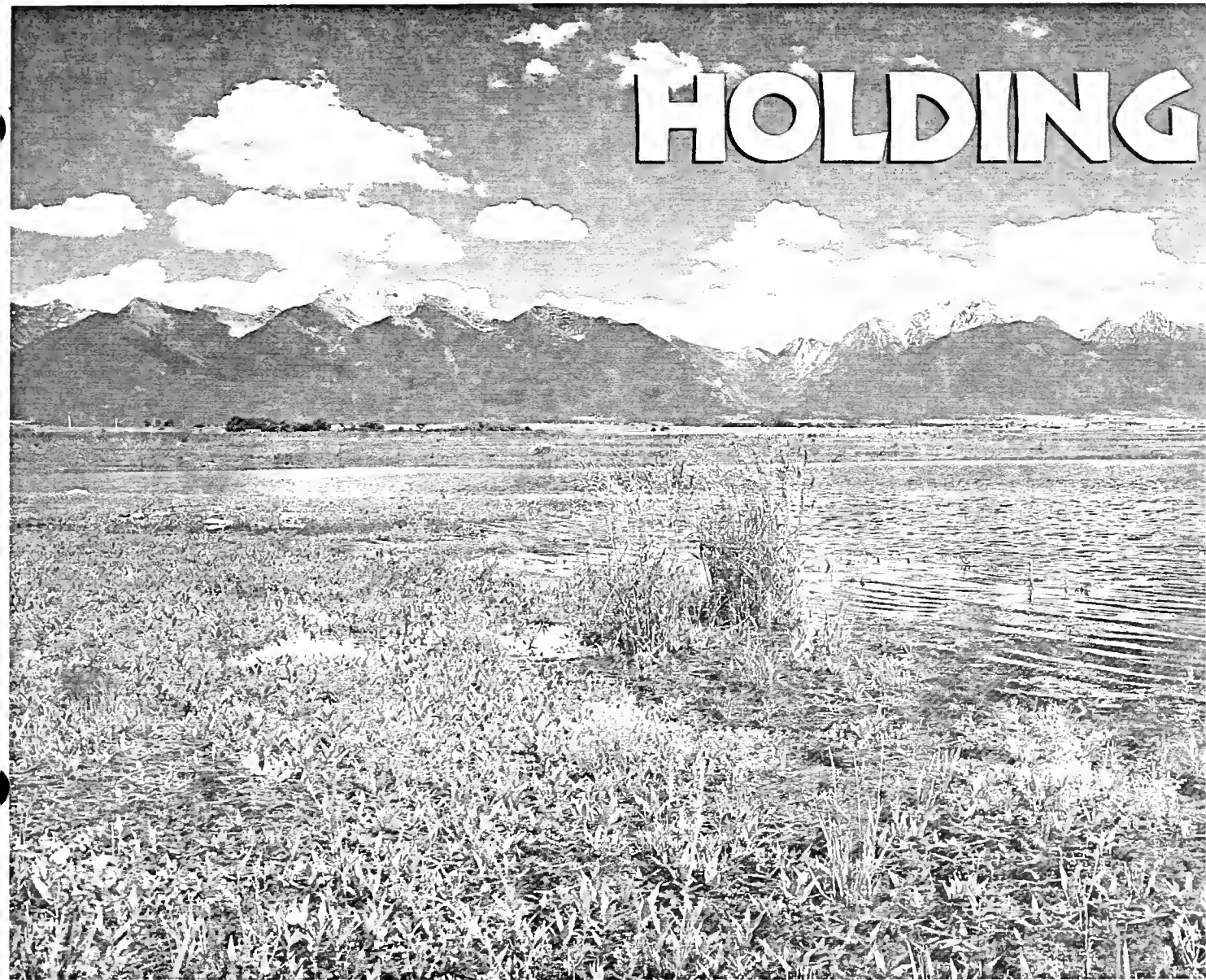
The primary goal of Ninepipe WMA is to provide upland and wetland habitats for a variety of wildlife species as well as hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities.



Hunting Opportunities: Excellent pheasant and waterfowl hunting is available. A joint state/tribal license and a Flathead Reservation bird stamp are required of all hunters who are not members of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. A federal migratory waterfowl stamp is required to hunt waterfowl. Regulations are formulated by the Flathead Reservation Fish and Wildlife Advisory Board and approved by the Tribal Council and Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission.

Wildlife Viewing: Opportunities abound for viewing songbirds, upland game birds, and waterfowl, especially in spring. Winter raptor viewing is nationally acclaimed. Numerous mammal and reptile species are commonly seen. A wildlife viewing and interpretive site with special features for people with disabilities has recently been added.

HOLDING



DOES ANYONE COME OVER the rise on Highway 93 where the white-capped swells of the Mission Mountains first appear without one heart-stopping moment when the mind double-checks the data? Are they real? For an instant, water, sky, and cloud mysteriously combine into an illusion of mountains. But it is no illusion, they are as real as Montana is.

At their feet, spreading across the valley floor like an antique quilt, are hundreds of glittering ponds, seeps, and potholes scoured round by glaciers that crept through 12,000 years ago to make this place one of the state's premier wetlands. The centerpiece is the Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area,

Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge, and Ninepipe Reservoir. Together they are home to the best waterfowl nesting habitat in Montana west of the Continental Divide.

Sightseeing, bird habitat, and future hunting opportunities—while very tempting—aren't on the agenda this trip. I'm spending the day at Ninepipe WMA to learn more about Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' long-term commitment to controlling noxious weeds on its lands. Ninepipe WMA is a living history of the agency's noxious weed work—including some of its most visible failures and a 17-year record of recovery and success.

Recently, with the hiring of Adam

Brooks as its first statewide noxious weed coordinator, FWP reaffirmed and expanded its commitment to controlling noxious weeds. The first statewide weed coordinator hired by a Montana land management agency, he will bring support and consistency to an already thriving network of land managers, like John Grant who manages the Ninepipe WMA.

Brooks met Grant while researching the scope of FWP's noxious weed control and touring FWP lands across the state. According to Brooks, FWP's land managers, many with wildlife biology and natural resource backgrounds, have established solid programs suited to the lands they

THE LINE

on Noxious

WEEDS

by **DIANE TIPTON**



DAVID R. BENNETT



DIANE TIPTON

FWP biologist John Grant balances weed control with habitat considerations at Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area

manage. "What we've lacked in the past," he says, "is someone to concentrate on the big picture. Someone to document FWP weed activities statewide, to review and report results, oversee budgets and facilitate communication between headquarters and the seven regions."

Brooks is charged with painting that big picture, and with raising "weed awareness" so sportsmen and women and recreationists will become more involved with weed control activities in areas where they recreate. It is his idea that I travel to Ninepipe WMA to hear a story that captures the complexity, the people, and the issues that personify FWP's approach to weed management.

Shortly after crossing the dam at Ninepipe Reservoir, I see the turn John Grant told me to watch for. A long lane leads to an old farmhouse, barn, and outbuildings. John is waiting for me in the yard. Surrounding him is a scene out of my childhood, an old Montana farm lacking only the leghorn chickens pecking in the yard and a litter of kittens under the porch. A chisel plow stands in front of the barn and John's summer assistant is tinkering with it. I feel right at home.

We waste no time jumping in his truck to take a look at the land—at least some of it. In all, the WMA takes in 3,462 acres. As Grant's truck bumps along the drive and out onto the dirt

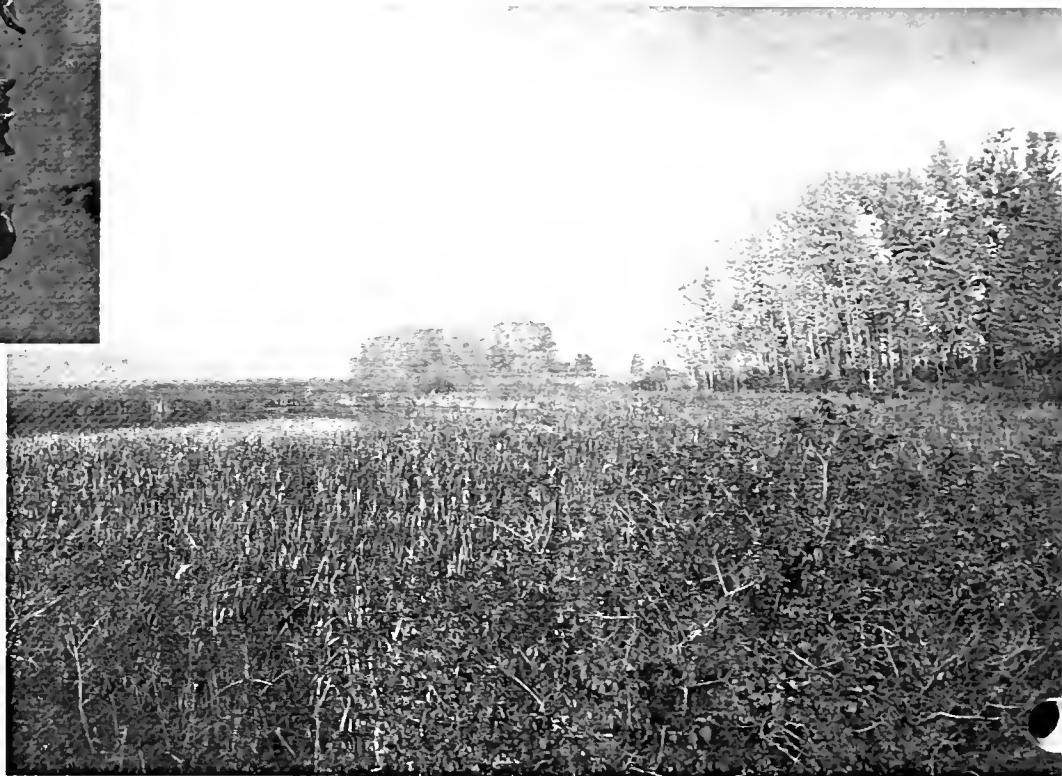
road that travels the edge of Ninepipe Reservoir, he explains that his noxious weed work often goes against the existing wisdom in one way or another. "I have to compromise between what is best for waterfowl nesting and what is best for weed control," he says. "I spray weeds in the spring when they are most susceptible to herbicides and before they go to seed, but I try to be as careful as possible not to disrupt bird nesting." Grant sprays through summer as various weeds go through their development cycle.

By fall, another prime time to spray for weeds, hunters are packing their gear and loading their bird dogs for the hunt. "We get hundreds of bird hunters



W. STEVE SHERMAN

Ninepipe National Wildlife Refuge (below) and surrounding Ninepipe WMA provide some of western Montana's best waterfowl nesting habitat. Lesser scaup (left) are among several duck species that benefit from vegetation management.



CHUCK HANEY

here in the fall," he says. "I can't be spraying for weeds then. It would detract from the great bird hunting they expect."

In his 10-plus years at Ninepipe, Grant has established a balance between managing waterfowl habitat and managing noxious weeds. "Weed control isn't an event—it's a process," he says. Even when he's out working the irrigation ditches to help maintain the wetlands' water levels, Grant is pulling weeds, cleaning out ditches, and watching for new noxious weeds that may be making their first appearance here.

"Managing weeds is similar to managing wildlife," Grant continues. "Both ignore boundaries—political, geographic, ownership—you name it." That quality is what brought attention to Ninepipe in 1983. At that time a serious weed problem existed. One hundred acres at a stretch were covered with blooms. For weeks in May what looked like deep blankets of snow were actually fields of a weed called whitetop. Late-summer blizzards of Canada thistle down slowed traffic on the highway when the wind came up.

FWP was trying to manage, but quickly learned noxious weeds are a force to be reckoned with. They spread exponentially and, without some use of herbicides, success was limited.

Ninepipe WMA was becoming the poster child for noxious weed lost causes—irate neighbors complained that weeds from FWP lands were infesting adjacent public and private land. The 1983 Legislature criticized management of the site as ineffective and in violation of the state's weed control laws.

Grant didn't take on management of Ninepipe until 1990, but he knows its history well. Some of the weed control tools he uses so deftly today weren't used before 1990 or were overused. FWP learned the hard way, he says, recounting how in 1983 the Bureau of Indian Affairs fire crews and FWP personnel burned 1,400 acres of dense nesting cover at once. The burning did rejuvenate the grass and it was one of the early, dramatic steps in the turnaround at Ninepipe. "But the folks in the valley weren't happy about the destruction of that much habitat and the

smoke it created," he says.

Today, Grant uses burning as a tool, but only in March and under very controlled circumstances. Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation fire crews do the burning while teaching wildland fire control techniques to volunteer firefighters from a four-county area. These carefully controlled fires promote desirable vegetation and make weeds easier to locate and treat.

"A big change at Ninepipe over the last 15 years or so is that we've built a network of people who care about weeds and care about helping each other fight them," Grant tells me as he drives east toward the Mission Range. Ninepipe's informal weed network includes land managers representing the National Wildlife Refuge, the National Bison Range, the Flathead Indian Reservation, the Lake County Weed District, and nearby private landowners.

“The thing is, we all have our different areas of expertise,” Grant explains. “If we work together, we multiply the information and training we can apply to that particular location. In my case, I feel I have a pretty spectacular piece of geography and I want the benefit of the best thinking available.”

While Grant is talking, I’m looking out for weeds I might recognize. I laugh to myself when a little farther on he pulls the truck off the road and up to a large sign with black lettering. “War On Weeds, Purple Loosestrife Management Zone.” With the weeds labeled this clearly, even I will be able to identify them.

Behind the sign is land that is being cooperatively managed in a county-wide project funded by the Lake County Weed District, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, FWP, and the Montana Weed Trust Fund grant program. The goal is to learn

effective ways to battle one of the state’s newest noxious weeds.

Wetlands are particularly vulnerable to purple loosestrife. While the weed is limited in Montana, its impact is serious and a state management plan is in place to contain and eradicate infestations. That makes this project at Ninepipe critical in the opinion of State Weed Coordinator Barbra Mullin and the State Weed Trust Fund advisory board, which is backing the work.

Down the road about a mile from the purple loosestrife management zone, Grant stops to show off one of the longest running success stories on the land—the use of biological controls to keep the St. Johnswort in check. Touted in the media for its medicinal effects in relieving depression, St. Johnswort was *cause* for depression in 1948. The *Chrysolina* beetle, an insect introduced in 1948 as a biological control, is more or less effective depending upon how many insects are working on the problem during a particular year.

“The insects seem to thrive when there is a wet fall,” Grant says, as we walk through dry grasses that still have the look of autumn about them. A wet fall means more insects the next spring to work on the St. Johnswort, while a dry fall means fewer insects the next spring. Where the land rises slightly I see the telltale tobacco-colored St. Johnswort that grew last year. The low, dark plants sprinkled across the field in no way dominate the landscape—or other plants.

“Overall, it’s what I’d call under control,” he says. “It looks pretty bad some years, but when the bugs have a good year they do a much better job of knocking it back than I ever could.” Instinctively, I bend down and break one off to keep as a sample. Even as a fully enlisted foot soldier in the war on weeds, I sometimes forget and carry a plant with me as I walk. It’s a habit from a childhood of summers on the ranch when there wasn’t anything to watch for but wild strawberries and



FRON SPONHER



JOHN GRANT

Above left: St. Johnswort, a European import colonizing roadsides and disturbed sites, is kept in check by the *Chrysolina* beetle. **Left:** Repeated tilling and planting grains and grasses eventually reclaimed a field of whitetop. **Above:** Prescribed burning, done in cooperation with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and local volunteer fire departments, rejuvenates desirable plants and makes weeds easier to control.

every plant was a friend. Now I know the power of one noxious weed to propagate and outcompete native plants.

We head back to the truck for a quick trip to the local diner for coffee and so I can take some notes. In the process, I retrace the rolling fields to the base of the Mission Mountains and marvel at the abrupt break between the massive base of this revered range of mountains and the acres of grasses, reeds, and glacier-carved ponds that spread out from them. No foothills

here. In this breathtaking place, it is little wonder herbicides were not an option for many years, based on opposition from surrounding communities.

In 1984, responding to the legislature's mandate to control noxious weeds, FWP researched area residents' concerns about the long-range impact of herbicides and prepared an environmental assessment. Resulting public agreement supported a plan that included responsible and appropriate use of herbicides at

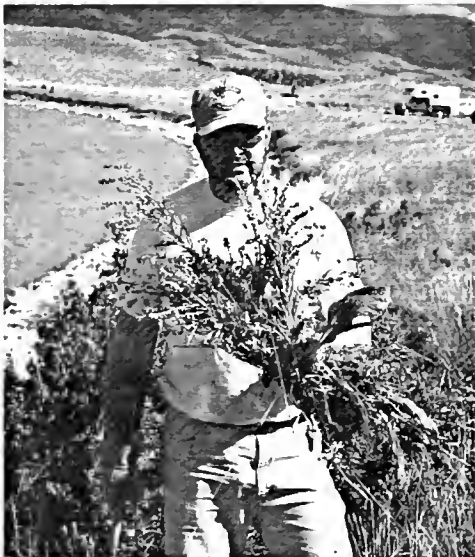
Ninepipe—another milestone in transforming this poster child from “lost cause” to “role-model.”

In the early 1990s, Grant came to the job already believing in a variety of controls. Over time he refined these choices into an integrated strategy of herbicides, biological controls, mowing, burning, tilling and planting grain and other crops, hand clipping and hand pulling. Today he uses selective herbicides formulated for low soil persistence to treat a variety of noxious weeds and other invasive plant species including whitetop, St. Johnswort, knapweed, teasel, tall buttercup, common tansy, hound's tongue, and oxeye daisy. One characteristic of the land—that the soils are rocky, heavy and slow to accept water—helps to further prevent herbicides from percolating through or persisting in the soil.

When we get to the diner, I surrender my St. Johnswort sample to Grant to stash in a nearby waste can and we continue our conversation over coffee. I try to press him for the details I think I need about his work. But it becomes clear that what I have here is more the mind of a Thoreau than a Ralph Nader, a man who knows the details but focuses on the big picture.

He wants to get to the good stuff, the real story, which is the land. “You have to listen to the land first,” he insists. “You need to give the land time to talk to you.” One of Grant's favorite stories is about the misidentification of plants. “If you have the plant misidentified—and it's easy to do—you aren't going to be using the best control methods for that noxious weed. In a very short time the ineffective control translates into a huge overgrowth of that weed and you have a big problem.”

When Grant came to Ninepipe he was told that Russian knapweed was diffuse knapweed. Diffuse knapweed can be controlled by tilling, which was the control being used at the time.



Adam Brooks

FWP'S NOXIOUS WEED PROGRAM

Building local weed coalitions and increasing public education and awareness are the two focal points of noxious weed management in Montana. Many of FWP's land managers are active members of local weed associations in addition to being members of the Montana Weed Control Association. FWP has 34 employees licensed by the Department of Agriculture for herbicide application.

Adam Brooks, FWP's statewide weed coordinator, is a member of the Montana Weed Control Association, Chairman of FWP's Weed Program Coordination Committee, ex-officio member of the State Weed Trust Advisory Council, and a member of the Statewide Weed Mapping Task Force. He is also involved with the Statewide Weed Awareness Campaign and several local weed control committees.

FWP's noxious weed control program includes:

- Early detection and prevention.
- Cultural controls (grazing, cultivation, and irrigation).
- Mechanical controls (pulling and mowing).
- Chemical controls (herbicides).
- Biocontrols (insects).

Hunters, anglers, and other recreationists can help by being “weed aware”:

- Learn to identify noxious weeds.
- Avoid parking, walking, or driving in weeds.
- Wash vehicles (especially undercarriages) before and after hunting trips.
- Ensure that clothing, equipment, and hunting dogs are weed-free.

Russian knapweed has rhizomes and spreads by its roots, making tilling a bad way to try to control it. Grant noticed very quickly that what he was doing wasn't working. By correctly identifying the plant, he kept the knapweed from getting ahead of him and stopped the costly misuse of a control.

"The land will tell you what you need to know, if you let it," Grant affirms. One of his best examples is a seven-acre field located northeast of the FWP farm buildings. In the early '90's the field was solid whitetop plants, says Grant. He began by tilling the land and planting grains like winter wheat and then letting the crop stand for the birds. In addition to "farming it up" each year, he did spot spraying. Repeated tilling during alternate summers helped to smooth the seedbed and keep weeds down while preparing for the next year's crop. Spraying continued within the crops to control the weeds, even as the grains were left standing for the birds.

Finally, after six years, the weed infestation was under enough control that Grant felt he could plant grass with some hope of getting it established. But grasses require spring and summer moisture. "This time the weather was with me and it worked. The grasses began to take hold," he says. I asked

Musk thistle, a noxious weed introduced from Europe, spreads rapidly through wind-borne seeds.

what he would have done if the season had been dry, favoring the weeds. "Oh, start over somewhere back in the ' process—maybe another year of spraying and planting and then try it again."

His good-humored patience amazes me—especially in light of the fact that new noxious weeds are entering the state every year. "If you want it to be like it was before noxious weeds—forget it," he says. "But I've seen significant, real progress. Noxious weeds are just little life forms. We can work with them. The important thing is to avoid becoming so distracted by the weeds that you forget why you're managing the land." The big picture again. This is how Ninepipe moved from weed crisis to a living history of how land can be renewed.

Grant defines success as an environment of diverse plant life that fully serves the waterfowl and pheasants that flock there. "I keep my eye on the weeds, but my mind on the quality of habitat I want to see thriving around here," he says simply.

This warm-eyed man who so loves every detail of this place must be a Montanan. I've made my notes and Grant is anxious to get outside on the

land where he can show rather than tell. But, I can't resist one last question, the one asked more often in this state than any other. "So, where are you from?"

His answer—New Jersey.

We laugh together at the irony. I tuck this knowledge away, and spend the next three or four hours touring glacial plains where a diverse array of plants grow, including noxious weeds, but in most cases grow side-by-side in a hard-won, fragile balance.

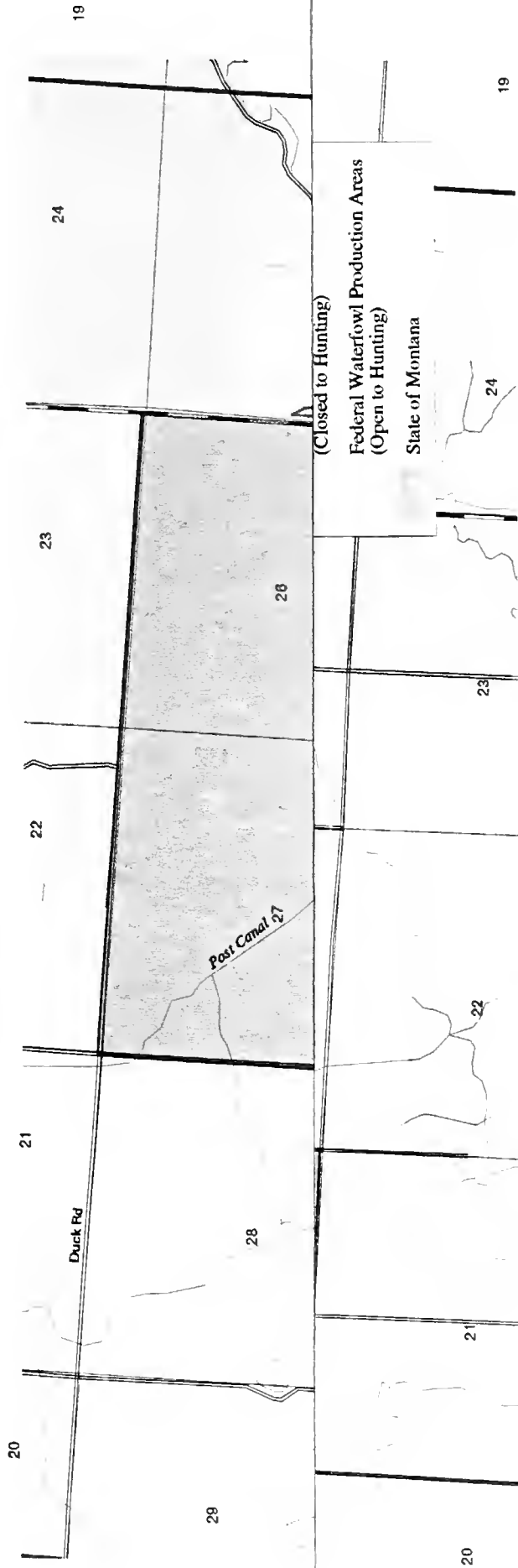
Later, as I drive down the dirt road alone, my mind returns to the thought that somehow this land that drew my great-grandparents here when it was only a territory continues to draw people who love it—people who see its treasures and are willing to do the pick and shovel work necessary to keep it that way.

Pulling and spraying weeds can be a dull, lonely business—I know this firsthand. But, Ninepipe and John Grant left me with a new awareness. Though often unknown to each other, many are working as one to hold the line on noxious weeds, piecing together a quilt of lands restored in some cases, protected in others, but all thriving in this place we love—this land of the shining mountains. ■



CHUCK HARNEY

Proposed Palmer Land Acquisition Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area



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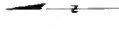
WMA
Location



INFORMATION



**Montana Fish,
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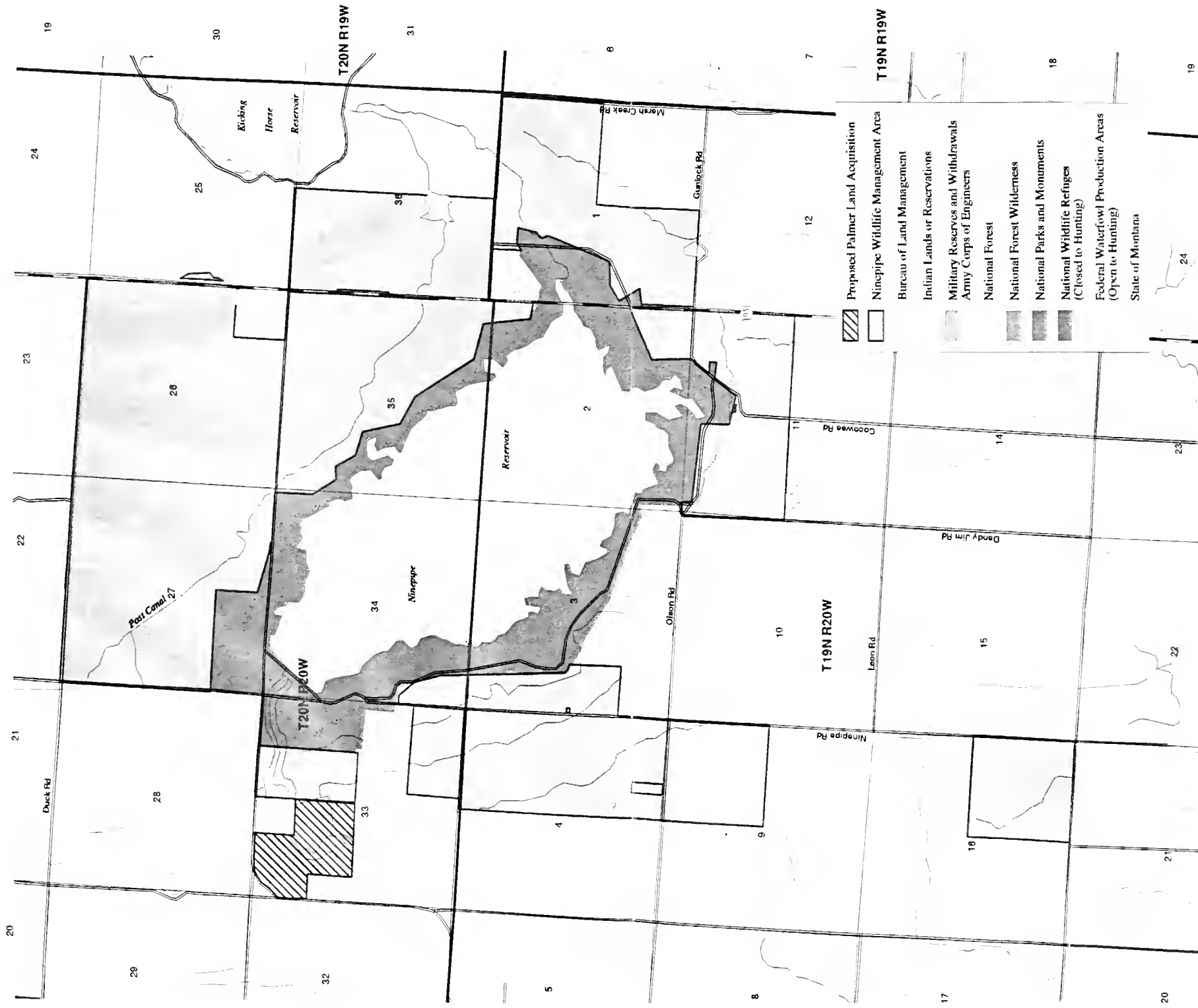
Map produced by:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Information Services Unit
490 N. Meridian
Kalispell, MT 59901

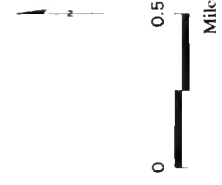
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Wildlife Management Areas from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Information Services Unit, Kalispell, MT. Wildlife Management Areas digitized at 1:24,000 from USGS 7.5 minute quadrangle topographic maps and using the COGSO module of Arc/INFO by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Information Services Unit, Kalispell, MT. Wildlife Management Area boundaries are accurate as of 05/01/99. Hydrography from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Information Services Unit, Kalispell, MT. Public land ownership, roads, and Public Land Survey System from the Natural Resource Information System, Montana State Library, Helena, MT. Hydrography, public land ownership, roads, and Public Land Survey System digitized at 1:100,000. Albers Equal Area Projection convergence true north to grid north -03724'.

Proposed Palmer Land Acquisition Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area



MONTANA
WMA
Location



Map produced by
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Information Services Unit
649 N. Meridian
Kalispell MT 59901

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wildlife@mbjpalmer.sml - L.B. - 04/07/2000

Wildlife Management Area from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Information Services Unit, Kalispell, MT. Wildlife Management Area digitized at 1:24,000 from USGS 7.5 minute quadrangle topographic maps and using the COGO module of ArcINFO by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Information Services Unit, Kalispell, MT. Wildlife Management Area boundaries are accurate as of 05/01/99. Hydrography from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Information Services Unit, Kalispell, MT. Public land ownership, roads, and Public and Survey System Name. The boundary, Public land ownership, roads, and Public Land Survey System digitized at 1:100,000 Albers Equal Area Projection, convergence line north to grid north -483724'.



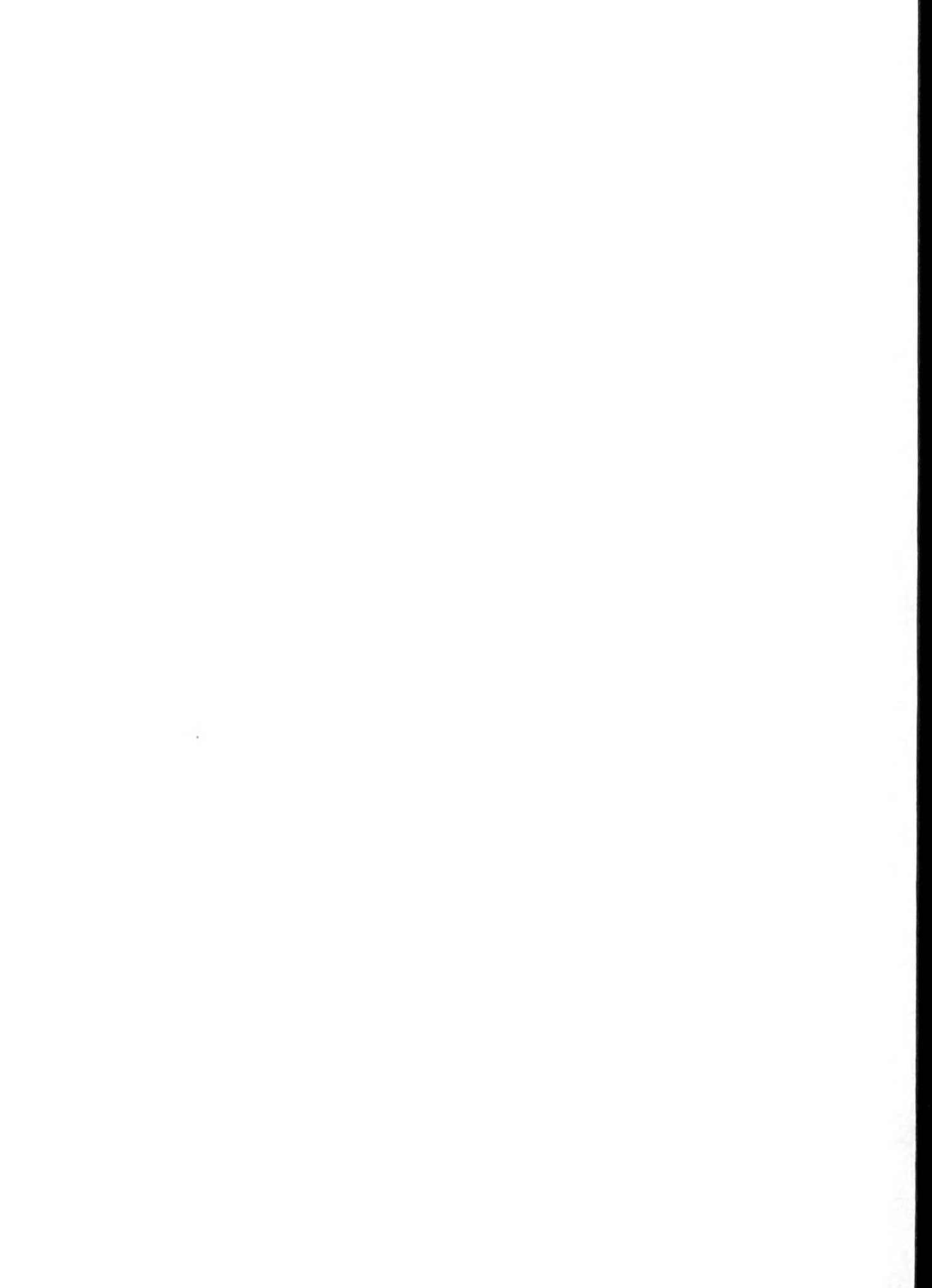
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