

# Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program (OLBP)

A voter-approved voluntary open land  
conservation program

March 2025

# OUTLINE

## **(1) Open Lands Bond Program History**

- i. Program History
- ii. Bond Election/Resolutions

## **(2) Open Lands Bond Program Background**

- i. Process/Participants
- ii. Roles
- iii. Phases
- iv. Financial Summary
- v. Outcomes

## **(3) Open Lands Bond Sponsoring Entity**

- i. A Land Trust's Role
- ii. Program Success Examples



# OLBP HISTORY

- In 2005, the Ravalli County Right to Farm and Ranch Board commissioned a study assessing the economic impact of Agriculture within the County.
  - Showed that Ag was then a \$35 million industry.
  - Suggested that Ravalli County create a voluntary, non-regulatory, landowner driven tool providing local farmers and ranchers an option to keep their working lands working.
- At the request of the Right to Farm and Ranch Board, an all Republican Board of County Commissioners put the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond on the ballot.
  - Commissioners Allan Thompson, Betty Lund & Greg Chilcott voted unanimously to place the Open Lands Bond on the November 2006 Ballot.

# OLBP BOND ELECTION

- The Open Lands Bond was passed by the voters in 2006 with nearly 60% of the vote.
- Tools for accomplishing the Bond Purpose:
  - Purchasing Land
  - Conservation Easements
  - Other interests in land
- Bond Purpose:

“...manage growth, preserve open lands, protect water quality of streams and the Bitterroot River, maintain wildlife habitat, protect drinking waters sources...” Ravalli County Board of County Commissioners, Resolution No. 2256, December 2007.

BOND ELECTION	
RAVALLI COUNTY, MONTANA OPEN LAND GENERAL OBLIGATION BOND ELECTION	
INSTRUCTION TO VOTERS: Fill in the oval before the words "OPEN LANDS BONDS - YES" if you wish to vote for the bond issue; if you are opposed to the bond issue fill in the oval before the words "OPEN LANDS BONDS - NO"	
Shall the Board of Ravalli County Commissioners be authorized to issue and sell general obligation bonds of Ravalli County solely for the purpose of preserving open lands in Ravalli County by purchasing land, conservation easements, and other interests in land from willing land owners for the following purposes: manage growth, preserve open lands, protect water quality of streams and the Bitterroot River, maintain wildlife habitat, protect drinking water sources, pay landowner costs and related transaction costs associated with an approved project, and pay costs associated with the sale and issuance of bonds in the principle amount of Ten Million and 00/100 Dollars (\$10,000,000) which bonds shall bear interest at a rate to be determined at a competitive sale, payable semiannually during a term of not to exceed twenty (20) years and redeemable on an interest payment date after one-half of their term, with all expenditures based on recommendations of an Open Lands Board, after public comment, approval by the Board of Ravalli County Commissioners, and subject to Ravalli County's yearly independent audit?	
<input type="radio"/>	OPEN LAND BONDS - YES
<input type="radio"/>	OPEN LAND BONDS - NO

# COUNTY RESOLUTIONS

## NO. 2256 AND NO. 2978

- Resolution No. 2256 established the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program including the following:
  - Open Lands Bond Program Goals and Objectives
  - The Open Lands Board
  - Open Lands Bond Funding Mechanism
  - Open Lands Bond Program Administration
  - Role of Sponsoring Entity
- Resolution No. 2978 Ravalli County Natural Resource Policy:
  - Open Lands Bond Program supports fundamental objectives of Resolution No. 2978 by helping to conserve open lands in Ravalli County.

### RESOLUTION NO. 2978

RESOLUTION ADOPTING THE RAVALLI COUNTY  
NATURAL RESOURCE USE POLICY

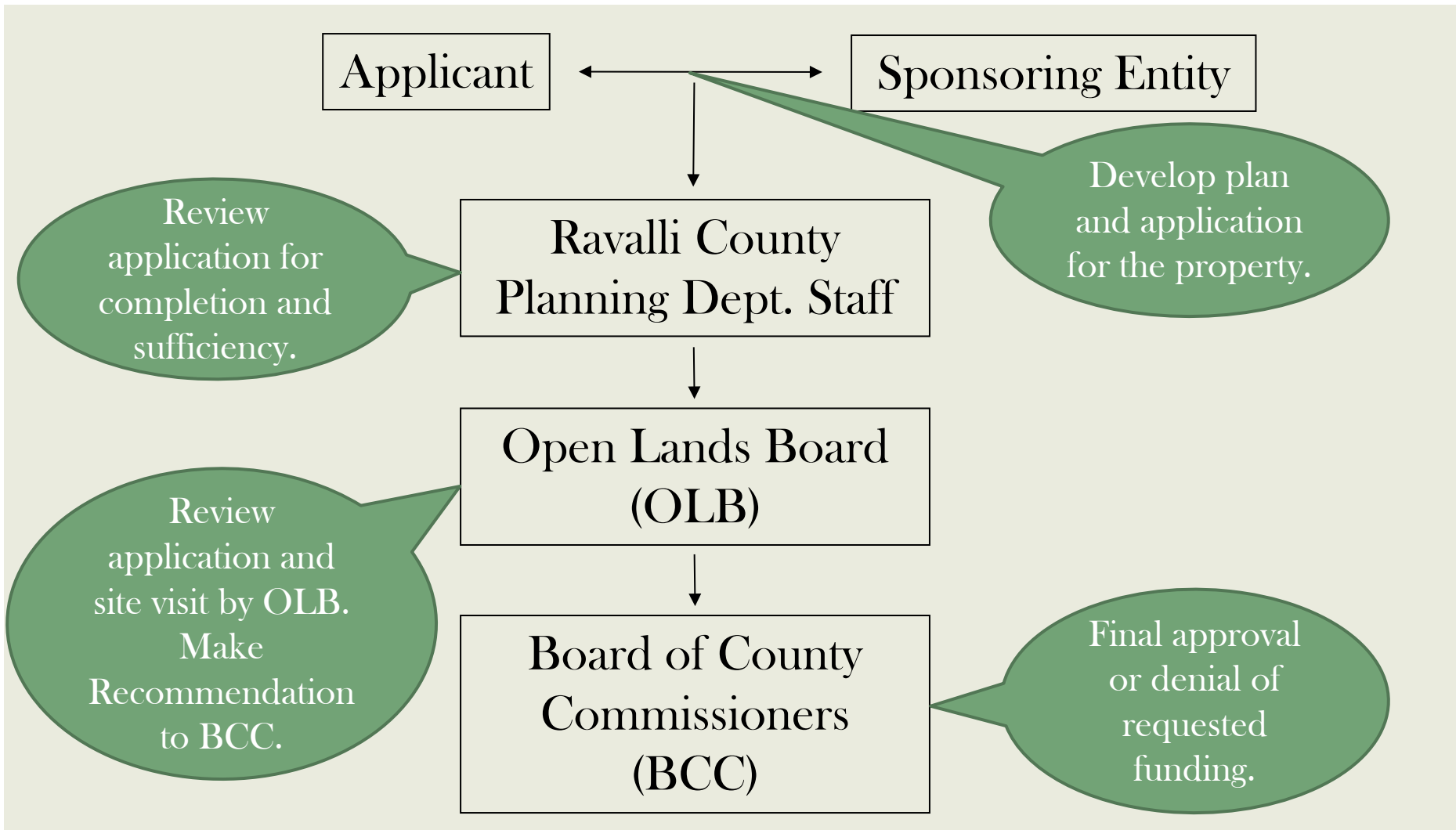
### RESOLUTION NO. 2256

RESOLUTION ESTABLISHING THE RAVALLI COUNTY  
OPEN LANDS BOND PROGRAM

# OLBP RENEWAL 2022

- At the request of the Right to Farm and Ranch Board, the Board of County Commissioners put a renewal of the Ravalli County Open Lands Bond on the 2022 ballot.
  - Commissioners Greg Chilcott, Dan Huls, and Jeff Burrows voted unanimously to place the Open Lands Bond on the November 2022 Ballot.
- With 71 % of the vote, Bitterroot Valley voters passed the renewal of the Ravalli County Open Lands bond for another \$10 Million on Nov. 8, 2022.

# OLBP PROCESS/ PARTICIPANTS



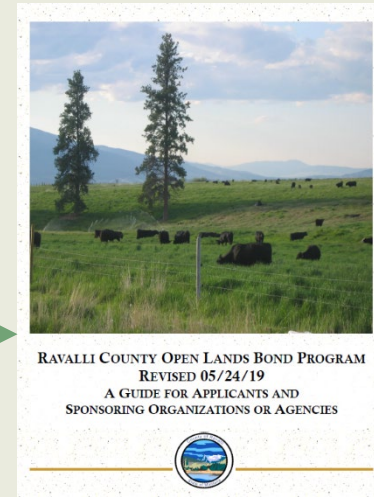
# OLBP PARTICIPANTS

- **Applicant - Private Landowners**
  - Beneficiaries of the OLBP.
- **Sponsoring Entity**
  - Qualified Land Trust Organization
  - Governmental Entity
- **Ravalli County Planning Staff Coordinator**
  - Provide technical and administrative support for the OLBP.
- **Citizen Advisory Board (OLB)**
  - Commissioner appointed. 13 voting members and 2 non-voting members, representing various backgrounds and expertise.
  - Primary role is to recommend or deny new OLBP projects to the BCC.
- **Citizens of Ravalli County**
  - All meetings are open to the public and comments are appreciated.
- **Board of County Commissioners**
  - Make final decision on approval of projects.



# THE ROLE OF OLB

- OLB meets regularly every third Thursday of every month to review project applications
- Overall roles/tasks include:
  - Conduct site visits – meet with landowners for organized tours of proposed projects
  - Evaluate projects individually and as a Board using specific guidance:
    - Guide for Applicants
    - Scoring Criteria
    - Funding Worksheet (from each application)
  - Follow OLB Bylaws
  - Only OLB members can vote at meetings
- Recommend approval or denial of projects to the BCC.



RAVALLI COUNTY OPEN LANDS BOND PROGRAM  
c/o Ravalli County Planning Department  
215 S. 4th Street  
Humboldt, MT 59840  
406-376-6500  
planning@rc.mt.gov

**Project Scoring Worksheet**  
(To be completed by Applicant)

Project Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
Applicant(s): \_\_\_\_\_

This Project Scoring Worksheet uses a numeric system and standard criteria to quantify aspects of an application. It is only one piece of the evaluation process, and the entire application will be considered when determining suitability for approval. There may be circumstances where the Project Scoring Worksheet does not truly reflect the value or uniqueness of a project, or where the scoring over-values a project. Higher scoring projects are not guaranteed to be approved, nor are lower scoring projects guaranteed to be denied. Please see the Ravalli County Open Lands Guidelines document for more information.

Issue	Criteria	Possible points	Score	Comments
<b>General Attributes</b>				
GA 1	Size of property to be put in an easement	More than 400 acres	4	
		100 to 400 acres	3	
		25 to 99 acres	2	
		Less than 25 acres	1	
GA 2	Water rights	Ravalli senior water rights or adequate irrigation district shares and well-maintained conveyance system to maintain production/consumption water?	4	
		Ravalli senior water rights and/or some irrigation district shares and an adequate conveyance system that generally maintains consumptive value?	2	
		There are insufficient water rights or irrigation district shares and no conveyance system or the system is in disrepair?	0	

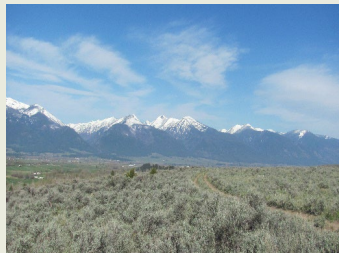
# THE BCC'S ROLE

- Appoint Open Lands Citizen Advisory Board (OLB).
- Review and approve Open Lands Program Criteria.
- Review Staff's and OLB recommendations.
- Make preliminary decision to approve or deny Open Lands Projects.
- Make final decision approving final documentation and payment of approved projects.



# OLBP PROJECT PHASES

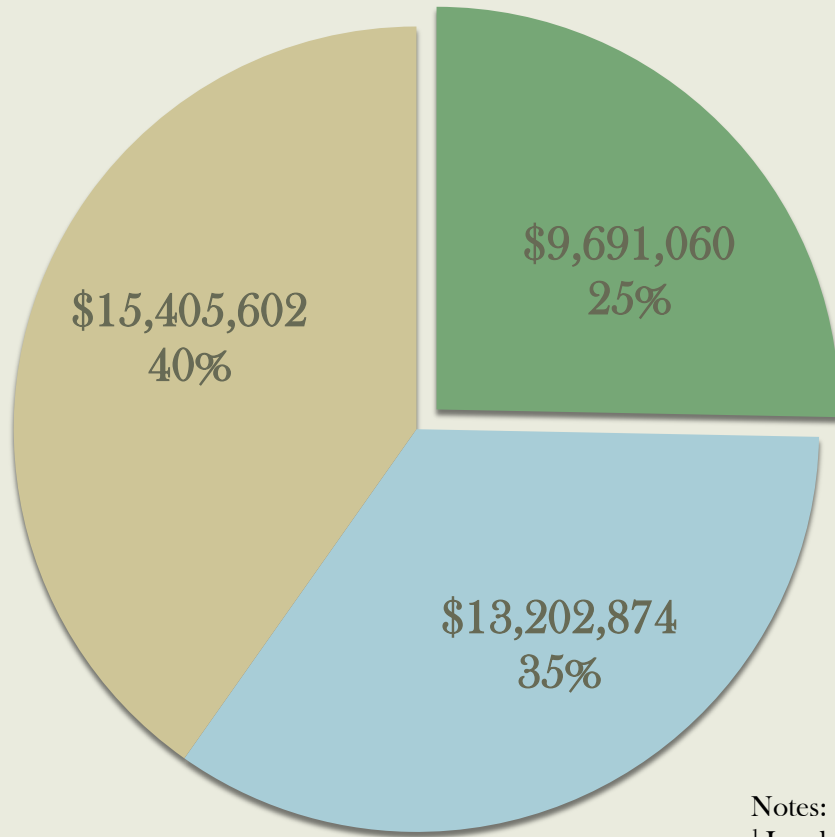
- Preliminary vetting and discussion by land owner and sponsor.
- Phase I (staff review; OLB site visit): 1-2 months
- Phase II: 1-2 months (often concurrent w/ Phase I)
- Phase III (OLB recommendation): 1 week/month
- Phase IV (BCC site visit & prelim decision): 1-2 months (depending on BCC schedule)
- Phase V (final docs & payment): 4 months to 1 year



# OLBP FINANCES

- Ravalli County Voters approved \$10 million in funding for the program in 2006 and an additional \$10 million in 2022.
- As of January 2025, approximately \$9 Million of bond money has funded 48 OLBP projects through Phase IV.
- Interest earned from Bond covers the bond issuance cost and OLB expenses. Equating to 100 % of Bond going to fund OLBP projects.
- As of January 2025, approximately \$ 1 Million of original bond money from the 2006 bond remaining to fund OLBP projects.

# LEVERAGING OF OLBP FUNDS (2009- 2025)<sup>1,2</sup>



- OLBP
- Cash Match (from other funders)
- Landowner Donation

- Average Open Lands Bonding cost per acre = \$1,150 (as of March 2025)
- Every \$1 of OLBP funds spent has been leveraged by \$3 from other sources.

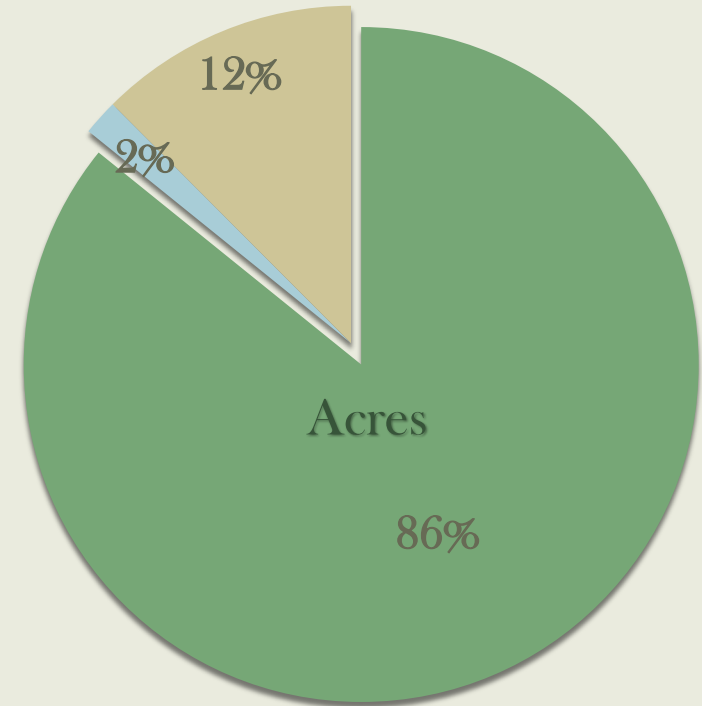
Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Landowner and Cash Match From Other Funders Source: Bitter Root Land Trust This includes projects approved but not closed yet (Buker Ranch, Bolin Ranch, Lazy KD Ranch, Groff Timber Ranch, Groff Farm, Groff Park ), as of March 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Source Ravalli County Finance Office

# OLBP OUTCOMES

- 48 OLBP funded projects
- Total acres conserved = 12,585 acres
- Type of Acres Conserved include:
  - Working Farms & Ranches = 11,139 acres
  - Public Access/Recreation = 222 acres
  - Publicly Accessible Private Land = 1,620 acres
- These projects include:
  - Agriculturally Important Soils = 6,087 acres
  - Elk Winter Range = 8,116 acres
  - Rivers & Streams = 44 miles
  - Riparian (streamside) habitat = 600 acres
  - Wetlands = 390 acres



- Working Farms & Ranches
- Public Access/Recreation
- Publicly Accessible Private Lands

Notes: Projects can fall into several categories, for example land can be both elk winter range and ag soil; Acreage data source: Bitter Root Land Trust

# A SPONSORING ENTITY

CAN BE ANY LAND TRUST OR GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION

BITTER ROOT



LAND TRUST



*Montana Fish,  
Wildlife & Parks*



# A LAND TRUST'S ROLE

Land trusts are private, independent, nonprofit organizations

- **Sponsoring Organization with an Applicant (Landowner) in the OLB process**
- **Partner with private landowners**
- **Complete project due diligence**
- **Negotiate terms of the conservation easement**
- **Draft Open Lands applications**
- **Secure matching funds, whenever possible**
- **Monitor conservation easements annually**
- **Provide land management assistance to interested landowners**
- **Uphold the terms of each conservation easement**

# EXAMPLES OF PROJECTS

The following slides include information on a few representative projects, highlighting conserved working lands, a public park, and a privately owned property with public access (Data source: Bitter Root Land Trust)



# SUTHERLIN FARMS

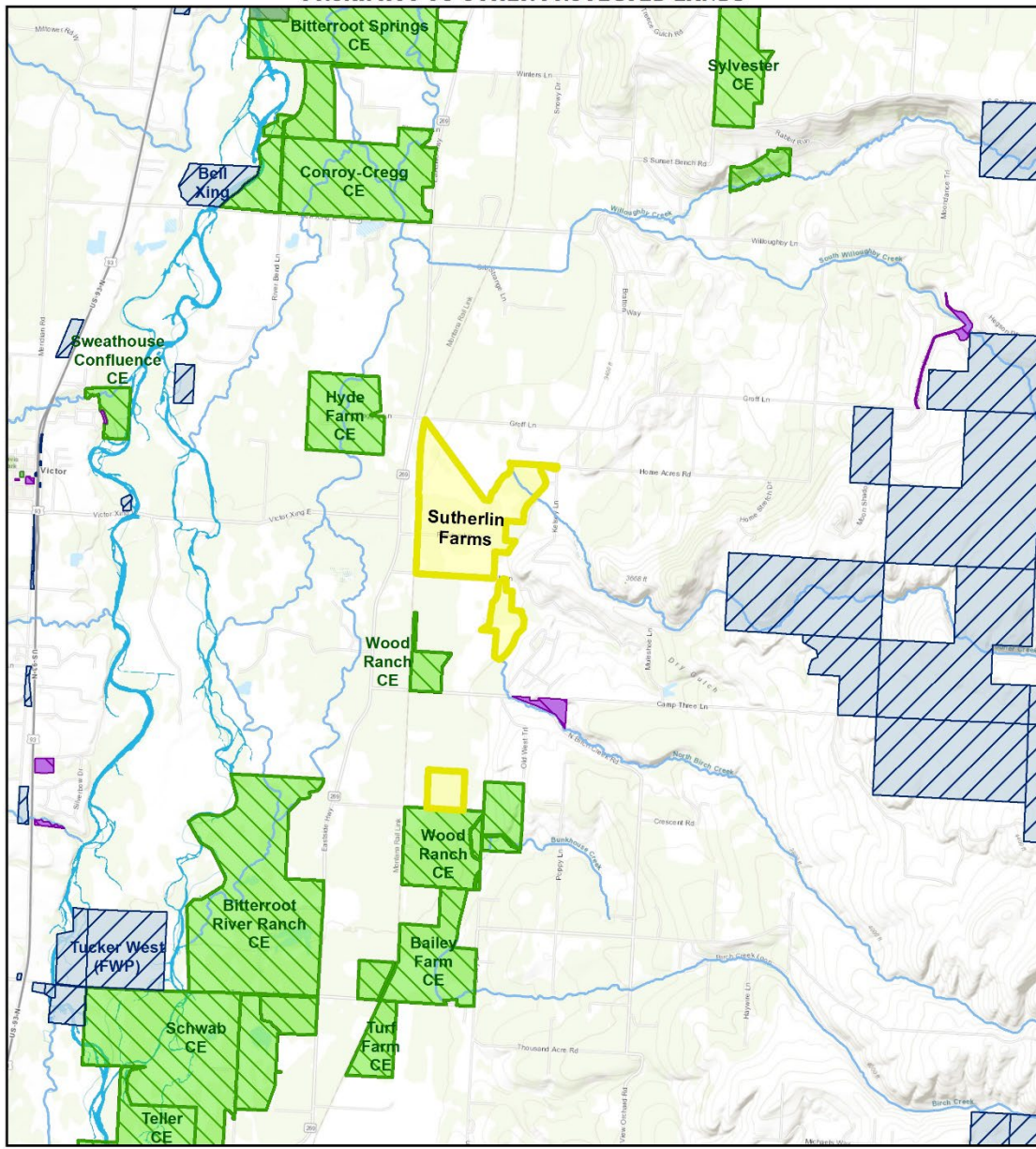
377 Acres

Stevensville



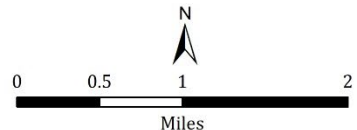
# SUTHERLIN FARMS

## PROXIMITY TO OTHER PROTECTED LANDS



### Legend

- Sutherlin Farms
- Federal Land
- Existing Conservation Easement
- State Land
- County Land



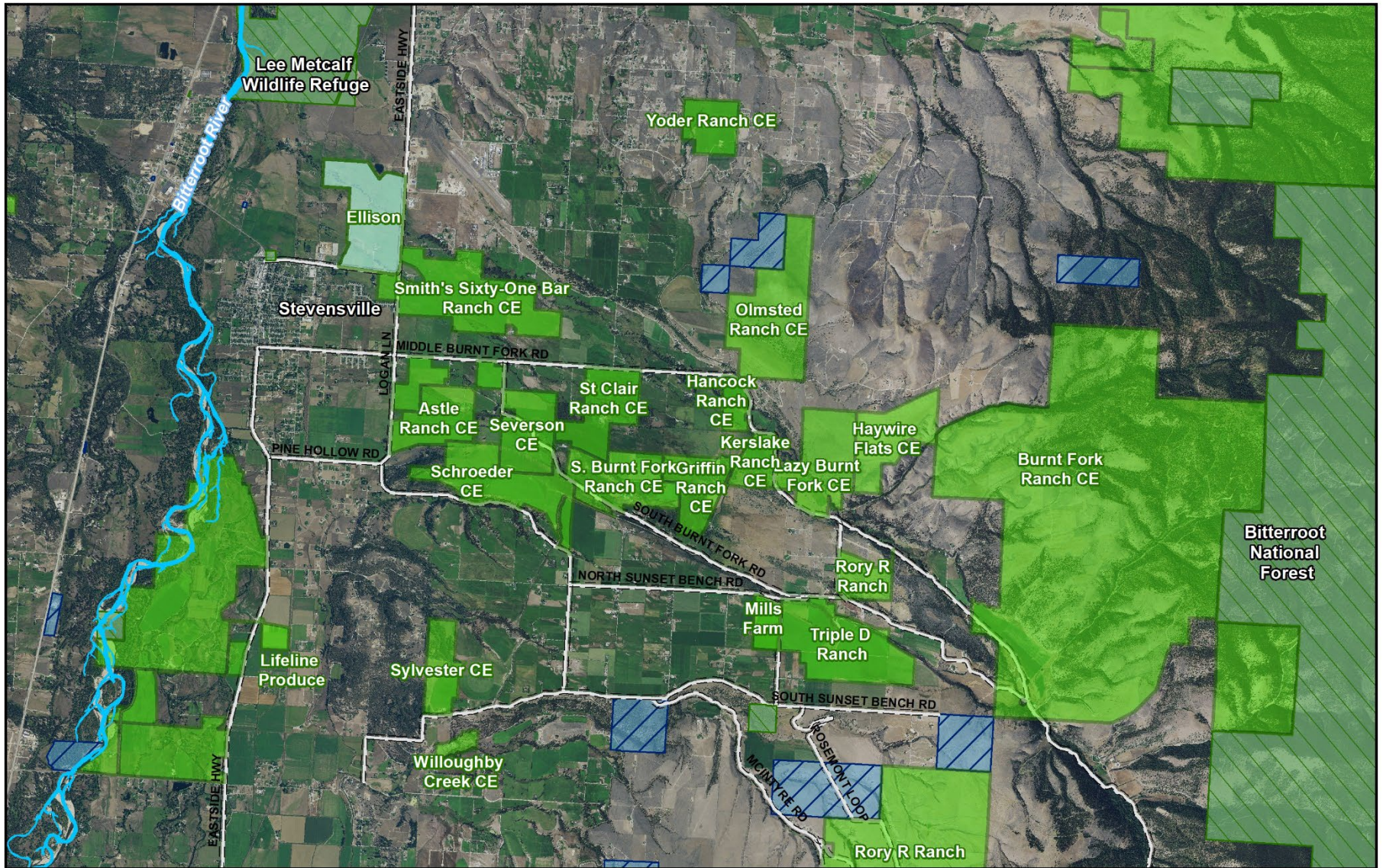
# SEVERSON'S FLYING E RANCH

354 Acres






Stevensville

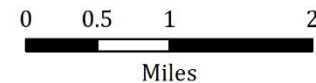


# Burnt Fork Neighborhood Conservation



## Legend

- |  |                                    |   |              |
|--|------------------------------------|---|--------------|
|  | Existing Conservation Easements    |  | Federal Land |
|  | In-Progress Conservation Easements |  | State Land   |
|  |                                    |  | County Land  |



# SKALKAHO BEND

PUBLIC PARK

70.5 Acres

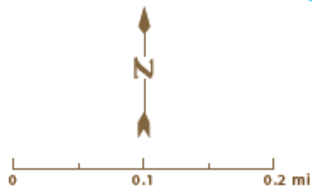
Hamilton



# RIVER PARK AND SKALKAHO BEND

## TRAIL MAP

City of Hamilton  
Bitter Root Land Trust



The boundaries depicted on this map are meant for general reference and should not be considered legal descriptions.

This map produced by Bitter Root Land Trust and GL, July 2020

**Legend**

- ★ Trailhead
- 🍃 Picnic Area
- P Parking Area
- 🚻 Restroom
- 0.50 Unpaved Trail (miles)
- Improved / Primitive Trail
- Ditch
- Public Parkland

# LAZY J CROSS RANCH

1,080 Acres

Sula Basin

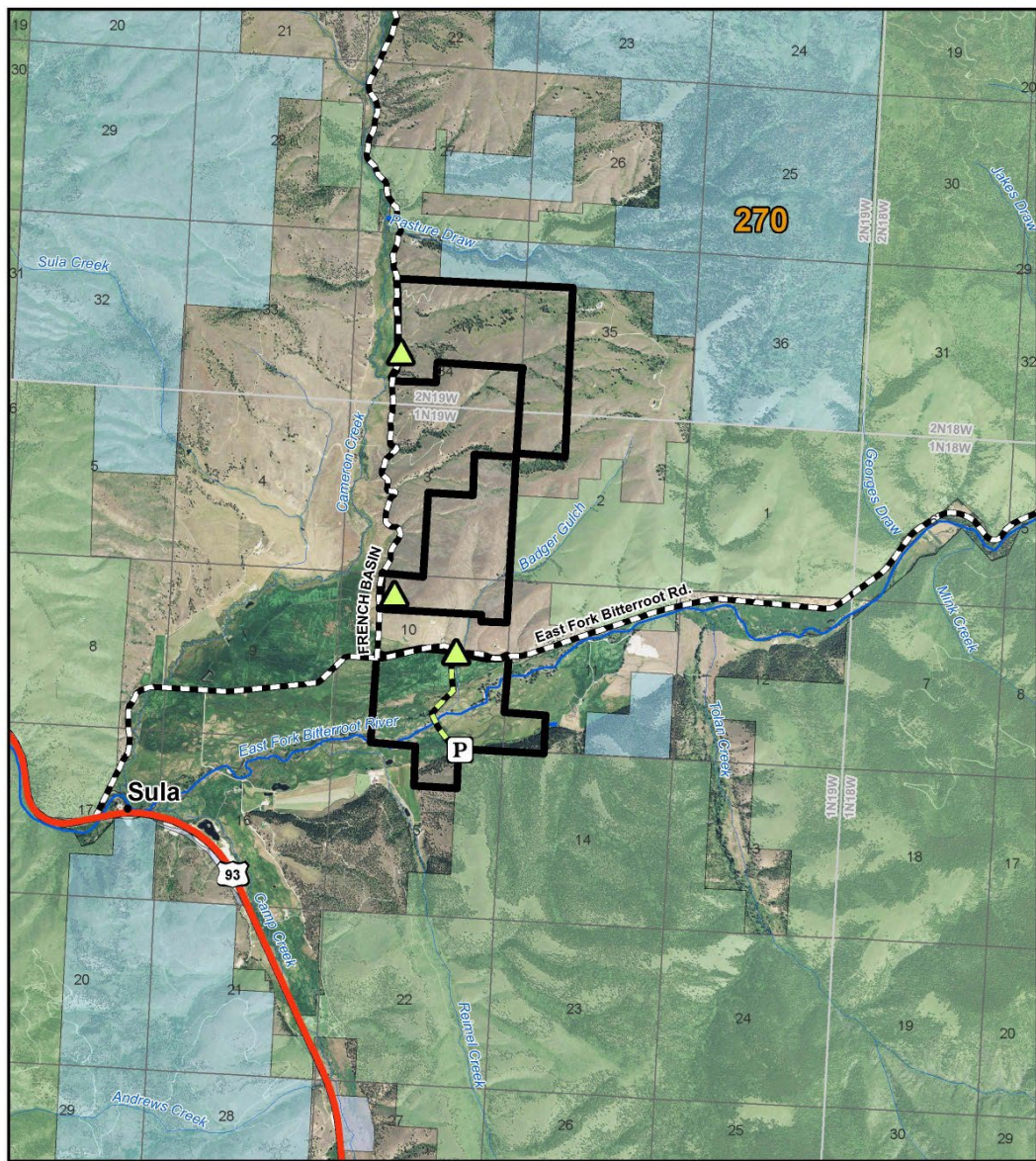


# LAZY J CROSS RANCH

## BLOCK MANAGEMENT MAP

Lazy J Cross is within the MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks Block Management program, which allows for public access for hunting.

Please see MT FWP website for full details and regulations.



### Lazy J Cross Ranch BMA #2

BMA Rules - See Reverse Page

**Disclaimer - This map is not intended to depict property ownership outside the Block Management Area. Contact the appropriate land management agency for information on public land ownership and travel guidelines.**

	BMA Boundary	Access Road
	Deer/Elk Hunting District & Boundary	County or Other Public Road
	Sign-in Box	
	Parking Area	

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks Region 2

BLM 100K Map(s): Nez Perce Pass, Wisdom Date: 8/6/2015 TR





## Program Overview

- The Open Lands Bond Program (OLBP) was approved by the voters and citizens of Ravalli County in 2006 and renewed in 2022.
- The OLBP values and conserves:
  - 1) Working agriculture, open space, wildlife habitat, water resources; and
  - 2) Private property rights and private ownership of private land.
- Conservation easements are voluntary, maintain private ownership and keep land on the County's tax rolls.
- The OLBP is the community's non-regulatory, property rights-based investment in the Bitterroot's future open spaces.
- The OLBP supports several of Ravalli County's most important industries: agriculture, hunting, fishing, and tourism, with the Bond Purpose to:
  - “manage growth, preserve open lands, protect water quality of streams and the Bitterroot River, maintain wildlife habitat, protect drinking waters sources...” Ravalli County Board of County Commissioners, Resolution No. 2256, December 2007.

# QUESTIONS??

Please see Frequently Asked Questions on  
Ravalli County Open Lands Bond Program website

