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Protecting the Lower Yellowstone River - Grant

Grant Name	Protecting the Lower Yellowstone River - Grant	Today's Date	12/14/2023
Staff Size	30	Organization Name	Wild Montana
Total Membership	4,178	Annual Operating Budget	\$3,267,411.00
BIPOC-led	No	Operating Budget Year	
C-Suite Staff		Tax Status/Organization Type	501c3 Organization
Notes			

Project Information

Project/Campaign Name	Protecting the Lower Yellowstone River	Project Address	
Project Location (State or Territory)	MT	Amount Requested from Alliance	\$50,000.00

Proposal Questions

<p>1. Purpose/History Of Organization</p> <p>Since 1958, Wild Montana has been uniting and mobilizing communities to keep Montana wild. We work at the local level, building trust, fostering collaboration, and forging agreements to protect the wild, confront climate change, enhance public land access, and help communities thrive. Our work has resulted in the establishment of 16 wilderness areas, the designation of the Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument, and various other legislative, administrative, and executive victories that have protected millions of acres of public lands from irresponsible development and degradation.</p>	<p>7. Measurable On-Ground Outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The North Wildcat Coulee WMA is opened to the public with improved recreation infrastructure and a management plan, conserving 328 acres and 2.2 miles of the riverfront. - The Fish and Wildlife Commissioners and Montana Land Board approved three new public land acquisitions. These three land acquisitions will conserve 1,500 acres and secure new public access to 4 miles of the riverfront. - Three hundred fifty of our grassroots supporters mobilized and submitted supportive public comments in favor of the public land acquisitions. - Five high-profile spokespeople testified in favor of these projects at the Fish and Wildlife Commission and Montana Land Board meetings. - Five high-profile spokespeople signed Op-Eds in favor of the Lower Yellowstone River Project, and these Op-Eds were published in major newspapers across Montana.
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2. Final Success

The Lower Yellowstone River Project will protect approximately 5,000 acres and 10 miles of critical riparian habitat along the Lower Yellowstone's riverfront, establish an all-new state park, and improve recreation infrastructure, simultaneously strengthening recreation opportunities and economic vitality for several towns in far eastern Montana in the next one to two years.

8. Evaluate Your Progress

In the near term, we will measure the Lower Yellowstone River Project's progress through the achievement of outlined goals, objectives, and outcomes for the upcoming year and key evaluation indicators, including:

- Grassroots mobilization: Measured by quantifiable metrics, including the number of comments submitted and letters to the editors/op-eds published.
- Project support: Measured through media impact and project endorsements from business owners, decision-makers, and members of the public.
- Public land acquisitions: Measured through supportive votes of the Fish and Wildlife Commission and Montana Land Board.

Although benefits will begin immediately, we will measure long-term success through the completion of the Lower Yellowstone River advisory committee's recommendations for the river corridor within the next four years and through positive economic impacts on eastern Montana towns, including area tourism, population growth, and job opportunities over the next ten years.

3. Location Details

The Yellowstone River – the longest free-flowing river in the lower 48 states – is a haven for biodiversity and climate resiliency. In eastern Montana, the riparian areas along the river are comprised of native vegetation, including cottonwood trees, willows, and native grasses that sustain critical habitat for an extensive variety of wildlife, including mule and white-tailed deer, Merriam's turkey, waterfowl, ring-necked pheasant, sharp-tailed grouse, and many other species. The area also hosts several species of concern, including great blue heron, black-tailed prairie dog, spiny softshell turtle, little brown myotis, and other species.

In eastern Montana, the health and protection of the river and its surrounding lands are intrinsically connected to the well-being of nearby communities. This overlooked region of Montana has experienced substantial economic decline as people move away to seek jobs and amenities unavailable in the area, leaving these small towns with increasing hardships as grocery stores and hardware stores close, pushing residents to drive upwards of 50 miles to access essential services. While other parts of Montana are already benefitting from a robust outdoor recreation economy that brings 7 billion dollars annually, communities in eastern Montana are left behind. The upper section of the Yellowstone River in Paradise Valley is a popular recreation destination; however, recreation stops east of Billings due to a lack of public

9. TCA Funding Plan

The Montana State Legislature's allocation for the Lower Yellowstone River Project – amounting to \$4 million for land acquisitions, \$3 million for recreation site improvements, and \$2 million for a state park – underscores the legislature's endorsement. However, effective utilization of this funding hinges on a driving force guiding the project to successful completion. Wild Montana has provided unwavering leadership and guidance for the project since its beginnings. We are committed to continuing to do so until the LYRC's vision for the river corridor is realized. Wild Montana will leverage funding from The Conservation Alliance to support staff time, travel, communications, and meeting expenses to facilitate collaboration between decision-makers, local stakeholders, and business owners; garner media coverage; and mobilize public support to obtain necessary Commission and Land Board support.

access and infrastructure. Similarly, conservation protections for the river further east also cease, leaving sensitive riparian habitat unprotected.

Recognizing an opportunity to protect wildlife habitat, increase recreation opportunities, and boost local economies, Wild Montana brought together community leaders, local citizens, and economic development experts with the founding of the Lower Yellowstone River Coalition (LYRC), who all agree: the Lower Yellowstone River is one of eastern Montana's most underutilized resources and under-protected natural wonders. Protecting the river and creating the recreation infrastructure needed for people to build deeper ties to the river is key to attracting families and small businesses to set down roots in the area and creating a sustainable economic driver that will allow several communities along the river corridor to benefit from a slice of the pie in Montana's outdoor recreation economy.

4. Strategy & Timeline For Final Success

Since the Lower Yellowstone River is checkered with private land, acquiring new public land is vital to protecting riparian habitat and increasing recreation access. In total, this project seeks to acquire 10–15 new public land properties. We are working with FWP to support these acquisitions, prioritizing areas high in conservation value and significant public access gaps. In November 2023, the Montana Land Board approved the first land acquisition of the project – the North Wildcat Coulee Wildlife Management Area (WMA). There are only a few final steps before this new WMA will be opened to the public, and we are working with FWP to complete this process.

To finalize the North Wildcat WMA and advance the project, we plan to accomplish the following objectives over the next year:

1. Open the North Wildcat Coulee Wildlife Management Area to the public by:
 - 1a. Supporting recreation infrastructure improvements for the North Wildcat WMA, including a gravel parking lot, signage, and human waste facility.
 - Mobilizing our supporters to submit comments during the public comment period for the environmental assessment concerning the impact of new infrastructure, anticipated to take place this winter/early spring.
 - 1b. Informing the public and celebrating the new WMA's opening through public relations and a ribbon-cutting ceremony with the Governor in winter/spring 2024.
 - Recruiting high-profile local and regional spokespeople for the ribbon-

10. JEDI Efforts and Impact

At Wild Montana, we firmly believe that justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion are essential to securing a future where Montana's people and wildlife flourish and public lands and waters are wild and connected. We are committed to advancing these principles and contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society. Internally, Wild Montana worked with a third party this year to evaluate our compensation practices and philosophy to ensure we adequately support our staff with competitive living wages. Externally, we have broadened our approach to collaboration, expanding the scope of who is represented at the table and amplifying the voices of our partners. Examples include our efforts to support the Fort Belknap Indian Community Water Compact – which passed through the Senate Committee of Indian Affairs in Congress this July – and our work to support the Blackfeet in securing a lease-free Badger-Two Medicine.

cutting ceremony.

- Press press advisory and press release for the ribbon cutting and recruit reporters to attend
- Implementing broad public promotion leading up to both the winter/spring ribbon cutting and the summer opening of the new WMA to create momentum for additional acquisitions

1c. Supporting the development of a management plan for the WMA.

2. Identify, advance, and finalize three new public land acquisitions (Wildlife Management Areas, Fishing Access Sites, and/or State Parks).

3. Continue to drive a positive public narrative for the project and build support for its long-term goals through earned and paid media using high-profile local and regional spokespeople.

Within the next four years, we plan to achieve final success for this project by implementing all the goals outlined by the citizens-based Lower Yellowstone River Corridor Advisory Committee:

- The Lower Yellowstone River State Park: A new state park with three separate units near Hysham, Terry, and Glendive will be established

- New state land acquisitions: Between 10 and 15 properties will be purchased from willing landowners to create new recreation access sites, wildlife management areas, boat ramps, and designated campsites. Conservation and rehabilitation of riparian wildlife habitat will be the sole purpose of several land acquisitions and will not include roads or other access.

- New land-based and water-based trails: New walking trails and three new water-based trails will provide opportunities for residents and visitors to build close ties to the river. Trails will also provide safe passage around diversion dams, allowing boaters and floaters to safely explore the river while ensuring farms and ranches remain unaffected.

- General infrastructure improvements: The project will improve designated campgrounds, boat ramps, potable water sources, access roads, human waste facilities, and ADA-accessible facilities.

- Management plan: We are working with FWP to develop a management plan and designation that recognizes the importance of conserving wildlife habitat across the region and managing lands for conservation outcomes.

According to Recreation on the Lower Yellowstone River: An Economic Opportunity – an economic analysis of the project, the planned investments in infrastructure, access, and habitat are forecasted to boost visitation to eastern Montana by 51,786 visits and visitor spending by \$5.3 million annually, which will support 56 jobs and produce \$6.7

million in goods and services each year (2022). Along with drawing more visitors to eastern Montana, the project will attract families and businesses to set down roots in the area and create quality recreation opportunities that will benefit the well-being of residents through exercise and time spent outside.

As a trusted statewide conservation organization involved in this project since its inception, we are well-positioned to lead this project to its successful completion, protecting wildlife habitat and boosting the economies of towns along the Lower Yellowstone River.

5. Key Decision Makers

The Lower Yellowstone River Project is endorsed by Montana Governor Greg Gianforte and six county commissions, numerous local elected officials, city councils, chambers of commerce, state legislators, tourism and economic development organizations, conservation nonprofits, sportsmen and angling groups, local ranchers, and much more. The project's broad base of support has been key to advancing this project and securing necessary funding. To acquire new public properties as planned, we must secure the support of the Montana Land Board for each public land acquisition. The Montana Land Board includes the Montana Governor, Attorney General, Commissioner of Securities and Insurance, Secretary of State, and Superintendent of Public Instruction. The Montana Land Board approved the North Wildcat Coulee WMA acquisition on a 4-1 vote. Three of those votes were partially due to direct conversations between Wild Montana staff and the land board member. To successfully secure additional public land properties, we need to sustain the support of land board members by keeping public support for the project visible and top of mind while deepening staff relationships with those elected officials. Over the next year, Wild Montana will continue to generate communications and earned media to build strong public awareness and support for the project and additional land acquisitions. During each land acquisition process, we will mobilize our grassroots supporter network and coalition stakeholders to engage in all public comment opportunities through calls, emails, public testimony, and LTEs/Op-Eds. We will also work throughout the grant period to garner new project endorsements from business owners through Business for Montana's Outdoors coalition of over 250 businesses across Montana and activate influential business owners to voice their support for the project.

11. Confidential Items N/A

6. Elevate Voices

The Lower Yellowstone River Project has been community-driven from its

beginnings. In 2019, dedicated community leaders, concerned citizens, and recreation enthusiasts from eastern Montana came together to create a vision for the protection of the river and the betterment of their communities, founding the LYRC. Notably, this project is led and supported by the often underrepresented voices of rural communities, including farmers and ranchers, who stand as the conservation champions for the project. Recognizing that rural communities are frequently not represented in conservation, we have amplified their voices in this project, ensuring their perspectives shape its trajectory and as a powerful model to showcase that all Montanans are united behind their public lands.

We are committed to harnessing the power of our statewide supporter base to elevate and support this inspiring eastern Montana conservation project. This past year, we rallied our grassroots supporters to submit over 200 comments endorsing the project's first public land acquisition and facilitated the submission of letters to the editors and op-eds in newspapers across Montana, fostering widespread support for the project. Grassroots actions remain a core tactic in our strategy. We will secure conservation protections and increase recreation opportunities along the Lower Yellowstone River by fostering ongoing dialogue, educating the public, and actively involving citizens in decision-making.

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