



Flathead Audubon Society

PO Box 9173
Kalispell, MT 59904

August 8, 2019

Eric Forward
National Fish and Wildlife Foundation
Conoco Phillips Spirit of Conservation Program
1133 Fifteenth St., N.W., Suite 1000 Washington, DC 20005

Dear Eric,

I am writing on behalf of Flathead Audubon Society, a local Chapter of the National Audubon Society composed of over 400 local members from the Flathead Valley. We strongly support Flathead Land Trust's application to the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation for the Conoco Phillips Spirit of Conservation Program grant for two proposed conservation easement projects - the 53.4-acre Boehm Mill Pond and 34.5-acre Danford Split Pond properties in the Flathead Valley, MT.

Since the early 2000s, our Chapter has been a part of the local collaboration of federal, state, tribal, and private entities working on landscape conservation of the Flathead River from Columbia Falls to Flathead Lake known as the Flathead River To Lake Initiative; we have contributed our funds, volunteer time, and our expertise to many of these projects including the licensing and managing of the 442-acre Owen Sowerwine Natural Area on the Flathead and Stillwater Rivers near Kalispell.

These two proposed Flathead Land Trust conservation easement projects are important additions to the approximately 6,000 or more acres of lands already conserved through the River To Lake Initiative. Both properties include wetland habitats that research has shown to be extremely important to migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, and other wetland species. Both projects are also located within highly developable unprotected agricultural lands along the Flathead River. Flathead County is second only to Gallatin County for population growth rates.

The Boehm project will protect 0.6 miles of Mill Creek and covers a significant portion of the wetland habitats of the Mill pond area near its confluence with the Flathead River. As a warm spring creek, Mill Creek provides important migratory waterfowl and great blue heron foraging habitat in late fall, winter, and spring once other ponds and wetlands become ice-covered. The project includes 38 acres of wetlands, 44 acres of the 100-year floodplain and shallow groundwater. The Boehm property is also used by grizzly bears, white-tailed deer, red-tailed hawks, osprey, and northern harrier as well as beaver, mink, river otter (including female that raises a family each year), and muskrats.

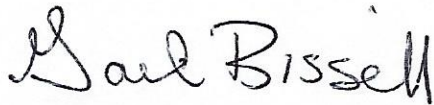
The Danford Split Pond project will protect the eastern portion of an approximately 30-acre pond split by an unsafe section of county road that is heavily used by birders. The western portion of the pond is already protected by the Cummings conservation easement which includes 12 acres of wetland adjacent to 1,300 acres of protected lands around Weaver Slough. Split Pond supports high variety of diving and dabbling ducks during spring/fall migrations and is important for nesting Canada geese, mallards, ruddy ducks, redheads, and American coot.

The Danford conservation easement project is particularly important to Flathead Audubon as it will allow creation of a highly needed and safe bird viewing area off the county road for the public in cooperation with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

For over 10 years, Flathead Audubon has been implementing a bird-oriented conservation/education program for K-12 students as well as for the general public, seniors and other groups in the Flathead Valley. Recently, in cooperation with Flathead Land Trust, local high school science programs, and other organizations, we are developing a high school bird-oriented program that culminates in student field trips during the spring and fall to up to four of these recently protected wetlands across the Flathead Valley that now have or will have public viewing areas. Split Pond will most definitely be part of that new education and public program.

We strongly support this application and hope these two amazing projects will be successfully funded. Thank you for the opportunity to support this effort.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gael Bissell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Gael Bissell
President, Flathead Audubon Society