

# CONSERVATION EASEMENTS LESSON PLAN

**For Instructor Use Only**



**PRICKLY PEAR  
LAND TRUST**

# CONSERVATION EASEMENTS

**Location:** In classroom or Mt. Ascension

**Aim:** What are land easements and what do they have to do with conservation?

**Time:** ~1hour

## **Guiding Questions:**

Given the option between selling your childhood home to someone who would preserve it or selling to someone who would tear it down but pay you more, which would you choose?

If you are the owner of a ranch how do you conserve the land you rely on so it continues to support your livelihood?

## **Learning Objectives:**

Understand the basic definition of a land easement

Grasp the importance of land easements both for the owners and conservation

## **Materials:**

Maps with properties, map showing all properties, worksheet to rank the properties

# Lesson Timeline

Note: This lesson will begin with an optional hike in the south hills on the 2006 trail starting at the trailhead off of Arrowroot Dr. If the hike is appropriate for time, the students will meet you there, you will lead them on a short hike to the summit of Mt. Ascension and back to the trailhead. Then you will all go back to the school and lead the students in the Land Trust activity.

## **Students arrive, greet them and introduce yourself**

**10  
MIN**

Try to be as engaging as possible. The introduction with the students is what sets the tone for the rest of the lesson. This does not require you to have any special skills, just be friendly and be yourself. It would be great if you included some information about what you do, or did, for work. It is a good opportunity to introduce the students to different careers and does not need to be related to the lesson you are leading.

Ask the students to introduce themselves. Up to you how you want to do this.

## **Optional Mt. Ascension Hike**

### **Give a brief introduction to land trusts and what they do at the trailhead**

**10  
MIN**

Utilize the information presented in this document to provide an overview of the work that land trusts do for their communities.

### **Lead the students on a hike to the summit of Mt Ascension**

**15-20  
MIN**

Talk with the students and keep them engaged on the way. If you know any fun facts about the area or plants or wildlife those are great topics

### **At the summit give a brief talk about PPLT and what we do**

**15-20  
MIN**

How and why PPLT was founded. Point out that the trail they hiked on would probably not exist without PPLT

Discuss how PPLT acquired Mt. Ascension

Discuss what PPLT is doing today

Lead a discussion on the basics of what a conservation easement is

Ask the students if they had land would they consider a conservation easement. Why or why not?

Discuss the benefits of conservation easements. Conserving open space, habitat management, public access

# Lesson Timeline Cont.

## **15-20** **Lead the students back to the trailhead**

**MIN**

Engage student questions related to PPLT or conservation easements if applicable. Consider providing more information on the flora and fauna or geology of the area

## In Class Directions

Skip to the “Land Acquisition Activity” if coming from the hike

**5**

### **Give a brief introduction to land trusts and what they do**

**MIN**

Utilize the information presented in this document to provide an overview of the work that land trusts do for their communities.

### **Talk about PPLT and what we do**

**15-20**

**MIN**

How and why PPLT was founded. Point out that the trail they hiked on would probably not exist without PPLT

Discuss how PPLT acquired Mt. Ascension

Discuss what PPLT is doing today

Lead a discussion on the basics of what a conservation easement is

Ask the students if they had land would they consider a conservation easement. Why or why not?

Discuss the benefits of conservation easements. Conserving open space, habitat management, public access

**30-35**

**MIN**

### **Lead the students in the land acquisition activity**

Using the materials provided in the Lesson Plan, split the students into groups of around 6.

**5**

**MIN**

### **Encourage discussion between students regarding their land trust decisions**

# Background Info

## Land Trusts 101

**A lot of the time** we think about conservation as something that happens somewhere else. National parks, state parks, and national forests are all examples of well known protected lands. But what a lot of people do not realize is that lands can be protected in different ways and conservation is most likely happening near you. This lesson will cover how PPLT protects land and water, and how land trusts contribute to larger conservation issues.

**Land trusts are mission-driven conservation organizations.** Each one is a little different but they are all non-profit, private organizations working to protect key lands without direction by the government or voters. There are national, state, and local land trusts across the US and each one sets their own conservation goals. Land trusts focus on a variety of goals, including preserving wildlife habitat, creating and protecting public access to land, supporting agriculture, and providing land to public services like community farms, gardens and low income housing, as well as educating the public. There are over 1300 land trusts in the US alone and all of them work towards their mission by protecting land for some public benefit.

**Land trusts protect land in two ways**, by purchasing property or by purchasing the landowner's right to "develop" a property. When a land trust purchases a property, they can either manage the property themselves (like Tenmile Creek Park or Sevenmile Creek) or donate it to a government organization to manage it, like the Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife service, or a local parks organization. When a land trust, instead, buys or is given just specific rights to a property, this is known as a conservation easement. What this means is that a landowner, we'll say a rancher, keeps his/her property and manages it, but they cannot put homes on the property. It must remain as open space, forest, or wildlife. We are going to use PPLT, because it is our local land trust, as a case study to figure out what land trusts do and how they do it.

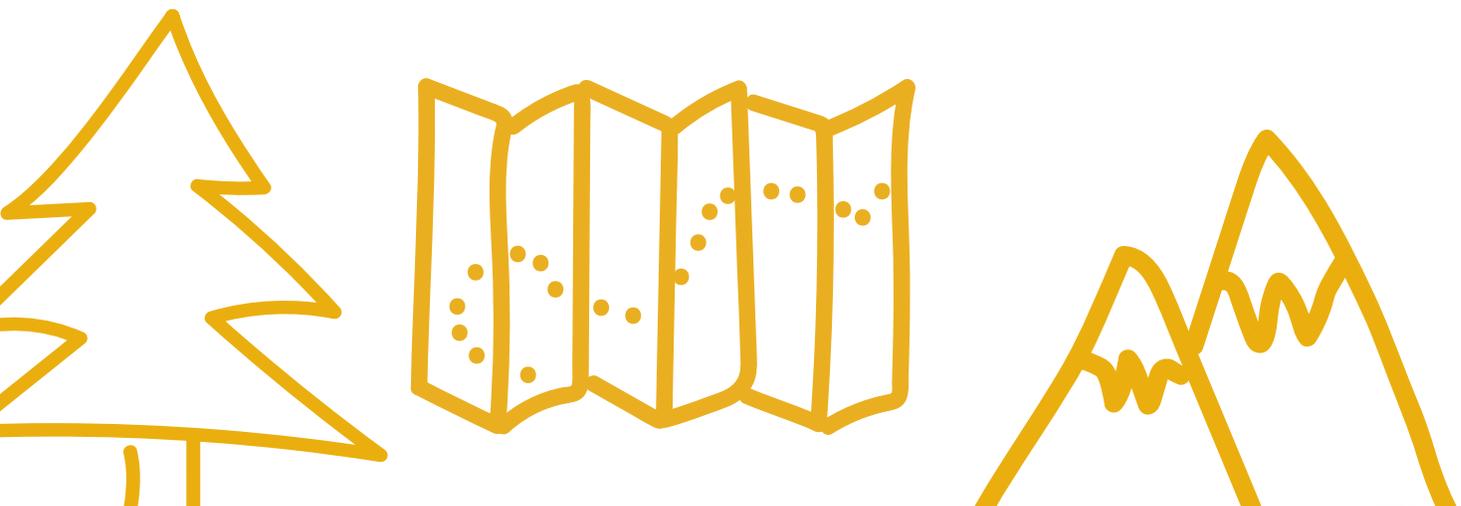


# Prickly Pear Land Trust

**PPLT was founded by residents of the Helena community in 1996.** The town of Helena was expanding and Mt. Ascension was parceled into different properties with the intention of building luxury homes on the mountain, which was a popular trails destination, the scenic backdrop of Helena, and prime elk habitat. Many community members of the City of Helena did not want to see the mountain that is such an important part of Helena's landscape disappear. From 2006-2015 with the help of many supporters, PPLT worked to protect public access to Mt Ascension while piecing back together the parcels of Mt Ascension and then turning the mountain over to public ownership. In December of 2015, the City of Helena took ownership of the last four parcels on Mt Ascension from PPLT, which marked the completion of this project.

**Originally** PPLT focused on buying and conserving land and turning it over to public agencies like the Forest Service, Fish Wildlife and Parks and the City of Helena. Since the 2000s, PPLT has expanded its conservation footprint around Helena by working with individual landowners to create conservation easements. With the full purchase of the Tenmile and Sevenmile Creek properties, however, PPLT has started to include a community conservation component. In other words, fully owned properties are being used for specific community benefits. PPLT turned their Tenmile Creek property into a fully accessible park with the goal of increasing community members' access to nature, especially for elderly, developmentally disabled, and veterans from the nearby veteran hospital. In addition, PPLT is currently working on their Prickly Pear Creek Greenway project. This project would create an accessible trail system that would connect Helena, East Helena, and Montana City. These are just a few of the projects PPLT is working on to increase the community's access to nature.

**One of the reasons PPLT can work on these projects so successfully** is because they are a land trust. As a private, non-profit organization, PPLT has greater flexibility to work with the public, private landowners, and multiple government agencies to increase the public's access to public land and to conserve areas for wildlife use.



# Conservation Easements

**A conservation easement is** a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values. PPLT works with private landowners that have either large properties and some smaller properties that are key for wildlife or public access. Some important properties to protect with an easement might be a large ranch or forest, a little property that has a trail connecting state land to forest service, or a stretch of land along a river where wildlife access water. Each piece of private property has a set of rights tied to it, mineral, logging, water, and housing development. When a piece of land is put under a conservation easement, the development rights are legally retired. Some landowners retain the right to farm and ranch, but conservation easements prevent the owner from participating in any practices that would further harm ecosystems or wildlife on the property. Landowners can also opt to include public access rights in the conservation easement. In fact, one of PPLT's most popular trails runs through private property that is under an easement. And the great news is, this conservation is permanent as conservation easements remain in effect even if the owner were to pass away, sell the land, or pass it on to an heir.

**Conservation easements can** reduce the value of a property, so why do land owners agree to conservation easements? Conservation easements can be purchased from landowners, or landowners can get tax benefits from donating a conservation easement on their property, but more often than not, the landowner pursues an easement not for the money, but to protect their property. A major component is that many landowners want to know that the land their family has cared for for generations will still be there in the future, providing public benefits. Conservation easements can provide that certainty to land owners.

## Non-Classroom Activities

**The Land Acquisition** lesson presented below is a wonderful activity for use both inside and out of the classroom. Follow the directions outlined to learn more about the types of decision making that go into land acquisition for a land trust.

Dont limit yourself to the maps presented here, look online at Montana cadastral data for information on parcels in your community. <http://svc.mt.gov/msl/mtcadastral>

# Land Acquisition Activity

## The Setup

- Split students into 2-4 groups with a maximum of 6 students per group
- Pass out a worksheet and set of maps to each table

*Note: The properties highlighted in this activity are a mix of landowners chosen to display the objectives of the lesson, they do not necessarily reflect properties involved in Prickly Pear Land Trust's land conservation efforts.*

## Introduction

- Each table will be acting as their own land trust
- Explain that land trusts all have their own particular criteria for prioritizing potential properties for acquisition or easement purchase.

Some land trusts focus on agricultural land protection, recreation promotion, wildlife protection, geographic proximity, floodplain preservation, or a variety of other factors

- Have the students pick a fun name for their land trust, and agree on a priority for land acquisition
- Tell the students to look over the maps and have them rank them by how well each property meets the goals of their particular land trust

# Property Information

Ranch A – large, agriculture, wildlife, water, limited seasonal foot access, threatened but not an island

Valley Property B – wildlife, water, limited access, contiguous with protected, historic use

Valley Property C – broken up, small, no ag, no water, no wildlife, islands in development, public access (good for park?)

Creek Property D – water, wildlife, threatened but not an island, contiguous w protected, some access, cultural site

Valley Property E – landfill, public access, no ag, no wildlife

Forest Property F – surrounded by protected, allows all access foot/horse/hunt/bike/OHV/camping, wildlife, small

Creek Property G – allows fishing/hiking/swimming, water, wildlife, very small

Valley Property H – allows hiking/biking, some wildlife, island

Forest Property I – surrounded by protected, wildlife, hike/bike

Valley Property J – very small, wildlife, contiguous, connectivity (a corridor)

Forest Property K – large, some grazing, no access, wildlife

Ranch L – large, water, agriculture, no access, wildlife, some connectivity

Walk around the classroom to listen to the students discussions, ask proping questions to get them to start thining about properties in new ways.

## Follow-up Questions ??

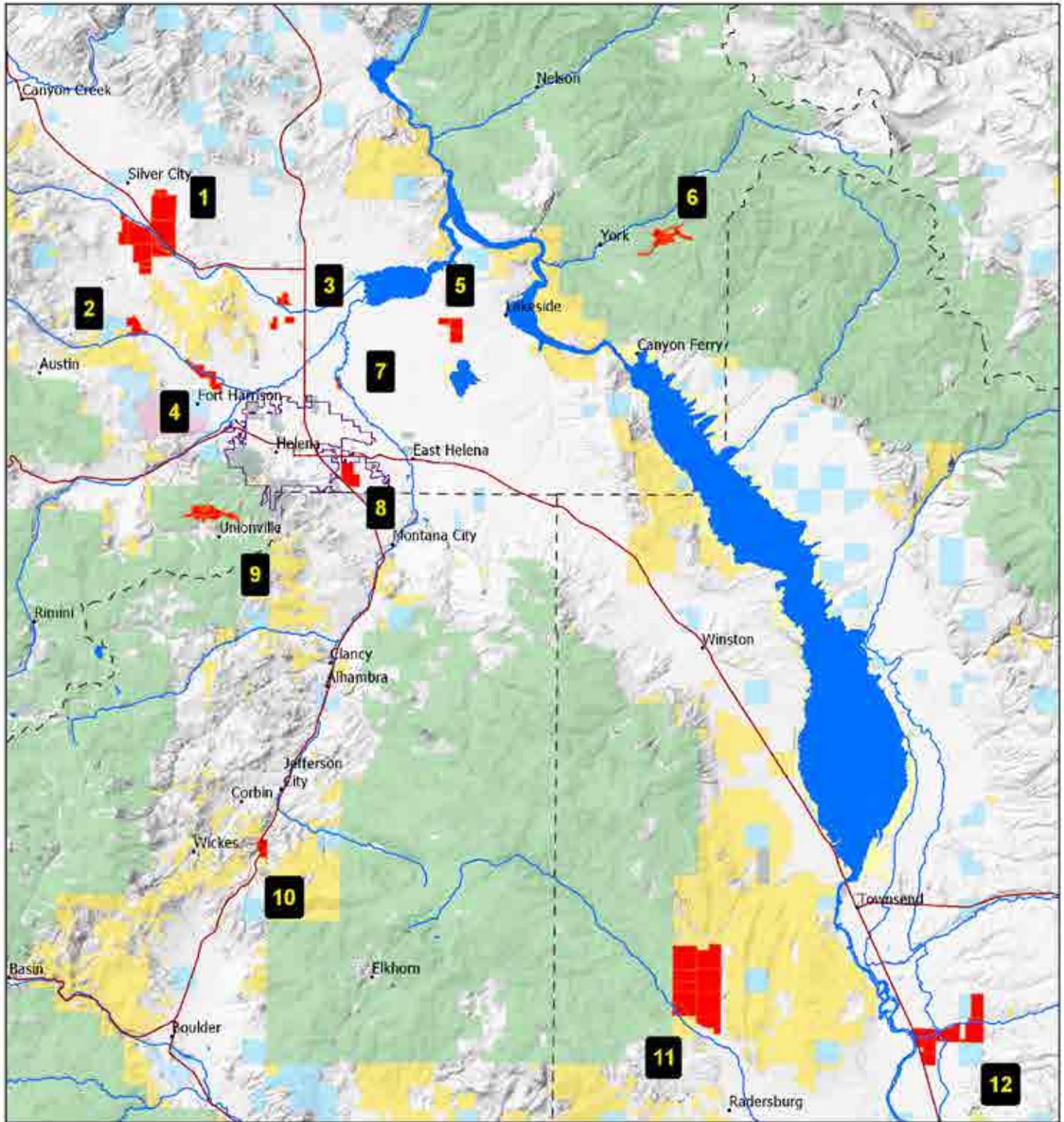
Does your ranking of these properties change based on what you value more? Agriculture v wild-life v biking access etc.?

Are there properties that may not be worth protecting? Do they have other values? (Of course, great for housing, stores, manufacturing, maybe even wind turbines/solar panels, small farms)

## Non-Classroom Activities

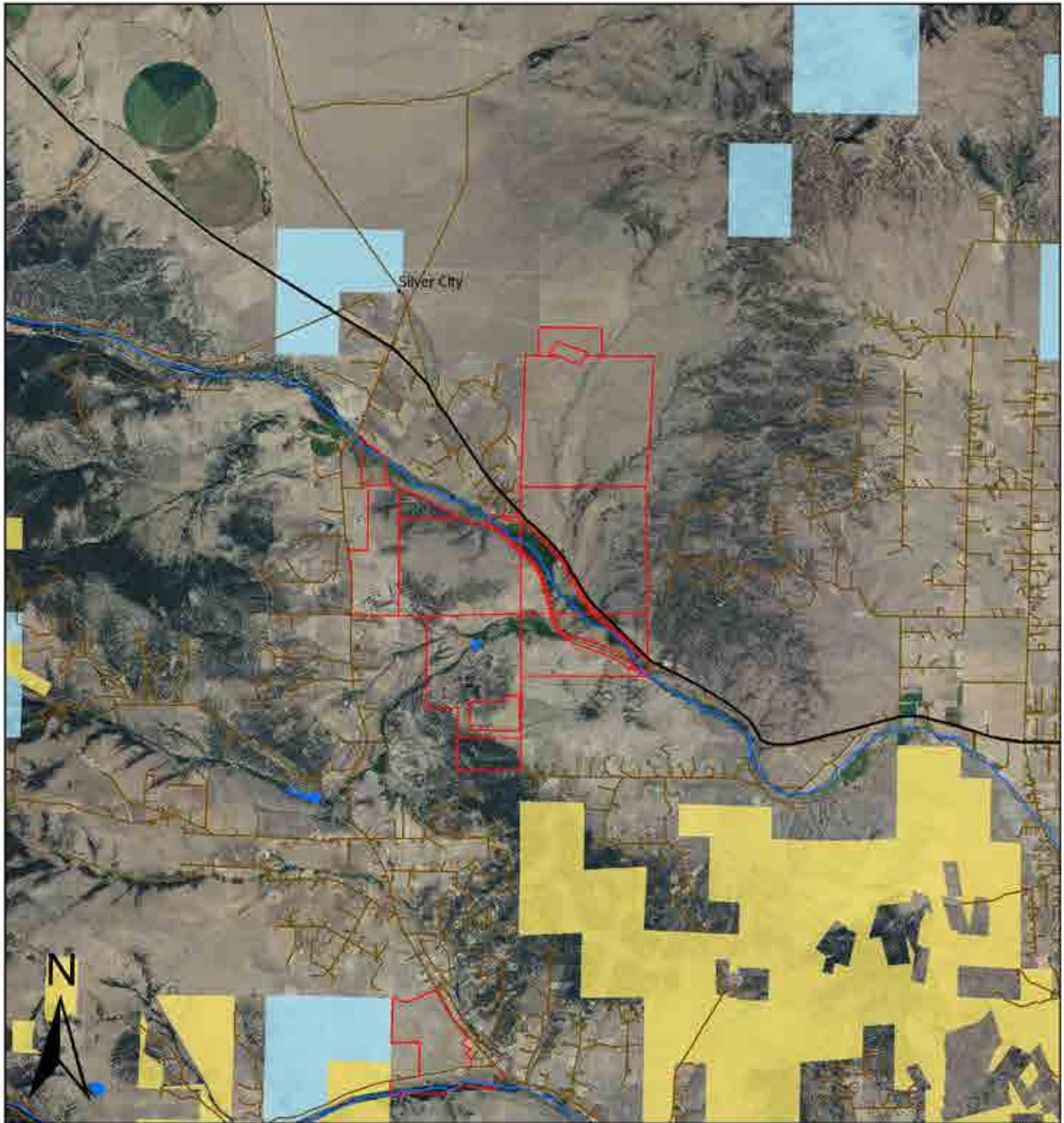
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- Highways\_PPLT\_WorkRegion
- - County\_Line
- HelenaCityLimit
- Bureau of Land Management
- Bureau of Reclamation
- US Forest Service
- Defense Dept./Army Corp of Engineers
- State of Montana Misc.

## Service Area Prickly Pear Land Trust Land Protection Activity



- LewClark Roadways
- MajorStreams\_PPLTRegion
- Bureau of Land Management
- State of Montana Misc.
- Montana State Trust Lands
- Local Government

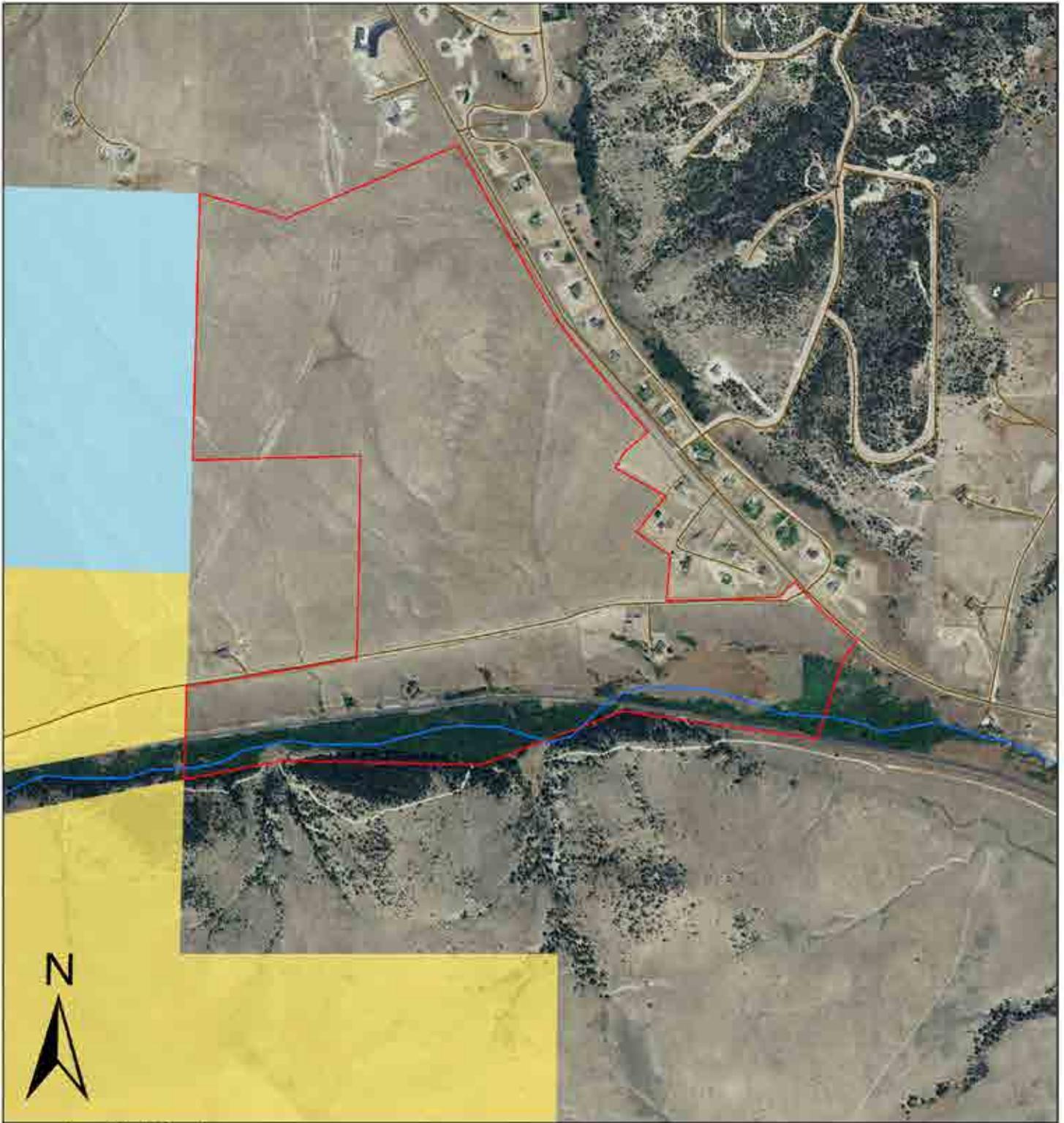
Ranch A

0 0.5 1 Miles

2,800 Acres

Wildlife: Elk, deer,  
bear, turkey

Access: seasonal  
hunting only



- LewClark Roadways
- MajorStreams\_PPLTRegion
- Bureau of Land Management
- Montana State Trust Lands

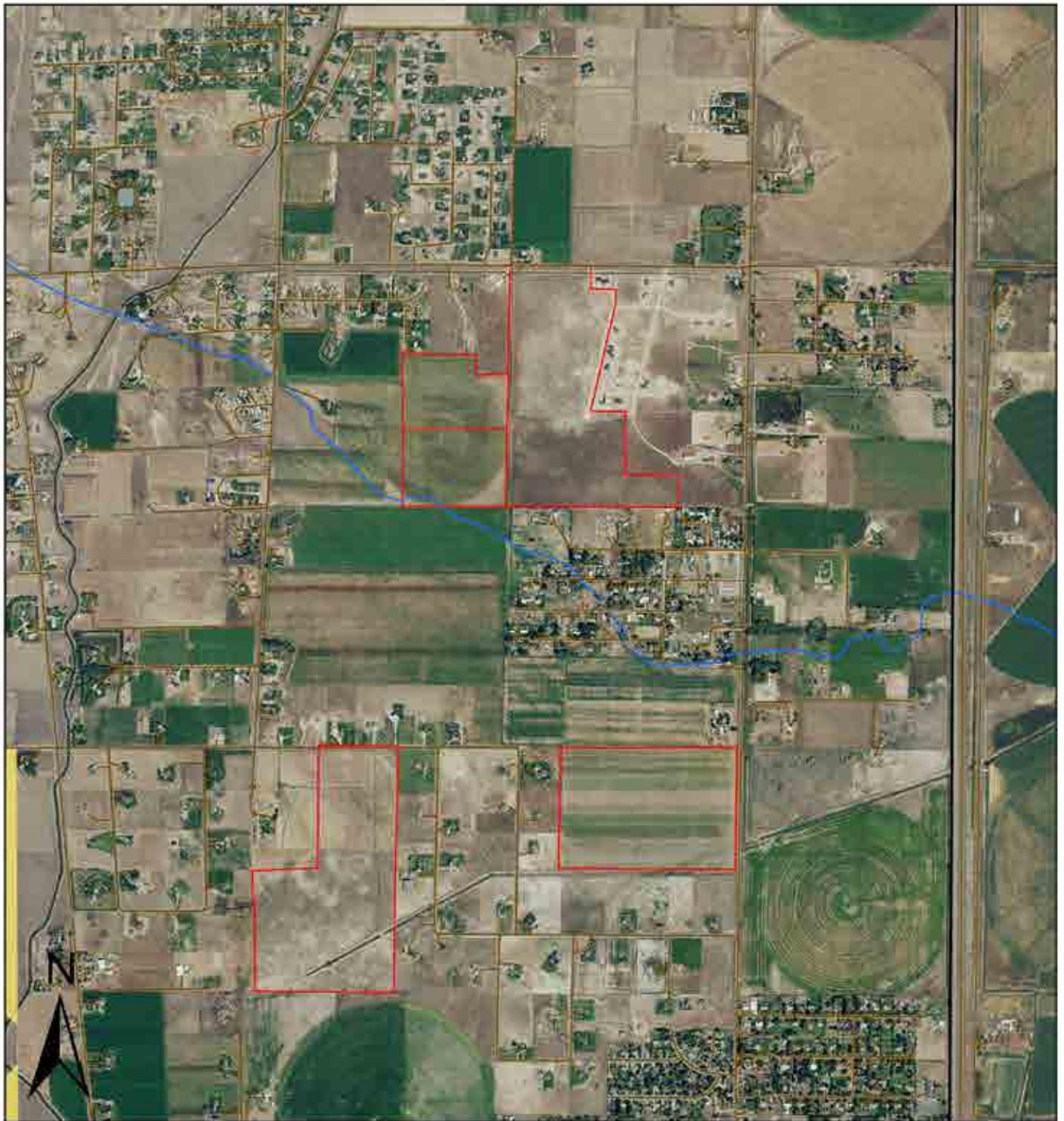
## 2. Valley Property B

0 0.1 0.2 Miles

257Acres

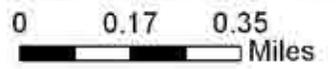
Wildlife: Elk, deer, bear, turkey, trout, beaver, pronghorn

Access: none



- LewClark Roadways
- MajorStreams\_PPLTRegion
- Bureau of Land Management
- Local Government

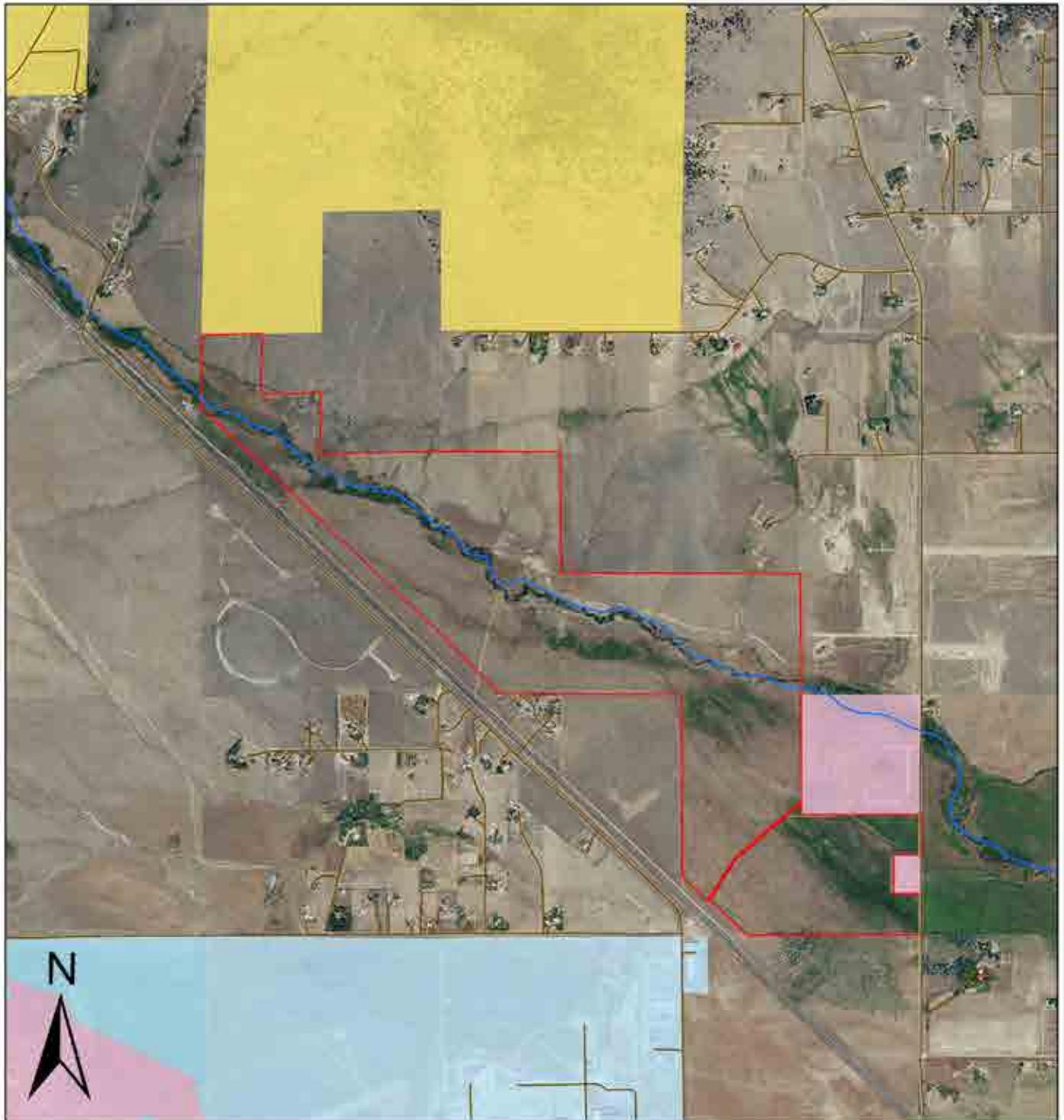
### 3. Valley Property C



254 Acres

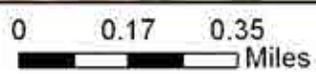
Wildlife: deer

Access: hiking, biking



- LewClark Roadways
- MajorStreams\_PPLTRRegion
- Bureau of Land Management
- Defense Dept/Army Corp of Engineers
- State of Montana Misc.
- Montana State Trust Lands

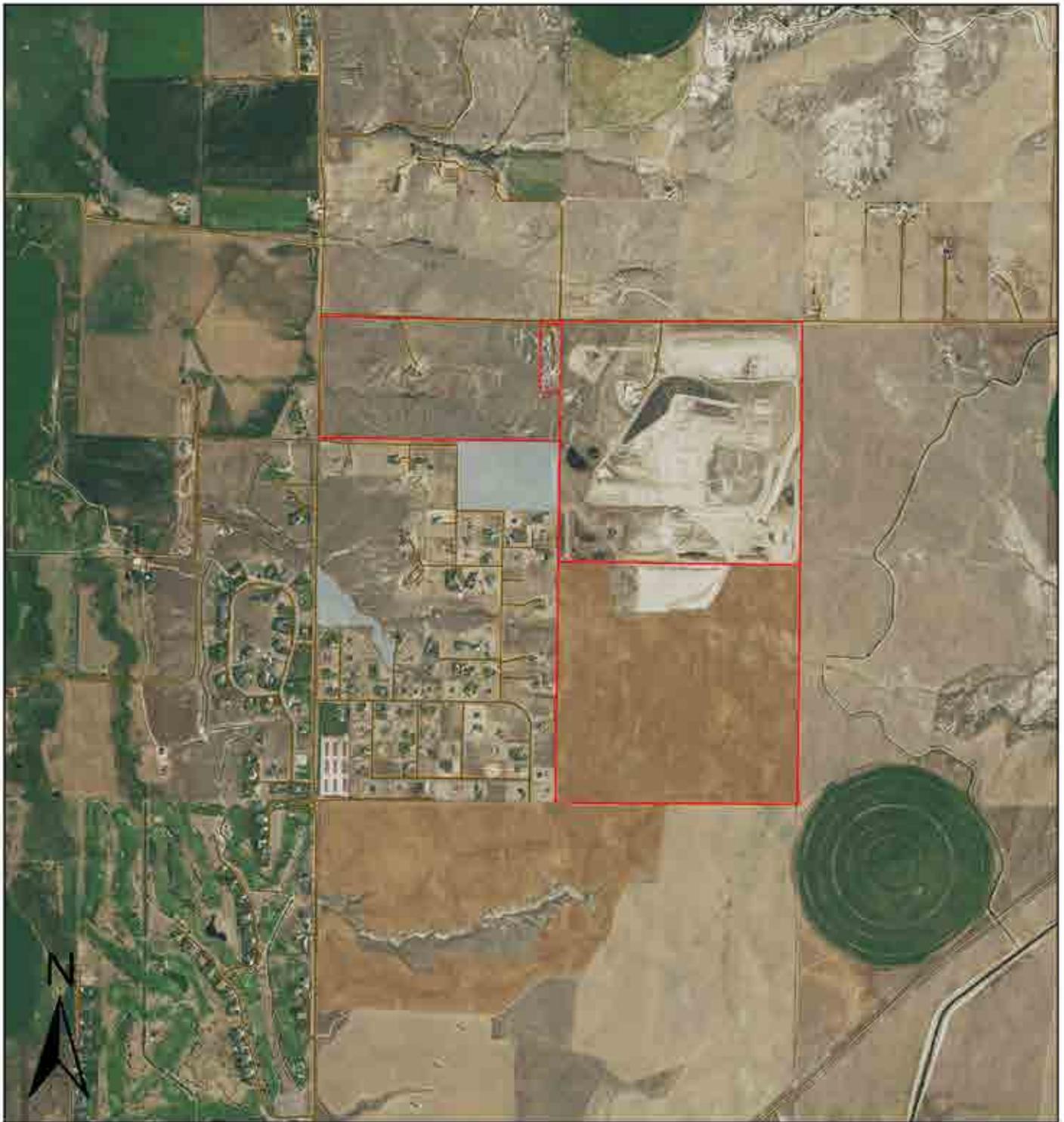
### 4. Creek Property D



358 Acres

Wildlife: pronghorn, deer, beaver, porcupine, various bird species, trout

Access: limited seasonal hiking



— LewClark Roadways  
Local Government

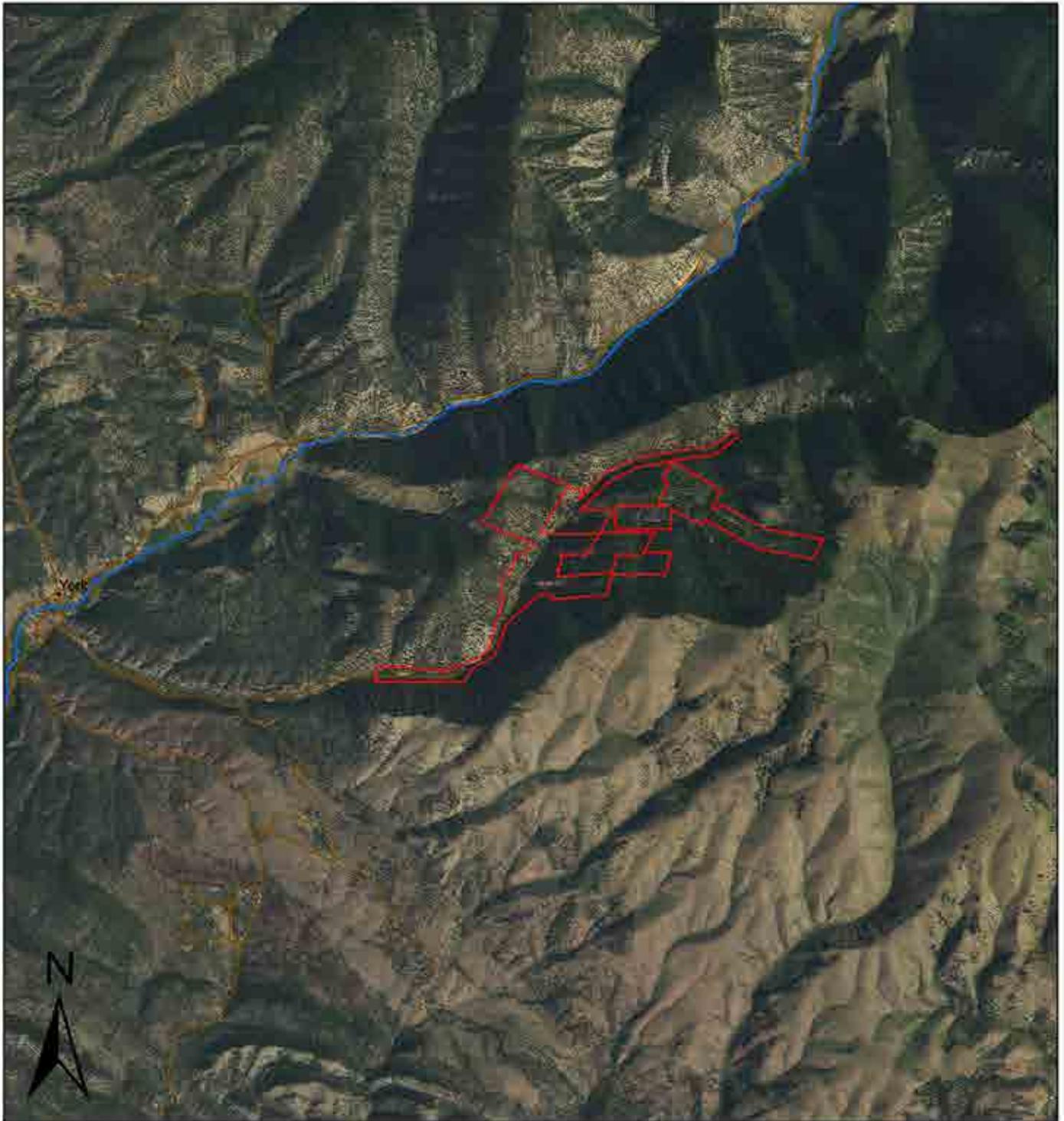
### 5. Valley Property E

0 0.17 0.35 Miles

403 Acres

Wildlife: skunk, raccoon, deer

Access: foot access



— LewClark Roadways  
 — MajorStreams\_PPLTRegion

\*Surrounded by National Forest (USFS)

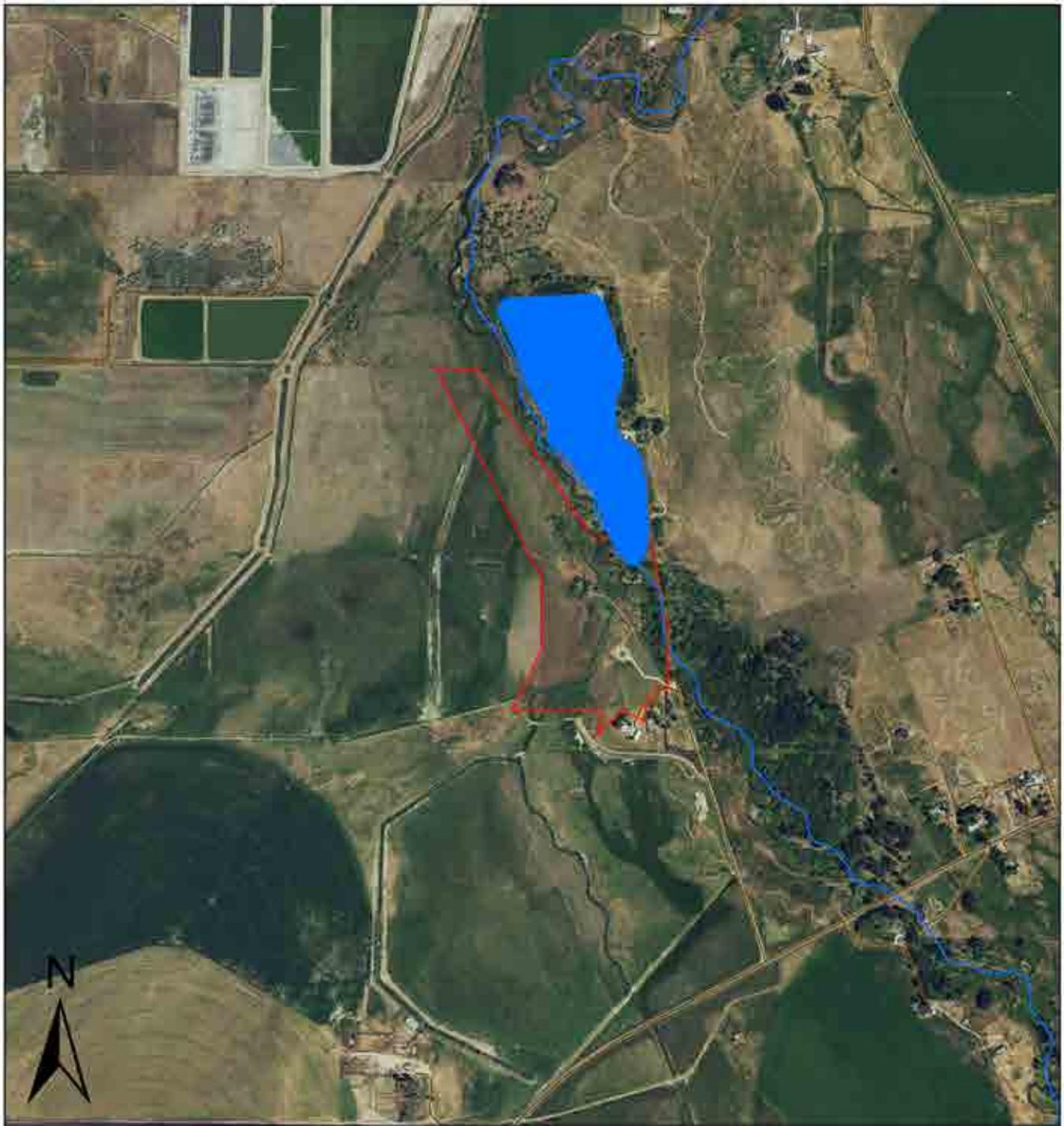
### 6. Forest Property F

0 0.45 0.9 Miles

390 Acres

Wildlife: deer, elk, bear, turkey, lynx, bobcat

Access: foot/horse/hunt/bike/OHV/camping, provides access to natl forest



- LewClark Roadways
- MajorStreams\_PPLTRegion
- HelenaCityLimit

### 7. Creek Property G



36 Acres

Wildlife: deer, trout, various birds

Access: foot, fishing, swimming



- Trail\_Map\_2015\_Trails
- LewClark Roadways
- HelenaCityLimit
- State of Montana Misc.
- Local Government
- Local Government
- Local Government

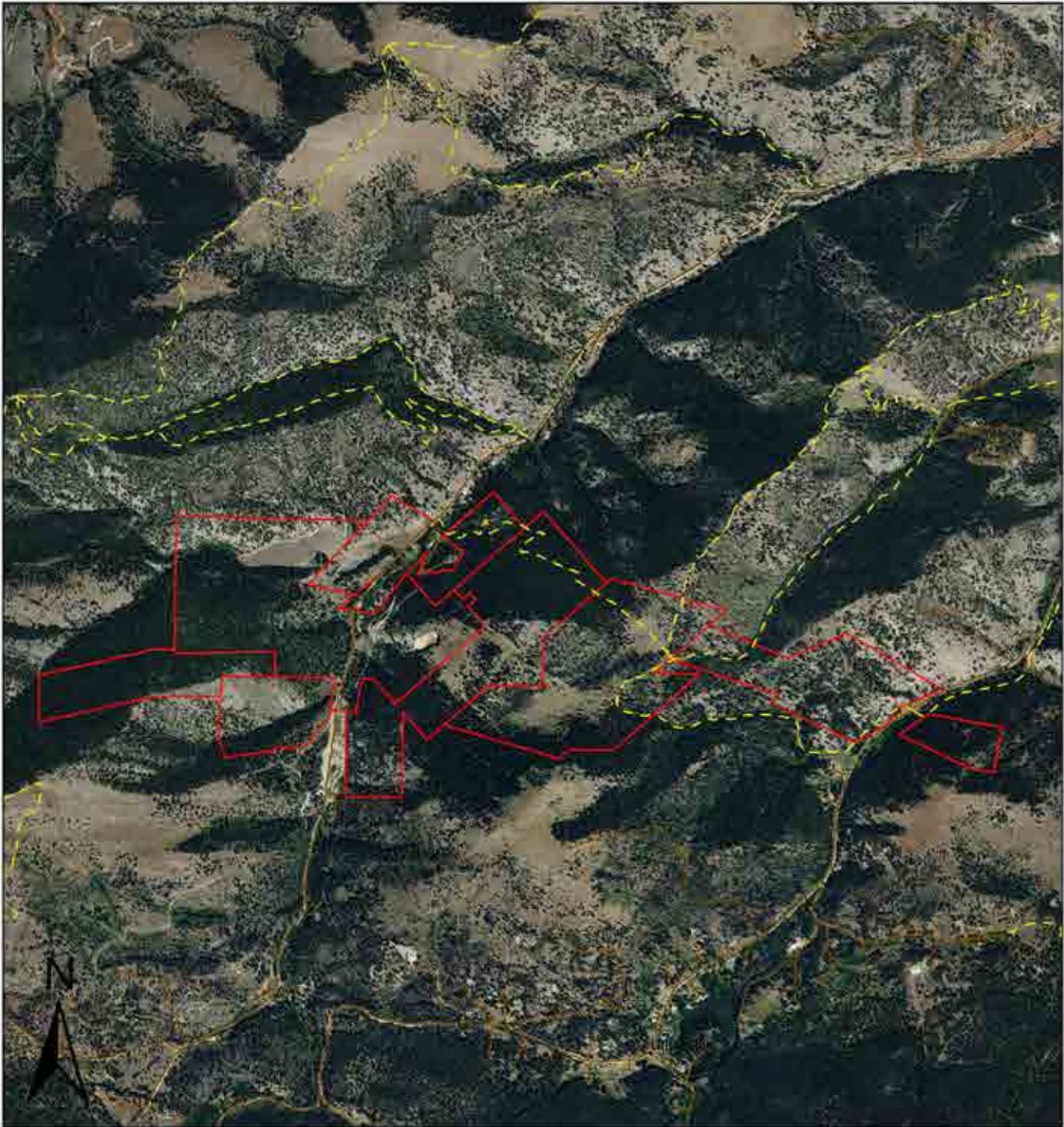
### 8. Valley Property H

0 0.17 0.35  
Miles

365 Acres

Wildlife: deer, some  
birds

Access: hiking, biking



Trail\_Map\_2015\_Trails  
LewClark Roadways

\*Surrounded by  
National Forest  
(USFS)

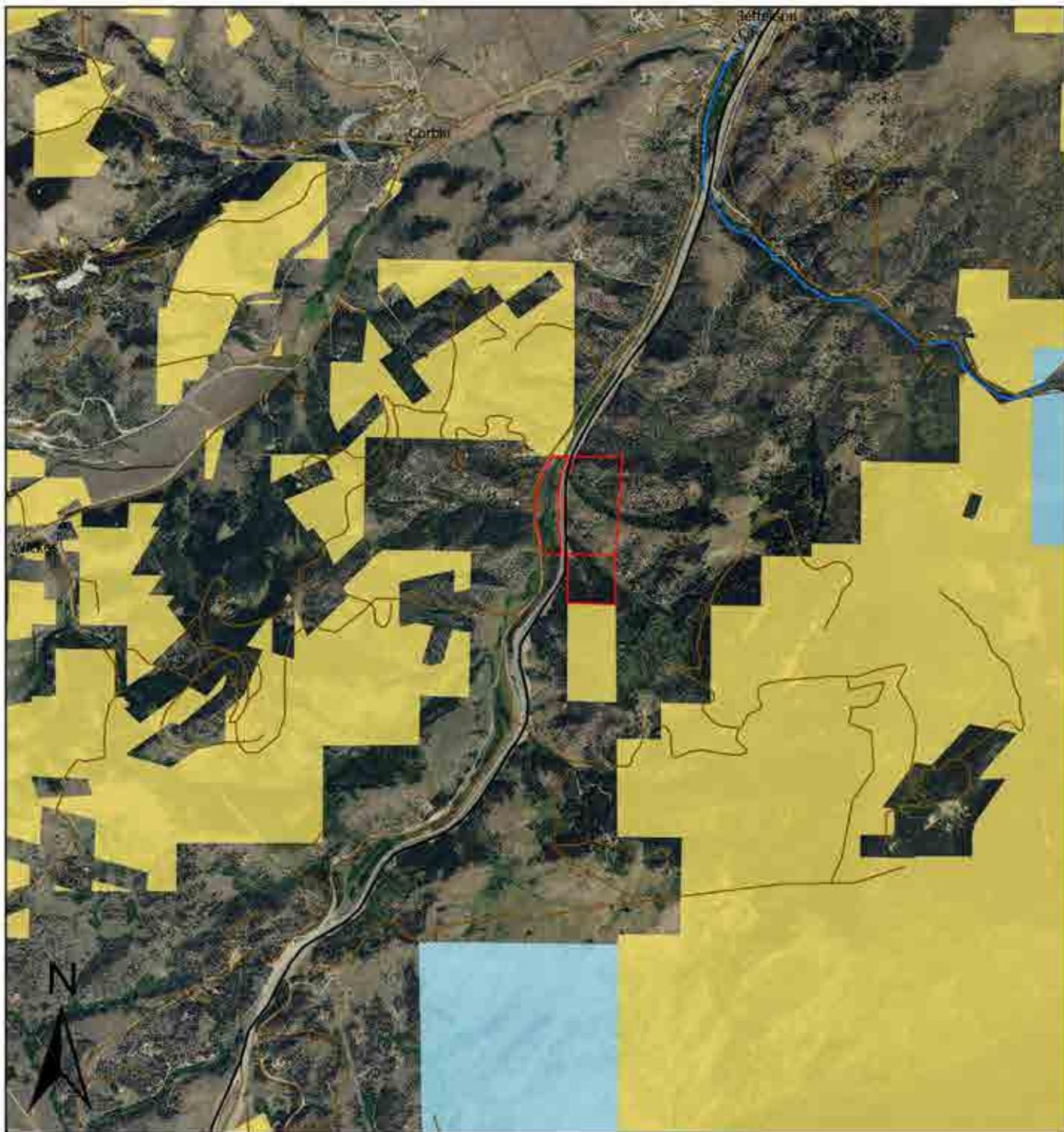
### 9. Forest Property I

0 0.2 0.4  
Miles

468 Acres

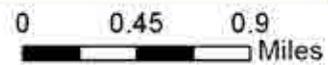
Wildlife: deer, elk,  
bear

Access: hiking, biking



- Roads - Jefferson
- MajorStreams\_PPLTRegion
- Bureau of Land Management
- US Forest Service
- Montana State Trust Lands
- Local Government

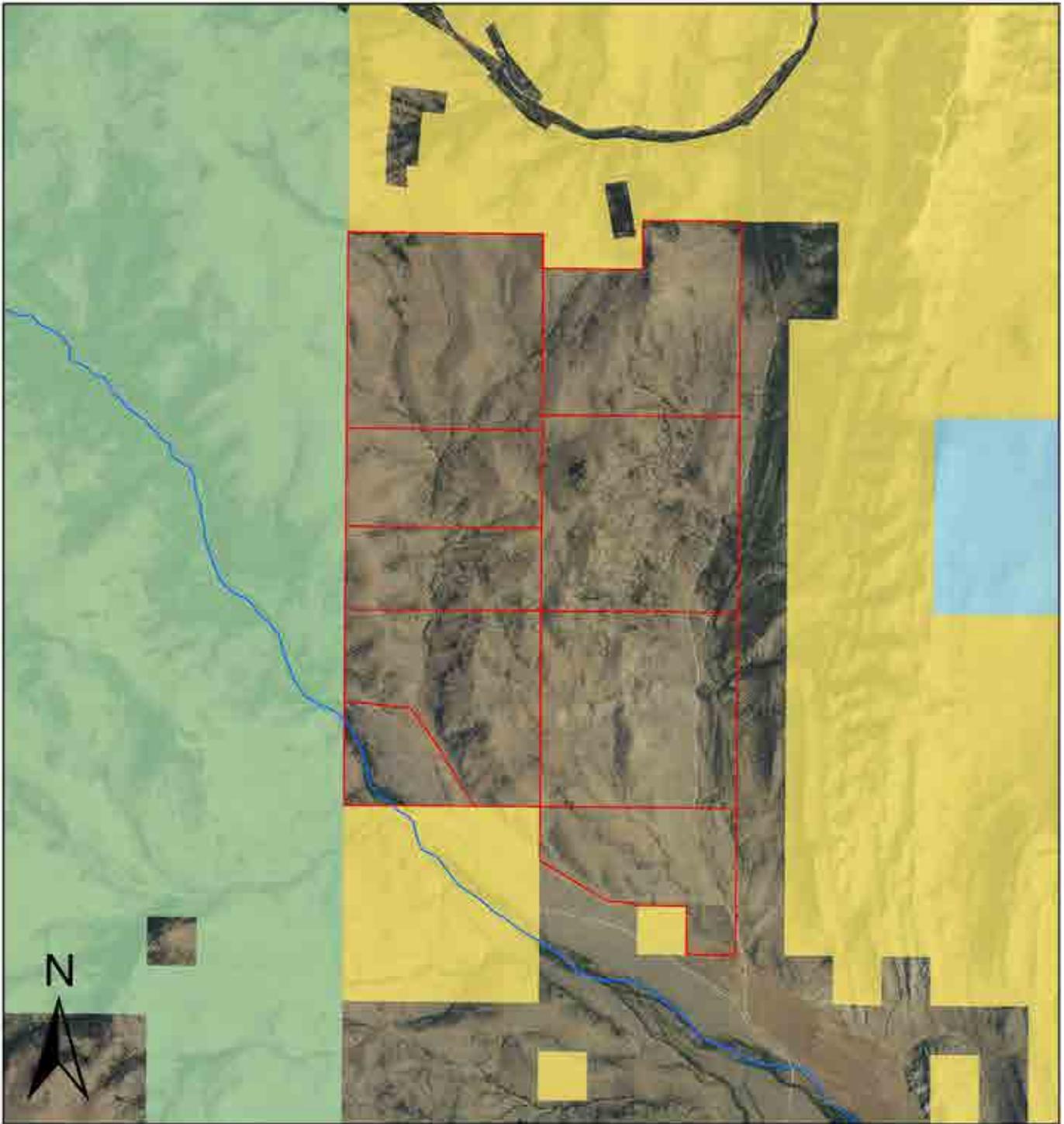
### 10. Valley Property J



157 Acres

Wildlife: deer, elk, bear, lynx, bobcat, turkey

Access: limited seasonal hunting



- MajorStreams\_PPLTRegion
- Bureau of Land Management
- US Forest Service
- Montana State Trust Lands

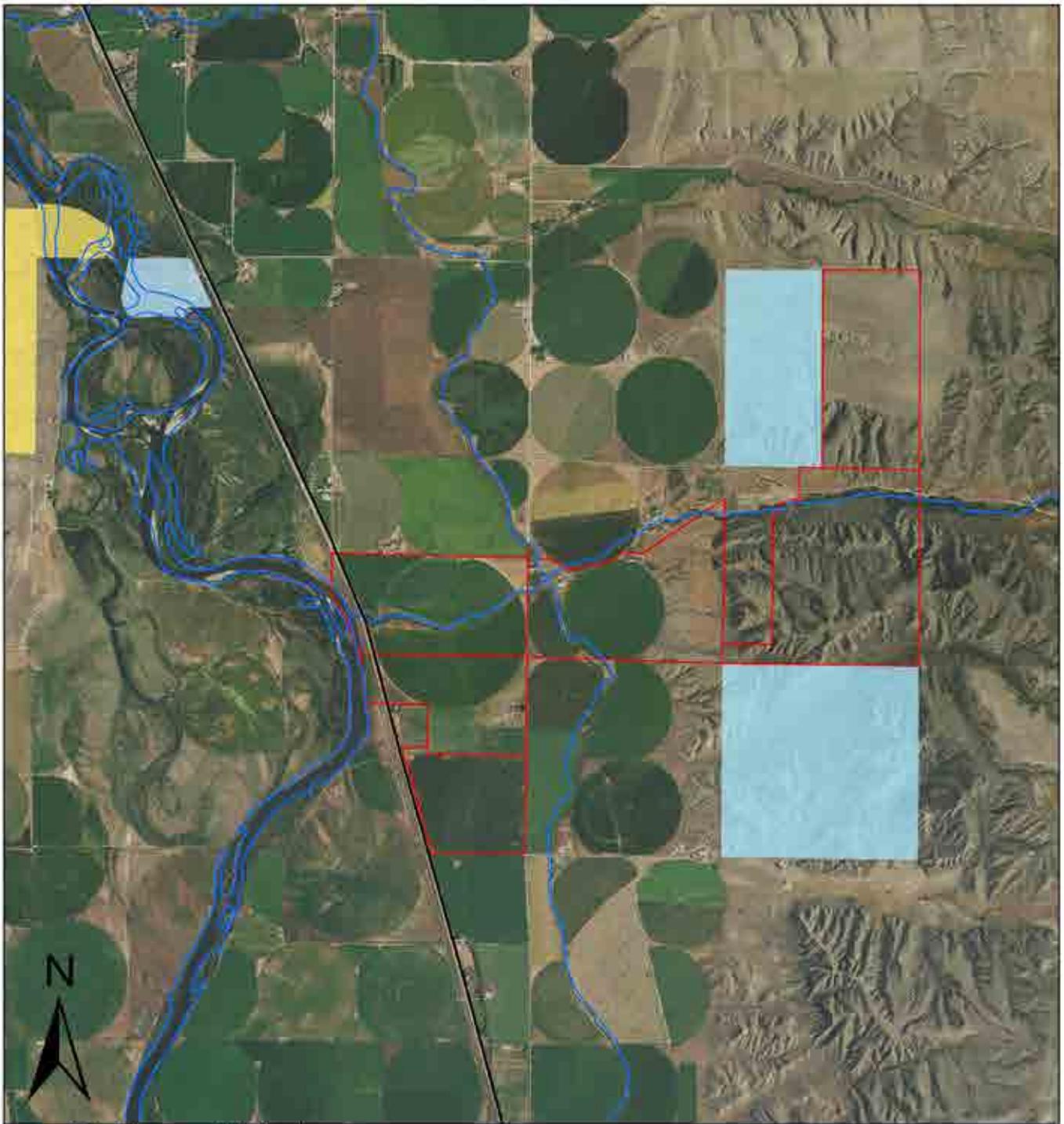
### 11. Forest Property K



4,046 Acres

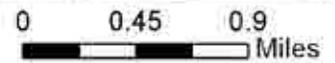
Wildlife: deer, elk,  
bear, bobcat, lynx,  
turkey

Access: no access



- MajorStreams\_PPLTRRegion
- Bureau of Land Management
- State of Montana Misc.
- Montana State Trust Lands

### 12. Ranch L



1,884 Acres

Wildlife: deer, elk,  
trout, pronghorn

Access: limited  
seasonal hunting  
access

**HAPPY.**

**PRICKLY PEAR LAND TRUST HELENA MT**

**TRAILS.**

[PRICKLYPEARLT.ORG](http://PRICKLYPEARLT.ORG)