

## Pico Acquisition Summary

The goal for this project is for the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources (UDWR) to acquire, in fee title, 1,600 privately owned acres of high altitude mountain shrub and aspen-conifer habitat in northeastern Utah. This acquisition will protect habitat for Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep, mule deer, Rocky Mountain elk, moose, pronghorn, black bear, cougar, and other wildlife by preventing subdivision or other development of the property while simultaneously connecting the property to approximately 7,200 acres of surrounding public lands owned by the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA). Additionally, two miles along the southern border of the SITLA property borders extensive public lands owned by the United States Forest Service (USFS). This land purchase will enable the landowners to gift their family with cash inheritance while simultaneously protecting the wildlife value of the property and opening up almost 8,800 contiguous acres of state-owned and publicly accessible lands and ensuring that the property remains valuable wildlife habitat.

This 1,600-acre property is located in Daggett County, Utah, close to the Utah/Wyoming border, approximately 8 miles west of the town of Manila in northeastern Utah. The property would connect to approximately 7,200 acres of SITLA-owned public property, which also abuts a large expanse of public property owned by USFS, creating a continuous flow of nearly 2,600,000 contiguous acres of public lands with multiple access points. The additional public access from this acquisition would better distribute hunters, reduce crowding, and improve overall public safety for hunting and recreating. Additionally, this purchase would add to the existing contiguity of over 2.5 million acres of connected wildlife habitat, promoting ease of migration, genetic diversity, and distribution of wildlife species and populations.

This property provides crucial summer range for big game species, namely mule deer and Rocky Mountain elk. Several hundred head of elk have been spotted on the property during helicopter surveys, and the property has potential to be year-round elk habitat during years with mild winters. Moose and pronghorn have also been seen regularly on the property, in addition to black bear and cougar. The southern portion of the property is shown to be occupied habitat for Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep, according to UDWR Wildlife Tracker data. Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep are found in the northern and eastern parts of the state, preferring open habitat types characterized by rugged terrain with adjacent steep rocky areas. With its high altitude ridges and valleys of varying topography, this property provides excellent sheep habitat. Although currently considered a species of least concern, at the turn of the century the species was near extinction and aggressive transplant efforts were made to reestablish the population. UDWR estimates only ~1,500 sheep in Utah at this time and they are still absent from much of their historic range in the state. Opportunities to purchase property within Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep habitat are rare in Utah. Acquiring this property would preserve important Utah habitat occupied by these sheep within the North Slope/Bare Top Mountain Unit, and aid in efforts to further increase and stabilize the population.

Bighorn sheep are hunted in Utah and are managed as a once-in-a-lifetime species by subspecies, in ordinance with both the *Utah Bighorn Sheep Management Plan* and the *Utah Wildlife Action Plan (WAP)* (2015-2025). Other big game and upland game species on the property will also be managed according to the WAP, as well as the *Utah Mule Deer Management Plan*, the *Utah Elk Management Plan*, the *Utah Moose Management Plan*, the *Utah Pronghorn Management Plan* and the *Utah Upland Game Management Plan*.

The property was historically grazed by sheep from the 1930s until the current landowner purchased the property in the late 1970s. Since that time, the property has been minimally grazed by cattle, with only 80 cow/calf pairs using the property per year. Because of this minimal grazing, the property does not have habitat damage from overgrazing that some other properties in the area have been susceptible to. UDWR is considering either continuing this minimal grazing approach, working towards a phase-out approach to grazing, or discontinuing grazing altogether on the property once acquired. Domestic sheep grazing in Bighorn sheep habitat is concerning due to the risk of spreading respiratory diseases from domestic sheep to Bighorn sheep. Therefore, only cattle grazing would be allowed on the property after this acquisition and any continued grazing would be managed in a way that would best benefit the property's wildlife and wildlife habitat. If this piece of property were to be purchased by another individual or entity that chose to graze domestic sheep, the UDWR would not be able to control this disease risk and many Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep may be impacted by disease.

The property has well-established aspen stands and mature Douglas fir, and provides occupied habitat of outstanding quality for every big game species in Utah with the exception of bison. As such, it is a rarity in the area and would be a great addition to UDWR ownership, especially with few UDWR-owned Wildlife Management Areas along the north slope of the range. UDWR has a demonstrated record of protecting habitat for a wide variety of wildlife and currently owns and manages over 600,000 acres across Utah. UDWR will consider this property acquisition a success if the property is purchased, resulting in protection of wildlife habitat and populations as well as increased access and recreational opportunities for the public.

The potential partners in this acquisition include Wild Sheep Foundation, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and Wildlife Conservation Foundation. The total appraised value of this property is \$4,700,000; however, UDWR and the landowner have agreed to a \$3,500,000 purchase price, with the landowner generously donating the remaining \$1,200,000 value. UDWR is working to secure funding from a combination of state, federal and donated contributions from interested sportsmen's groups for this acquisition.

In order to acquire this 1,600-acre property, the Division of Wildlife Resources will follow a work plan and timeline consistent with the goals of the project. The landowner fully supports the vision and conservation efforts for the property. In 2023 UDWR formalized a purchase agreement, acquired a formal appraisal, and started relevant title work. In 2024 UDWR will secure funding, complete title work, and close on the acquisition. Funding should be secured in mid-2024 and UDWR plans to close on the project by January 2025. The property will be closed with two separate payments; half of the purchase price paid in July of 2024 and the remainder of the purchase price paid in January 2025.