

CONSERVATION PLANNING ALONG MONTANA'S FRONT RANGE: ARE WE CONSERVING THE RIGHT ECOSYSTEM CONDITIONS?

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Conservation planning has at least two important levels that should be addressed if conservation objectives are to be met. The first level is ensuring that lands remain in uses capable of meeting the conservation objectives through purchases, easements, or other protection tools. The second level addresses if the existing conditions are appropriate to support the conservation objectives, and if not, what changes are needed. Montana's Front Range is recognized for its high conservation value and has seen considerable effort to protect these lands from development through easements. EMRI has been working with cooperating ranchers to assess the existing ecosystem conditions in a delineated planning area along the Front Range, and to compare these conditions to an historical reference. We developed a description of historical grass/shrub and riparian/wetland ecosystems in the area. We have conducted field sampling of vegetation for the past two summers to compare to the historical reference. The Front Range supports a very high diversity of plant species and is a critical area for many wildlife species. Preliminary results reveal that non-agricultural grass and shrub ecosystems are in good condition at the ecosystem level, but the riparian ecosystems have very high levels of exotic species. Management that returns fire to the grassland ecosystems and that reduces the levels of exotics in riparian areas is recommended.