

**WILDLIFE HABITAT OVERLAY AND LANDSCAPE
MANAGEMENT ASSESSMENT
RIVER RIM RANCH DIVISION II PUD/MASTER PLAN
TETON COUNTY, IDAHO**



Prepared For

Big Sky Western Bank

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B i o t a



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April 19, 2013

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INTRODUCTION

A PUD Master Plan Amendment application has been submitted to Teton County, Idaho by the River Rim development team. The amendment application effects the 6 phases associated with Division II of the River Rim PUD. Division I of the River Rim PUD was completed in 2006, and revisions to the PUD considered herein do not have any bearing on Division I development. Division II of the River Rim PUD, undertaken in 2006, includes approximately 4,480 acres with up to 578 residential units in 6 development phases.

Teton County Code Title 9, Subdivision Regulations, defines the regulatory pathway by which PUD amendments to recorded subdivisions are processed. It is within this regulatory framework and specifics [outlined in Title 9-Chapter 7 (as amended), Vacations, Dedications and Boundary Adjustments] that the amended application of the approved Master Plan for River Rim, Division II is being reviewed.

The purpose and intent of Chapter 7, stated herein in abbreviated form, is to provide an efficient procedure for reviewing changes; to ensure revised development plans comply with all applicable regulations; to reduce the intrusion of development into sensitive natural areas of the county; and to reduce governmental costs associated with scattered development by expediting changes to recorded plats that reduce the number of vacant platted lots in the county. With this intent, Biota Research and Consulting, Inc. was requested by the applicant to provide supplemental information to the River Rim PUD Master Plan amendment application in order to meet the definitions and requirements of Chapter 7.

Given that the 2006 PUD Master Plan was approved prior to the institution of Wildlife Habitat Overlay Regulations there are components of this amendment application that require additional information to address the purpose and intent of Title 9-Chapter 7. The applicants met with Angie Rutherford, the Teton County Planning Administrator, and representatives of Biota on April 5, 2013 to determine the scope of supplemental information and analysis to be provided by qualified consulting wildlife professionals. The following submittal addresses natural resource impacts associated with Division II Phase VI, the South Canyon Area, as well as the efficacy of the Landscape Management Plan in the vicinity of Division II Phase I, the West Rim Area.

BACKGROUND

Per guidance provided by Title 9-Chapter 7, evaluations of development plan amendments are based on the interpretation of the scale of development modification, and the associated increase or decrease of impacts. Given that the proposed amendment will impact the size and layout of 6 phases of the River Rim Division II PUD Master Plan, it is recognized that the amendment represents substantial changes to the approved Master Plan. An administrative decision was made on April 5, 2013 by the Planning Administrator to accept the application for amendment to the Division II Master Plan as “Substantial

Changes–Decreased Scale and Impact” pending the results generated by qualified wildlife professionals from review of the modifications to the development footprint in the South Canyon Area.

The overall submittal reflects a reduction in the number of units, lots, and parcels for River Rim Division II as a whole because the applicant has removed entitlements to 150 residential units. This reduction also results in a 560-acre increase of dedicated, predominantly agricultural open space. However, the redistribution of development rights in the amended plan requires closer scrutiny within the South Canyon Area where it is unclear if the standards of a “decreased scale or impact” are met. This is primarily due to uncertainty as to whether or not the amended development plan encroaches further into Wildlife Habitat Overlays as defined in Title 8 or Title 9.

To consider the amended River Rim Master Plan amendments as Substantial Changes with Decreased Scale and Impact, the re-arrangement or relocation of lots or parcels shall not encroach further into natural resource areas or Overlay areas as defined in Title 8 or Title 9 (Title 9, Chapter 7, Section 2-b-ii). This Wildlife Habitat Assessment has been requested to determine whether or not the amended PUD encroaches into natural resource or mapped Overlay areas. If the proposed PUD Amendment represents a substantial change with decreased scale and impact, the criteria for approval would only require submittal of maps and analyses included with the original application and approval, and specifically that no additional studies or analyses would be required. This Wildlife Habitat Overlay Assessment is not accompanied by a comprehensive Natural Resource Assessment, but is an application of the Title 9 Wildlife Habitat Assessment methodologies completed to inform the location and regulatory requirements associated with the Wildlife Habitat Overlay within the study area.

LOCATION AND PHYSIOGRAPHY

The property is located west of Teton in Teton County, Idaho (Appendix 1-Attachments 1 and 2), situated on the northwest rim of Teton Basin, a mountain valley drained by the Teton River. The basin includes large areas of wetlands, marshes, sloughs, riparian corridors, shrublands, and grazed and cultivated farmlands, which provide habitat to a variety of common and rare plants and animals. Elevations of the project area range approximately from 5,900 to 6,425 feet. Surface hydrological features present within the project area and its vicinity consist of the Teton River and Milk Creek, an ephemeral stream that transports flows from winter snowmelt and stormwater runoff from the foothills of the Big Hole Mountains.

A large portion of the north slopes of the Big Hole Mountains in the vicinity of the project area has been maintained in some level of agricultural development for generations. A characteristically short growing season, irrigation limitations, and topographic constraints have limited most agricultural activities to dryland farming, principally spring wheat and spring barley. Where feasible, irrigated crops have been developed and a small percentage of the landscape is maintained as rangeland for livestock.

The Teton River riparian corridor and the surrounding foothills and mountains provide year-round habitat to elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose. Several big game migration routes have been identified by the Teton Regional Land Trust (TRLT) through the process of defining the Teton County Wildlife Habitat Overlays in proximity to the project area and document important movement areas in Teton Valley, notably through the Badger and Bitch Creek habitat complexes. Winter range and movement corridors are considered both locally and regionally important. The Teton River is important habitat for Yellowstone cutthroat trout, and the upper watershed remains an important stronghold for this species in the region.

WILDLIFE HABITAT OVERLAY ASSESSMENT

INDICATOR HABITAT VEGETATIVE COMMUNITIES

Wildlife habitat indicator vegetation and evidence of wildlife use within the project area were documented during site visit on April 12, 2013. A total of 86 acres of native vegetative covertypes that constitute wildlife habitat [as defined in Merigliano (2009)] were documented and mapped within the South Canyon Area (Appendix 1-Attachment 3). The remaining 602 acres (87%) of the South Canyon Area is in intensive agricultural production. The vast majority of this landscape, including all of the revised Division II development that is coincident with the mapped Wildlife Habitat Overlay (about 6 acres), is under either center pivot or hand-line irrigation. Annual rotations of barley and potatoes are grown in the area and discing occurs annually after harvest, thereby effectively removing any palatable standing forage from this landscape. No measureable impacts to native vegetation associated with the Wildlife Habitat Overlay will result from the amended PUD layout. Development has been removed and density has been reduced in the two areas of existing approved development closest to stands of native vegetation. This involves the reduction of high-density cluster of cabin lots along the Teton River rim, and the removal of a 3.75-acre residential lot closest to Division I. The amended PUD master plan will not result in destruction or alteration of indicator habitat vegetative communities as defined in the county code.



Figure 1. Representative landscape of River Rim Division II, South Canyon Area.

EVIDENCE OF INDICATOR SPECIES

As previously stated, the Wildlife Habitat Overlay analysis is focused on the South Canyon Area where an incremental increase in development area and number of lots has occurred within the Big Game and Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse components of the Wildlife Habitat Overlay. Titles 8 and 9 define elk

and mule deer as indicator species and mountain shrublands as indicator habitat within the Big Game Overlay, and sagebrush-steppe and mountain shrublands are defined as indicator habitat within the Columbian Sharp-Tailed Grouse Overlay. Site investigations included an evaluation of available vegetative communities, indicator habitat, evidence of wildlife (indicator species) utilization within the project area, and the spatial orientation of the proposed amended development (Appendix 1-Attachment 4).

Mule Deer – The principle species of concern with regards to evidence of occupancy within the broader landscape in the vicinity of River Rim Ranch is mule deer. The most notable declines in distinct Idaho mule deer populations have been in the southeastern portion of the state (IDFG 2008). The downstream portion of the Teton River Canyon, from Idaho State Highway 33 at Harrop’s Bridge north sustains between 2,000 and 3,000 mule deer annually. Population decreases have been attributed to diminishing habitat, in part due to development. The Teton River Canyon mule deer population is comprised about equally of local animals and winter migrants traveling from Wyoming, where winter habitat is limited because of high elevation and snow depth (Hurley and Miyasaki 2004). Mule deer fawning and summer ranges are located primarily on the mountain slopes surrounding these drainages and do not limit mule deer populations. In contrast, mule deer winter range represents areas where deer find food and cover during the most inclement winter weather conditions and are essential to the long-term survival of populations.



Figure 2. Representative Big Game habitat within River Rim Division I.

The south facing aspects of the rim country along the south boundary of Division I represents mule deer winter range, as well as a movement corridor. Mule deer were observed during recent visits to the project area along the rim, and evidence of bedding and foraging was observed throughout the steep

slopes where the sagebrush tall shrub vegetative community type is present. This community type also persists along the Teton River canyon within the South Canyon Area. Proposed development incorporates a wildlife corridor that will be a minimum of 800 feet at the very narrowest point following the removal of an approved residential lot, and more commonly exceeds 1,000 feet in width. Proposed development within the Big Game Wildlife Habitat Overlay is not expected to adversely impact indicator habitat or preclude the movement of mule deer through this landscape.

Elk – The majority of elk in Teton Basin spend the spring, summer, and fall months in Wyoming and Yellowstone National Park, although the Big Hole Mountains also support a robust elk population. In the 1980's, approximately 100 elk wintered along and adjacent to the Teton River and its tributaries, and some individuals continue to be seen in this same area. After large increases in elk populations through the 1990s, the Teton Basin population split into 2 herds. As in most areas, elk populations in Teton Basin are limited due to a lack of suitable, undisturbed winter range (TRLT 2006). The Teton Zone herd consists of around 500 individuals and occupies the northern portion of Teton County and southern portions of Fremont County. The Palisades Zone, which covers the Big Holes and Snake River Mountains, has an estimated population of about 700 animals. Winter range in the area is limited due to high elevations, deep snow levels, and low temperatures.

Important big game habitat mapped by Idaho Fish and Game and the Teton Regional Land Trust is depicted to the west of the project area and encompasses the north and northeast slope of the Big Hole Mountains; a small movement corridor connects this habitat with the Teton River. According to Idaho Fish and Game, an important big game movement corridor originates from the “general Rammell Hollow area” in the vicinity of the project area. This corridor is occasionally used by elk moving between the Big Hole Mountains and the Teton River lowlands and is important at an ecosystem level.

The intensively farmed land within the South Canyon area lacks any remnant standing vegetation that might attract elk, and does not represent foraging habitat or winter range. The southern boundary of Division I located north of the South Canyon Area is suitable transitional habitat, but does not represent important elk winter range or a heavily used migration corridor. No evidence of elk presence (such as tracks, pellet groups, bedding sites, or direct observations) was observed within the South Canyon Area of Division II. Although elk are common west of Highway 33 and along the Teton River, elk are not expected to use the South Canyon Area with any consistency for either wintering or for migrations. The protected movement corridor of 800 to 1,000 feet along the Division I boundary is adequate to allow the movement of big game, including elk, across this landscape. Proposed development within the Big Game Wildlife Habitat Overlay associated with the PUD Amendment will not adversely impact indicator habitat, elk foraging, or the movement of elk through this landscape.

Sharp-tailed Grouse – Idaho Partners in Flight has ranked Columbian sharp-tailed grouse as a high priority conservation concern species (Ritter 2000). However, Idaho Fish and Game has identified southeastern Idaho as a demonstrably secure area and estimate the population at approximately 40,000 birds. Estimated annual harvest in the state of Idaho in recent years is between 10,000-15,000 birds (Bart 2000). Breeding habitat consists of bunchgrass-dominated grassland and shrub-bunchgrass rangelands. During winter, sharp-tailed grouse are dependent on montane shrub covertypes, especially where serviceberry is a significant component of the shrub stratum. Serviceberry is the primary food source for sharp-tailed grouse from late fall through early spring (Hoffman and Thomas 2007). In southeastern Idaho, the population is highly dependent on retired and rehabilitated grasslands in the Natural Resource Conservation Service-Conservation Reserve Program during the breeding season. The western benchlands of Teton Basin and the north escarpment of the Big Hole Mountains have a relatively large

acreage enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program, in addition to wintering habitat protected on the Caribou-Targhee National Forest. The combination of Conservation Reserve Program land and cropland has proven beneficial to breeding grouse.

The northeast corner of the South Canyon Area falls within mapped sharp-tailed grouse habitat overlay associated with the Teton River riparian corridor. Within this zone, mountain shrub, riparian and aspen vegetative communities provide food and cover for grouse. Sharp-tailed grouse will also use barley cropland along the periphery of the native shrub habitat. Some previously approved development is present within mapped sharp-tailed grouse habitat but no new development is proposed within the Columbian Sharp-tailed Grouse Wildlife Habitat Overlay. Development density has, in fact, been reduced within mapped sharp-tailed grouse habitat located within the South Canyon Area as a result of the high-density cabin area being converted into 10 residential lots. Human disturbance and associated wildlife considerations will be reduced based on the amendment to the PUD master plan.

The proposed additional 6 acres of impact resulting from the creation of 9 new lots in the Division II development expansion in the South Canyon Area is located outside of the mapped sharp-tailed grouse habitat (Appendix 1-Attachment 4). This additional development will not impact any native vegetation, indicator habitat, or observed sharp-tailed grouse utilization areas. Overall, the PUD Master Plan Amendment would likely have a net positive impact on sharp-tailed grouse through reduction of development density and associated human disturbance proximate to the Teton River canyon sharp-tailed grouse habitat.

LANDSCAPE MANAGEMENT PLAN REVIEW

The criteria for approval of an amended PUD also includes a Landscape Management Plan to incorporate changes to short-term objectives within the Golf Course tract. The restructuring of the River Rim PUD Master Plan includes the postponement of golf course development on West River Rim Ranch. The Teton County Planning Administrator requested that the Landscape Management Plan covering the golf course area be reviewed by a qualified wildlife professional with a focus on the details relevant to the ecological impacts of golf course reclamation (Appendix 2). The Landscape Management Plan is presently in “Concept” form and will track the PUD Master Plan amendment process, for development into a final submittal.

The landscape throughout the 270-acre Tract J of Phase I (golf course area) received intensive investment in the form of mass excavation and shaping, irrigation, roads and contouring of the 18-hole golf course. A 6-acre pond has been excavated within the golf course area and approximately 191,000 cubic yards of topsoil is stockpiled on site for use during future development of fairways and greens. This topsoil is a resource available to support a reclamation plan that incorporates native vegetation and agricultural uses.

Golf Course Reclamation – The topographic grading of the golf course is complete but the golf course remains unfinished. For this reason, a reclamation plan has been developed that maintains the integrity of the golf course terrain, while creating a feasible working landscape to sustain the graded terrain without further degradation. The following breakdown represents the conceptual landscape plan as illustrated in Appendix 2.

Agricultural Areas (40%, 114 acres)

Native Grass/Shrub Areas (50%, 136.5 acres)

Lined Ponds

- Existing Pond (7 acres)
- 2 South End Ponds (3 acres)
- 3 North End Ponds (7 acres)

Trail System (8' wide)

- Internal Trails based on cart path alignment (13,800 lineal feet)
- Connector Trails (4,100 lineal feet)

Agricultural/Native Grassland Mosaic – The 270-acre golf course interim open space area integrates a return to the agricultural context from which the golf course was originally developed, along with additional amenities for River Rim residents. The long-term concept is to maintain 50% of the open space area in native grasses, and allow for establishment of the native shrub community, similar to the processes observed on neighboring CRP fallow croplands. The native grass/shrub community is a landscape detail that is borrowed from the final landscape design of the golf course. Native cover will be maintained throughout the golf course, with the ultimate goal of cutting tees, greens and bunkers out of the native grass/shrub areas, while preserving the outlying native plant communities in perpetuity. For this reason a native grass seed mix has already been developed by a specialist, derived from the seed-basis of native plants in proximity to the River Rim PUD project area (Table 1).

Table 1. Native grass seed mix for the River Rim Division II, Phase I West Rim Area.

Variety	Percent Stand
Goldar Bluebunch Wheatgrass	35
Joseph Idaho Fescue	20
Sodar Streambank Wheatgrass	15
Magnar Basin Wildrye	10
Prairie Junegrass	10
Sherman Big Bluegrass	5
Sandburg Bluegrass	5

The remaining 40% of the upland area that constitutes fairways, roughs, and golf course perimeter have been earmarked for agricultural uses. The ultimate cultivated crop will be determined by the lessee; however, either dryland wheat or barley can be anticipated. Other portions of River Rim Open Space are currently managed in this way, with lessees maintaining open space as developed agricultural plots yielding crops. From the standpoint of noxious weed eradication, either application will provide a means to curb the invasive species that have taken hold in areas of the golf course. The best long-term control technique for reducing exotic plant invasions is to establish diverse and continuous native vegetative cover. However, spot herbicide spraying of weeds will likely be necessary for several years prior to establishment of native plant communities. A planted cover crop, either native or grain, with concurrent applied weed control in the form of target spraying (which is ongoing throughout River Rim at present) uses competition from preferred species to control expansion of invasive plants. All details with regards to open space management, weed treatment, and agricultural leasing are handled on site by the River Rim Ranch property manager, Sean Cracraft.

Developed Amenities – The golf course area will be designed such that grading for the golf course pathways can be preserved as an interior trail system. A total of 6 excavated ponds will be lined and completed and these water features will be developed for aesthetic purposes, as well as preserving these ponds for potential future inclusion in the golf course plan. All ponds will be designed to county standards so that excavated aquatic features do not pose a risk of entrainment to wildlife in winter.

Wildlife Uses –Restoration of the golf course open space to native grasses integrated with farming plots will inherently enhance suitability for wildlife throughout the golf course area. The proposed open space areas can be expected to be used by a diverse suite of wildlife species, although it is understood that the long-term value of this area will be reduced as residential development of Division II, Phase I progresses. The primary expectations of golf course reclamation, in the short-term, are to preserve the value added areas of the golf course; distribute stockpiled topsoil to support native grasslands, shrubs, and agricultural uses; and develop open space amenities for the use and enjoyment by River Rim residents. A shrub-grassland component to the open space will create a mix of native species including sagebrush, basin wildrye, wheat grasses, bunchgrasses, and pioneering native shrubs; vegetative communities that would greatly benefit a broad suite of native wildlife, specifically ungulates, upland game birds including sharp-tailed grouse, raptors, small mammals and migratory birds.

CONCLUSION

The River Rim Subdivision PUD is being amended per the County Code requirements as set forth in Chapter 7 of Title 9 as revised. Definitions and criteria for review and approval of the amendment bear on determinations made through a Natural Resource Analysis, to the extent that such a study was required for the original PUD approval. Given that River Rim was reviewed and approved prior to development of the Natural Resource Analysis and Wildlife Habitat Overlay regulatory ordinance, a summary of findings for extant Wildlife Habitat indicator vegetation and use by indicator species identified by the Wildlife Habitat Overlay is provided here. These findings are specific to the South Canyon Area of Division II, wherein the amended PUD Master Plan incorporates portions of 9 new lots with a combined 6 acres of new impacts viewed as possible expansion into the WH Overlay mapping. The findings of this study confirm that the WH Overlay mapping is not applicable to the landscape where the amended plan appears to impact the WH Overlay. The site investigation and WH Overlay analysis supports the finding that the proposed amendment represents Substantial Change to the approved Master Plan; however, the changes represent a decrease in scale and impact by the definitions of the Title 9 ordinance, and are consistent with the purpose and intent stated in Chapter 7 of Title 9.

As a component of the River Rim Ranch Division II PUD amendment, a Landscape Management plan has been presented in concept form, as a short-term revision to Open Space usage, where the applicant's objective in the long-term includes development of the approved golf course. The short-term Landscape Management Plan is intended to preserve the investment in infrastructure that exists on site, sustain a productive and ecologically sound Open Space resource complicit with County regulations within Phase I of Division II, and provide an amenity to homeowners through development of a trail system and aesthetic landscape features. The proposal for the 270-acre Tract J incorporates a sound balance of agricultural and native grassland reclamation, and a focused commitment to control of noxious and invasive plant species. As designed, the Landscape Management plan exceeds the County requirements within Title 9 specific design, maintenance, weed control, and protection from adverse impacts to wildlife. The Plan as designed will have inherent benefits to a broad suite of native species including, but not limited to ungulates, raptors, migratory birds, small mammals and upland gamebirds.

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APPENDIX 1 - LIST OF ATTACHMENTS

- 1) Location and topography of the River Rim Ranch property and platted parcels, Teton County, Idaho.
- 2) Aerial photograph depicting the location of the River Rim Ranch property and platted parcels, Teton County, Idaho.
- 3) Aerial photograph depicting the Wildlife Habitat Indicator Vegetative Communities in relation to the combined Wildlife Habitat Overlay within the South Canyon Area, River Rim Division II, Teton County, Idaho.
- 4) Aerial photograph depicting the Wildlife Habitat Overlay mapping in relation to approved and proposed development in the South Canyon Area, River Rim Division II, Teton County, Idaho.

APPENDIX 2 – TRACT J CONCEPT OPEN SPACE INTERIM PLAN

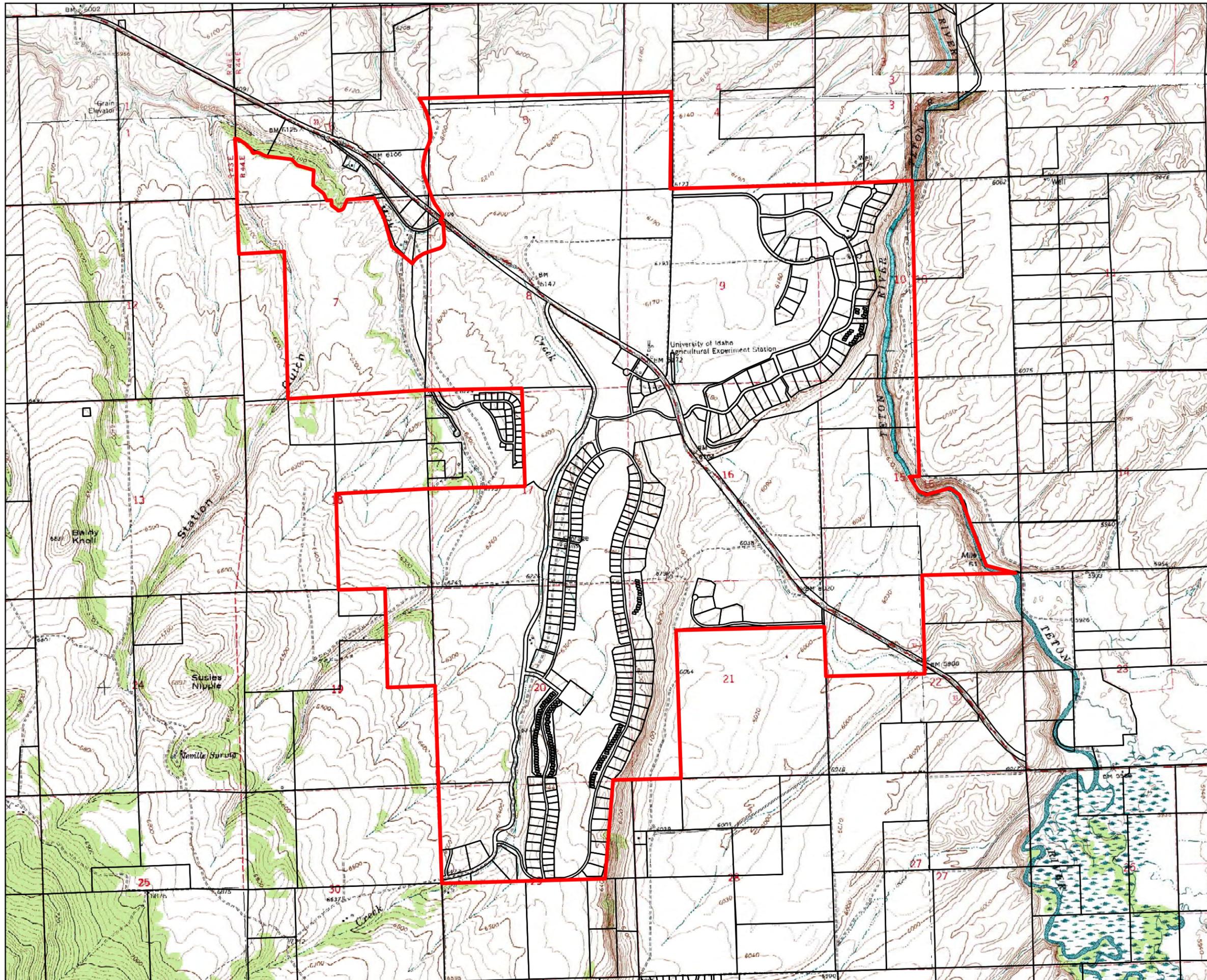
Attachment 1
Location and topography of River Rim Ranch
and platted parcels, Teton County, Idaho.

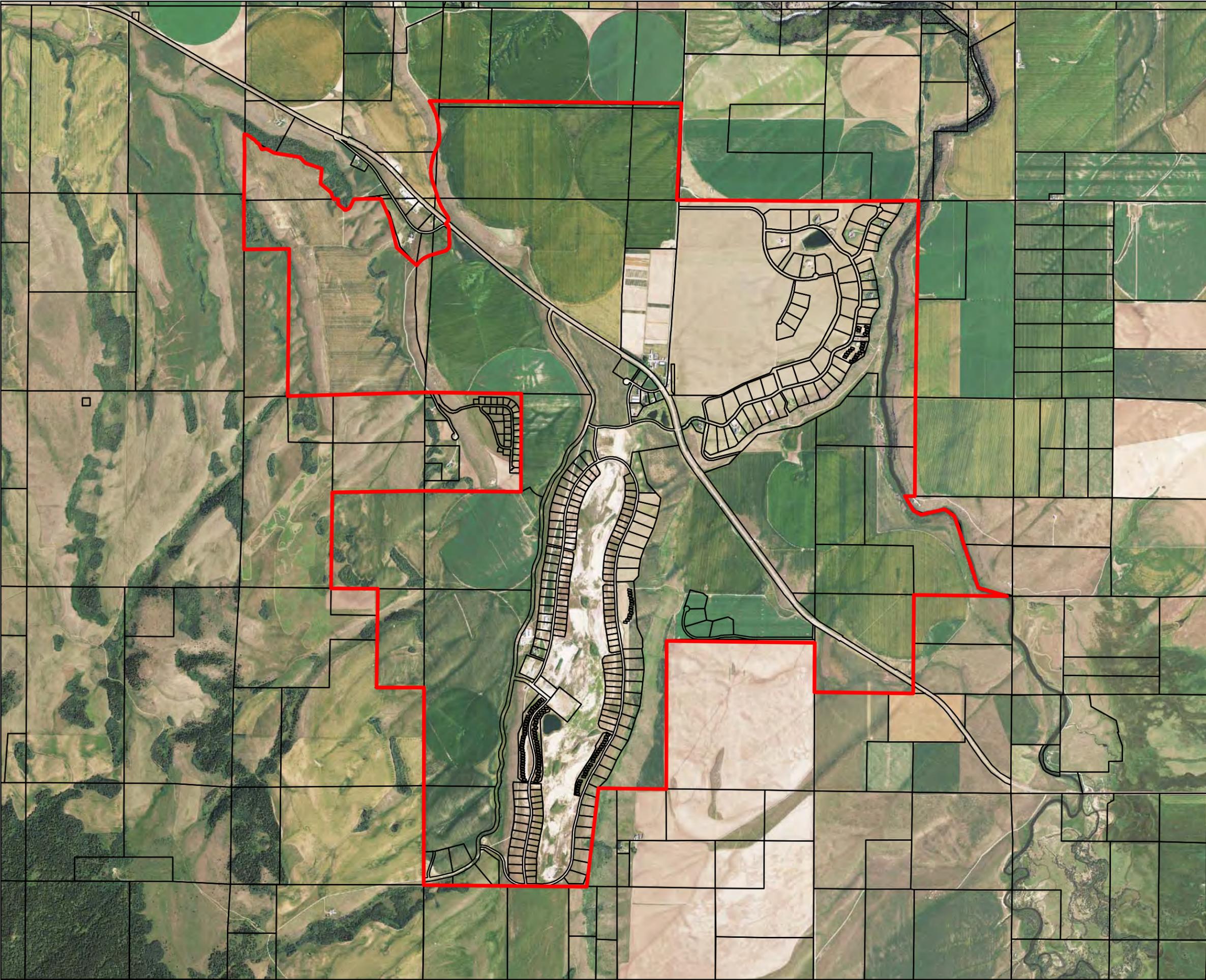
April 19, 2013

Approximate Scale: 1 inch = 2,500 feet

LEGEND

-  Project Area
-  Platted Parcels





Attachment 2
Aerial photograph depicting the location of the
River Rim Ranch property and platted parcels,
Teton County, Idaho.

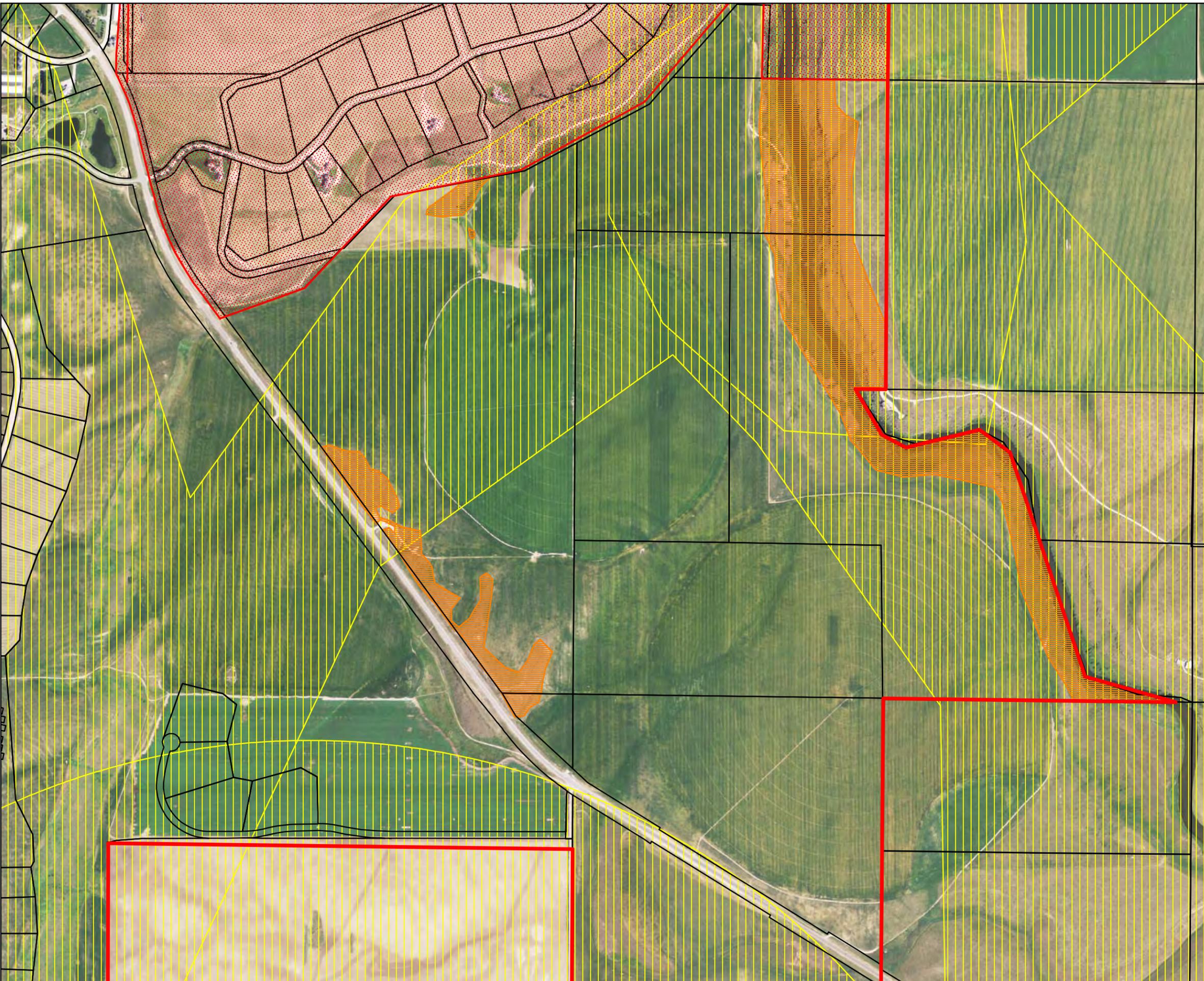
April 19, 2013

Approximate Scale: 1 inch = 2,500 feet

LEGEND

-  Project Area
-  Platted Parcels





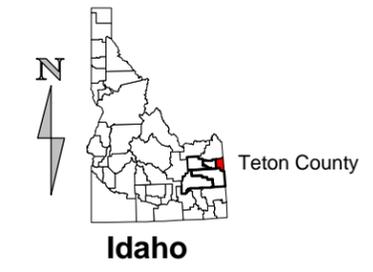
Attachment 3
 Aerial photograph depicting the Wildlife Habitat Indicator Vegetative Communities in relation to the combined Wildlife Habitat Overlay within the South Canyon Area, River Rim Division II, Teton County, Idaho.

April 19, 2013

Approximate Scale: 1 inch = 800 feet

LEGEND

-  River Rim Division II
-  Platted Parcels
-  River Rim Division I
-  Wildlife Habitat Overlay-Combined
-  Wildlife Habitat Indicator Vegetation



Attachment 4
 Aerial photograph depicting the
 Wildlife Habitat Overlay mapping in relation to
 approved and proposed development in the
 South Canyon Area, River Rim Division II,
 Teton County, Idaho.

April 19, 2013

Approximate Scale: 1 inch = 800 feet

LEGEND

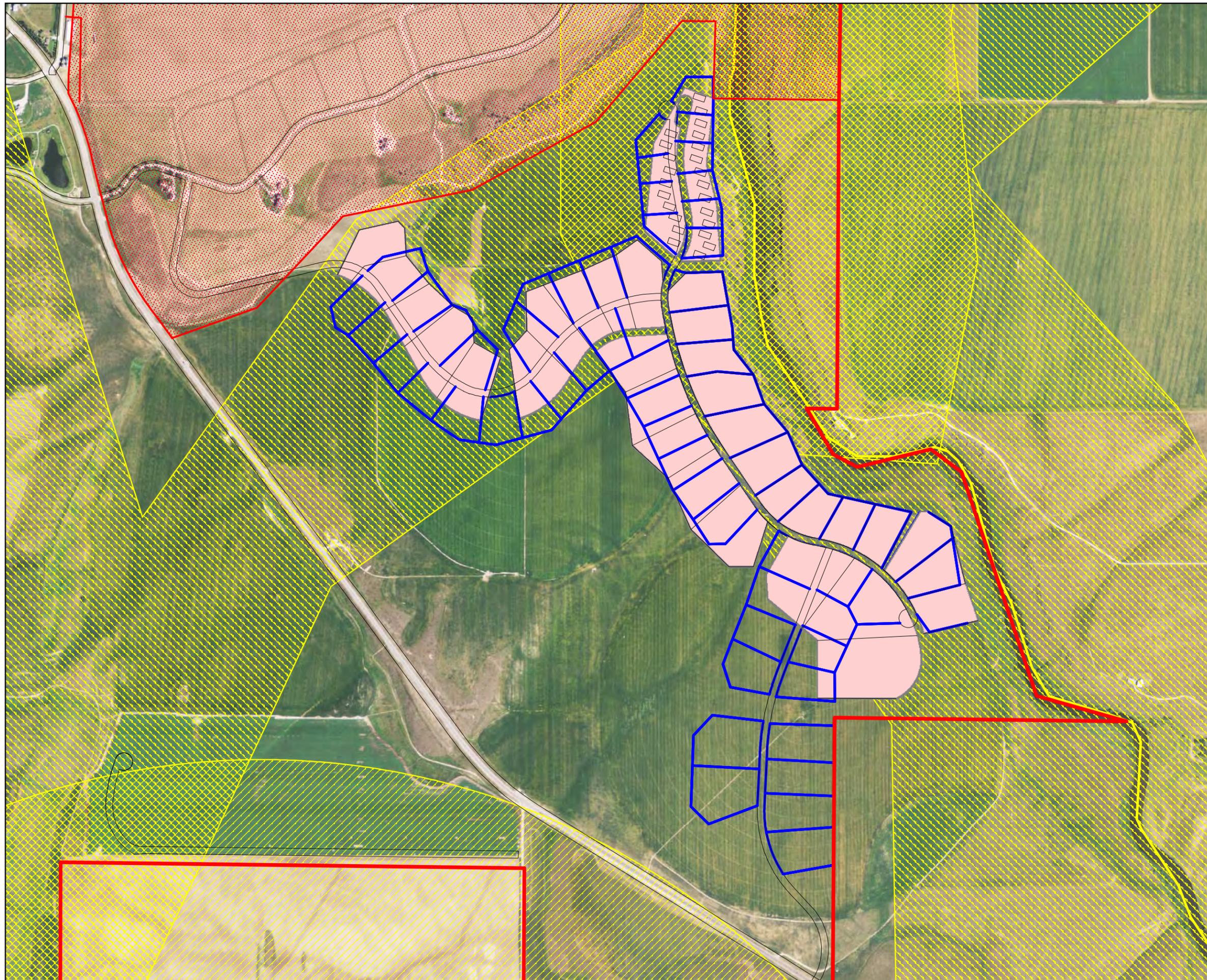
-  River Rim Division II
-  River Rim Division I
-  Approved South Canyon Area Lots
-  Proposed South Canyon Area Lots
-  Big Game Migration Corridors and Seasonal Range
-  Sharp-tailed Grouse Breeding and Wintering Habitat
-  Perennial and Seasonal Trout Habitat

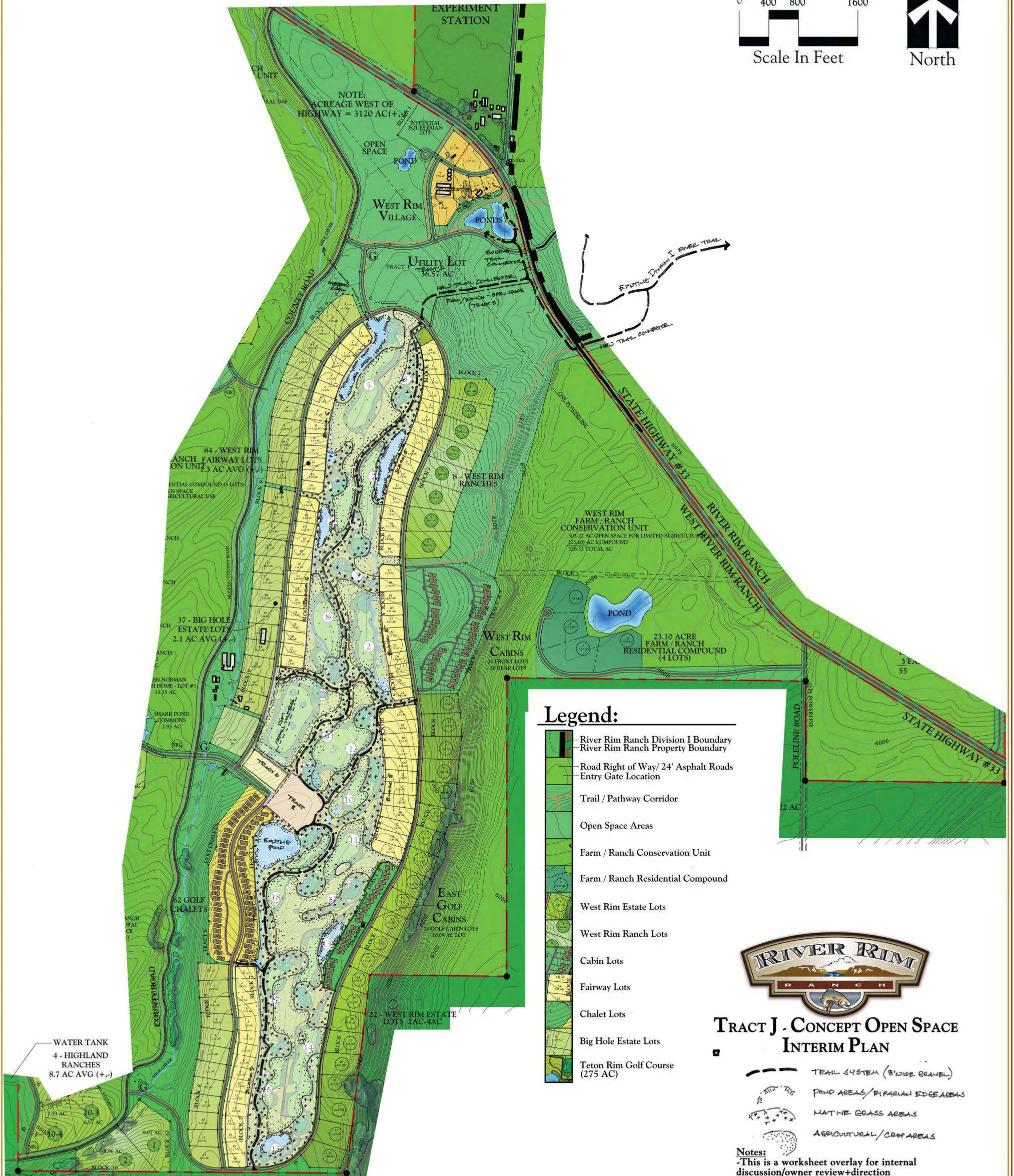
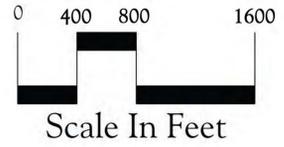


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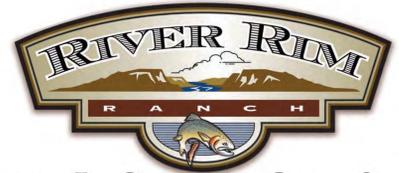


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- Legend:**
- River Rim Ranch Division I Boundary
 - River Rim Ranch Property Boundary
 - Road Right of Way/ 24' Asphalt Roads
 - Entry Gate Location
 - Trail / Pathway Corridor
 - Open Space Areas
 - Farm / Ranch Conservation Unit
 - Farm / Ranch Residential Compound
 - West Rim Estate Lots
 - West Rim Ranch Lots
 - Cabin Lots
 - Fairway Lots
 - Chalet Lots
 - Big Hole Estate Lots
 - Teton Rim Golf Course (275 AC)



TRACT J - CONCEPT OPEN SPACE INTERIM PLAN

- TRAIL SYSTEM (BIODE GRANEL)
- POND AREAS / RIPARIAN EDGE AREAS
- NATIVE GRASS AREAS
- AGRICULTURAL / CROP AREAS

Notes:
 - This is a worksheet overlay for internal discussion/owner review+direction
 - March 21, 2013 - MP

NOTE:
 ACREAGE WEST OF
 HIGHWAY = 3120 AC(+/-)

WATER TANK
 4 - HIGHLAND
 RANCHES
 8.7 AC AVG (+/-)