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### U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE CONSERVATION PROGRAM WINS GOVERNMENT INNOVATIONS AWARD

#### MONTANA-BASED PROGRAM ONE OF TWO FEDERAL INITIATIVES TO WIN \$100K PRIZE

WASHINGTON, DC— For its cooperative approach to conservation on Montana’s Blackfoot watershed, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (USFWS) Grassroots Conservation Program has won an Innovations in American Government Award. The Award, which carries a prize of \$100,000, is sponsored by the Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government and is administered in partnership with the Council for Excellence in Government.

The Blackfoot River Valley of southern Montana provides the landscape described in Norman MacLean’s novella, “A River Runs Through It.” But when director Robert Redford visited the site for filming his 1992 movie of that name, he saw a landscape so ravaged by industry that he was forced to shoot in other parts of the state.

But by then, a local movement was already underway to restore the area’s ecosystem. In 1991, Greg Neudecker, a biologist with the USFWS’s Montana Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program, was invited by Jim Stone, a local rancher, to join informal talks among landowners aimed at restoring the land and preserving a way of life in the watershed. It became official in 1993 when the USFWS and local landowners and environmentalists chartered the Blackfoot Challenge.

The Blackfoot Challenge is one of more than thirty Grass Roots Conservation Programs run by regional offices of the USFWS in collaboration with local stakeholders. Neudecker says that “working with people is just as important as working with wildlife,” when trying to conserve habitat for grizzly bears, gray wolves, bull trout, and hundreds of bird species.

In the Blackfoot watershed, as throughout much of the West, that wildlife habitat is largely in private hands, and 75% of the species in the 1.5 million acre watershed depend on privately held land for their survival. While the federal government owns 53% of the land and the State of Montana owns 7%, the remainder is owned by a timber company, and more than 2,500 farmers, ranchers, and residential owners. Each of the 500 landowners and 160 other partners in this grassroots effort, including environmental groups, has an interest in preserving the health and beauty of the watershed, and ensuring that it can sustain the farming, fishing, timber, and tourism industries that so many Montanans depend upon.

By empowering local landowners, the Grassroots Conservation program has already: restored 38 miles of streams and fisheries, 2,600 acres of wetlands, and 2,600 acres of native grasslands; reduced conflicts between people and grizzly bears by 50% in 2005; and has protected 140,000 acres of private lands as habitat for native plant and animal species. Gowher Rizvi, Director of Harvard’s Ash Institute, said, “This program has made

tremendous, measurable progress towards its goal of creating a sustainable watershed that benefits all the different kinds of communities that depend on it.”

“The real innovation of this program,” said Patricia McGinnis, President and CEO of the Council for Excellence in Government, “is the spirit of cooperation among private land owners and the government. This is an unusual and vital accomplishment and a model for other communities in the American west.” Rancher Jim Stone agrees: “We have built real trust here, and that’s why it works – trust.”

The Grassroots Conservation Program is one of seven programs receiving this year’s Innovations in American Government Awards. Each winner takes a unique approach to meeting community needs and achieving real results. Because each of these programs is a model for government’s capacity to do good, and do it well, the \$100,000 prize specifically supports dissemination to other jurisdictions.

The Innovations in American Government Awards honor city, county, state, tribal and federal government initiatives that are truly creative, measurably effective, meet a significant need, and have the potential to be transferred to other jurisdictions. The 2006 award winners, selected from an initial pool of 1,000 applicants, include two federal, two state, one county, and two municipal programs. The efforts improve conservation, healthcare, housing, education, social services, and law enforcement. The winners will be formally announced this evening at dinner event in Washington, DC.

**The Ash Institute for Democratic Governance and Innovation** ([www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu](http://www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu)) at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government fosters excellence in government around the world in order to generate and strengthen democracy. Through its awards program, research, publications, curriculum support, and global network, the Institute champions critical milestones in creative and effective governance and democratic practice.

**The Council for Excellence in Government** ([www.excelgov.org](http://www.excelgov.org)) is a national, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is to improve government performance by strengthening results-oriented management and creative leadership in the public sector, and to build understanding by focusing public discussion on government’s role and responsibilities.

The Grassroots Conservation Program’s May 25, 2006 presentation to the National Selection Committee, chaired by David Gergen, at Harvard’s Kennedy School can be seen at the Ash Institute’s website: <http://www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu/Ash/news.htm>. For more information on the Innovations in American Government program and this year’s winners, visit [www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu](http://www.ashinstitute.harvard.edu) or [www.excelgov.org](http://www.excelgov.org).