

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: December 11, 2014

Agenda Item: Whitetail Prairie Addition to the Beartooth WMA – Region 4

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 15 minutes

Background

FWP's Habitat Montana Program is intending to partner with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Pittman Robertson funding to purchase in fee title of 2,840 acres known as "Whitetail Prairie" from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation for its appraised value of \$4.075 million. The F&W Commission endorsed this project in February 2014. The property is located eight miles east of Craig and 29 miles northeast of Helena in Lewis and Clark County, immediately adjacent to the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area. The property, which would be incorporated into the WMA, includes intermountain foothill grasslands important to ungulates and numerous other wildlife species seasonally and year-round, along with mountain stream habitats important to westslope cutthroat trout and other aquatic species. In addition to preserving and protecting wildlife and fisheries habitats, the acquisition would guarantee public recreational access to the Whitetail Prairie property and to 880 acres of adjoining state lands and federal BLM lands.

Public Involvement Process & Results

A public comment period for the EA and Management Plan was available from Oct. 6 through Nov. 4. A public meeting was held at the Wolf Creek School on Oct. 20, with one person in attendance. Sixty one written comments were received (55 in support and six opposed/neutral to the Proposed Action). Consideration and evaluation of public comment is distilled in the Decision Notice to the EA. All comments received remain on file at the Great Falls FWP Region 4 office and are available for public review.

Alternatives and Analysis

- *Alternative A:* No Action. Under the No Action Alternative, FWP would not purchase the Whitetail Prairie property from RMEF. As a result, the landowner would sell to another buyer by listing the property on the open market.
- *Preferred Alternative B:* Acquisition of the Whitetail Prairie property. This alternative involves FWP purchasing the property in fee title from RMEF at an approximate cost of \$4.075 million (25 percent Habitat Montana and 75 percent Pittman Robertson).

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the F&W Commission approve of proceeding with the purchase of this addition to the Beartooth WMA as described. As a natural extension of the WMA, the Whitetail Prairie property provides year-round habitat for elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, black bear, mountain lion, wolf, furbearers, and mountain grouse. The property also provides year-round habitat for a variety of non-game birds and small mammal species, while providing public hunting, trapping, hiking and wildlife viewing opportunities. Additionally, this project supports high quality Missouri River watershed fisheries habitat.

Proposed Motion

I move that the commission approve FWP's recommendation to purchase the Whitetail Prairie property from Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation as described.