

# **FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** July 14, 2016

**Agenda Item:** Veebaray Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Grazing System (R7)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 Min

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## **Background**

FWP proposes to enter into a 21- year Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program (UGBEP) agreement with Veebaray Company Ranches (the landowners) located near Enid, MT. The project would develop stock water sources and other improvements to implement three, 3-pasture summer rest rotation grazing systems on 12,145 acres of the Veebaray Ranch. Total estimated project cost would be \$369,130 with costs being split between the UGBEP (\$179,565), the landowners (\$179,565), and American Bird Conservancy (\$10,000). The intent of this agreement is to develop a partnership between FWP and a private landowner to improve native habitats for the benefit of wildlife, primarily upland game birds, and to simultaneously provide public upland game bird hunting opportunities.

Veebaray Company would like to implement rest-rotational grazing to better distribute cattle and enhance rangeland health. This property supports extensive woody draws and associated shrub-grassland habitats, but historic grazing management limited the productivity of these habitats for wildlife. Establishment of this system would provide rest and deferred grazing treatments, directly enhancing nesting, brood, and wintering habitat for upland game birds while improving the productivity and extent of perennial grasses, forbs, and brushy cover. Wildlife and livestock would both benefit from improvement in the overall health and carrying capacity of the range. This proposed project aligns with priorities identified in Region 7's UGBEP Strategic Plan, including the regional goal to "*Develop and maintain grazing management projects to improve and/or maintain productive nesting and brood rearing cover. Enhance or provide critical winter habitat. Enhance public recreational opportunities*" Sharp-tailed grouse, pheasants, partridge, and wild turkeys are expected to benefit from this proposal.

## **Public Involvement Process & Results**

Comments from the UGBEP Council were supportive; the majority felt this was a good expenditure of program funds and the Veebaray Ranch would provide outstanding potential for upland game bird hunting. The proposal was released for public comment from June 10 through June 24. A total of 17 comments were received; 13 expressed support for the proposal. One commenter had questions about the level of public hunting access specified in the proposal. The agreement will specify a minimum of 200 public hunter days annually over the life the agreement. The remaining three comments were not germane to the proposal.

## **Alternatives and Analysis**

The proposed action is to proceed with this UGBEP project. The alternative would be to forego this opportunity to develop a long-term partnership between MFWP and a private landowner to improve native habitats for the benefit of wildlife and enhance public recreational opportunities.

## **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends the Commission approve proceeding with the Veebaray UGBEP project as proposed.

## **Proposed Motion**

I move the Commission approve proceeding with the Veebaray Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program grazing system as proposed.