

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 14, 2017

Agenda Item: Farming Leases on Elk Island Wildlife Management Area (R7)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

Background

Elk Island WMA was purchased by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to maintain a woodland/cropland complex to benefit a diversity of wildlife while maximizing hunting opportunities, primarily for white-tailed deer and pheasants. The proposed action is to renew two share-crop agreements on 170 acres of the WMA. The lessees will cultivate and retain a portion of the hay/grain crop harvest, leaving the remaining crop standing for wildlife use during winter months. The benefit and purpose of the leases are to provide winter habitat and forage, primarily for wintering pheasants, deer, and turkeys. Standing crops also benefit migrating waterfowl and a variety of other wildlife species. The area is open to public hunting during all Commission-approved seasons, and provides opportunity for deer, upland game bird, and waterfowl hunting.

Public Involvement Process & Results

The Environmental Assessment for the project was released on January 30, with comments accepted through February 20. FWP received three comments regarding the proposed leases. Two were in favor and one seemed to be opposed to the proposed leases, but also included many comments outside the scope of this EA. FWP issued its decision notice on February 21, in support of the agricultural leases, contingent on Commission approval.

Alternatives and Analysis

Under the no action alternative, agricultural lands would not be cultivated and FWP would need to commit resources to manage weeds and restore cover on the cultivated 170 acres of farm fields, and wildlife would be negatively impacted by lack of wintering habitat and forage resources. Renewing the agricultural leases would benefit wildlife by providing high-quality forage and wintering habitat and continued hunting opportunity for deer and pheasant with little expense to FWP.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends that the Commission approve the agricultural leases on Elk Island WMA, which would provide valuable winter forage for wildlife and promote quality hunting opportunities for sportsmen.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the agricultural leases on Elk Island WMA as proposed.