

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

**Meeting Date:** October 12, 2017

**Agenda Item:** Canyon Ferry Wildlife Management Area Farming Leases (R3)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 Min

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**Background:** Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks manages Canyon Ferry Wildlife Management Area (CFWMA) through a management agreement with the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. FWP is proposing to renew six current farming leases and one existing bee yard (apiary) lease for a 5-year period (2018-2022). The croplands are irrigated, producing typically grain and hay. In addition to the farmed areas which include annual winter food plot set-asides, adjacent shelterbelt and nesting-cover habitats have been developed through past lease agreements. Farmed acres and developed habitats support pheasants, white-tailed deer, mourning doves, field-feeding waterfowl, and many other wildlife species, enhancing wildlife viewing and hunting opportunities and providing a sustainable agricultural presence.

Of the six farming leases, five are proposed to be cash leases and one lease is proposed to be a payment in-kind lease (payment is in services rendered in lieu of a cash lease payment). Lessees were given a choice regarding the type of lease. For the cash leases, the per-acre lease rate is determined using averages for private leases as published by the National Ag Statistics Service. Cash leases would require an annual 12.5% set aside of the amount of grain (or alternative crop) acreage, to serve as a winter food plot. FWP would not charge rent for the winter food plot acres. Several of the lessees would also be required to irrigate adjacent shelterbelts at least three times during the growing season each year. The value of work performed for FWP is subtracted from the cash lease amount. The total estimated return to FWP from the cash leases would be approximately \$19,000 for 2018. For the in-kind lease, the lessee would be required to plant 20% of the farmed lease acres annually as a winter food plot in lieu of a cash lease payment. The winter food plot would either be grain or a special game bird food plot mix. The bee yard (apiary) lease would pay a set rate of \$150/year.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** FWP completed an Environmental Assessment to analyze potential impacts of renewing or not renewing the agricultural leases. The EA was announced in three newspapers and on FWP's webpage with a 30-day public comment period ending September 22. One comment was received. A Decision Notice was completed that recommends renewing the leases.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** Under the No Action Alternative the farming leases would not be renewed. This would negatively impact a variety of wildlife species, require additional management activity by FWP staff, and affect FWP's working relations with neighbors and the local community. Under the Proposed Action, FWP would renew the six existing agricultural leases and the one existing bee yard lease for 5 years. Providing agricultural leases on a portion of CFWMA provides a number of habitat benefits and maintains good working relationships with agricultural producers.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** FWP recommends proceeding with renewal of these leases because of the wildlife habitat and related public benefits.

**Proposed Motion:**

I move the Fish and Wildlife commission approve renewal of the six farming leases and the one existing bee yard (apiary) lease on Canyon Ferry WMA for a period of five years, through 2022.