

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 12, 2017

Agenda Item: Wall Creek Wildlife Management Area Grazing Lease Renewal (R3)

Division: Wildlife **Action Needed:** Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 Min

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Background: A nine-year grazing lease renewal is proposed with the Wall Creek Grazing Association (WCGA) on the Wall Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) to graze from approximately 220 to 600 cattle AUMs annually on 5,550 acres of FWP-owned land and 920 acres of DNRC land leased by FWP. The WMA is part of a larger cooperative grazing system that includes 16,780 acres of United States Forest Service lands and 220 acres of Bureau of Land Management land leased by the WCGA. The cooperative grazing system has been in place for the past 33 years. Although no private lands are part of the grazing system, members of the WCGA own lands within the Madison Valley and provide winter habitat for 1,000 to 2,000 elk annually. The objectives of the grazing lease include: (1) expanding the wildlife benefits of FWP management to adjacent DNRC, BLM, and USFS lands; (2) showcase the WMA as an area where wildlife and livestock can co-exist while maintaining healthy rangelands; and (3) work cooperatively with private landowners who provide winter elk habitat and public hunting access on their lands.

Public Involvement Process & Results: A draft Environmental Assessment has been completed and was released for public review and comment on August 8. Public comment was accepted through September 9. No public comments were received.

Alternatives and Analysis:

-*Alternative A* would discontinue the grazing lease and halt all grazing on the WMA.

-*Alternative B* would continue the existing rest-rotation grazing system for the period 2018 – 2026. The WCGA would lease grazing on the Wall Creek WMA at a rate of one-half the FWP standard Grazing rate (currently \$24.00/AUM) and assumes fence responsibilities as outlined in Appendix C of the environmental assessment.

Alternative B is the preferred alternative. This alternative would continue three decades of cooperative landscape management and working relationships. The cooperative grazing system: (1) expands rest-rotation grazing to DNRC, BLM, and USFS property surrounding the Wall Creek WMA; (2) increases tolerance of wintering elk from area livestock producers by sharing summer forage with said landowners; and (3) continues to demonstrate that elk, livestock, and healthy rangelands can coexist across common landscapes. Alternative A would: (1) remove the existing landscape approach to livestock grazing; (2) abandon the considerable time and financial investment in this grazing system; (3) increase winter forage available to elk on the WMA, but reduce private landowner tolerance of wintering elk across the Madison Valley and therefore winter forage available to elk on private lands; and (4) negatively impact local landowner/FWP/sportsmen relations.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends approval of the nine-year lease to the WCGA for one-half of the FWP standard grazing rate, which corresponds with electric fence set up and take down, and maintenance of affected boundary fences. Overall, this system is meeting stated wildlife habitat objectives for the WMA and benefitting wildlife habitats on affected public lands.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve renewal of the grazing lease for nine years on the Wall Creek WMA as proposed by FWP.