

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 12, 2017

Agenda Item: Blackfoot-Clearwater Wildlife Management Area Conifer Expansion and Grassland Restoration Project (R2)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 Min

Background

The native rough fescue-bluebunch wheatgrass grassland (native grassland), ponderosa pine grassland savannah, and isolated aspen stands of the Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA (BCWMA) serve as critical winter range to elk and deer. Due to fire suppression over the past 100 years, conifers - mainly ponderosa pine and Douglas-fir - have slowly expanded onto approximately 2,917 acres of this important habitat resulting in the loss of winter forage for elk and deer. To address this resource concern FWP proposes to initiate a forest management project focusing on removing conifers that have expanded into the native grassland, ponderosa pine savannah, and aspen stands along the western portion of the BCWMA in Missoula County. In addition to the wildlife benefits, this project also supports the statutory requirements of § 87-1-622, MCA to “address fire mitigation, pine beetle infestation, and wildlife enhancement...”

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP released a Draft EA for public review of the proposed Project on August 2, and accepted public comment until August 31. A legal notice of the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was submitted to three newspapers and FWP mailed 19 copies of the Draft EA, and emailed approximately 61 notifications of the EA’s availability to adjacent landowners, interested individuals, groups and agencies.

FWP received eight comments total, one from a conservation group and seven from individuals. All comments supported the project and none were in opposition.

Alternatives and Analysis

If no action were taken, FWP expects that valuable wildlife habitat, including critical ungulate winter-range would continue to deteriorate due to expanding conifers into the project area, and the risk of insects and disease along with high-intensity wildfire hazard would continue to increase.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends that the Commission approve the proposed action to move forward with project implementation. This proposed project would help ensure maintenance and improvement of critical big game winter habitat.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the Blackfoot-Clearwater Conifer Expansion and Grassland Restoration project as presented by FWP.