

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

**Meeting Date:** April 19, 2018

**Agenda Item:** Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area Grazing Lease Renewal (R2)

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

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

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### **Background**

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to renew a Grazing Lease Agreement with the Blackfoot River Ranch (BRR, Lessee) that has been successfully implemented since 2006. The current exchange of use grazing lease agreement expires at the end of the grazing season this year. FWP proposes a six-year lease renewal to continue to use cattle grazing on approximately 354 acres of historically cultivated land on FWP's Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area (WMA) to enhance spring forage quality on the WMA in exchange for the BRR adhering to a rest-rotation grazing management plan on approximately 640 acres of BRR's nearby private native rangeland. The rest-rotation system provides for plant community health and the rested pasture provides forage for wintering elk as well as cover for a variety of wildlife. The grazing agreement also would include a hunting access provision, highly valued by the public.

### **Public Involvement Process & Results**

FWP released a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and published a legal notice of the proposal and availability of the draft EA to four local and regional newspapers. In addition, FWP mailed 16 copies and emailed approximately 29 notifications of the EA's availability to adjacent landowners, interested individuals, groups and agencies. FWP received no public input during the 21-day comment period for this proposed lease renewal.

### **Alternatives and Analysis**

If the no action alternative were to be selected, the six-year Grazing Lease with BRR would not be renewed. FWP would not obtain benefits such as improved spring forage on the WMA or benefits of rest-rotation grazing strategy on adjacent private land, that also serves as elk winter range. The indirect benefits of cooperatively managing this area with a neighboring landowner also would not be realized.

### **Agency Recommendation & Rationale**

FWP recommends the commission approve the proposal to enter a six-year grazing lease, involving FWP land (354 acres on Aunt Molly WMA) with the Blackfoot River Ranch (640 acres of private land). The lease arrangement serves multiple wildlife habitat benefits both on the WMA and on neighboring native rangeland, while helping support sustainable ranching and public hunting opportunities.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the proposed six-year exchange of use grazing lease with the Blackfoot River Ranch on the Aunt Molly Wildlife Management Area.