

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: August 9, 2018

Agenda Item: Robb-Ledford WMA Aspen Enhancement Project

Division: Wildlife **Action Needed:** Proposed

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background

The Robb-Ledford WMA provides year-round habitat, including critical winter habitat, for elk, mule deer, moose, pronghorn, greater sage-grouse, and ruffed grouse. Bighorn sheep occupy habitats in close proximity to the proposed treatment areas. FWP is proposing to implement approximately 44 acres of aspen enhancement treatments through contracted harvest of conifer trees that have commercial value and lop-and-scatter of trees with no commercial value. The proposed project is adjacent to an ongoing FWP conifer removal project aimed at maintaining sagebrush grassland. Aspen woodland habitats were identified as Tier 1 Community Types of Greatest Conservation Need in the 2015 FWP State Wildlife Action Plan, because of their relatively limited abundance and the high plant and animal diversity they support. The greatest conservation threats are considered to be fragmentation and reduction due to human-related development and forest succession. Forest succession — that is, shading out and competition by taller conifers — is expected to functionally eliminate the current aspen-dominated habitat patch within 40 years without wildfire or a forest treatment.

Public Involvement Process & Results

This project proposal has been discussed with local sportsmen's interest groups, livestock lessees, neighboring state and federal agencies, and other interested parties. The ongoing Robb-Ledford and Blacktail WMA Conifer Removal Project, treating expanding conifers in sagebrush grasslands, was vetted through the Sheridan area wildlife biologist interested-persons email list and through an environmental assessment process. Public comment was limited but exclusively supportive. Upon endorsement, FWP would complete further public scoping and analysis in the form of a draft environmental assessment and associated public review.

Alternatives and Analysis

No action would result in perpetuating the current condition and, barring the occurrence of a natural disturbance event, conifers would continue to outcompete aspen and decrease in abundance within the proposed project area until the aspen stand would no longer sustain itself. We estimate that through time the aspen-dominated patch would be continually reduced, resulting in reduced carrying capacity for wintering moose, reduced fawn-rearing habitat and late-fall browse resources for mule deer, reduced winter browse for elk, loss of existing ruffed-grouse habitat, and reduced surface water flowing from existing localized springs.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the commission endorse this project, which would allow FWP to develop an environmental analysis and additional public review. Implementing the proposed treatment is expected to enhance aspen and support productive wildlife habitat for a variety of wildlife species.

Proposed Motion

I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission endorse the Rob-Ledford WMA Aspen Enhancement Project, allowing FWP to conduct further analysis and public involvement.