

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 25, 2019

Agenda Item: Blackfoot Clearwater WMA and Two-Creek Ranch Cooperative Grazing/Haying Lease (R2)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

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Background

FWP proposes to renew the cooperative grazing/haying lease agreement with Two-Creek Ranch (TCR, cooperator), which has been continually implemented since 2004. The lease expired at the end of the grazing season last year. FWP proposes a six-year renewal of the lease to continue to use a maximum of 160 animal unit months (AUMs) of cattle grazing (with some limited haying) on approximately 887 acres of historically cultivated land on FWP's Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area (BCWMA) to enhance spring forage quality for big game on the BCWMA, in exchange for the TCR adhering to a rest-rotation grazing management plan on approximately 795 acres of TCR's nearby private native rangeland, which involves important winter elk habitat. The rest-rotation system would continue to provide enhanced plant-community health, and the rested pastures would provide forage for wintering elk as well as cover for a variety of wildlife. Two of the seven BCWMA pastures would not be grazed by livestock (to eliminate compaction and other mechanical damage to these sub-irrigated fields); instead, these pastures may be hayed once a year if conditions are favorable. No payment is involved, but the cooperator would also perform some weed spraying and fence/gate maintenance on the BCWMA. As part of the lease agreement, the cooperator would also allow public hunting on the private land involved in the lease.

Public Involvement Process & Results

A draft environmental assessment (EA) was made available for public comment for 30 days from February to March 2019. The EA was posted on FWP's website and comments could be made directly on the EA's webpage or submitted via mail or email. Legal notices were published once each in three local, regional, and statewide newspapers. FWP sent 16 printed copies of the EA and 47 emails of the EA's availability to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups, and agencies, and a statewide news release was distributed. FWP received three comments during the public review period, two from individuals (located in Hamilton and Missoula) and one from the Anaconda Sportsman Club. All three commenters supported the proposed action, and no commenters were in opposition.

Alternatives and Analysis

If the no-action alternative were selected, the six-year cooperative habitat agreement with TCR would not be renewed. FWP would not obtain benefits such as improved spring forage on the BCWMA or the rest-rotation grazing strategy on adjacent private lands that also serve as elk winter range. The indirect benefits of cooperatively managing this area with a neighboring landowner would not be realized.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the commission approve the proposal to enter into a 2019-2024 cooperative grazing/haying agreement, involving FWP's BCWMA and TCR's owned or leased private lands. The lease arrangement serves multiple wildlife habitat benefits both on the BCWMA and on neighboring native rangeland, while helping support sustainable ranching and public hunting opportunities.

Proposed Motion

I move the commission approve the cooperative grazing and haying lease with the Two-Creek Ranch on the Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area as proposed.