



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

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Meeting Date: June 25, 2020

Agenda Item: Marten Reintroduction to the Little Belt Mountains

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: In 2014, the commission tentatively approved a project that would initiate restoration of marten to the Little Belt Mountain complex. Marten were present in the isolated ranges of central Montana but were likely extirpated by the early 1900s. Recent snow-track, camera trap, and genetic surveys conducted by the department and U.S. Forest Service failed to confirm any current marten presence in the Little Belt Mountain complex.

Marten populations have been reestablished across portions of their historical North American range using translocations, including in Montana. Recent genetic and phylogeographic data suggest that of the two marten species in Montana, *M. caurina* (found in west-central and southwest Montana) most likely occupied the Little Belt Mountain complex.

The department and the Montana Natural Heritage Program developed a predictive habitat suitability model for marten in Montana, which indicates that the Little Belt and Castle Mountains include some of the highest quality unoccupied marten habitat in the state. The department proposes translocating a minimum of 60 *M. caurina* (at least 30 female) from locations in southwest Montana (Region 3) over two years to release sites on Forest Service land within the Little Belt Mountains. The goal is to restore a native species to its historical range in central Montana, restore native species diversity, provide recreational viewing, and to ultimately restore marten harvest opportunity.

Public Involvement Process and Results: The department will release an environmental assessment of this proposal in June to notify the public and to gather input from interested constituents. The Helena Lewis and Clark National Forest, Safari Club International, and Montana Trappers Association have been supportive of the proposal.

Alternatives and Analysis: Marten are poor dispersers and are unlikely to naturally recolonize the Little Belt Mountain complex. The species will remain absent there without reintroduction.

Agency Recommendation and Rationale: The department recommends proceeding with a formal analysis and public disclosure of a project that would translocate a minimum of 60 marten from southwest Montana to the Little Belt Mountains between September 2020 and March 2022. The department expects to partner with trappers to capture animals and expects the project to be partially privately funded.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission direct the department to develop an environmental assessment to analyze the restoration of marten to historically occupied habitats in central Montana's Little Belt Mountains.