

FWP COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: 10 May 2012

Division: Fish and Wildlife

Agenda Item: West Kootenai WMA Forest Management and Road Construction Proposal

Action Needed: X **Endorse Course of Action**

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background: The West Kootenai WMA consists of 917 acres located about 10 miles NW of Eureka, MT. Most of the area is heavily forested with dense stands of Douglas-fir. A 2011 Management Plan identified various forest treatments needed to improve forest health, maintain habitat diversity for wildlife, and reduce the risk of wildfire. FWP is seeking approval to implement that plan through timber management on 240 total acres in six units. Current tree density throughout most of the WMA is so great that there is a very real risk that fire could completely alter the character of the landscape and threaten adjoining properties as well if these management prescriptions are not implemented. To complete any of these forest management activities, approximately 300 yards of new road construction will be necessary along the narrow access strip on the south end of the WMA. While products derived from thinning are expected to offset the total cost of this project, it will still cost approximately \$85,000 to complete all aspects of this project. However, FWP is also anticipating a \$48,000 grant administered by DNRC to assist in the completion of this work. A licensed forester will be contracted by FWP to assist the Eureka area wildlife biologist in administering the project.

Public Involvement Process & Results: No public review has been initiated for this habitat work. However, broad public support is expected. In 2009, a petition was circulated and signed by 57 West Kootenai residents asking FWP to do more to reduce the risk of wildfire in the area. With Commission endorsement, FWP will initiate a MEPA review that will include opportunity for public comment.

Alternatives and Analysis:

- 1) Defer entire project until some point in the future. While this option may save FWP some money in the short term, it would result in further deterioration of the forested stands and increase fire risks, both within and outside the WMA. It would also result in the loss of significant matching funds (DNRC Grant).
- 2) Complete only those portions of the plan that address immediate fire risks (new access road construction and Units 2 and 3) and defer all others. This option would be helpful in the short term, but would ignore the long-term wildlife habitat needs of the WMA.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: We recommend that FWP be allowed to move forward on this project as proposed. Failure to do so will prolong fire risks and badly needed management and may result in the loss of a major funding source.

Proposed Motion: I move that the Commission endorse FWP proceeding with development of an Environmental Analysis that will address forest management activities within the West Kootenai WMA.