Decision Notice
and
Finding of No Significant Impact
for
Mount Silcox Wildlife Management Area Grazing Lease
Sanders County, Montana
Environmental Assessment

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 1
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

April 16, 2010

Project Proposal

The proposed action will allow cattle to graze on the Mt. Silcox Wildlife Management Area (WMA) as part of a three-pasture rest-rotation grazing management plan (see Appendix A for the management plan) to benefit wildlife. The three-pasture rest-rotation grazing system will consist of two pastures, approximately 250 acres each, located on the WMA, which is owned and managed by FWP. The third pasture will consist of approximately 90 acres of land the operator leases from a third party.

The duration of the plan will be for six years (two complete grazing cycles). Benefits include an increase in the quality of grass produced on the WMA. The species composition of grass on the west pasture is predominately composed of several varieties of Poa (Poa spp.). The primary grass on the east WMA pasture is an introduced species - smooth brome (Bromus inermis). Additional grass species found on the WMA in lesser quantities are Idaho fescue (Festuca idahoensis), bluebunch wheat grass (Agropyron spicatum), and Timothy (Phleum spp.). Wintering deer, elk, and bighorn sheep will benefit from the improved quality of vegetation and stimulation of fall regrowth during the critical winter and spring seasons.

Public Comment

FWP accepted public comment on the draft environmental assessment (EA) for a 14-day period from March 15 through March 29, 2010. The EA was advertised through media releases and legal notices. Copies of the EA were available from the Kalispell FWP office, on the FWP web site, and at the Montana State Library and the Thompson Falls City Library. The EA was mailed directly to a number of interested persons.

Eight letters were received. Two letters were in favor of the proposal, while six letters were against the proposal.

Response to Comments

- Five comments were generally against any livestock grazing on the WMA and that no benefits would be observed.

FWP Response:
The main objective of the Mount Silcox WMA is to provide crucial winter and spring habitat for primarily elk and bighorn sheep. The designed and proven system of rest-rotation grazing is used as a tool to improve the forage condition for these species during the important winter and spring seasons. Past livestock grazing on this WMA and other WMAs managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks has proven to be very effective and compatible with big game and other wildlife species. The number of grazing pairs will be monitored and evaluated to prevent overgrazing on the 250 acres of pasture and can be adjusted as necessary.

- Three comments suggested using prescribed fire instead of livestock grazing to achieve the desired benefits.

FWP Response:
While fire might be a useful tool on some WMAs, the immediate proximity of homes and two separate power lines preclude the use of fire, from a safety perspective, on the Mount Silcox WMA.

- Two comments suggested that livestock grazing forced elk to utilize forage on adjacent private property.

FWP Response:
Elk are very mobile and do utilize forage on private property. While some observations of foraging elk are found on private property, a much higher percentage of observations are located on the WMA. Use between cattle and elk typically doesn't overlap during the grazing period from April 15 through October 15 of each year. No adjacent landowners have complained about elk on their property.

- One comment complained about overgrazing of the WMA by cattle.

FWP Response:
While slight overgrazing may occur during times of low rainfall and higher than normal temperatures, particularly on pasture 2, this is not the norm. The number of grazing pairs will be monitored and evaluated to prevent overgrazing and can be adjusted as necessary.

- One comment suggested a wolf/cattle conflict.

FWP Response:
The Silcox wolf pack does frequent the area and has been observed on the pastures of the WMA. Conflicts should be minimized because cattle do not calve on the WMA. If livestock are attacked or killed and it is confirmed to be by wolves, the situation will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, as protocol dictates based on rules by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks and Wildlife Services.

- One comment referred to the possibility of disease transmission from domestic livestock to bighorn sheep.

FWP Response:
Disease transmission from cattle to bighorn sheep is not known to occur. The only known transmission of disease to bighorn sheep is from domestic sheep and goats. No domestic sheep or goats are allowed to graze the WMA.

Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI):
Based on the analysis in the EA, I find the proposed alternative, to allow cattle grazing on the WMA, to be the preferred alternative. I have evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies, and have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

The final EA may be viewed at or obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region One, 490 N. Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901. Please contact FWP Biologist Bruce Sterling, (406) 827-4389 or e-mail to bsterling@mt.gov, with questions or comments.

James R. Satterfield, Jr.

April 16, 2010

James Satterfield, Jr., Ph.D.
Regional Supervisor

Date

Appendix A

MOUNT SILCOX GRAZING MANAGEMENT PLAN

The three-pasture rest-rotation grazing system will consist of two pastures, approximately 250 acres each, located on the Mount Silcox Wildlife Management Area (MSWMA), which is owned and managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP). The third pasture will consist of approximately 90 acres of land the operator leases from a third party and is located east of Thompson Falls and adjacent to the Clark Fork River in Sanders County, Montana.

The pastures on Mount Silcox WMA were grazed from 1995 through 2003 and again in 2007 and 2008 during the summer and fall grazing seasons. Stocking rates of about 50 pairs were used. The management area has been rested the past year. All internal and perimeter fences and gates are currently in good condition. As part of the grazing agreement, Archie and John Knerr are willing to maintain the WMA fences and gates prior to turning livestock onto the pastures each year.

A long-term problem with managing livestock on the WMA has been a source of water. The option of developing a well and water tanks was explored, but the cost was determined to be prohibitive. During the 2007/08 grazing period Mickey Vulles, whose land boarders the WMA, supplied water for cattle from his own water source. Mr. Vulles is willing to provide water from his well for livestock while they graze the WMA.

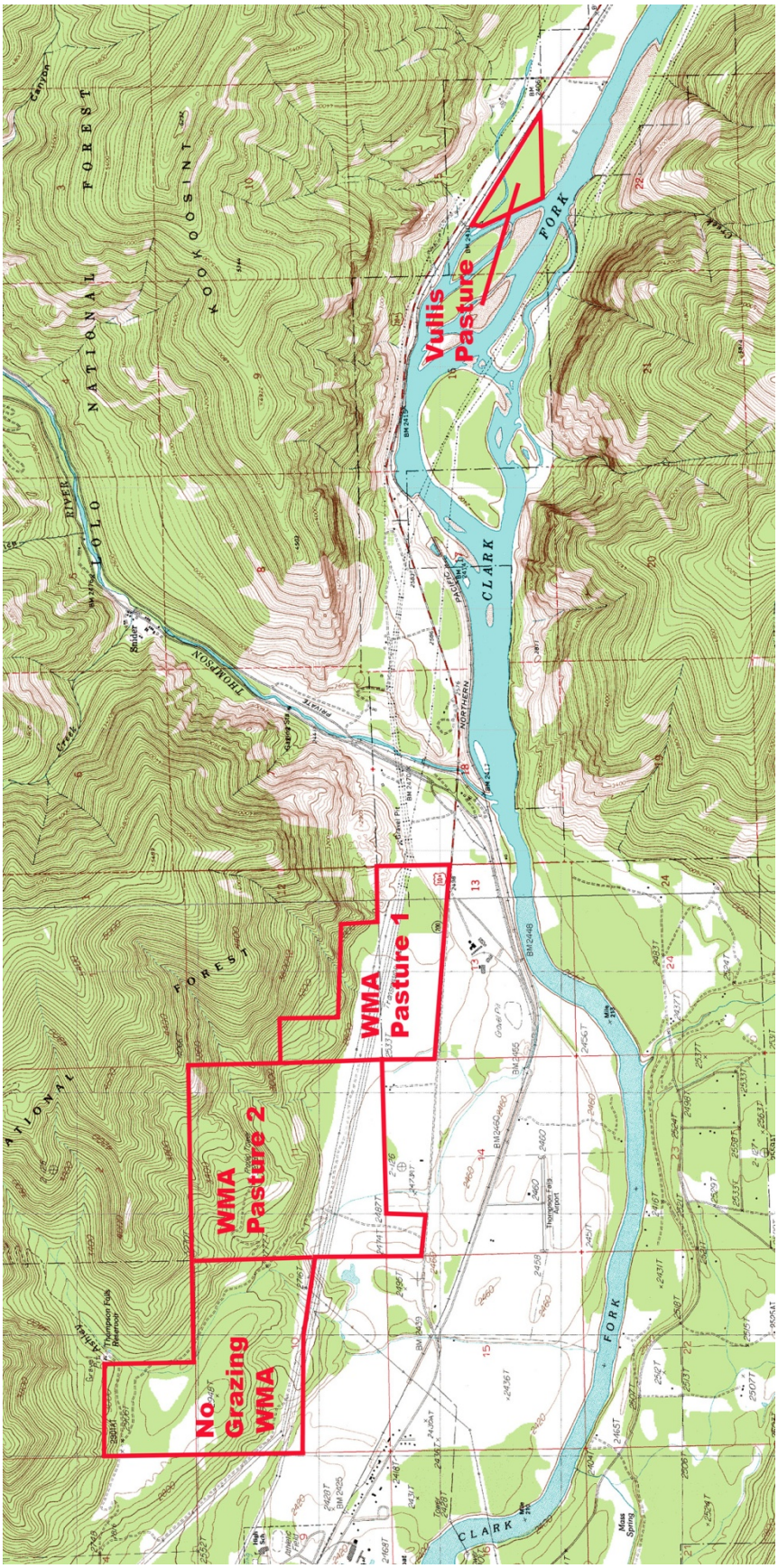
The grazing period will be for 6 years, which is equivalent to 2 complete grazing cycles. Table 1 describes the grazing rotation, pastures, and grazing period for the complete 6-year grazing schedule.

Table 1. Grazing rotation schedule for the Mount Silcox WMA - Mickey Vulles cooperative grazing system (see map).

Year	WMA South (Pasture 1)	WMA North (Pasture 2)	Vulles (Pasture 3)
2010	C[1]	A	B
2011	A	B	C
2012	B	C	A
2013	C	A	B
2014	A	B	C
2015	B	C	A

[1]C= rest from livestock grazing for entire year. A= livestock grazing from mid-April to mid-July (seed ripe). B= livestock grazing from mid-July to October 15.

The stocking rate would be a maximum of 50 cow-calf pairs and two bulls. This would amount to 612 AUMs of grazing annually. The AUMs provided on the WMA will vary annually depending on the grazing rotation described in Table 1.


No Grazing WMA
WMA Pasture 2
WMA Pasture 1
Vullis Pasture
LOLO NATIONAL FOREST
KOOKOOSINT
THOMPSON
CLARK FORK
NORTHERN PACIFIC
Thompson Falls Reservoir
Thompson Falls Airport
Moss Spring