USDA AND MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS SEEK PUBLIC COMMENT ON THE PROPOSED USE OF VOLUNTARY PUBLIC ACCESS AND HABITAT INCENTIVE PROGRAM GRANT FUNDS

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC) and the State of Montana announce the availability of a Final Programmatic Environmental Assessment (PEA) and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) for the proposed use of Voluntary Public Access and Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP) grant funds to expand Montana's Block Management Program. The Farm Service Agency (FSA) administers the VPA-HIP on behalf of the CCC. The VPA-HIP is a program authorized by the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 that provides grants to States and tribal governments to encourage owners and operators of privately held farm, ranch, and forest land to voluntarily open land for public access for outdoor recreation activities such as hunting, fishing, hiking, wildlife watching, and other outdoor activities. Distribution of VPA-HIP funds to landowners is administered by the State or tribal government that receives the grant.

The State of Montana proposes to use VPA-HIP grant funds over a three-year period to expand the Block Management Program to include the Open Fields for Game Bird Hunters program to increase access for game bird hunting and the Reconnecting Towns and Country program to increase access near certain cities and towns for hunting activities by providing incentive payments to eligible private landowners for negotiated agreements to expand public recreational access to private lands.

The purpose of the PEA is to aid in providing USDA and the State of Montana decision-makers and the public with an analysis of the environmental benefits and potential impacts associated with using VPA-HIP grant funds to expand the Block Management Program.

An electronic version of the Final PEA for using VPA-HIP grant funds to expand the Block Management Program and the FONSI are now located at http://public.geo-marine.com and will be available for a period of 30 days as of April 14, 2012. Electronic comments may be posted at this site as well. A copy of the Final PEA can also be reviewed at the FSA Environmental and Cultural Resource Compliance website: http://www.fsa.usda.gov/FSA/webapp?area=home&subject=ecrc&topic=nep-cd, or at the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Recent Public Notices website: http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/. Comments may also be emailed to MontanaPEA@geo-marine.com or faxed to (757) 873-3703.

Written comments regarding this assessment may be mailed to:
Montana VPA-HIP PEA Comments
c/o Geo-Marine Incorporated
2713 Magruder Boulevard, Suite D
Hampton, Virginia 23666
Comments should be submitted by the close of business on May 13, 2012 to ensure consideration.