

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Environmental Assessment

AGRICULTURAL LEASE ON PORTION OF ISAAC HOMESTEAD WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

January 2013

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) propose to lease approximately 125 acres of the 1,169 acre Isaac Homestead Wildlife Management Area (WMA) for agricultural production to increase wildlife cover and forage.

2. Agency authority for the proposed action:

MFWP has the authority under Section 87-1-210 MCA to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In addition, in accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, MFWP is required to assess the impacts that any proposal or project might have on the natural and human environments. Further, MFWP's land lease-out policy, as it pertains to the disposition of interest in Department lands (87-1-209) requires an Environmental Assessment (EA) to be written for all new agricultural leases, lease extensions or lease renewals.

3. Anticipated Schedule:

Public Comment Period:	January 30, 2013 – February 20, 2013
Decision Notice:	March, 2013
FWP Commission Final Consideration:	April, 2013
Lessee selected:	February, 2013
Lease Begins:	April 1, of each year
Lease Ends:	March 31, of each year
Term of Lease:	1 year; 2013-2014

4. Location affected by proposed action:

Isaac Homestead WMA in eastern Montana is located west of the town of Hysham along the Yellowstone River in Treasure County (Figure 1). Isaac Homestead WMA comprises 1,169 acres in T6N, R35E portions of sections 10-11, 14-15, and more particularly designated and described as shown in Book 12, pages 271 and 618 and Book 13, pages 235 and 245 of Deeds in the office of the Clerk and Recorder of Treasure County, Montana. However, this proposal is relevant only to approximately 125 acres of irrigated crop land (Appendix A).

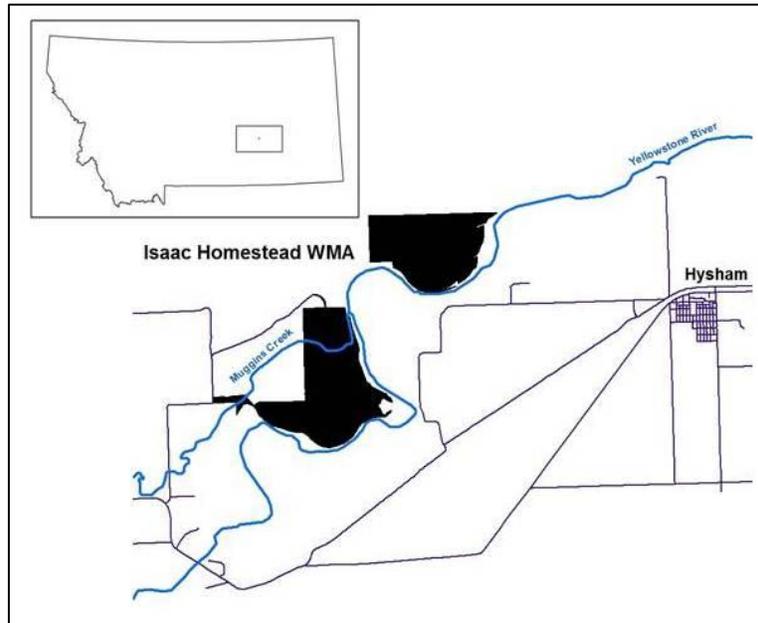


Figure 1. Isaac Homestead WMA in eastern Montana is located west of the town of Hysham along the Yellowstone River in Treasure County.

5. Project size:

The project size is approximately 125 acres of irrigated crop land.

<u>Land Cover/Use</u>	<u>Acres</u>	<u>Land Cover/Use</u>	<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive	
(b) Open Space/Woodlands/Recreation	<u>0</u>	Irrigated Cropland	<u>125</u>
		Dry Cropland	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian Areas	<u>0</u>	Forestry	<u>0</u>
		Rangeland	<u>0</u>
		Other	<u>0</u>

6. Permits, Funding & Overlapping Jurisdictions:

- (a) Permits: None required
- (b) Funding: N/A
- (c) Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities: None

7. Narrative summary of the proposed action:

The Isaac Homestead WMA was purchased by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) to provide hunting opportunities while also maintaining wildlife populations and the unique riparian ecosystem in a viable and healthy condition. The fields in the proposed project area

(Appendix A) have traditionally been utilized for agricultural production. The proposed action is to continue producing grain crops in these fields in order to increase forage, cover, and edge effects for the benefit of wildlife (primarily white-tailed deer, pheasant, and wild turkey). The proposed action directly affects only the irrigated crop land portions of the Isaac Homestead WMA (~125 acres). Details and terms of the Isaac Homestead WMA agricultural lease are described in Appendix B.

8. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:

Alternative A: No Action: Agricultural lease will not be renewed and agricultural lands will not be cultivated.

- Winter-time wildlife habitat would be limited by a lack of food resources.
- Structural diversity of vegetation (edge) would decrease over time.
- MFWP would be required to commit additional resources for weed management on the previously cultivated acres.

Alternative B: Proposed Action: Continue agricultural production: Agricultural lease will be renewed for the mutual benefit of the lessee, MFWP, and wildlife.

- Wintering wildlife will be provided a food source.
- Structural diversity of vegetation will increase through the cultivation grain crops.
- Noxious weeds will be treated and controlled through common farming practices.
- Soils will be fertilized, conditioned, and stabilized.
- Healthy relationships between MFWP and neighboring landowners/farmers will be maintained.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

1. Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. LAND RESOURCES Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil which would reduce productivity or fertility?			X			1b
c. Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				
f. Other		X				

1b. Temporary impacts due to soil covering will occur due to common farming practices/cultivation.

2. AIR Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions or pollutants?		X				
e. For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		N/A				
f. Other		X				

- The proposed action would have no effect on the ambient air quality.

3. WATER Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?			X			3b
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		N/A				
m. For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		N/A				
n. Other		X				

3b. Cultivating this area involves diverting water from the Rancher Ditch Company's irrigation ditch and some minor runoff from common irrigation practices is possible. However, the fields proposed for cultivation are bounded by riparian shrubs and grasses and do not directly border the Yellowstone River or its tributaries. No other alterations or changes to water quality/quantity or neighboring water rights are expected.

4. VEGETATION	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X positive			4a
b. Alteration of a plant community?		X				
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?		X				
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		N/A				
g. Other		X				

4a. The fields proposed for cultivation have been used for agricultural production for the past 12 years. Continuing the agricultural lease for this area will provide increased crop abundance for wildlife usage.

5. FISH/WILDLIFE	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X positive			5b
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?			X positive			5c
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				5f
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?		X				
h. For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in		N/A				
i. For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		N/A				
j. Other		X				

5b/5c. The primary purpose of the proposed lease is to increase winter food resources for wildlife. Winter is generally considered the season when food is most limited, and ensuring the availability of this life requisite is likely to increase the abundance and density of game animals. Nongame species likewise benefit from additional food resources and are also expected to be more abundant.

5f. One Montana bird Species of Concern (great blue heron), one Montana turtle Species of Concern (spiny softshell), and two Montana fish Species of Concern (blue sucker and sauger), are known to occur in or along the Yellowstone River. The proposed project should not have any adverse effects on these species because it is not expected to impact water quality or riparian habitats. All the fields proposed for cultivation have traditionally been used for agricultural production and none directly border the

Yellowstone River. The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (16 U.S.C. 668-668d), prohibits human-induced disturbance that could induce abandonment of a known nest site. While bald eagles are occasionally observed on and around the Isaac Homestead WMA, no nests are currently located on the WMA.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to serve or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				
e. Other		X				

- The proposed action would have no effect on existing noise level.

7. LAND USE	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				
e. Other		X				

- No known or anticipated conflicts related to land usage would occur as a result of adopting this proposal.

8. RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		X				
e. Other		X				

- Chemical spraying is part of MFWP’s weed management plan to limit the infestation of noxious weeds on its properties per guidance of the 2008 Integrated Weed

Management Plan. Weed treatment and storage and mixing of the chemicals would be in accordance with standard operating procedures. No known or anticipated impacts would occur as a result of adopting this proposal.

9. COMMUNITY IMPACT	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				
f. Other		X				

- The proposed action would have no effect on local communities, increase traffic hazards, or alter the distribution of population in the area.

10. PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				10b
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. **Define projected revenue sources		N/A				10e
f. **Define projected maintenance costs.		N/A				10f
g. Other		X				

10b. MFWP is required by law to pay property taxes in an amount equal to a private individual. This project will not affect the tax base in any way.

10e. There is no monetary revenue projected for this project. As payment under the agricultural lease, the lessee is required to leave 20% of the grain crop standing for wildlife use (See Appendix B for details).

10f. Additional costs to MFWP associated with periodic monitoring of agricultural production and weeds will be minimal, since the MFWP area biologist routinely monitors the WMA anyway.

11. AESTHETICS/RECREATION	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?		X				
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				
c. Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		N/A				
e. Other		X				

- Agricultural activity would occur outside the time frame of upland game bird and big game rifle seasons.

12. CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. **Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		N/A				
e. Other		X				

- No impacts to cultural or historical resources are anticipated.

C. SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		N/A				
g. For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		N/A				
h. Other		X				

Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

The agricultural lease agreement between MFWP and the lessee would include all lease stipulations and enforceable control measures. These are identified in the lease agreement and pertinent attachments to same.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

The proposed agricultural lease on the Isaac Homestead WMA will be used to improve vegetative diversity and provide forage for pheasant, wild turkey, and white tailed deer that utilize the WMA.

The proposed project is not expected to have significant impacts on the physical or human environment. Identified impacts are expected to be minor and of short duration. The project is expected to benefit wildlife habitat.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public involvement:

The public will be notified in the following manner about the proposed action and alternatives considered, and how to comment on this EA:

- One public notice in each of these newspapers:
Miles City Star and *Forsyth Independent Press*
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited and very minor impacts, which can be mitigated.

2. Duration of comment period:

The public comment period will extend for 21 days. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., Wednesday, February 20, 2013 and can be mailed to the address below:

Isaac Homestead WMA Agriculture Lease
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
P.O. Box 428
Forsyth, MT 59327

Or email comments to: jbanfield@mt.gov

PART V. EA PREPARATION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)?

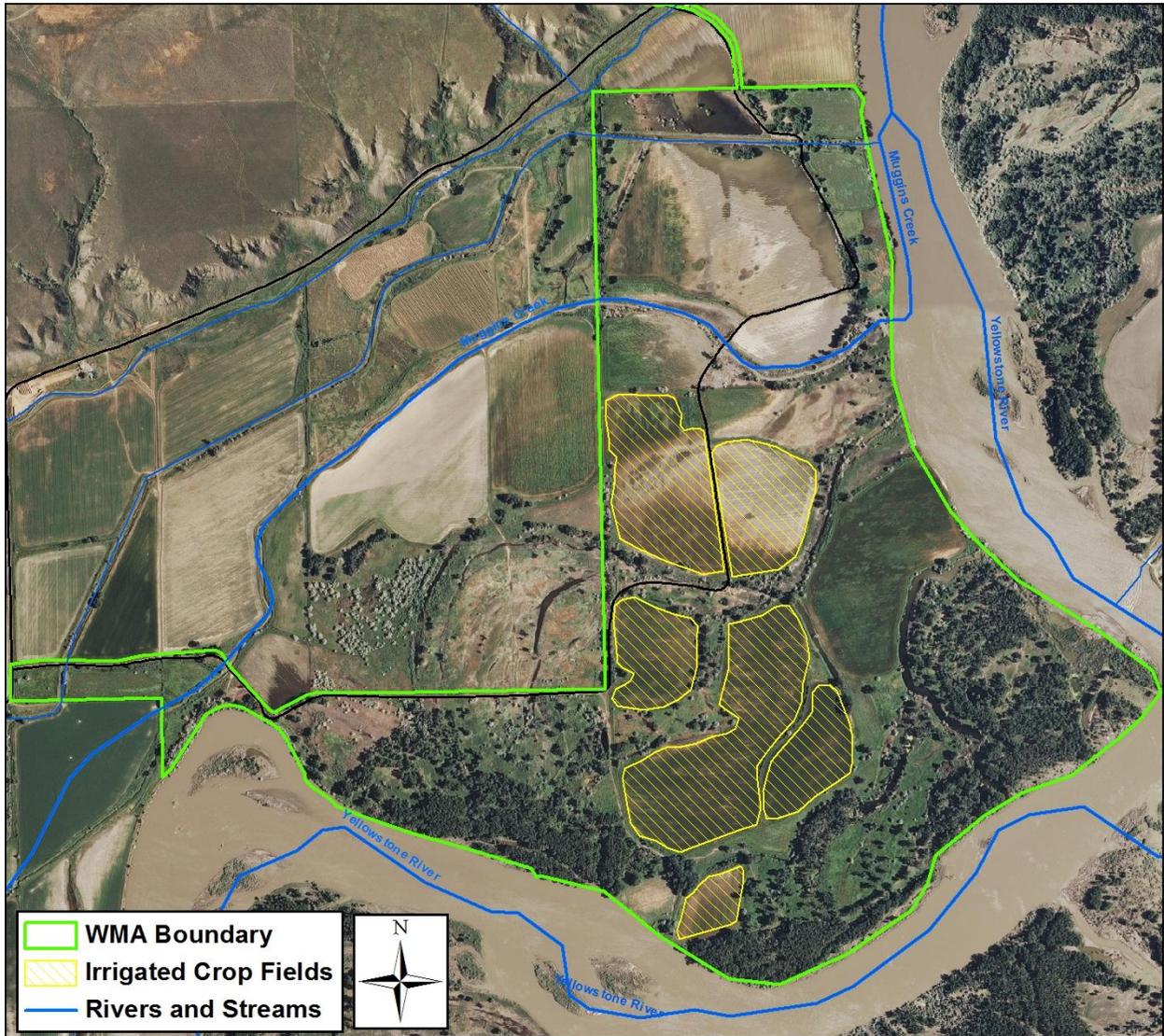
If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.

No, an EIS is not required. It has been determined that no significant impacts to the physical and human environment will result due to the proposed action alternative, nor will there be significant public controversy over the proposed action; therefore, an EIS is not required.

2. Person responsible for preparing the EA:

Jeremy Banfield, MFWP Wildlife Biologist
P.O. Box 428
Forsyth, MT 59327
Cell: 406-698-9278

APPENDIX A
Proposed Project Area Map – Isaac Homestead WMA



APPENDIX B

Agricultural Production Plan – Isaac Homestead WMA

A 1-year agricultural lease is proposed for ~125 acres of irrigated crop land within the Isaac Homestead WMA. The crop-fields proposed for cultivation have been used for agricultural purposes for the past 12 years.

The specific type of grain crop the lessee intends to plant/harvest will be approved by the Forsyth area wildlife biologist prior to any cultivation. Crops are chosen based on their importance to wildlife as a cover and food resource.

Payment:

The lessee will harvest grain crops keeping four-fifths of the said crop for his/her own possession and use. The lessee will leave the remaining one-fifth standing in the field as payment to the MFWP, and for the benefit of wildlife. The Forsyth area wildlife biologist will determine the areas in which this one-fifth portion of crop is to be left standing, prior to harvest.

Dates of Lease: April 1, 2013 to March 31, 2014.

Special Conditions and Terms:

1. The lessee shall remove all straw/bales produced on MFWP property within 60 days of the crop harvest.
2. Agricultural machinery will not be stored on MFWP property.
3. The plowing of field stubble post-harvest will be postponed until the spring of each year.
4. The lessee agrees to control weeds on all cultivated acres whether being harvested or left standing, using approved agricultural practices.
5. The lessee agrees to irrigate all cultivated acres whether being harvested or left standing, using approved agricultural practices.
6. Costs associated with fence maintenance and repair will be paid by the MFWP. However, any damage caused by the lessee will be repaired at his/her expense.
7. Costs associated with the maintenance and operation of the MFWP's Crisafulli Irrigation pump will be paid by the MFWP.
8. Irrigation costs associated with the Rancher Ditch Company annual assessment will be paid by the MFWP.