

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Environmental Assessment

GRAZING LEASE ON PORTION OF ISAAC HOMESTEAD WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA

February 2013

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) propose to lease approximately 675 acres of the 1,169 acre Isaac Homestead Wildlife Management Area (WMA) for winter-time cattle grazing to rejuvenate decadent vegetation for enhanced 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:	February 7 – February 28, 2013
Decision Notice:	March 4, 2013
FWP Commission Final Consideration:	April, 2013
Lessee selected:	March, 2013
Lease Begins:	April 1, 2013
Lease Ends:	March 31, 2014
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 the 675 acre western portion of the WMA (Appendix A).

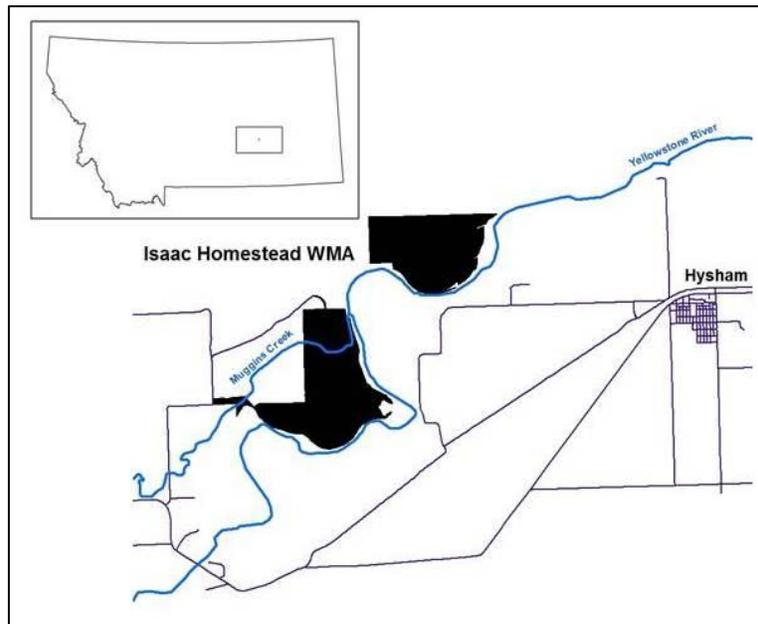


Figure 1. Isaac Homestead WMA in eastern Montana is located west of the town of Hysham along the Yellowstone River in Treasure County.

5. Project size:

The project size is approximately 675 acres of potential rangeland.

Land Cover/Use	Acres	Land Cover/Use	Acres
(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>0</u>
		Dry Cropland	<u>0</u>
		Forestry	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian Areas	<u>0</u>	Rangeland	<u>675</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 pastures in the proposed project area (Appendix A) currently contain stands of rank, minimally productive vegetation that is too thick to provide ideal nesting and brood rearing habitat for pheasants and other bird species. The proposed action is to temporarily allow grazing during the winter season (Jan 15 – Mar 15), when usage of the WMA is at its lowest. Grazing will allow plants to restore vigor and seedlings to establish. The result will be healthy plant communities that are diverse, provide excellent nesting and brood rearing cover for birds, and improved forage for a variety of wildlife species. Details and terms of the Isaac Homestead WMA grazing lease are described in Appendix B.

8. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:

Alternative A: No Action

- Decadent residual vegetation would remain.
- White-tailed deer and pheasant habitat would remain sub-optimal.
- Continued decline in vegetation quality and wildlife habitat functionality.

Alternative B: Haying or mowing under existing sharecropper agreements:

- Mowing and haying can result in direct mortality of birds and destruction of nests.
- Mowing is time-consuming, costly, and would result in significant litter deposition that may limit bird use and take several years to break down.
- Mowing would result in thick litter that might inhibit vegetation growth, reestablishment, and might promote establishment of undesirable plant species.

Alternative C: Proposed Action: Provide grazing lease.

- Soil and plant disturbance would reduce decadent residual vegetation and benefit plant seedling establishment.
- Management would promote maximum plant production, vigor and nutrient content.
- Provide better spring green-up vegetation conditions for white tailed deer.
- Provide better nesting and brood rearing cover for pheasants.
- Some segments of the general public may disapprove of cattle grazing on the WMA.
- Grazing the WMA as a management tool would facilitate positive relationships with local ranchers.

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	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
Will the proposed action result in:						
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. Some impacts to soil conditions may occur due to trampling, trailing or grazing in localized, high use areas. The grazing capacity estimate is believed to be a conservative estimate, so the risk of overgrazing-induced erosion should be minimal. Hoof action from livestock grazing should provide a positive benefit to soil quality by helping to break down old residual vegetative material, thereby returning nutrients to the soil.

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				3a
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				3h
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				

3a/b/h. Cattle grazing can result in fecal matter being discharged into waterways. This is anticipated have no impact on water quality for this project for the following reasons. (1) Cattle grazing is a prominent land use in the local area and the grazing that is proposed to occur on the WMA is for a short duration, thus any impacts to water quality would be negligible and of little significance given the prevalence of cattle grazing on the landscape. (2) Grazing will take place only during the winter months when most of the WMA waterways are frozen. (3) The level of grazing recommended will leave adequate vegetative material to protect the soil and minimize potential runoff.

4. <u>VEGETATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
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 positive			4b
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				4c
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			X		Yes	4e
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		N/A				
g. Other		X				

4a/b. While vegetation cover and quantity will be decreased as livestock are grazing a specific pasture, vegetation quality will increase following grazing as a part of the 3-year grazing cycle. Grazing will enhance the availability and palatability of spring forage in the area and improve overall plant condition. Grazing disturbance will promote vegetative species diversity. Plant and soil disturbance as the result of grazing may enhance seed placement, germination, and seedling establishment. Importantly, grazing will help to break down dense litter mats and rejuvenate vegetation that has become decadent due to years without any form of disturbance.

4c. No unique, rare, threatened, or endangered plant species are known to occur on the area proposed for grazing. The area has been tilled and planted historically.

4e. Grazing could introduce and spread noxious weeds. The project area will be monitored for new or spreading weed infestations by the MFWP area biologist, the grazing lessee, and Treasure County Weed District personnel. Weed infestations will continue to be controlled according to MFWP's 2008 Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan. Weed control is conducted primarily by the Treasure County Weed District.

5. <u>FISH/WILDLIFE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT*				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		

				Significant	Mitigated	
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/c. The project will have a positive long-term impact on whitetail deer and pheasant habitat. Cattle grazing will remove the existing buildup of decadent vegetation and residual litter, which should enhance spring green-up conditions and provide more palatable forage for grazing wildlife and pheasant brood rearing. Cattle grazing will provide a diversity of vegetation structure in the area. Grazing is also expected to promote vegetative diversity, with increased forb and insect diversity and abundance, which are important components of upland game bird brood rearing habitat. Expected increases in species diversity and structural diversity of vegetation due to cattle grazing are expected to increase nongame species diversity and use of the area, especially songbirds.

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. 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. Although cattle do vocalize, cattle grazing is a dominant land use in the local area and the proposed level of grazing will not significantly increase the number of cattle in the general area.

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. This project generates revenue rather than requiring revenue to complete. The exact amount of revenue from the grazing lease will depend upon the number of AUM's grazed X the 2013 grazing rate. The 2013 grazing rate is established as the annual average private land grazing rate as determined by the MT Agricultural Statistics Service.

10f. Additional costs to MFWP associated with periodic monitoring of cattle grazing 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				

- Cattle grazing would occur outside the time frame of upland game bird and big game rifle seasons. Grazing will occur when use of the WMA is at its lowest annually.

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 grazing 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 grazing lease on the Isaac Homestead WMA will be used to improve vegetative conditions for pheasant and white tailed deer that utilize the WMA particularly during the spring, nesting, and brood rearing periods.

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 conditions in the long-term.

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>.

Copies of this environmental assessment will be distributed to neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project. 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., February 28, 2013** and can be mailed to the address below:

Isaac Homestead WMA Grazing 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)?

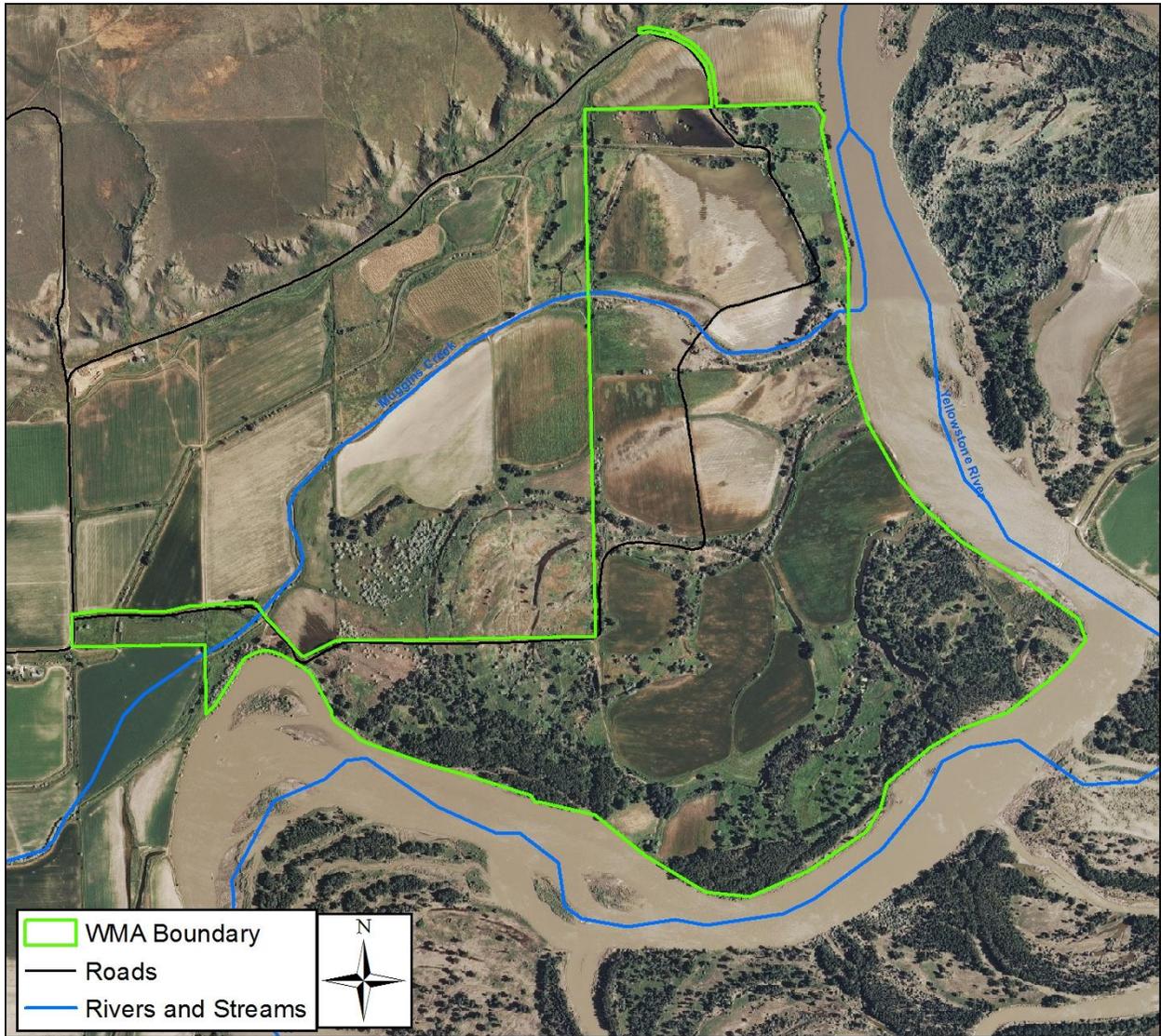
If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.

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

Grazing Plan – Isaac Homestead WMA

A 1-year agricultural lease is proposed for ~675 acres within the Isaac Homestead WMA. The area proposed for grazing has not been grazed for the past 7 years. Cattle will be allowed to graze from January 15, 2014 to March 15, 2014. Grazing in this time-frame is preferred because 1) public use of the WMA is at its annual lowest and 2) cattle will not disturb nesting or brood rearing pheasants.

Evaluation

The purpose of the lease is to remove decadent vegetation, promote new growth and increase vegetation diversity. To evaluate effectiveness, vegetation density and diversity will be measured before and after grazing. The results will be used to determine future benefits and use of grazing as a management tool on the WMA.

Stocking Rates

Stocking rates for the lease area will be determined based upon NRCS recommendations for AUM's for Treasure County soil types (available from <http://www.mt.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/ecs/range/aum/mt083aum.html>) and soil data for the project area from the NRCS Web Soil Survey (available from <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/WebSoilSurvey.aspx>). Stocking rates may be reduced based on the discretion of the lessee and area wildlife biologist.

Payment:

The rental due the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks will be the statewide private land grazing rate average for that year. Annual payments will vary depending upon AUMs grazed.

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

Special Conditions and Terms:

1. Stocking rates will be determined and agreed upon by the area wildlife biologist and the lessee, prior to any grazing.
2. 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.
3. Salt and mineral supplement is the responsibility of the lessee; salt grounds shall be moved periodically as designated by the area wildlife biologist.
4. The lessee is responsible for moving cattle and adhering to lease terms.