Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
March 25, 2014

Dear Interested Party:

This letter is to notify you that I have made a decision regarding Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) implementation of grazing lease renewal on a portion of the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area (BTWMA). My decision is to move forward with the proposed action. The 160 acre grazing lease will allow the removal of current vegetation by grazing as a management tool to enhance the subsequent availability and palatability of forage on that portion of the BTWMA described in the Environmental Assessment.

No modifications were made in the documents you received/reviewed after the public review period. Please consider your previous copies of the Environmental Assessment along with the stipulations of this Decision Notice as final.

Comments received regarding the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area grazing lease proposal are summarized in the enclosed Decision Notice. No changes have been made to the draft Environmental Analysis after consideration of public input. It is my recommendation to move forward with the proposed grazing lease renewal on a 160 acre portion of the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area with lessee Voegele's Inc.

Thank you for your interest and involvement.

Sincerely,

Gary Bertellotti
Region 4 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840
gbertellotti@mt.gov

DECISION NOTICE for the Draft Environmental Assessment:
Beartooth WMA Grazing Lease Renewal – Voegele's Inc.

Region 4 Headquarters
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION:
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to renew a grazing lease on 160 acres of the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area (BTWMA) for cattle grazing to better manage vegetation for wildlife to adjoining landowner (lessee) Voegele's Inc. for a 6-year period.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT AND PUBLIC REVIEW PROCESS
FWP is required to assess impacts to the human and physical environment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The Beartooth Wildlife Management Area grazing lease renewal proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in an Environmental Assessment. A 21-day public comment period ran from February 28 through March 21, 2014. Public notices of the draft Environmental Assessment were placed on the FWP web site and were announced in a news release to the area and statewide newspaper outlets. Hard copies were available at the FWP Region 4 office in Great Falls, and were offered via mail upon request.

ALTERNATIVE TO PROPOSED ACTION:

Alternative A:* *No Action

- Decadent residual vegetation would accumulate, and the area would be unattractive to elk and other big game species.
- Elk and other big game would likely utilize adjacent private land pastures.
- Increased risk of wildfire
- Installation of approximately 3 miles of fence required to separate this 160 acre parcel from the rest of the larger pasture at a cost of about $50,000.

Alternative B:* *Proposed Action

- Managed vegetation cycles across a larger rest rotation grazing system.
- Soil and plant disturbance that could benefit seedling establishment of desirable plant species.
- Seven of nine years during grazing treatment each pasture would have growing season rest for plant root development and maintenance.
- One of every five years the pasture would have complete rest from grazing for plant root development
- Provide for better spring and summer green-up vegetation conditions for elk, mule deer and other wildlife species; thereby reducing elk, mule deer and other big game usage of adjacent private property.
- Continued strong relations with area Landowners and continued public hunting access to lessee private lands as required by the grazing lease.

Future Fisheries program in summer 2013 about ½ mile north of Cottonwood Creek. This grazing fence allows the lessee to better manage cattle use of the riparian habitats of Cottonwood Creek. The 160 acres involved in the proposal includes ¼ mile of Cottonwood Creek.

-Our overall response is that the lessee pays very little to use this small portion of the WMA, with few restrictions, while FWP (the public) pay the taxes on the land. Admittedly, this is an awkward piece of property for FWP management. Therefore, FWP should seek to trade this tract for one that has similar or greater value to wildlife and would allow more efficient FWP management. Possibilities for this option should be discussed in the Decision Notice.

Discussions with the landowner to trade/purchase adjacent lands have occurred over the years. It was recently decided by the landowners to offer FWP a fee title sale of the entire 2,840 acre Whitetail Prairie parcel. The FWP Commission endorsed moving forward with the proposed acquisition at their March 13, 2014 meeting. Appraisal and a complete EA public process will follow summer/fall 2014.

-The EA states that, without this grazing lease that incorporates the pasture into a larger private pasture, FWP would have to build about 3 miles of new fence to enclose the 160-acre tract. We note that the entire exterior of the tract is only 2.25 miles. Please explain the discrepancy.

Due to the location of this parcel, steep and rugged topography limits running any fence line on exact boundaries. Should a fence be built to include the 160 acres in to the BTWMA, it have to be built as topography allows, making it longer than 2.25 miles as the exact boundary on a map indicates. It would most likely be 2.5 – 3 miles of fence to incorporate this parcel into the WMA, a very expensive project for the gain.

-The EA states that the lessee maintains pasture fences under this contract. However, the EA also states that the 160-acre tract is not fenced. What FWP fencing is the lessee required to maintain?

The lessee is required to maintain the FWP permanent boundary fence located in Section 12, which is utilized as the southern boundary of the grazing lease pasture. The east and west side of Section 12 is a common boundary fence which the lessee is also required to maintain, along with any interior grazing fence(s). Total FWP fence maintained by the lessee equals 2.0 miles.

-The EA states that the lease requires allowance of public hunting on lessee private lands. More information is needed to evaluate this public benefit from the lease. Is the lessee's land in Block Management? (If so, the lessee is already compensated for allowing public hunting.) Is there any information on how many hunters use this private land, and on any restrictions to this use?

The grazing lease requires the lessees allow public access on their private property as stated in the EA. The landowners allow hunting access (not through a FWP administered program) on the adjacent 2,840 acre Whitetail Prairie parcel. The landowners also sold a conservation easement on their Riverdale Ranch property to FWP in 2010, which provides perpetual hunting and recreational access on 850 acres and 4 miles of Missouri River frontage.

<u>Supporting public comments in support of Alternative B (Proposed Action) were as follows:</u>

-Cory, I would like to take this opportunity to register my full support to the proposed grazing lease as presented by your office. As a longtime member of the Russell Country Sportsmen's Assoc. and an active participant of the Devil's Kitchen Working Group , I know firsthand the present conditions of the Beartooth WMA and the benefits realized by the well planned ,controlled and designed grazing program administered by FW&P and conducted by the lease holder . The current conditions on the WMA, forage, habitat and wildlife populations attest to the value of the grazing program and the very professional management of the resource by FW&P. I have seen some of the comments submitted in opposition to this

STIPULATION OF THIS RECORD OF DECISION DOCUMENT
None.

MODIFICATIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT PLAN
No modifications to the EA is recommended.

DECISION
Utilizing the Environmental Analysis and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP that addresses the interests and issues identified for this proposed project. Given results of FWP's analysis coupled with the nature of the public comment, acceptance of this grazing proposal on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area is warranted. After review of this proposal and the corresponding majority public support and comment, it is my recommendation that FWP proceed with renewing the 160 acre grazing lease on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area with lessee Voegele's Inc for a 6 year period.

Signed,

Gary Bertellotti
Region 4 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840
gbertellotti@mt.gov

BTWMA Voegele's Inc EA Decision Notice Mailing List
Gallatin Wildlife Federation
John Borgreen
Safari Club International – Great Falls Chapter – Brad Lencioni
Pheasants Forever – Great Falls Chapter – Jim Stutzman
Tom McElroy
Patty Ehrhardt
Chase Hibbard
John and Sara Hiss

Loecker, Cory

From: Sarah [smhiss@hotmail.com]
Sent: Friday, February 28, 2014 12:18 AM
To: Loecker, Cory
Subject: Beartooth WMA

Cory,

I saw the EA for the proposed grazing lease on the beartooth and it has me wondering what the rest of the lease agreements look like. Can you provide me a copy of all of the current and potential grazing lease agreements for the wma? Or at least inform me on how to get a copy?

I would like to add 4 points/comments:

1) It was my understanding that this 160 acre parcel was NOT part of the wma. It certainly is not managed as par of the WMA in hunting season as it is a different hunting district than the wma.
2) I can't help but wonder how the fencing cost was estimated. I am a rancher and fencing cost is currently $5,000/mile. I have actually walked the 160 acre parcel and can say with confidence that it is not a unique fencing project. If you are willing to pay half of your estimate I am willing to do the work.
3) As a rancher I can say with a clear conscious that it is unacceptable to charge $1.35/aum. Fair grazing rates are $20/aum minimum. It is not appropriate for private landowners to see individual profit off of state land.
4) I appreciate that there is a use for cattle in land management. But you need to keep the cattle out of the riparian zone after the upland grasses are turning. If not the plant species with the highest water content are the desirable shrubs and forbs in the riparian strip. The EA failed to recognize that significant use and harm to the health of the riparian vegetation community has and will occur if the late summer grazing is allowed. And we all know the cattle are not consuming "decedent vegetation" during August.

Thanks for your work in managing the states wildlife and land.

John

Loecker, Cory

From: tricityinc@aol.com
Sent: Wednesday, March 19, 2014 8:35 AM
To: Loecker, Cory
Subject: Beartooth Grazing Proposal

My name is Brad Lencioni, and I am currently the President of the Great Falls Chapter of Safari Club International. The Great Falls Chapter is in favor of the grazing proposal set forth by FWP in cooperation with the landowners to use the Beartooth to graze their cattle on. We feel this is a win-win for all parties involved. This grazing system has worked well in the past, and should continue to do so in the future. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Brad Lencioni

Loecker, Cory

From: Tom McElroy [tmcelroy77@hotmail.com]
Sent: Thursday, March 20, 2014 6:35 AM
To: Loecker, Cory
Subject: Re: Beartooth Grazing Proposal

As a member of SCI and I currently serve on the board of directors I'm in full support of this grazing program implemented by fwp. I have hunted the Bear Tooth over the last eight years and have seen the benefit of this grazing program. This is a important tool in managing this resource.
Thank you for your consideration.

Concerned Sportsman,
Tom McElroy
Sent from my iPa

On Mar 19, 2014, at 8:43 AM, tricityinc@aol.com wrote:

> please send comments to corey, on this matter, Voegeles graze the Beartooth, justenough to promote regrowth . FWP requires their leases to allow public hunting. They graze early one year, late one year, and rest the 3rd year. this keeps a balance and works well to invite the elk to winter on the Beartooth. Please comment to corey.
>
> ----Original Message----
> From: tricityinc <tricityinc@aol.com>
> To: cloecker <cloecker@mt.gov>
> Sent: Wed, Mar 19, 2014 8:35 am
> Subject: Beartooth Grazing Proposal
>
> My name is Brad Lencioni, and I am currently the President of the Great Falls Chapter of Safari Club International. The Great Falls Chapter is in favor of the grazing proposal set forth by FWP in cooperation with the landowners to use the Beartooth to graze their cattle on. We feel this is a win-win for all parties involved. This grazing system has worked well in the past, and should continue to do so in the future. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.
>
> Brad Lencioni

Loecker, Cory

From: Julie and John Borgreen [jjjd2@bresnan.net]
Sent: Thursday, March 20, 2014 12:56 PM
To: Loecker, Cory
Cc: Bertellotti, Gary; Taylor, Graham; Richard Stuker Stuker; Hagener, Jeff; Kujala, Quentin
Subject: Comments BTWMA
Attachments: BTWMA-Voegele's Inc Grazing EA Packet 2014-2019 lease.pdf

Cory Loecker
Biologist,Reg. 4 FW&P
Great Falls , Mt.

Cory, I would like to take this opportunity to register my full support to the proposed grazing lease as presented by your office.
As a longtime member of the Russell Country Sportsmen's Assoc. and an active participant of the Devil's Kitchen Working Group , I
know first hand the present conditions of the Beartooth WMA and the benefits realized by the well planned ,controlled and designed
grazing program administered by FW&P and conducted by the lease holder . The current conditions on the WMA , forage, habitat
and wildlife populations attest to the value of the grazing program and the very professional management of the resource by FW&P.

I have seen some of the comments submitted in opposition to this proposed lease , and am frankly offended to say the least. Personally,
and as an active member of RCSA and the Devil's Kitchen Working Group , all the positive efforts over the years to be disputed and opposed
by folks that have never seen the WMA , even after repeated invitations is insulting, short sighted and counter productive to science based
resource management and the efforts of individuals ,organizations ,FW&P and the dedicated Dept. personnel .

Thank you for allowing me to comment and share my thoughts on this important issue.
Again, I offer my full support to this proposed action.

John Borgreen

Loecker, Cory

From: Ehrhardt, Patty [pehrhardt@PAML.com]
Sent: Thursday, March 20, 2014 11:49 AM
To: Loecker, Cory
Subject: FW: Beartooth Grazing Proposal

To Whom it May Concern:
I am Patty Ehrhardt and the Vice President of the Great Falls Chapter of Safari Club International (SCI). It is my understanding that Voegeles graze the Beartooth, just enough to promote regrowth. FWP requires their leases to allow public hunting. They graze early one year, late one year, and rest the 3rd year. this keeps a balance and works well to invite the elk to winter on the Beartooth.
We had a meeting last night of 14 people involved in the Great Falls Chapter and we all agreed that we are in favor of the grazing proposal set forth by FWP in cooperation with the landowners to use the Beartooth to graze their cattle on. We feel this is a win-win for all parties involved. This grazing system has worked well in the past, and should continue to do so in the future.
Regards, Patty

Patty Ehrhardt
Director Esoteric Sales & Marketing
C~406-868-7245
F~ 509-755-8870
pehrhardt@paml.com

----Original Message----
From: tricityinc <tricityinc@aol.com>
To: cloecker <cloecker@mt.gov>
Sent: Wed, Mar 19, 2014 8:35 am
Subject: Beartooth Grazing Proposal

My name is Brad Lencioni, and I am currently the President of the Great Falls Chapter of Safari Club International. The Great Falls Chapter is in favor of the grazing proposal set forth by FWP in cooperation with the landowners to use the Beartooth to graze their cattle on. We feel this is a win-win for all parties involved. This grazing system has worked well in the past, and should continue to do so in the future. Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Brad Lencioni

PAML EMAIL DISCLAIMER:
Information contained in this message may be privileged and confidential.
If the reader of this message is not the intended recipient, be notified
that any dissemination, distribution or copying of this communication is
strictly prohibited. If this communication is received in error, please

Loecker, Cory

From: Jim andKaren Stutzman [stutz292@hotmail.com]
Sent: Monday, March 10, 2014 2:10 PM
To: Loecker, Cory
Subject: Beartooth WMA Grazing EA Comments

To Whom it May Concern:

My name is Jim Stutzman and I am the Chairman of the Upper Missouri Pheasants Forever Chapter. I am providing comments on behalf of Upper Missouri PF regarding the draft Environmental Assessment (EA) concerning grazing of the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area.

Upper Missouri PF supports the EA as written. Prescribed grazing is a widely accepted habitat management tool. This proposal will enhance and improve habitat conditions for elk and mule deer. The current cooperators have been reliable WMA partners for over 2 decades. Maintaining this productive partnership makes sense fiscally, administratively and ecologically.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment. Please contact me if you have questions regarding PF's comments.

Sincerely,
Jim Stutzman, Upper Missouri PF
406-799-4393

GALLATIN WILDLIFE ASSOCIATION
P. O. Box 5276
Bozeman, MT 59717
(406) 586-1729

Beartooth WMA Grazing Lease
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
cloecker@mt.gov

The Gallatin Wildlife Association (GWA) is a non-profit volunteer wildlife conservation organization representing hunters, anglers and other wildlife advocates in Southwest Montana and elsewhere. Our mission is to protect habitat and conserve fish and wildlife. GWA supports sustainable management of fish and wildlife populations through fair chase public hunting and fishing opportunities that will ensure these traditions are passed on for future generations to enjoy. We support the Montana constitution which states: "the opportunity to harvest wild game is a heritage that shall forever be preserved" and that "the legislature shall provide adequate remedies to prevent unreasonable depletion of natural resources." We appreciate the opportunity to comment on this environmental analysis.

While the Voegele's lease involves only a small, 160-acre, outlier on the Beartooth Wildlife Management Area, it demonstrates serious issues, some of which occur on two other private grazing leases on Beartooth WMA and on many other FWP WMAs. Therefore, GWA believes it is very important to state our concerns with this small lease.

We strongly object to selling public resources at below-market value unless there are clear and demonstrated extra public benefits, which is not the case with this lease. The federal grazing rate, currently $1.35/AUM, is abhorrently below the market value of AUMs, and even well below the DNRC rate or the standard FWP rate. Is the federal grazing rate required under the Holter Lake land exchange agreement? If so, we must wonder how such a give-away occurred. Who are the participants in this agreement?

Our overall response is that the lessee pays very little to use this small portion of the WMA, with few restrictions, while FWP (the public) pay the taxes on the land. Admittedly, this is an awkward piece of property for FWP management. Therefore, FWP should seek to trade this tract for one that has similar or greater value to wildlife and would allow more efficient FWP management. Possibilities for this option should be discussed in the Decision Notice.

GWA supports effective, efficient and economically justified methods for producing public benefits from our WMAs. These comments are provided in that spirit. Thank you for providing the opportunity.

Sincerely,

Glenn Hockett, Volunteer president
Jim Bailey
Gallatin Wildlife Association

Fleischner, T. 2010. Livestock grazing and wildlife conservation in the American West: historical, policy and conservation biology perspectives. in Wild Rangelands: Conserving Wildlife While Maintaining Livestock in Semi-arid Ecosystems. J. T. du Toit et al. (eds.). Blackwell Publ.

Shamhart, J., F. King and K. Proffitt. 2012. Effects of a rest-rotation grazing system on wintering elk distributions at Wall Creek, Montana. Rangeland Ecology & Management 65(2):129-136.

Wagoner, S. J., L. A. Shipley, R. C. Cook and L. Hardesty. 2013. Spring cattle grazing and mule deer nutrition in a bluebunch wheatgrass community. J. Wildlife Management (we have a pre-publication copy, accepted January 2013. See recent issues of JWM.)

From: Corey Halvorson [corey.halvorson@hotmail.com]
Sent: Monday, March 24, 2014 3:42 PM - late
To: Loecker, Cory
Subject: Beartooth Grazing Proposal

Mr Loecker
Good afternoon, my name is Corey Halvorson and I have just finished discussing the proposed grazing of the Beartooth with some colleges and would like to throw my support behind this initiative. From my understanding teh grazing being permited is limited in scope in an effort to promote new growth which is the favored grasses ot wildlife while still providing a benefit the the cattle ranchers. This is obviously a win-win-win for the rancher, sportsman, and wildlife. This system has a track record of woking well in the past and I don't see why that would change now.

Thanks for considering my point of view.

Respectfully,
Corey Halvorson

Loecker, Cory

From: Chase Hibbard [chase@siebenlivestock.com]
Sent: Monday, March 03, 2014 1:10 PM
To: Loecker, Cory
Subject: RE: BTWMA - Voegeles Inc Grazing lease EA

Cory,

Looks good.

Chase

Loecker, Cory

From: Chase Hibbard [chase@siebenlivestock.com]
Sent: Monday, March 03, 2014 1:10 PM
To: Loecker, Cory
Subject: RE: BTWMA - Voegeles Inc Grazing lease EA

Cory,

Looks good.

Chase

From: Corey Halvorson [corey.halvorson@hotmail.com]
Sent: Monday, March 24, 2014 3:42 PM - late
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Corey Halvorson