

**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE**  
**for the**  
**Fleecer WMA Charcoal Gulch Habitat Project**

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**  
**Region 3, Bozeman**  
**May 12, 2014**

**Preface**

Fleecer WMA provides important winter range habitat for mule deer and elk, as well as year-round habitat for many other wildlife species. The Charcoal Gulch area of Fleecer WMA in particular provides an ecologically important mix of aspen, sagebrush, grassland, and forested habitat that meets the feeding, bedding, security and thermal cover needs of a variety of wildlife, especially wintering elk and mule deer. The Charcoal Gulch area has been recognized as a key elk winter range, as far back as 35 years, based on early survey reports. Winter surveys conducted annually since then confirm that this is still the case.

Due to climatic factors and land management practices over the past century, a large proportion of shrub land, grassland, and deciduous habitat are being lost to conifer expansion throughout the intermountain west. Comparison of air photos from 1989 to 2011 show that this is happening in the Charcoal Gulch area as well.

Current mule deer populations across Montana are at lower levels than they have been in the past decade. To address this on a statewide level, FWP recently eliminated most mule deer doe harvest opportunity, including in Hunting District 319 where this project is proposed. Another management action taken to address low deer populations in this area was to increase the lion quota in 2012 and in 2014. In addition to managing for predation and hunter harvest of the female segment of the population, sound game management should factor in the condition of important mule deer habitats and implement habitat improvements if appropriate, which is what this project proposes.

**Proposed Action**

Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP) proposes to improve habitat conditions on big game winter range in the Charcoal Gulch area of Fleecer WMA. The proposed action would remove competing Douglas-fir trees from approximately 25 acres of aspen and 70 acres of sagebrush-grasslands. In addition, approximately 50 acres of Douglas-fir forest stands would be selectively thinned by 15%. The proposed action is intended to restore productivity to decadent aspen stands by removing competing conifers; reverse the loss of sagebrush habitat caused by encroaching conifers; improve forest health by selectively thinning Douglas-fir stands impacted by insects, disease, and overcrowding; and minimize the threat of wildfire in the area by reducing fuels. Tree removal would be by hand. No new roads would be constructed. This is a non-commercial timber project.

**Public Process and Comments**

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on April 10, 2014.

Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 30 days (through May 9, 2014). Legal notices were printed in the *Montana Standard* (Butte) and the *Anaconda Leader*. The EA was also posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/>.

This project has been discussed with Skyline Sportsmen Association, local field staff for the BLM and Forest Service whose managed land is adjacent to the project area, permittees on the adjacent Forest Service allotment, and adjacent landowners to where the project is to occur. One party submitted a comment in support of the proposed action.

**Final Environmental Assessment**

The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

**Decision**

Based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment, it is my decision to approve the proposed action for implementation of the Fleecer WMA Charcoal Gulch Habitat project, pending FWP Commission approval.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



Patrick J. Flowers  
Region 3 Supervisor  
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date