



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION FWP PROPOSAL & INFORMATION SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: June 20, 2024

Agenda Item: Flathead Lake Wildlife Habitat Protection Area Rules

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: In 2009, FWP issued the Flathead Lake Islands Management Plan. This plan sought to address ways to balance recreational opportunities with resource conservation of the agency-owned islands on Flathead Lake, including Cedar, Bird, Wild Horse, Douglas, and Goose islands. FWP staff worked with a planning committee comprised of a wide diversity of stakeholders to develop a framework for recreation management on the islands. Although these strategies have been implemented to a large degree on Wild Horse Island, which is a unit of Flathead Lake State Park, implementation has been delayed on the remaining islands, which are designated as Wildlife Habitat Protection Areas (WHPAs).

As recreational use of the WHPA islands has grown, impacts to wildlife habitat on the islands have as well. The most frequently observed impact is associated with the lack of restroom facilities. During peak summer months, heavy day-use and camping have resulted in visible human feces, litter, fire scars, vandalism, and numerous pioneered campsites and trails. FWP staff have documented and cleaned up numerous fire rings and associated burn-pile debris on both Bird and Cedar islands, and, in 2020, a wildfire burned most of Bird Island. This fire likely was human caused.

FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) on Oct. 21, 2021, that proposed the development of composting latrines on Cedar and Bird islands, along with development of designated campsites, combined with length-of-stay and maximum campsite occupancy limits. The analysis yielded a decision to proceed with the development of the proposed infrastructure. Funds were allocated in 2022 to complete the installation.

The following recommendations are a departure from the public use rules (ARM 12.12.101-12.12.140), which would otherwise govern.

FWP recommends charging camping fees at Cedar and Bird islands to offset operational costs:

Rustic Campsite (per camping unit, per night)

- Resident = \$12
- Resident Senior/Disabled = \$6
- Nonresident = \$20

FWP also recommends implementing the following elements of the EA for the purpose of mitigating recreational impacts to these WHPA islands:

- Restrict maximum campsite occupancy to four people per site, and limit length of stay to three nights within a 14-day period on Cedar and Bird islands.
- Restrict Douglas and Goose islands as day-use only to conserve wildlife habitat.
- Restrict all recreational use (day-use and camping) during the waterfowl nesting season (March 1-July 15) on Bird, Douglas, and Goose islands.

- Prohibit campfires but allow gas or propane fueled camp stoves in accordance with prevailing fire restrictions on Bird and Cedar Islands. Prohibit campfires and all camp stoves on Douglas and Goose Islands.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP conducted a robust public process for the EA that included extensive media outlet coverage, outreach to interested parties, a virtual public information meeting, and a 30-day public comment period. FWP enjoyed strong public participation during these processes. Additionally, the department will solicit public comment prior to the June commission meeting. Public comments will be posted online and provided to commissioners at least two weeks prior to the June commission meeting.

Analysis & Alternatives:

Alternative A: No Action: Camping and other recreational activities on the islands would be governed by the public use rules (ARM 12.12.101-12.12.140).

Alternative B: Proposed Action: Installing composting toilets and establish designated campsites on Bird and Cedar islands to mitigate negative habitat impacts, reduce the potential for social conflicts, and reduce the overall impacts to existing vegetation. Camping fees would be charged to offset the cost of operations. The addition of signage would provide users with a better understanding about the history of the islands, FWP's regulations, and information about island wildlife habitat.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends implementing the proposed action to better manage recreation and associated impacts on the WHPAs. The intent is to allow a continuation of historic recreational use on the islands, while simultaneously reducing recreation related impacts to habitats.

Proposed Motion: I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopt the proposed recreation management measures and camping fees outlined in Alternative B for the Flathead Lake WHPA islands, Cedar, Bird, Douglas, and Goose.