

WILDLIFE HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM
REPORT TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COUNCIL



MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS

WILDLIFE DIVISION

September 2024



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	4
OVERVIEW.....	4
REPORTING PERIOD ACCOMPLISHMENTS (FY 23-24).....	7
Program Development and Activity.....	7
WHIP Grant Projects Awarded (FY 23-24)	9
2023	9
2024	10
OVERALL ACCOMPLISHMENTS.....	10
Summary of Improvements to Wildlife Habitat.....	10
Treated Acres	11
Priority Wildlife Habitat	11
Vegetation Monitoring Results	11
Summary of Past and Current Funding.....	14
PROGRAM EVALUATION AND ONGOING ADAPTATION	15
PREVIOUS EQC REPORTS.....	16

ABSTRACT

In this report, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) provides an overview of The Kelly Flynn Montana Wildlife Habitat Improvement Act accomplishments during the reporting period of July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2024. This report to the Montana Environmental Quality Council follows the outline laid out in MCA 87-5-807(c) and 5-11-210, as required in advance of the 2024 legislative session. This report is available electronically on the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program web page: <https://fwp.mt.gov/aboutfwp/grant-programs/wildlife-habitat-improvement>.

OVERVIEW

The Kelly Flynn Montana Wildlife Habitat Improvement Act (the Act), sponsored by Rep. Kelly Flynn, was passed into law during the 2017 Legislature. The purpose of the Act is to restore ecologically important wildlife habitat by managing noxious weeds at watershed or landscape scales, typically involving collaborative efforts over multiple landownerships. The Act makes available up to \$2M annually in federal Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration (P-R) funds through a competitive grant process. The Act is structured to support habitat restoration efforts across private, state, and federal lands that will have demonstratable benefits for wildlife. Grant applicants are responsible for providing non-federal matching funds. For each dollar of non-federal match provided for eligible activities, the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) can provide three dollars of grant funding (25%:75%). Program funds can be used to pay for herbicides and additives, biological control agents, vegetation restoration and reseeding materials, infrastructure materials for prescribed grazing improvements as a component of an overall integrated noxious weed management plan, related contracted services for applying treatments and installing restoration enhancements, grant administration and related administrative costs up to 10% of total project amount, and other weed or soil treatment methods recommended and approved by the WHIP Advisory Council (Table 1).

The process for awarding grants is described in statute (MCA 87-5-804) and administrative rule (ARM 12.9.1603-1606). The process includes opening a grant application period in the fall, reviews and recommendations by the WHIP Advisory Council, a decision by the Director of FWP on which proposals will move forward (based on formal input from the WHIP Advisory Council), and then further consideration by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through their separate grant application process. Awarded grants require two agreements with the project sponsor, a program agreement, and a sub-recipient agreement. Once the agreements are signed, this marks the start of a grant project. In addition to completing habitat restoration activities, the project sponsor is responsible for monitoring grant compliance and effectiveness of treatments, submitting bills for reimbursement, and completing scheduled reports including semi-annual progress reports, annual performance reports, annual vegetation monitoring reports, and a final report.

Currently, FWP administers 12 active WHIP projects that successfully made it through the award process, with two projects in the application review phase. The map below (Figure 1) provides an overview of WHIP project locations, the year awarded, and the amount of federal funding awarded. More detailed information on new projects and accomplishments for existing projects are in the Reporting Period Accomplishments and Overall Accomplishments sections of this report.

TABLE 1. MEMBERSHIP ON THE WILDLIFE HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM ADVISORY COUNCIL.

	Name	City Mailing Address	Organization	Representing
Voting	Amy Adler	Forsyth	Rosebud County	Eastern Montana County Weed District Supervisor
	Julia Altemus	Missoula	Montana Wood Products Association	Timber Industry
	Amber Burch	Dillon	Beaverhead County	Montana Weed Control Association
	Rick Sandru	Twin Bridges		Livestock Producer
	Karen Laitala	Deer Lodge	Powell County	Western Montana County Weed District Supervisor
	Chris Marchion	Anaconda	Montana Wildlife Federation	Hunting Organization
	Dean Pearson	Missoula	Rocky Mountain Research Station	Biological Research and Control Interests
	VACANT			Farming Representative
	Ray Shaw	Sheridan		Commercial Herbicide Applicator
	Ron Trippet	Kalispell	NW Montana Back Country Horsemen	Multiple Use Recreation Organization
Non-Voting	VACANT			Tribal Representative
	Jasmine Chaffee	Helena	Department of Agriculture	Montana Weed Coordinator
	Michelle Cox	Missoula	US Forest Service	US Forest Service
	Charles Hueth	Helena	US Bureau of Reclamation	US Bureau of Reclamation
	Chase Scheffler	Great Falls	US Fish and Wildlife Service	US Fish and Wildlife Service
	Mike Hamel	Helena	Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation	Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation
	Brenda Witkowski	Miles City	US Bureau of Land Management	US Bureau of Land Management

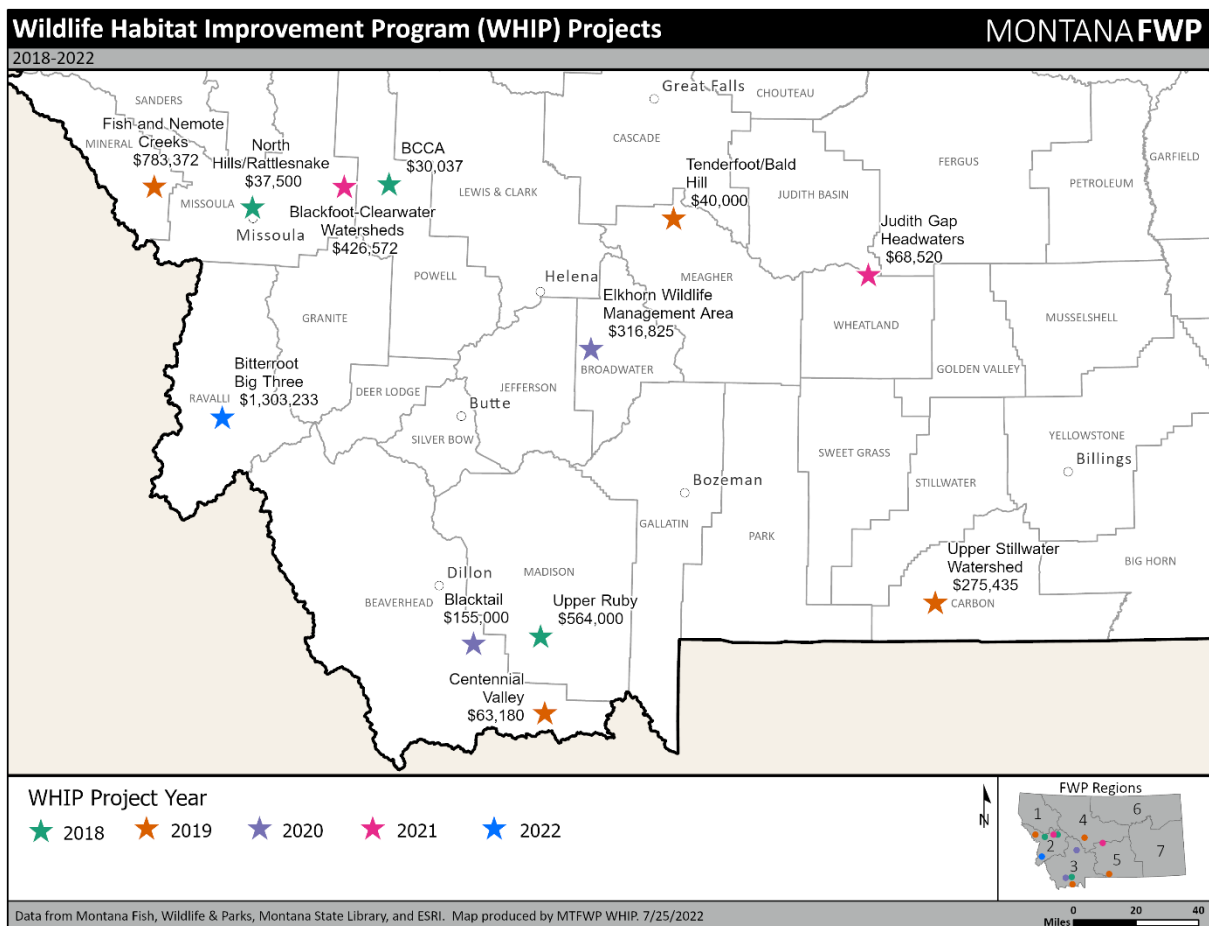


FIGURE 1. WILDLIFE HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM PROJECTS AWARDED, 2018-2024. FWP IS IN THE PROCESS OF ESTABLISHING TWO NEW GRANTS THAT HAVE YET TO BE AWARDED.

REPORTING PERIOD ACCOMPLISHMENTS (FY 23-24)

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AND ACTIVITY

Advisory Council WHIP Project Tour

WHIP Advisory Council members, along with FWP biologists and managers, Missoula and Powell County Weed Coordinators, USFS range managers, and other stakeholders, gathered on June 28th, 2023 to tour the North Hills/Rattlesnake & Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA) WHIP Projects - both projects funded in 2018. Tour attendees viewed herbicide treatment areas on public lands, private land partner properties, and areas with unique management challenges including high recreation use, limited access for spray crews, and difficult terrain. Attendees viewed landscape scale work that is being completed by the Missoula County Department of Ecology and Extension and Powell County Weed district and its partners.



FIGURE 2. WHIP COUNCIL MEMBERS AND STAKEHOLDERS PROJECT TOUR, BLACKFOOT COMMUNITY CONSERVATION AREA, JUNE 2023

Field Visits

WHIP coordinator(s) at FWP have conducted site visits on 9 WHIP projects to date: Upper Ruby, Blackfoot Community Conservation Area, North Hills/Rattlesnake, Centennial Valley, Tenderfoot Bald Hills, Upper Stillwater, Fish and Nemote Creeks, Blacktail, and the Elkhorns. (Figure 3-4). The purpose of a site visit is for FWP to ensure that projects are on track to meet their goals and objectives by the end of the grant period and that project actions follow the agreed upon Scope of Work. Site visits are also important for evaluating whether vegetation monitoring efforts follow the WHIP protocol and are representative of the treatment areas. At site visits the WHIP coordinator can provide project support where needed – assist with establishing monitoring sites, offer ideas on ways to effectively spend grant funds, and answer any questions that project sponsors and partners may have. Site visits are also an opportunity to get a look at other habitat work being done in coordination with noxious weed

management to amplify wildlife habitat benefits. For example, within the North Hills/Rattlesnake WHIP project area, an aspen regeneration project is being implemented along with WHIP weed control treatments to improve elk, deer, and upland game bird habitat.



FIGURE 3. LEFT-MECINUS RANTHINUS LARVAE ON DALMATIAN TOADFLAX, RIGHT-DALMATIAN TOADFLAX BOCONTROL MONITORING SITE



FIGURE 4. HOUNDSTONGUE ALONG HIGHLY USED RECREATIONAL CORRIDOR IN STILLWATER VALLEY

Vegetation Monitoring

As required by the WHIP program, project partners have begun establishing and reading vegetation monitoring transects within treatment areas following the WHIP program protocol. Sites should be monitored prior to treatment and several years after treatment (schedule depends on treatment type) to evaluate changes in plant communities over time. Some project sponsors and partners have found it challenging to commit staff time and resources to monitoring efforts. FWP has written administrative rule amendments into effect as of 2024, that will help in aiding grant recipients with monitoring and administration efforts (See Program Evaluation and Ongoing Adaptation). Efforts and discussions are also underway between FWP staff and the WHIP Advisory Council on creating a Monitoring Sub-Committee to further evaluate and analyze the monitoring data presented to FWP through annual reports (See the Vegetation Monitoring Results section for a summary of project monitoring.)

COVID-19 & Drought Setbacks

WHIP project work was reduced or delayed on some projects in 2023 and 2024 due to unique circumstances and challenges including staff changes and recovery from Covid-19 related issues. In addition, a wet spring and flooding events in 2023 limited work on some WHIP projects. FWP has been providing support to project sponsors to alter treatment plans and schedules to meet their WHIP project goals. The 5-year grant length gives project sponsors some flexibility to shift work as unforeseeable circumstances arise and the WHIP coordinator can help make amendments to individual grant agreements as needed. To date, the WHIP coordinator has received three requests from project sponsors for grant extensions due to these environmental and staffing challenges.

Program Outreach and Education

The WHIP coordinator has presented information and updates on the WHIP program and how to apply at Montana Weed Control Association trainings and other local interest group meetings. The coordinator has reached out to other partners such as Pheasants Forever, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, USFW, DNRC, and the BLM to provide program overviews and promote the WHIP program. The coordinator has provided guidance to WHIP applicants and project sponsors as questions and/or concerns arise. Montana Conservation Districts included a WHIP FAQ sheet and program overview in their yearly newsletter to help increase awareness and interest in the program. Outreach and education efforts to weed management organizations and the public will continue.

Program Coordination

Andrew Amidon started as the new WHIP coordinator as of January 2024.

WHIP GRANT PROJECTS AWARDED (FY 23-24)

2023

FWP opened an application period from September 1st, 2022 – November 23rd, 2022 and received no applications for 2023. The WHIP program coordinator along with the advisory council are seeking to understand the reasons for lack of participation and applications. FWP distributed surveys to key agencies, partners, and private landowners across Montana with the intention of gathering more information. Reasons for not participating in the program were mixed with complexity of application, capacity of organizations and staff, and lack of interest from landowners as main factors influencing non-participation in the program.

2024

In the fall of 2023, the WHIP program opened an application period from September 8th – November 22nd and received two applications. Both applicants were previous WHIP grant recipients:

BCCA WHIP CONTINUATION PROJECT

The BCCA Continuation Project was submitted by the Powell County Weed District and project partners include the Blackfoot Challenge. The BCCA is located in the Blackfoot watershed, near Ovando Mountain. Forming the southern border of the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat Wilderness areas and lying just north of the Blackfoot River, the area encompasses important wildlife habitat- important transition zones between wilderness, national forest, productive valley bottoms and riparian and wetland areas.

- Total Project: 981 acres
- Priority Wildlife Habitat: 5,609 acres
- Weed Treatment Area: 398 acres
- WHIP Funds Requested: \$49,500
- Cash Match Funds: \$16,500
- Grant Length: 5 years

UPPER RUBY WATERSHED CONTINUATION PROJECT

The Upper Ruby Watershed WHIP Continuation project was submitted by the Ruby Valley Conservation District and project partners include Ruby Valley Grazing Association, Ledford Creek Grazing Association, private landowners, the Bureau of Land Management, and the US Forest Service. The Upper Ruby Watershed Management Cooperative Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project (URWMCWHIP) is within the headwaters of the Ruby River Watershed, Madison County in Southwest Montana. The upper Ruby Watershed is bounded by the Gravelly, Greenhorn, Snowcrest, Ruby, and Sweetwater Hills mountain ranges.

- Total Project Area: 280,000 acres
- Priority Wildlife Habitat: 382,500
- Weed Treatment Area: 5,440 acres
- WHIP Funds Requested: \$701,250
- Cash Match Funds: \$233,750
- Grant Length: 5 years

OVERALL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

SUMMARY OF IMPROVEMENTS TO WILDLIFE HABITAT

A requirement of MCA 87-5-807.

Improvements to wildlife habitat are based on three different measures:

1. Directly **treated acres**, involving some combination of herbicides, biocontrol, reseeding, and changes in grazing management.
2. Acres of **priority wildlife habitat** that benefit from WHIP projects. Priority wildlife habitat is defined as plant communities or settings that provide a unique, high value habitat, important to one or more priority wildlife species (species of conservation concern or game species that are

recognized by the state of Montana for their ecological, economic, or recreational values). Acres are estimated by the project sponsor based on the larger landscape that benefits from the project treatments. That is, wildlife that use the treated areas also use the larger landscape. And, if treatment areas were left untreated, these surrounding habitat areas would likely be impacted by continued weed expansion.

3. Actual changes in plant community composition and cover, based on **vegetation monitoring** results.

TREATED ACRES

TABLE 2. TOTAL ACRES OF NOXIOUS WEEDS TREATED USING WHIP PROGRAM DOLLARS (FEDERAL AND CASH MATCH). TREATMENTS INCLUDE HERBICIDE APPLICATION, BIOCONTROL RELEASES, AND VEGETATION RESTORATION AND RESEEDING (GRAZING IMPROVEMENTS HAVE NOT BEEN IMPLEMENTED IN ANY WHIP PROJECTS TO DATE).

Grant year	Number of WHIP projects	Acres treated*
2018	3	5,634 ac
2019	4	17,629 ac
2020	2	4,888 ac
2021	2	2,143 ac
2022	1	3,912 ac
2024	2	Applications in review phase
Total	14	34,206 ac

* Cumulative acreage for the grant year cohort.

** Treated acres for the late 2023 – early 2024 season will not be reported to FWP until after this report is submitted.

PRIORITY WILDLIFE HABITAT

TABLE 3. TOTAL ACRES OF PRIORITY WILDLIFE HABITAT BENEFITTING FROM WHIP PROJECTS.

Grant year	Number of WHIP projects	Acres of priority wildlife habitat*
2018	3	258,024 ac
2019	4	401,143 ac
2020	2	307,351 ac
2021	2	122,380 ac
2022	1	434,000 ac
2024**	2	285,739 ac
Total	14	1,808,637 ac

* Cumulative acreage for each grant year cohort.

**In review phase with USFWS, not included in acreage

VEGETATION MONITORING RESULTS

Weed treatment monitoring reports are current as of the 2023 season. Over 20 vegetation monitoring transects, and 4 biological control transects have been established for projects from 2021 to 2023. While still early in treatment and monitoring efforts, preliminary results indicate an overall reduction in target noxious weed species cover and a stability or increase in desirable perennial grasses,

forbs, and shrubs. An increase in annual grasses and bare ground may indicate a need for follow-up management actions to promote native plant establishment, such as reseeding, soil amendments, and continued weed treatments.

Because of annual fluctuations in site conditions such as drought, wet springs, and disturbance, it will be important to monitor treatment sites for several years to confirm trends in plant communities. Below (Figures 5, 6 and 7) are final monitoring results for the Upper Ruby WHIP Project, initiated in 2018. Results show a significant reduction in noxious weeds 3- and 5-years post treatment, and a positive response in perennial grass cover. Shrub and forb recovery are anticipated to increase following the last years of treatments. Monitoring pre- and post- treatment can help indicate the trend of a plant community in these ecologically important habitats. Figure 7 below shows a monitoring plot in a newly discovered patch of *Ventenata* among Knapweed skeletons on the Blackfoot Clearwater Wildlife Management Area, a critical area for wintering elk and mule deer.

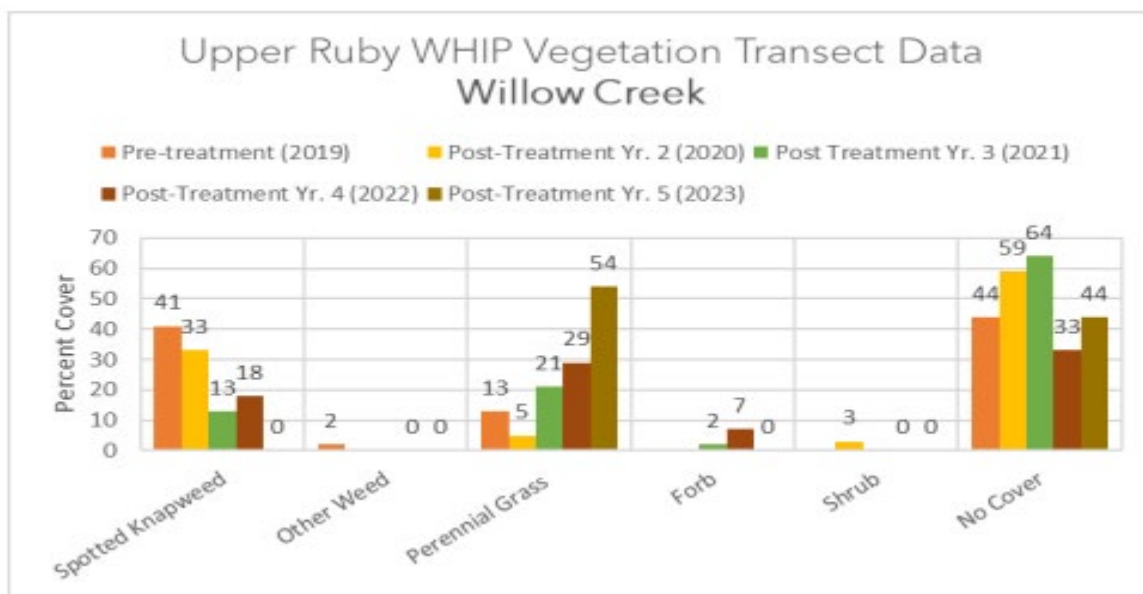


FIGURE 4. WILLOW CREEK, UPPER RUBY WHIP TRANSECT DATA, FINAL.

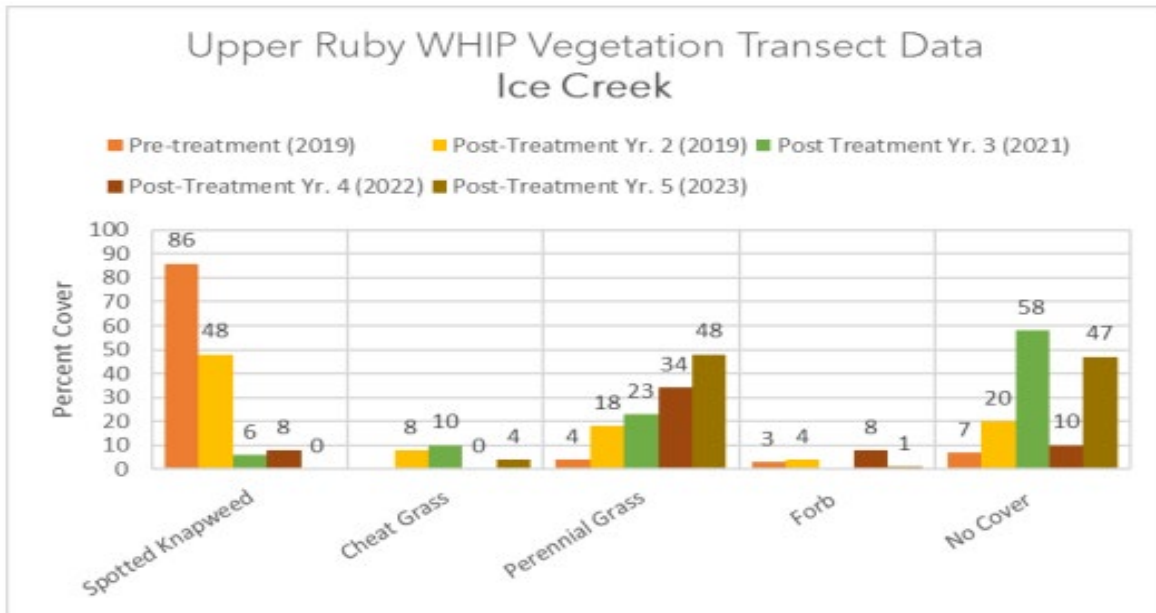


FIGURE 6. ICE CREEK, UPPER RUBY WHIP TRANSECT DATA, FINAL.

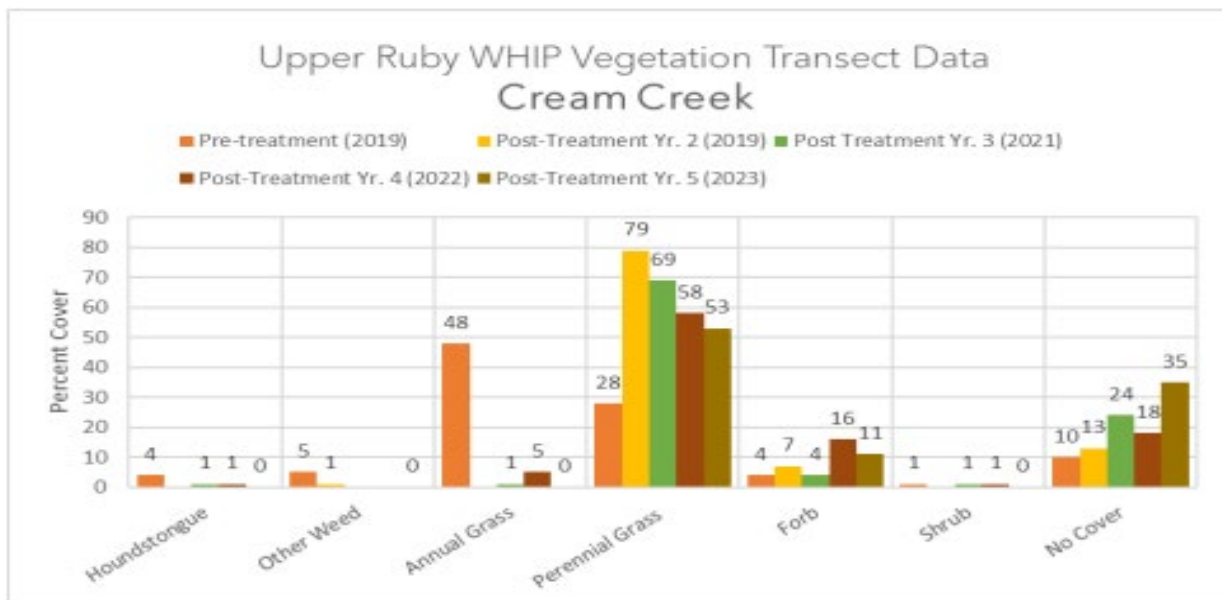


FIGURE 7. CREAM CREEK, UPPER RUBY WHIP TRANSECT DATA, FINAL.



FIGURE 8. TRANSECT LOCATIONS ON THE BLACKFOOT CLEARWATER WHIP PROJECT, SHOWING VENTENATA AND KNAPEWEED INFESTATIONS.

SUMMARY OF PAST AND CURRENT FUNDING

TABLE 4. FEDERAL PITTMAN-ROBERTSON WILDLIFE RESTORATION (P-R) DOLLARS AWARDED TO WHIP PROJECTS BY YEAR. AS OF FY22 END, ALL AWARDED GRANTS REMAIN ACTIVE AND NO PROJECTS HAVE BEEN CLOSED.

Grant year	Number of WHIP projects	P-R dollars awarded
2018	3	\$631,537.50
2019	4	\$1,161,987.00
2020	2	\$471,825.00
2021	2	\$495,092.00
2022	1	\$1,303,233.00
2024*	2	\$750,750.00
Total	14	\$4,814,424.50

*Projects still in review

PROGRAM EVALUATION AND ONGOING ADAPTATION

The WHIP coordinator and other FWP Wildlife Division staff have evaluated WHIP projects through site visits, required semi-annual and annual performance reports, and frequent communication with project sponsors. In general, project sponsors find the WHIP program to be highly valuable and effective for getting important weed management work done in priority wildlife habitats. Insights from project sponsors and partners include: the importance of planning and coordination throughout the WHIP process, from the grant application to project completion; the importance of having a single project leader that can coordinate communication and work plans across all project partners; and the need to consider weed management work and funding sources after the initial 5-year WHIP grant period so that positive changes to wildlife habitat continue. Project sponsors have also mentioned the challenges encountered while trying to get WHIP project work done including COVID-19 restrictions, staffing shortages, drought conditions, fire risk, wet spring conditions, and winter conditions in the fall. Such setbacks should be considered during the grant application and review process as they may affect the amount of work a project can feasibly accomplish during the 5-year grant period.

The WHIP Advisory Council met twice during the reporting period, through virtual platforms and in person, to review new WHIP grant applications and to discuss other program business. Council members continue to provide detailed technical reviews of project proposals and inquire further with applicants to ensure that projects will be beneficial and successful. FWP appreciates the Council's dedication and support for WHIP. During council meetings, members discuss the goals, needs, and challenges of the program. Conversations have centered on the need to allow a portion of grant funds to be used towards grant administration and vegetation monitoring efforts, which is crucial for getting program participation from small organizations that do not have the staff or resources to cover these required tasks. The Council has also agreed that additional weed treatment options should be included in the program to allow for more flexibility, better control of weeds, and greater improvement to wildlife habitat.

As a result of discussions during council meetings and feedback from project sponsors and partners, the Council recommended specific statutory changes to the WHIP program. House Bill 86, sponsored by Rep. Kenneth Walsh, was adopted and signed into law during the 2023 legislative session. Those amendments are as follows:

1. Added "Kelly Flynn" to the title of the Act
2. Removed sunset date of June 2023 and continue to offer up to \$2M/year in grants (consistent with current program statute).
3. Added new language (MCA 87-5-806(4)) to allow up to 10% overhead to be taken for grant administration, vegetation monitoring, and related administrative costs.
4. Added new language (MCA 87-5-806(4)) to allow additional weed treatment options that are approved by the WHIP Council.

PREVIOUS EQC REPORTS

- [2022 WHIP Program Report to the EQC](#)
- [2020 WHIP Program Report to the EQC](#)
- [2018 WHIP Program Report to the EQC](#)

