

WILDLIFE HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

REPORT TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COUNCIL

MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE AND PARKS



WILDLIFE DIVISION

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ABSTRACT

This report provides an overview and update of accomplishments by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) pertaining the Montana Wildlife Habitat Improvement Act, since the Act's passage during the 2017 Legislature. 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 2019 Legislative Session. This report is available electronically on the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program web page:

<http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/habitat/wildlife/programs/whip/default.html>

OVERVIEW

The 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 habitats 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, the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) can provide three dollars of grant funding. Program funds can be used to pay for herbicides and additives, biological control agents, materials for vegetation restoration and reseeding, infrastructure materials for establishing grazing improvements, and for related services for applying treatments and installing restoration enhancements.

The process for awarding grants is described in statute (MCA 87-5-804) and administrative rule (ARM 12.9.1603-1606). The process starts with FWP opening a grant application period. At the close of the application period, staff review each application for completeness and meeting eligibility requirements. Grant applications are then forwarded to the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program Advisory Council for scoring and ranking. The scoring process culminates with a meeting of the Council members where applicants have an opportunity to answer questions and the Council votes on recommendations for funding. The Director of FWP considers the recommendations of the Advisory Council and makes a final determination which applications should be promoted further in the process. Successful applicants work with FWP to complete an Environmental Assessment and make necessary adjustments to assure proper treatment methodologies and minimizing negative environmental impacts. FWP then submits a grant application for P-R funding to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. For each awarded grant,

FWP will establish a sub-recipient agreement with the Project Sponsor. 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 and submitting an annual progress report and a final report.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Program Development

Outreach – Representative Flynn conducted considerable work, including numerous conversations with individuals involved with land management and noxious weed management, prior to introducing HB434 to the 2017 Legislature. As a result, many operators involved with noxious weed management across Montana were aware of and engaged in the legislative process and are aware of the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP). To help key individuals better understand how the program would work and what opportunities were available, FWP made presentations on WHIP to the Montana Weed Control Association and to county weed coordinators in both eastern and western Montana. FWP developed a program web page and news releases for informing the public of the program, encouraging input during the administrative rule making process, making the public aware of the opportunity to serve on the WHIP Advisory Council, and for encouraging submission of grant applications.

Administrative Rules – The Montana Wildlife Habitat Improvement Act required development and adoption of administrative rules. FWP met with Rep. Flynn while drafting the rules to ensure the rules were crafted in a manner consistent with the Act. ARM 12.9.1601 through 12.9.1606 provide definitions, additional details for what are eligible expenditures, application procedures, information required in grant applications, scoring and ranking details, and grant requirements. These rules are located within Wildlife Division Subchapter 16 entitled “Wildlife Habitat Noxious Weed Grant Program” and were adopted as final on March 31, 2018.

Advisory Council – The Act established a 19-member Advisory Council to provide oversight for the program and to make funding recommendations on individual grant applications. In January 2018, FWP opened a 30-day application period with a news release and numerous phone calls and emails to encourage broad participation in the Advisory Council membership application process. A total of 24 applications were received for the non-agency positions on the Council. The following table lists the current council membership. The member representing a “Multiple Use Recreation Organization” was filled by Mr. Doug Abelin, who has since resigned. FWP will be filling that vacant slot prior to the next grant application ranking process.

Table 1. Membership on the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program Advisory Council.

First Name	Last Name	City Mailing Address	Organization	Representing
Doug	Abelin*	Helena	Capital Trail Vehicle Association	Multiple Use Recreation Organization
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
Kelly	Flynn	Townsend		Livestock Producer
Karen	Laitala	Garrison	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
Rick	Sandru	Twin Bridges		Farming
Ray	Shaw	Sheridan		Commercial Herbicide Applicator
Dale	Becker	Pablo	Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes	Tribes
David	Burch	Helena	Department of Agriculture	Montana Weed Coordinator
Randy	Gazda	Ovando	US Fish and Wildlife Service	US Fish and Wildlife Service
Mary	Manning	Missoula	US Forest Service	US Forest Service
Taryn	Preston	Helena	US Bureau of Reclamation	US Bureau of Reclamation
Dan	Dobler	Helena	Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation	Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation
Carmela	Romerio	Billings	US Bureau of Land Management	US Bureau of Land Management

* Mr. Abelin has resigned from the Council. FWP will be filling this vacancy prior to the next grant application ranking process.

Program Coordinator Position – FWP established a modified full-time position for coordinating the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program. As of the writing of this update, FWP is in the process of filling this position. The department is proposing to make this a base position, for consideration by the 2019 Legislature.

The Coordinator Position is responsible for fulfilling annual administrative processes and conducting day to day management oversight to ensure WHIP is operated effectively and efficiently with outcomes that are biologically defensible, using appropriate business processes. This includes establishing grant opportunities, outreach to prospective applicants, managing the grant review process, assisting in and reviewing Montana Environmental Policy Act assessments for each project, assembling information for P-R grant applications, establishing grant agreements, developing and conducting standard business practices that includes transitioning the program to the Montana WebGrants system, staffing the advisory council, conducting field evaluations for compliance and effectiveness monitoring, and serving as a technical expert on noxious weeds, herbicides, treatments, wildlife habitats, and native plant communities.

Grant Application Schedule - FWP conducted the first request for grant applications during January/February 2018, with the intent of making funding available by fall 2018. Here forward, FWP intends to open grant application periods during the fall of each year (early October through mid-December), with the intent of making funding available during the following year's field season. This timing will allow land management agency staff, county weed districts, landowners, and weed contractors who are busy during the summer/fall field season to assemble grant applications after the weed control season has concluded. This schedule will begin with the second grant application period opening in early October 2018, for funding projects that would start in 2019.

Grants

FWP opened a 45-day application period in January and received 9 grant applications, requesting a total of \$1.11 million. Of these, the Advisory Council voted to fund 3 of the applications, totaling \$631,527. Director Williams fully concurred with the Council's recommendation. As of the writing of this report, FWP is working with each of the applicants to complete environmental assessments and assemble information for submitting applications for Pitman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration funding.

They are as follows:

- Blackfoot Community Conservation Area Weed Management for Enhanced Wildlife Habitat
 - Location: Blackfoot Community Forest north of Ovando
 - Request: \$30,038
 - Longevity: 3 years
- North Hills-Rattlesnake WHIP Project
 - Location: North of Missoula on private and national forest lands
 - Request: \$37,489

- Longevity: 4 years
- Upper Ruby Weed Management Cooperative
 - Location: Southwest Madison County, south of Sheridan and Alder
 - Request: \$564,000
 - Longevity: 5 years

Improvements to Wildlife Habitat

This section of the report is a requirement of MCA 87-5-807. FWP is presently working with the three selected applicants to secure funding. There is nothing to report for this section at this time.

Summary of Past and Current Funding

This section of the report is a requirement of MCA 87-5-807. As described earlier, funding has yet to be secured for the first round of selected projects.