

2023 Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) Grant Application Instructions

Application Deadline: November 23, 2022 by 5:00pm

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks – Wildlife Division – PO Box 200701 – Helena, MT 59620

Grant Program Background

The 2017 Montana Legislature passed House Bill 434, which established the Montana Wildlife Habitat Improvement Act. The Act authorizes up to \$2M of federal Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act funding to be distributed through the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) for conducting restoration work on ecologically important wildlife habitats through management activities of state and county listed noxious weeds. This includes herbicide, biocontrol, and mechanical treatments, restoration seedings, and grazing improvements as part of an integrated weed management plan to restore priority wildlife habitat.

Eligible WHIP Expenditures

Grant dollar expenditures are limited to herbicides and additives, biological control agents, materials required for restoration seeding, fencing for prescribed grazing management (permanent electric and barbed wire) and associated contracted services for the above treatments and improvements. Grant funds can only be expended by reimbursement (see Grant Award and Implementation section for more information).

Non-federal cash match expenditures can include all the above plus additional infrastructure costs necessary for establishing prescribed grazing such as stock tanks, pipelines, spring development, and/or wells, and associated contracted installation services.

All grant applications require signed letters of commitment from each participant contributing non-federal matching cash. Each dollar of matching cash can leverage three dollars of grant funds (25%:75%). *Administration or overhead costs are not applicable.*

How to Submit a WHIP Grant

Application Submission: Application forms must be submitted electronically at <https://funding.mt.gov> using the online WebGrants system. Applicants new to WebGrants will need to register with WebGrants and choose Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks as your agency of interest for grant programs.

Environmental Assessments (EA) do not need to be completed with the grant application. Applicants will be required to complete an EA after the funding recommendations have been approved by the Director of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. However, FWP encourages starting the EA process prior to or

immediately following the Advisory Council meeting in January to ensure a timely application submission to the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS).

Grant Deadline: Applications must be submitted using WebGrants no later than 5:00 pm on November 23, 2022.

WHIP Questions: WHIP applications are complicated. FWP strongly encourages contacting the WHIP Coordinator, Smith Wells, at 406-444-7291 or smith.wells@mt.gov for questions and guidance with your project design to ensure compliance with the program requirements.

Grant Application Information and Requirements

Information for a Successful Grant Application:

- The WHIP Advisory Council recommends working with the local county weed district coordinator to provide assistance with herbicide selection for the site and type of noxious weeds to be controlled.
- A single WHIP application funding request cannot exceed the \$2M program funding limit.
- Grant and cash match (non-federal) funds **must** be expended on treatment areas that are within priority wildlife habitats.
- A WHIP grant period typically starts July 1st and ends on June 30th of the last year of the grant project. Only cash match is available to expend July 1st. Grant dollars are available for reimbursement only after agreements are signed, which may take up to two months after grant approval. Plan your noxious weed treatment schedule accordingly.
- The project area needs to be of landscape scale, such as a watershed or ecologically based unit, typically involving multiple landowner types (private, state, federal). And the project area **must** include ecologically important wildlife habitat that is impacted by noxious weed infestations.
- Grant applicants should work with their local FWP wildlife biologist to help determine if the proposal involves priority wildlife habitat that is directly threatened by noxious weed infestations. The project **must enhance** priority habitats for one or more priority wildlife species through control, management, or eradication of noxious weeds. Make sure to include the collaborative work with FWP in the narrative description, it is an important component of the grant planning process and application. Applicants should include *a letter of support* by the local FWP wildlife biologist, as some Advisory Council members look specifically for this letter.
- The applicant needs to contact each landowner within the WHIP project area to determine type of hunting access and hunter days for that landowner. Accessibility for public hunting within the project area is an important criterion for ranking WHIP applications.
- See the WHIP Grant Application Scoring section for the full list of application scoring criteria.

Vegetation Monitoring:

The purpose of monitoring is to evaluate change in plant communities over time. All WHIP projects are required to monitor a representative portion of the noxious weed treatments to help determine if management objectives are being met. The WHIP Administrative Rules require grantees to use repeatable quantitative and qualitative vegetation monitoring for pre- and post-treatment conditions. The following are the monitoring requirements for the type of weed treatment:

- For herbicide and cultural treatments, conduct vegetation monitoring at representative locations during the treatment year (pre-treatment) and three consecutive years post-treatment using the WHIP Vegetation Monitoring Protocol.
- For biocontrol treatments, monitor targeted noxious weeds and native vegetation response at the release location during the treatment year (pre-treatment) and years three and five post-treatment, and monitor for post-treatment occurrence of biocontrol agents using the WHIP Biocontrol Monitoring Protocol.
- For prescribed grazing projects, conduct vegetation monitoring at representative locations before the implementation of the grazing plan (pre-treatment) and years three, five, and ten of the grazing plan.

Required Application Attachments:

- A. **Maps.** Attach project maps to the grant application in WebGrants that provide the following information:
1. the WHIP project area,
 2. proximity to recognizable towns, cities, or landmarks.
 3. priority wildlife habitat areas,
 4. landowner type of all participating lands – (all maps should include public/private ownership using standard colors),
 5. general location of infestations of state or county listed noxious weeds,
 6. treatment areas that would be funded both with WHIP grant and cash match funding and the types of weed treatments within these areas (herbicide-aerial; herbicide-ground/spot spraying; biocontrol-insect type; reseeding; and prescribed grazing),
 7. private property boundaries of all participating lands, labeled with landowner name and type of hunting access or a corresponding legend/table with boundary colors, landowner names, and type of hunting access, and
 8. approximate locations of monitoring transects.

These mapped components may be included in an inset map or in multiple maps at different scales. Each map must have a legend, north arrow, and scale indicator. Make sure the boundary lines for the various required items are easy to see and understand.

- B. **Contribution Statements.** Each landowner that is contributing to the grant's cash match (non-federal) must sign a WHIP Partner Contribution Statement. Attach all the signed contribution statements to the grant application. It is best to have one document with all statements (scan the statements in as one pdf file is preferred).
- C. **Grazing Plan.** If prescribed grazing is proposed as a treatment in the WHIP application, please see further information below, including required components of the grazing plan.
- D. **Letters of Support.** As suggested, letters of support are optional but can help make a compelling case for funding, including letters from: 1) the local FWP wildlife biologist 2) any participating WHIP partners, or 3) other pertinent parties.

Prescribed Grazing Treatment Requirements

The WHIP program can be used for cost sharing on fencing improvements (barbed wire and permanent electric) where livestock grazing has caused a decline in native plant communities and facilitated weed infestations (see the Eligible Grazing Expenditures section for additional cash match items). However, the WHIP participating landowner will need to design a prescribed grazing plan as part of this treatment option. Prescribed grazing treatments **cannot** be a standalone weed control option. Grazing improvements must be part of an integrated weed control plan with herbicide, biological control, and/or reseeding treatments for a holistic approach to reducing weed infestations while improving the overall integrity of native plant communities.

Grazing Plan Required Components:

- 1) a description of the current livestock grazing management.
- 2) well defined short-term objectives that can be measured at the end of the grant period (up to 5 years). Such as, percent reduction in weed infestations, percent change in plant community composition, and before-and-after adjusted grazing patterns based on applied principles of range management.
- 3) an initial assessment of the ecological conditions including the general plant composition, ground cover, or other prominent grazing-related issues that have facilitated noxious weed infestation.
- 4) a description of how, by implementing the prescribed grazing plan, the conditions of the pastures are expected to improve over time and how that is expected to reduce future noxious weed issues.
- 5) a 10-year grazing rotation schedule specific to each affected pasture, the class of livestock, and other information pertinent to the management of livestock.
- 6) a schedule for completing all fence installation and other approved grazing infrastructure/improvement within the **first two years** of the grant period. This should allow

enough time to document results of implementing the new grazing plan and determine if the (short-term) grant period objectives were met.

- 7) a map of proposed pastures corresponding to the grazing schedule along with identified infrastructure improvements.

Start designing a prescribed grazing plan by identifying pasture type: native plant communities, riparian, non-native pasture, or irrigated pasture. The type of pasture will help determine grazing timing (spring/summer/fall), length, and intensity. The prescribed grazing plan must be attached to the grant application in WebGrants as documentation of the improved season of use rotation.

Eligible Grazing Expenditures:

The following are eligible fencing materials for grant dollars and cash match:

- Wildlife friendly fencing: metal t-posts, wooden driver posts, barbed wire, electric wire for permanent electric fence, etc. See the following for information on wildlife friendly fences: <http://fwp.mt.gov/fwpDoc.html?id=34461>
- Contracted fence installation costs

Additional **non-federal cash match** for prescribed grazing treatment projects includes:

- Stock water tanks
- Underground water pipelines for stock tanks
- Spring developments and/or wells for livestock
- Contracted installation costs for the above items

Note: ground disturbing activities may require an archeological review.

Any type of equipment that is transferable for other uses, such as solar panels, pumps, generators, trailers **cannot** be purchased with program funds nor considered as cash match.

Additional Information Regarding Prescribed Grazing:

- The WHIP program agreements involving grazing will require a full 10 years of following the grazing rotation after the grazing improvements have been completed. To accommodate the 1-2 years needed for installing improvements prior to starting the grazing rotation, these agreements may run up to 12 years in length.
- private landowners that choose to implement a grazing improvement treatment using a prescribed grazing plan will have an abstract of notice recorded in the county where the grazing improvement property is located. All recording fees will be assumed by FWP.
- applications involving prescribed grazing need to include information on how weed infestations have been impacted by livestock grazing issues and how the grazing infrastructure along with the prescribed grazing plan will help invigorate and re-establish native plants,

suppress noxious weeds or other invasive plants, improve rangeland health, and restore wildlife habitat.

- A performance report on deliverables is required at the end of the grant period for closing that part of the WHIP project. And after the 10th year of the grazing rotation, a final report on monitoring results is required for closing the WHIP project.
- Annual reporting on compliance with the grazing plan is required. This is in addition to vegetation monitoring reports, described earlier in this document.

WHIP Grant Approval Process

After grant applications have been submitted, they are reviewed for completeness by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) staff and then ranked by the WHIP Advisory Council. Incomplete applications may not be considered for funding. FWP will hold grant hearings with the WHIP Advisory Council in January to briefly review each complete grant application and hear a presentation by each grant applicant. The Advisory Council makes funding recommendations to FWP.

Project sponsors of the selected applications for funding considerations will be notified they have approximately 30 days to complete and submit the EA forms to the WHIP Coordinator. Project sponsors must complete an EA prior to FWP submitting the project's grant application to the USFWS for acquiring program funds. The timeliness of the application to USFWS depends on tasks required of the grant awardee, FWP, and the USFWS.

Grant proposals only from counties that meet MCA 87-5-806(2) requirements are eligible for funding from WHIP. Project sponsors also must have a current SAM Unique Entity ID or obtain one before the WHIP project can be awarded.

Grant Award and Implementation

Grant awardees will be required to:

- sign a *sub-recipient agreement* (up to 5 years) with FWP that is subject to administrative requirements of the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act (Title 50 CFR 80-20-160),
- sign a *program agreement* with FWP for project monitoring requirements (3 to 5 years post treatment, or up to 12 years for grazing treatments) and
- submit semi-annual progress and annual performance reports, scheduled vegetation monitoring documentation, and a final accomplishment report.

Projects may not start accumulating cash match until FWP receives a notice of grant approval from the USFWS. The earliest, cash match could start accumulating would be around July 1. WHIP grant dollars will not be available until both WHIP agreements are signed by the project sponsor and FWP, which can take up to two months.

WHIP Reimbursement Payments:

Project sponsors need to submit a reimbursement claim and expenditure documentation through WebGrants. Reimbursement claims will be approved based on actual expenditure receipts for completion of planned project weed treatments. Receipts or vendor invoices with copies of checks will serve as documentation that bills have been paid, which is a requirement of Pittman-Robertson funds, prior to reimbursement from FWP.

Project sponsors need to ensure they have the minimum requirement of 25% cash match prior to requesting grant funds for a reimbursement payment. Approved cash match can be accumulated in the first part of the grant period and then all grant funds can be expended during the remainder of the grant period. Or, FWP can also reimburse 75% of approved expenditures, leaving the remaining cost as match.

WHIP Terminology

Measurable objective means an anticipated response in vegetation that will be measured to evaluate the effectiveness of a noxious weed treatment to restore, rehabilitate, improve, or manage land as wildlife habitat.

Prescribed grazing is the application of domestic livestock grazing at a specified season and intensity to accomplish specific vegetation management goals, consistent with WHIP program goals of reducing noxious weeds and restoring priority wildlife habitat.

Priority habitat means plant communities or settings that provide a unique, high value habitat, important to one or more priority wildlife species.

Priority wildlife species means wild birds or mammals that are either species of conservation concern or game species that are recognized by the State of Montana for their ecological, economic, or recreational values.

Project area means land comprising treatments and the area where benefits are anticipated, such as a watershed, ecological unit, or other defined area.

Project sponsor means the local, state, or national organization, either public or private, administering a project.

Treatment areas means specific sites where noxious weed management treatments occur.

Weed management strategy means a planning document that provides direction for identifying, prioritizing, and treating noxious weeds.

WHIP Grant Application Scoring

Applications that are complete and meet minimum qualifications will receive a score.

Points	Criteria
0 – 20	1) Proposal involves a noxious weed threat with compelling information on how the infestation directly diminishes the effectiveness of a priority habitat to support one or more priority wildlife species.
0 – 20	2) Proposal would significantly reduce or resolve noxious weed threat and support habitat effectiveness over a sizable portion of priority habitat and associated watersheds. Applications that do not include a minimum acreage of priority habitat to benefit from grant funding will receive zero points.
0 – 10	3) Project would help implement an established weed management strategy, is technically feasible, and would maintain or restore native vegetation.
0 – 10	4) Management of project area addresses the primary spread of noxious weeds to native wildlife habitats (up to 5 pts) while also providing for native plant community health to reduce susceptibility to weed invasion (up to 5 pts).
0 – 10	5) Project involves funding commitments from multiple partners (up to 5 pts) and leverages additional funding or in-kind contribution beyond the minimum requirement (up to 5 pts).
0 – 15	6) Project demonstrates an effective collaboration across multiple land ownerships. Cooperative Weed Management Areas, as defined in the Montana State Weed Management Plan, would receive the highest points.
0 – 15	7) Project area provides access for public hunting.
0 – 10	8) Monitoring plan meets or exceeds minimum requirements as detailed under the Monitoring Plan section of the WHIP Application – narrative description.
0 – 10	9) The grant application, including proposal information, funding and monitoring plans is clear, well organized, and reflects a high likelihood of success for all aspects of the proposed project.
120	Total points available.

Questions & Answers about WHIP

The following are questions FWP has received, or generated on its own, to help clarify certain aspects of the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP).

MCA 87-5-805(4), which defines qualifying program expenditures, is cited multiple times below. For reference, qualifying expenditures are as follows:

- (a) biological or mechanical control of noxious weeds;
- (b) purchases and application of approved herbicides;
- (c) seed purchases and application of seed; and
- (d) grazing costs as a component of an overall integrated noxious weed management plan.

If you have further questions, please contact Smith Wells, Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program Coordinator at 406-444-7291 or smith.wells@mt.gov.

1) QUESTION: How is non-federal match defined for WHIP?

ANSWER: For the purposes of WHIP, non-federal match is limited to qualifying expenditures (MCA 87-5-806(4)) made with nonfederal dollars during the period of the grant. See also Eligible WHIP Expenditures.

2) QUESTION: How is non-federal match documented?

ANSWER: A copy of a paid invoiced receipt must be submitted to document cash match.

3) QUESTION: How does FWP distribute grant funds?

ANSWER: All grant funds will be requested by and paid directly to the Project Sponsor. FWP will make payments upon receipt of proper documentation, including a statement of work completed, source of non-federal match, and associated copies of paid invoiced receipts.

4) QUESTION: If WHIP funding is intended specifically for priority wildlife habitat, how do we address non-habitat areas that are integrated within those habitats?

ANSWER: FWP recognizes the value of providing comprehensive weed treatment coverage. WHIP grant funds are intended to be used on important wildlife habitats (MCA 87-5-804). To be effective, treatments on incidental non-habitats, such as a road corridor or other minor disturbed sites can be included. These sites must, however, be incidental in size when compared to the overall treatment area. WHIP is not intended for targeting roads and other disturbed areas in the vicinity of wildlife habitat. However, partner efforts to manage weeds in these non-habitat areas are useful to include as background information in the grant application to show the overall effectiveness of coordinated partner efforts.

5) QUESTION: What are some options for how cash match (non-federal) can be used to leverage grant funds?

ANSWER: As the question implies, there are a few ways of configuring cash match (non-federal). Eligible expenditures (MCA 87-5-806(4)) within treatment areas may serve as cash match (non-federal), be funded with grant funds, or a combination of both. We provide the following scenarios to help explain this further. Note that in all scenarios, the cash match must be spent either before the federal funds or coincident with federal funds at a rate of 25% match and 75% federal. The federal dollars cannot be

spent before the cash match (non-federal) dollars, but the cash match (non-federal) dollars may be spent before the federal dollars.

Scenario 1: The most common manner for providing match is to complete an eligible treatment (using non-federal funds for materials or services as defined in MCA 87-5-806(4)) and submit receipts to the project sponsor for reimbursement and then project sponsor submits paid receipts to FWP based on work accomplished. FWP would then provide reimbursement to the project sponsor for 75% of the documented costs.

Scenario 2: Landowner A completes an eligible treatment using non-federal funding within one of the treatment areas. Landowner A may have paid for the treatment entirely out-of-pocket or may have used other non-federal sources and therefore all the expenditures may be claimed as non-federal match. Landowner B, who also has land within a treatment area, may ask for reimbursement for approved treatment(s) of up to 3 dollars of federal WHIP funds for every dollar spent by Landowner A.

Important related notations: The intended match configuration must be described in the WHIP Project Funding Plan: Budget Narrative Overview (Word document) section of the WHIP application. Also, grant cash match (non-federal) expenditures must be confirmed before federal funds can be distributed.

6) QUESTION: Does contributing partners mean the landowners that will be benefitting from this grant or specifically the entity who will be administering the program? In other grant programs a CWMA (Coordinated Weed Management Area) is selected and left open to all landowners in that area to participate if they are interested, but we don't usually require any landowner confirmation prior to applying for a grant.

ANSWER: A contributing partner is any entity that intends to provide a cash match (non-federal) toward the grant project. It is important that grant expenditures be restricted to ecologically important wildlife habitats (where treatment areas are defined), as required by program statute. The grant application format requires each cash match (non-federal) contributing partner to complete a contribution statement that details their contributions to the project. This provides the Advisory Council and FWP with a tangible accounting of grant cash match (non-federal) that is being offered up. This does require knowing in advance the contributing partners and their commitments toward the grant project. As with the following question, it may be that a landowner intends to provide 25% cost share on work conducted on their land, corresponding to an estimated treatment acreage. The actual amount may vary depending on the actual acreage treated. Also, as with Scenario 2 above, a landowner could participate without contributing match.

7) QUESTION: How imperative is it that the herbicide application cost summary spreadsheet exactly matches the actual treatments? In my experience landowners oftentimes change their minds on what they treat after they have already agreed to a specific amount.

ANSWER: An awarded grant can only pay up to the total amount committed to in the grant agreement within the defined treatment areas, consistent with what is detailed in the grant application. And, the actual types of treatments (including types of chemicals, specific biocontrol agents, and the like) must be the same as what is described in the application. These details form the basis for completing an environmental assessment. Actual types of treatments cannot vary from what is described in the EA and the grant agreement; however, we recognize the acreages in the cost summary sheets are estimates and will vary from actual treated acreages. Anticipated treatment acres should be based on best estimates.

8) QUESTION: Can overhead be charged in the WHIP grant budget for grant administration?

ANSWER: MCA 87-5-805(4) defines qualifying expenditures of WHIP (see introductory information above). Administration or other such costs **are not** eligible. Only qualifying expenditures can be funded with WHIP funds or used as match for WHIP funds. Other partner contributions that support the grant project objectives, but that are not eligible for funding can still be documented in the WHIP Project Funding Plan: Other Partner Contributions section of the WHIP application and will be considered when ranking grant applications.

9) QUESTION: What is “other partner contributions”?

ANSWER: These are materials or labor that a partner is providing within the project area that helps accomplish the overall goal of wildlife habitat restoration that is not being used as a cash match contribution. These items do not constitute match for federal funding but can be used to describe the overall effectiveness and commitment of the partnership, which would be important for ranking grant applications and awarding funding. These contributions can be documented in the WHIP Project Funding Plan: Other Partner Contributions section of the WHIP application.

10) QUESTION: If we are conducting treatment work over multiple years, do we need to show a breakdown by year in the Detailed Treatment forms?

ANSWER: Yes, each of the detailed treatment forms have a section that requires acres treated per year. This breakdown of treatments by year helps FWP staff and the Advisory Council members better understand the anticipated treatments of the multi-year proposed project.

11) QUESTION: Why are there both a Commercial and a Private (landowner) Herbicide Applicator Cost Summary section on the Herbicide form?

ANSWER: The Private (landowner) Herbicide Applicator Cost Summary section does not include the cost of applying herbicides because the landowner’s labor and related application expenses are not a reimbursable cost. The herbicide application costs of a commercial applicator are reimbursable with paid invoiced receipts.

12) QUESTION: Can a landowner apply herbicides as part of a grant?

ANSWER: Yes, the following are the grant requirements for herbicide applicators. All commercial and governmental pesticide applicators must be properly licensed to apply herbicides. All landowners must have a farm applicator license if they will be using a restricted use herbicide, such as Tordon, in a treatment area. Verification of proper licensing will be required in the project status reports. The landowner’s labor and related application expenses are not a reimbursable cost.