

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 25, 2019

Agenda Item: Threemile WMA Forest Habitat Restoration Project, Phase 2 (R2)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

FWP proposes to implement a second forest management/habitat restoration plan for the Threemile Wildlife Management Area (TWMA), ESE of Florence in Ravalli County. During winter 2016-2017, FWP implemented a pilot treatment (Phase 1), involving thinning 372 timbered acres for improving understory-forage production for wildlife, releasing aspen stands and decreasing conifer expansion in meadows, while reducing risk of wildfire/beetle infestation. The current Phase 2 proposal would treat approximately 1,492 acres with similar habitat goals, using commercial and non-commercial understory thinning and prescribed burning. This project would also include road improvements, relocation of existing roads, replacing a bridge, and culvert installation to facilitate logging and log hauling, and reduce erosion and sediment transport. After use, roads would be revegetated and stabilized, remaining accessible for future maintenance, fire suppression, and non-motorized recreational access. FWP plans to work with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and the Bitterroot National Forest under the auspices of the Good Neighbor Authority to treat 238 acres of National Forest System Lands located within and adjacent to the TWMA.

Public Involvement Process & Results

A draft environmental assessment (EA) was available for public review for 30 days from February to March 2019. The EA was posted on FWP's website and comments could be made directly on the EA's webpage or submitted via mail or email. Legal notices were published once each in four local, regional, and statewide newspapers. A statewide news release was distributed, and FWP sent 15 printed copies of the EA and 49 emails of the EA's availability to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups, and agencies. FWP received six comments during the public review period -- five from individuals and one from the Montana Wildlife Federation (MWF, Helena). Four commenters (including MWF) supported the proposed action, no commenters were in opposition, and two commenters did not state support or opposition. (One supporter indicated: "I am generally supportive . . .") Individuals commenters included two from Stevensville and one each from Bozeman, Hamilton, and Missoula.

Alternatives and Analysis

"No action" would allow conifers to continue expanding and increasing in density on TWMA, reducing understory and herbaceous vegetation for wildlife while increasing the susceptibility to a stand-replacement fire. FWP could consider a smaller action involving fewer acres, but because of the success of Phase 1 — a demonstration that was largely viewed as successful by FWP and the public — a larger-scale habitat restoration project would be timely, more efficient, and more effective at accomplishing habitat goals.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the commission approve the proposed action to move forward with project implementation. The project would provide long term benefits for sustaining and improving wildlife habitats on the WMA.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve this proposed Phase-2 forest habitat restoration project on Threemile WMA as proposed.