



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

March 18, 2020

Dear Interested Party:

This letter is to notify you that Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) has made a decision on a proposed grazing lease renewal on the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area (BLWMA) with Pollock Ranch. The lease will allow the removal of current vegetation by grazing as a management tool to enhance the subsequent availability and palatability of fall and spring forage on the BLWMA as described in the Environmental Assessment and proposed grazing plan.

The Environmental Assessment (EA) for the project was available for public review from February 14 to March 14, 2020, receiving three (3) comments. One (1) comment expressed support while two (2) comments did not state a position. After reviewing the Draft EA with respect to public comment, it is FWP's conclusion that the impacts associated with the proposed action will not have a significant impact on the physical or human environment in the project area. The Draft EA is the appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action and an environmental impact statement is not required. Comments received are summarized in the enclosed Decision Notice. No changes have been made to the draft Environmental Analysis after consideration of public input. It is my recommendation to move forward with the proposed grazing lease renewal. Please consider your previous copy of the Environmental Assessment and the proposed grazing plan along with the stipulations of this Decision Notice as final.

The Fish & Wildlife Commission will be review agricultural leases at their April 23, 2020 meeting. Copies of the Decision Notice and Final EA will be available on the FWP website at <http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/decisionNotices/>.

Thank you for your interest and involvement.

Sincerely,

Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
gbertellotti@mt.gov
(406) 454-5840



DECISION NOTICE

BLACKLEAF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA GRAZING RENEWAL ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 4, Great Falls
March 18, 2020

Preface

The enclosed Decision Notice has been prepared on a proposal to renew a grazing lease on the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area (BLWMA) with the Pollock Ranch for a 4-year term, extending from June 1, 2020 through September 1, 2023. The BLWMA is located approximately 12 miles west of Bynum along the Rocky Mountain Front in Teton County. The proposed grazing lease is designed to provide a variety of habitat benefits, including maintain forage attractiveness/palatability, provide habitat structure diversity and plant community health through grazing treatments and includes rest pastures that provide cover and forage for wildlife. This system is expected to provide habitat benefits particularly for elk, moose, mule and white-tailed deer, ruffed and dusky grouse, and a variety of nongame wildlife species. Livestock grazing has been utilized as a habitat management tool on the BLWMA in a similar fashion since 1990.

Public Process and Comments

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, FWP completed an Environmental Assessment (EA) for the proposed project which was available for public review and comment from February 14 to March 14, 2020.

The following two alternatives were considered in this Environmental Assessment:

Alternative A: Renewal of the BLWMA grazing lease.

Alternative B: Elimination of livestock grazing on the BLWMA.

The public was informed of this EA via the following:

- Notice was published in Great Falls Tribune and local newspapers.
- Copies of the EA mailed or notification of its availability to neighboring landowners and other interested parties, including those on the Region 4 News Release distribution list.
- Public notice posted on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>
- The EA was available at FWP Region 4 Headquarters or by emailing rrauscher@mt.gov.

Three (3) comments were received (3) during the 30-day comment period. One (1) comment expressed support for Alternative A, while two (2) comments did not state support for either Alternative.

Table 1: Summary of comments received on the proposed Blackleaf WMA grazing lease renewal. FWP response to comments, where applicable, are in bold.

Commenting Party	From	Support Or Oppose	Comments
Individual	Bynum	No Position Stated	<p>“I have not read the draft EA but my thoughts are: the WMA is primarily and was established for wildlife. My observations from years past are that in these grazing areas, near mid to late summer, there is nothing left but cow turds and dirt. There is no feed for wintering game and no chance of regeneration. I don’t understand wildlife management.”</p> <p>FWP response: FWP is dedicated to managing fish and wildlife habitat. BLWMA is grazed on a rotational basis. Approximately 25% of the WMA is grazed annually leaving the remaining available forage for wildlife. Long-term analysis has shown a significant improvement of range condition benefitting wildlife.</p>
Individual	Great Falls	Support	<p>“In regards to the Blackleaf lease, if it is working for all parties involved, I do not see any reason to not continue it. Unless there is anything that needs to be amended in the verbiage or the way the property is being used, I would vote to just continue on in the same direction that I has been.”</p>
Individual	Great Falls	No Position Stated	<p>“Intensive grazing has exhibited positive results on the Bear tooth WMA and on the neighboring Sieben Ranch. Intensive is the key word. Allowing cattle to wander around 600 acres is NOT intensive. Since electric poly wire is being used, a more intensive grazing rotation [smaller pastures for shorter periods of time] should yield better results.”</p> <p>FWP response: The grazing system allows pastures to be divided into halves or thirds depending upon previous and current year’s production. Stocking rates are also adjusted to ensure sufficient grazing intensity.</p> <p>“Based on the Bear Tooth WMA and the neighboring Sieben Ranch results; the rotation could be reduced to 2 or three years using a more intensive system.”</p> <p>FWP response: Geophysical and climatic differences exist between the Beartooth and Blackleaf WMAs. Accordingly, grazing systems differ as well. Long-term analysis of vegetative trends has shown vegetation condition on the Blackleaf WMA has improved from Fair condition to Excellent indicating the appropriateness of the current rotation.</p> <p>“HOWEVER, the photos indicate the invasion of evergreen trees. There needs to be a plan to keep these trees in check or they will over run the Blackleaf as they have over run the Sun River WMA.”</p> <p>FWP response: Conifer management is outside the scope of this Environmental Assessment. Nonetheless, conifer encroachment is being addressed on the Blackleaf WMA.</p> <p>“I would also like to see, on the maps, the land that is available to public hunting during big game and upland seasons. For his access to have value, to the public, it must be favorable to handicapped recreationalists.”</p> <p>FWP Response: A map of these lands are included in the EA. FWP has no authority on private land handicap accessibility.</p>

Final Environmental Assessment

The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

After reviewing the Draft EA with respect to public comment, it is FWP's conclusion that the impacts associated with the proposed action will not have a significant impact on the physical or human environment in the project area. The Draft EA is the appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action and an environmental impact statement is not required. Comments received are summarized in the enclosed Decision Notice. No changes have been made to the draft Environmental Analysis after consideration of public input. It is my recommendation to move forward with the proposed 4-year grazing lease renewal on the BLWMA with Pollock Ranch.

Sincerely,



Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
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gbertellotti@mt.gov