



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: April 1, 2021

Agenda Item: Beckman WMA Agricultural Lease, Region 4

Action Needed: Final Approval **Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

Background: The Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA), acquired in 1999, comprises approximately 6,600 acres of Judith River bottomlands, breaks, and upland benchlands. The primary purpose of the WMA is to provide productive year-round mule deer habitat, but the WMA also supports other ungulates as well as game birds and many other species of wildlife. The WMA is popular for big game and upland game bird hunting. Since 2000, FWP has administered an approximately 75-acre irrigated haying lease on the WMA, with the intent of providing enhanced wildlife forage while also benefiting a local producer. The lease, which is currently vacant, has been difficult to keep active due to the remoteness of the hayfields and economic feasibility for producers.

FWP proposes to establish a new six-year hay lease. As in the past, this is intended to be a no-cash lease, whereby after haying, the lessee irrigates and leaves a standing hay crop for wildlife benefit. FWP would choose a lessee through a competitive selection process. Producers would propose a hay management schedule suited to their needs while also supporting wildlife benefits. FWP would select the lessee who offers the most habitat value for wildlife, considering number of cuttings, renovation specifications, frequency of fertilization, minimum post-harvest irrigation commitment, and the like.

Public Involvement Process & Results: An Environmental Assessment (EA) was released March 2, with a public comment period ending March 23. FWP did not receive any public comments, and the Decision Notice recommends proceeding with a six-year haying lease arrangement.

Alternatives and Analysis:

No Action: In the absence of irrigation, these fields would green up briefly during spring, but then dry and become decadent over the summer. They would become weedy and would require management action to restore them to permanent cover.

Proposed Action: FWP would establish a six-year irrigated haying lease through a competitive selection process, with the intent of providing high quality forage and enhanced wildlife habitat. Irrigated hay fields make the WMA more attractive to ungulates, possibly reducing game damage on adjacent properties.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends approval of a six-year hay lease on Beckman WMA, to be established through a competitive selection process. The lease would be mutually beneficial for wildlife and a local producer.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve a six-year haying lease on 75 acres of the Beckman WMA as proposed.