



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

**Meeting Date:** October 20, 2022

**Agenda Item:** Fleecer Mountain WMA Grazing Lease Renewals, Region 3

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 10 minutes

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**Background:** The department proposes to implement a nine-year comprehensive habitat management program on Fleecer Mountain WMA to improve range conditions for wintering elk and other wildlife species. The program would include: 1) renewal of both a cash grazing lease with the Dupuis family that also involves grazing management on U.S. Forest Service (USFS) lands, and a grazing exchange-of-use (EOU) lease with an adjacent landowner (Fleecer Cattle Company, formerly Smith 6-S Livestock); 2) renewal of an exchange-for-services (EFS) irrigated grazing lease on the Fleecer Addition portion of the WMA; and 3) incorporation of controlled burning on an as-needed basis to improve palatability of smooth brome fields on the WMA. The department is seeking commission approval for renewing the three lease agreements to extend from May 2023 through October 2031. The prescribed fire option does not require commission authorization.

The coordinated grazing program between the department, USFS (Dupuis family allotment), and Fleecer Cattle Company was initiated in 1987 with modifications made over the years to better suit habitat objectives. It consists of a grazing system across the entire Fleecer elk winter range, encompassing portions of these three land ownerships. The state portion of the program addressed by the environmental assessment (EA) would consist of an EOU lease agreement with Fleecer Cattle Company for a maximum of 300 animal unit months (AUMs) during spring, and an option to provide up to 56 AUMs in the fall. Spring grazing would be applied primarily to smooth brome fields and one of three native grazing units on the WMA. Fall grazing would be applied to a second of the three native pastures. A separate cash grazing lease (38 AUMs) with the Dupuis family (in coordination with USFS) would be part of the fall grazing treatment, benefitting elk forage availability on USFS winter range.

The EFS irrigated grazing lease would be renewed for the Fleecer Addition, which was purchased by the department in 2018 for its high value as elk winter range. This 194-acre parcel contains about 70 acres of former hayfields dominated by smooth brome. At the time of purchase, the department entered into a five-year EFS lease agreement with the Moose Creek Ranch, allowing up to 120 AUMs of livestock grazing annually (divided evenly between spring and fall use) through a deferred-rotation system in exchange for maintaining and operating the irrigation system, managing noxious weeds, and maintaining fences on the Fleecer Addition parcel. Because this arrangement has proved satisfactory to both parties, no changes are being proposed to this EFS agreement other than to renew it for a nine-year term.

**Public Involvement Process and Results:** An EA was completed for the proposed project and released for public comment on June 14. Public comments on the proposed action were accepted for 18 days. The public was notified of the proposed action through two legal notices in four newspapers; a department news release and EA notification on the website, and emailed and postal mailed to neighboring landowners, local conservation groups, and other interested parties; and copies of the draft EA were made available upon request. A Decision Notice was released on July 7, that recommended proceeding with the proposed actions. Additional public comment on the lease renewals will be solicited for a four-week period starting Aug. 26. Public comments will be posted online and provided to commissioners no later than two weeks prior to the October commission meeting.

**Analysis and Alternatives:** Two alternatives were analyzed in the EA: proceed with the proposed action or take no action. The grazing lease arrangements serve to improve elk winter range while also benefiting neighboring ranches. These benefits would cease and land maintenance responsibilities for the department would increase if the leases were not renewed.

Alternative A: The commission may choose to approve the exchange-of-use grazing lease with Fleecer Cattle Company, the cash grazing lease with the Dupuis family, and the exchange-for-services grazing lease with the Moose Creek Ranch.

Alternative B: The commission may choose to not approve the leases.

**Agency Recommendation and Rationale:** The department recommends that the commission approve the Fleecer Mountain WMA leases for a nine-year term beginning in May 2023 to include the EOU, cash grazing, and EOS leases as presented. This comprehensive approach would help achieve habitat objectives for the WMA while benefitting local livestock producers.

**Proposed Motion:** I move that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the nine-year exchange-of-use grazing lease with Fleecer Cattle Company, the cash grazing lease with the Dupuis family, and the exchange-for-services grazing lease with the Moose Creek Ranch (Alternative A) as presented by the department.