



Draft Environmental Assessment



FLEECER WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA HABITAT MANAGEMENT PROGRAM June 2022

PART 1: PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of Proposed Action

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to implement a 9-year comprehensive habitat management program on Fleecer Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA) designed to improve range conditions for wintering elk and other wildlife species. The program would include: 1) a renewal of a fee grazing lease and a modified grazing exchange-of-use (EOU) agreement with a coordinated grazing program between FWP, the adjacent landowner (Fleecer Cattle Company, formerly Smith 6-S Livestock) and potentially the U.S. Forest Service (USFS); 2) a renewal of an exchange-for-services (EFS) agreement on the Fleecer Addition portion of the WMA; and 3) incorporation of controlled burning on an as-needed basis to better manage smooth brome fields on the WMA. This habitat management program would extend from May 2023 through October 2031.

The coordinated grazing program between FWP, USFS, and Fleecer Cattle Company was initiated in 1987 with modifications made over the years to better suit habitat objectives. It consisted of a grazing system laid out across the entirety of the Fleecer elk winter range which encompassed portions of these three land ownerships. The FWP portion of the program addressed by this environmental analysis (EA) would consist of an EOU agreement with the neighboring landowner for a maximum of 300 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) in spring. There would also be an option to provide up to 94 AUMs in the fall (56 AUMs via the EOU) and a separate fee-grazing lease (38 AUMs) with another neighbor.

Spring grazing would provide intensive grazing in a pasture dominated by smooth brome and lighter use in one of three other pastures on the WMA in a rest-rotation basis. If fall grazing is utilized, grazing would occur in a third pasture according to the rest-rotation schedule while the fourth pasture would receive rest from livestock grazing that year. In the case of the EOU, the lessee would rest one pasture on private land or their DNRC lease annually.

The Fleecer Addition was purchased by FWP in 2018 because of its high value as elk winter range and shared boundary with the existing WMA. This 194-acre parcel contains approximately 70 acres of former hayfields dominated by smooth brome. At the time of purchase, FWP entered into a 5-year EFS agreement with the Moose Creek Ranch. This EFS allowed 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 9-year term.

Where livestock grazing does not sufficiently remove accumulation of smooth brome, FWP proposes using prescribed burns to reduce build-up of old grass and promote current year growth that would be more palatable to wintering elk. Controlled burning would only be used as needed and when burning conditions allow.

This proposed habitat management program would involve 3,896 acres of FWP land, 875 acres of Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) land leased by FWP, 1,920 acres of the lessee's private land, and 640 acres of DNRC land leased by the lessee. Total acreage would be 7,331. In addition, there would be an opportunity to dovetail with the adjacent Forest Service grazing system of 6,080 acres, if or when their grazing plans can align with this proposed action. Should this occur within the timeline of this proposed action, total acreage involved would expand to 13,411 total acres.

2. Purpose and Benefit of Proposed Action

Historical Background

In 1962, FWP acquired the Fleecer WMA in order to expand elk winter habitat provided by USFS lands that border the property to the west. Since the 1930's, the area had received intensive year-round grazing from domestic livestock including horses, cattle, and sheep. Livestock grazing was excluded from the WMA from 1962 to 1982. The USFS agreed to delay making any increases to livestock on the adjacent Fleecer allotment during this period until sufficient time could be given to study the needs of wildlife over the entire Fleecer elk winter range.

One of the goals for the management of the Fleecer WMA was to use coordinated resource management across ownerships to alleviate conflict between wildlife and agricultural land use. FWP, USFS, and the neighboring Smith 6-S Livestock ranch initiated a program in 1982 to address conflicts between elk and cattle on elk winter range. They combined research with sound range management principles to design a grazing system with the following six objectives:

1. Manage the entire elk winter range in the Fleecer area as one unit regardless of ownership.
2. Increase elk populations to potential on public land ownerships.
3. Minimize impact of winter and spring use by elk on private land by providing adequate habitat on public lands.
4. Maintain soils, vegetation, and riparian zones in good or better condition on public and private lands.
5. Increase cattle grazing potential.
6. Maintain optimum level of livestock production on Smith 6-S Livestock lands.

The Fleecer Coordinated Grazing Program was fully implemented in 1987 after some adjustments to the initial design. Decision Notices to continue the grazing program were issued and approved by the FWP Commission in 1998, 2010, 2013, and 2019. This program has demonstrated the compatibility of livestock production and wildlife/recreation-based economies. The original designers have been recognized at the state and national level for their abilities to mitigate wildlife and livestock conflicts through a sound grazing system design. The program is well known and has served as a template for other cooperative grazing systems on WMAs across the state.

The Fleecer Coordinated Grazing Program has followed rest-rotation grazing principles described by Hormay (1970). The complete grazing program originally consisted of 12 pastures: six on USFS, three on FWP, and three on Fleecer Cattle Company land. Nine of the 12 pastures provide winter habitat for elk: three each on FWP, Fleecer Cattle Company, and USFS lands. The remaining three FS pastures provide summer and fall elk habitat. For a complete description of the Fleecer Coordinated Grazing Program, please refer to Frisina and Morin (1991).

The three pastures on Fleecer WMA have allowed for full implementation of a rest-rotation system that is independent of but coordinated with the rotation on the USFS and Fleecer Cattle Company lands (Figure 1A and Figure 1B, Table 1). In 2012, Pasture 3 was divided by using temporary electric fencing to create a fourth pasture known as the Pond Pasture. This allowed for targeted use of smooth brome that had been cultivated and hayed in this pasture prior to FWP ownership (Photo 1). Since this portion of Pasture 3 is located at a higher elevation than the rest of the WMA, cattle typically would not graze the smooth brome during the spring as it was often still under snow and by fall it was too cured to be palatable to cattle and elk. Elk generally avoided this area during the winter until FWP and the lessee began intensively grazing this area in the spring to remove accumulated old-growth smooth brome.

Figure 1A: Map of FWP and private pastures in the Fleecer Coordinated Grazing Program.

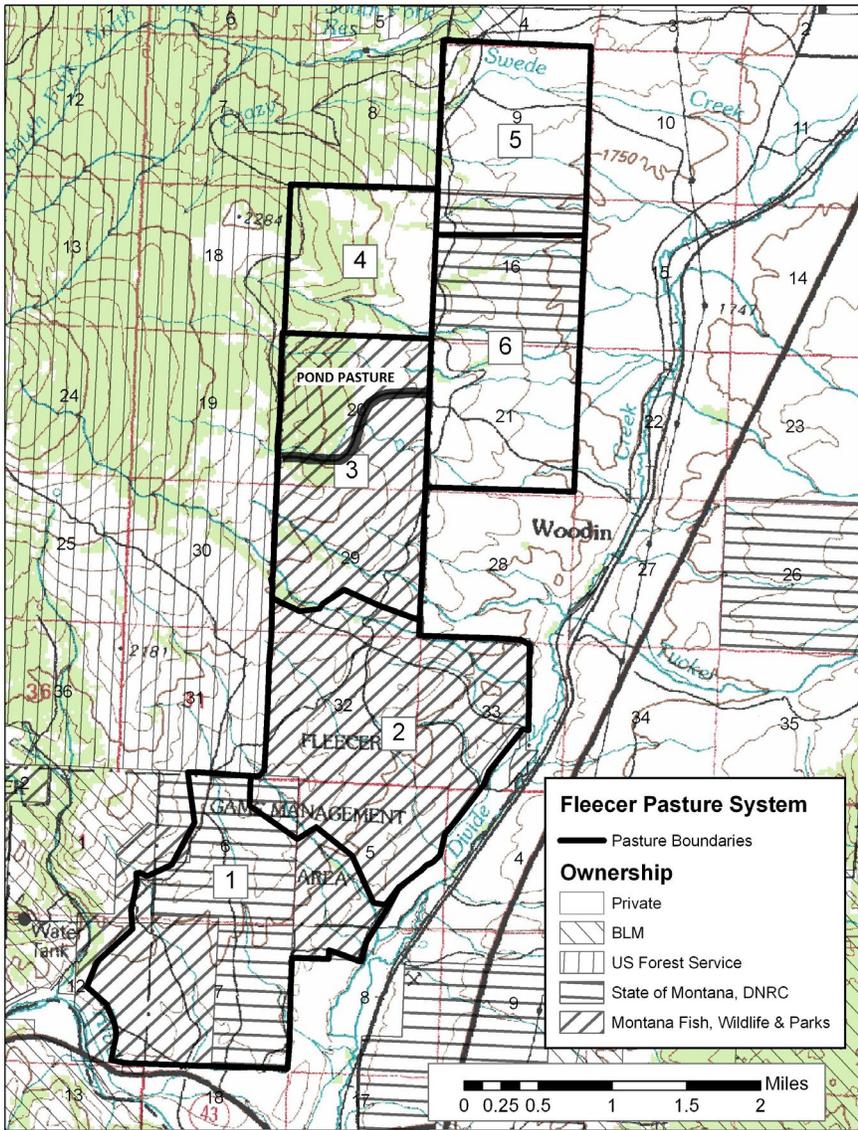


Figure 1B: Map of USFS pastures in the Fleecer Coordinated Grazing Program.

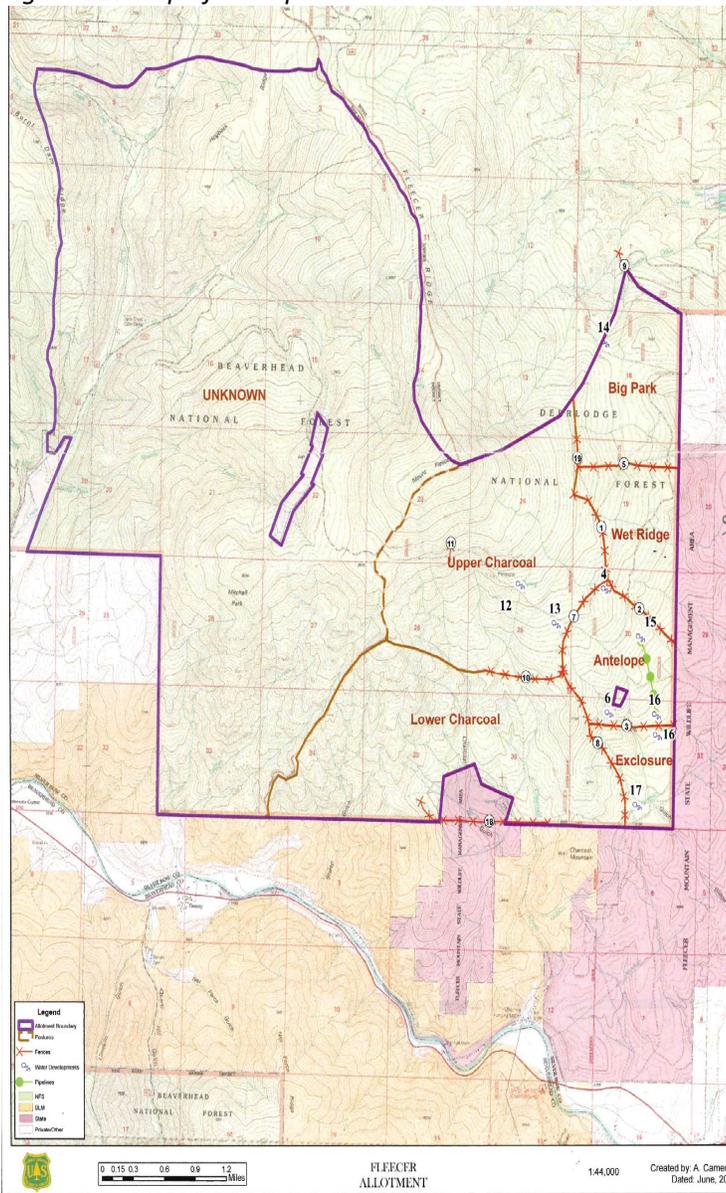


Table 1: Grazing schedule for FWP portion of Fleecer Coordinated Grazing program, 2019-2022. Spring = late April-early June, depending on forage availability; Late Fall = October 1-October 15; Rest = no use by livestock.

YEAR	PASTURE			
	1	2	3	Pond
2019	Rest	Rest	Late Fall	Spring
2020	Late Fall	Rest	Rest	Spring
2021	Rest	Late Fall	Rest	Spring
2022	Rest	Rest	Late Fall	Spring

Photo 1: Hay harvested on Forrest Lindlief homestead circa 1930's. This is the site of the present-day Pond Pasture on Fleecer WMA. Photo courtesy of C. Harvey.



Separate contracts have governed spring and fall grazing treatments. The spring grazing contract has been an exchange of use with Fleecer Cattle Company and allowed for a maximum of 500 AUMs. Grazing took place from approximately mid-April to late May, or prior to the onset of rapid growth of bluebunch wheatgrass. In lieu of payment to FWP, Fleecer Cattle Company would rest from livestock grazing one of their three elk winter range pastures in an independently managed system. The spring grazing treatment was designed to promote removal of accumulated old grass by cattle and timed to provide maximum regrowth of native grasses and forbs that same growing season.

The fall grazing contracts have been with two lessees. A maximum of 94 AUMs of livestock grazing have been allowed October 1-15 annually. Fall grazing on the WMA has allowed livestock to be moved off USFS pastures located at higher elevations adjacent to the WMA thus allowing permittees to use the full grazing season while providing rest to a USFS elk winter range pasture. The regrowth provided on the Fleecer WMA pasture used in the spring, along with the rested pasture on Fleecer Cattle Company land and the additional forage available on the other WMA- and USFS pastures, have provided maximum production of winter forage for elk and other wildlife across land ownerships.

Lessees have been charged FWP's low rate (50% of the National Agricultural Statistical Survey [NASS] AUM rate for Montana) in return for maintaining WMA pasture fences during both the spring and fall grazing periods. FWP has been responsible for providing materials and any major fence replacement or construction. During this last lease period, no major fence construction has occurred. Interior pasture fences are single-strand electric fences which are taken down when not in use, reducing maintenance and impacts to wildlife movements. Operation costs incurred by the Fleecer WMA grazing program during the period of the last grazing lease (2019-2022) was \$50 for the DNRC annual pasture agreement fee (\$25 per year, 2 of 4 years). On an annual basis, 6-8 FWP staff days have been devoted to the Fleecer coordinated grazing program.

In 2018, the adjacent 194-acre Fleecer Addition parcel was purchased by FWP and added to the WMA. This parcel was the site of the original Lindlief homestead and also contained a relic tame-grass hayfield. In addition to this 70-acre irrigated and sub-irrigated hayfield, the parcel also contained 24 acres of dry shrub-grassland and

100 acres of riparian corridor along Divide Creek. The riparian corridor has been encumbered with a Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) easement administered by the USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) since 2013. Specifically, this is a Reserved Rights Pilot Warranty Easement Deed that allows for limited livestock grazing to occur on the encumbered acres.

Vegetation in the irrigated and sub-irrigated meadows is predominantly smooth brome. Since purchasing the property, FWP has managed these hayfields and wetlands as hiding cover for ground-nesting birds and small mammals as well as for big game winter forage through a 5-year exchange-for-services agreement with the Moose Creek Ranch. The lessee has received up to 120 AUMs annually of periodic, scheduled livestock grazing in exchange for maintaining and operating the irrigation system, managing noxious weeds, and maintaining fences on the Fleecer Addition parcel. Cattle grazing is used to manage smooth brome. Grazing occurs in a spring-fall deferred system with up to 60 AUMs each for spring and fall (Table 2). There are two upland pastures (~35 acres each) and two wetland pastures (~50 acres each) (Figure 2). The 24 acres of native shrub-grasslands is not included in the grazing system and is given continuous rest. FWP worked with NRCS in 2018 to ensure the grazing program would comply with the terms of the warranty easement deed.

Spring grazing has occurred in the uplands and is managed to remove old-growth brome that was not removed by wintering elk. It occurs after elk have utilized early spring green-up and have migrated off the winter range. Only one upland pasture is grazed each spring, leaving the other upland pasture rested for the benefit of ground-nesting birds, small mammals, and other wildlife. No spring grazing occurs in the wetland pastures to improve the wetland quality and enhance the habitat for amphibians and reptiles.

Fall grazing is lighter intensity spread over three pastures and is managed to leave substantial forage for wintering big game. Grazing alternates between the two wetland pastures and in both upland pastures annually, occurring in early fall before elk typically arrive on winter range and after the bird nesting season is past.

Figure 2: Pasture layout on the Fleecer Addition parcel. U=uplands, W=wetland. The cross-hatched area is the 24-acre dry shrub-grassland pasture that is excluded from livestock grazing.



Table 2: Grazing schedule for the Fleecer Addition exchange-for-services agreement, 2018-2022. Spring=May 1-15, Fall=October 1-15, Rest=no livestock grazing.

Year	Upland 1	Upland 2	Wetland 1	Wetland 2
2018	Spring/Fall	Fall	Fall	Rest
2019	Fall	Spring/Fall	Rest	Fall
2020	Spring/Fall	Fall	Fall	Rest
2021	Fall	Spring/Fall	Rest	Fall
2022	Spring/Fall	Fall	Fall	Rest

Scheduled irrigation and periodic removal of smooth brome has helped to increase elk use of this FWP property over the past five years, thus helping to reduce game damage on neighboring properties (Photo 2). Rested and lightly grazed pastures have provided suitable habitat for ground-nesting birds such as long-billed curlew and sandhill cranes, small mammals, and other wildlife.

Since purchase, FWP has fertilized the hayfields every third year to optimize production of tame grasses for winter big game use. Having the lessee responsible for annual maintenance on this parcel has allowed FWP personnel to work on other Fleecer WMA projects such as weed management. This exchange for services agreement has proven to be a cost-effective way to manage the wildlife habitat on the Fleecer Addition parcel while also benefitting a local agriculture producer.

Photo 2. Elk use on the Fleecer Addition parcel after a late winter snow, March 11, 2019. The Fleecer Addition is the heavily tracked area below the fenceline. Elk appear to be using the wildlife gate that was put in to allow for easier access to the smooth brome fields. After feeding, elk bed on the east-facing slopes on the main parcel of Fleecer WMA. Photo courtesy of K. Johnson.



Purpose of Proposed Action

The proposed action is to implement a comprehensive habitat management program on Fleecer WMA that improves range conditions for wintering big game and other wildlife species using systematic livestock grazing and controlled burns. Specifically, it would continue both the Fleecer coordinated grazing program and the Fleecer Addition grazing program with potential to dovetail once again with the Forest Service if or when their grazing plans can align with this proposed action. This would continue FWP's involvement in a cooperative grazing system that spans elk winter range and land ownerships and has demonstrated ability to improve elk winter habitat conditions in a way that is compatible with neighboring livestock interests.

Objectives for the Proposed Action:

- Continue to manage the entire elk winter range in the Fleecer area as one unit regardless of ownership.
- Continue to provide high-quality vegetation for wintering elk and other wildlife through planned rest from grazing across multiple ownerships.
- Continue to maintain or improve soils, vegetation, and riparian zones through systematic grazing on the WMA.
- Continue to minimize impacts of winter and spring use by elk on private land by providing quality habitat on public lands.
- Continue to work with local livestock producers to achieve wildlife management goals that also provide benefit to their operations.

3. Agency authority for the proposed action

FWP has the authority under Section 87-1-210, M.C.A. to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. Any consideration of continued livestock grazing on the Fleecer WMA would have to be consistent with the management goals and objectives as outlined in the Fleecer WMA Management Plan (draft 1992). FWP is additionally required to conduct an environmental assessment for all leases under the FWP Land Lease-Out Policy in accordance with Section 87-1-303, M.C.A. FWP Commission must also approve all grazing leases on Wildlife Management Areas owned by FWP.

4. Anticipated Schedule (dates may change)

Public Comment Period: June 10 – July 1, 2022

Decision Notice: July 8, 2022

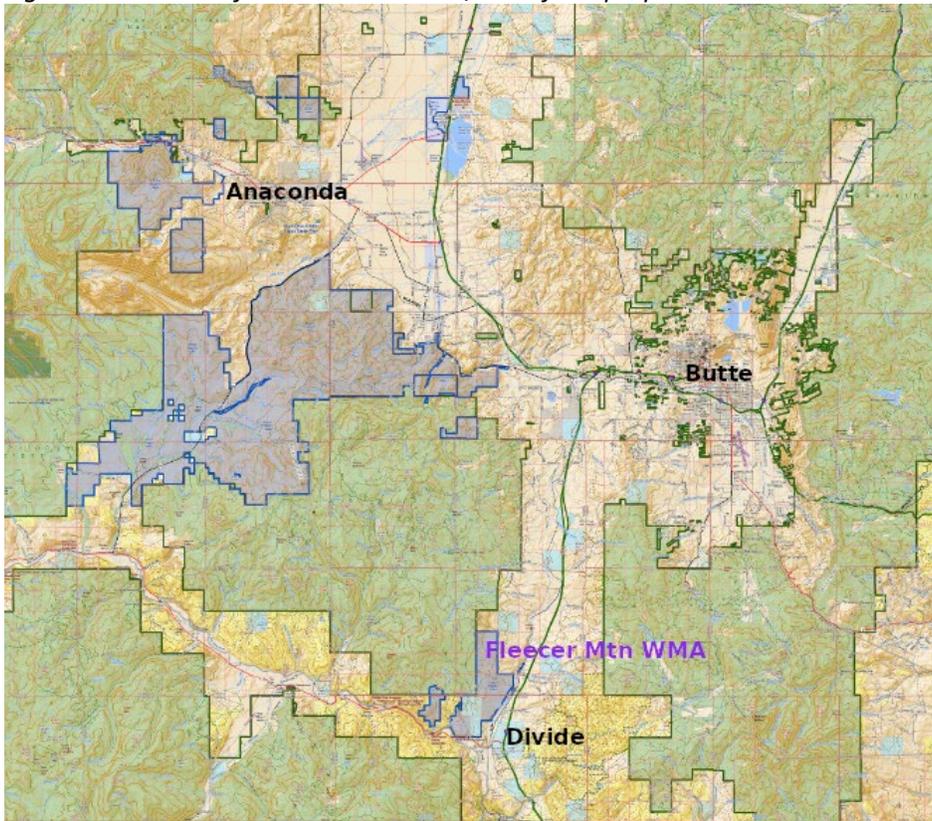
Presented to the FWP Commission for Approval: October 2022

Proposed Leases in Effect: May 2023

5. Project Location

The Fleecer Mountain WMA is located in Silver Bow County in southwestern Montana (Figure 3). It is situated on the southeastern face of Fleecer Mountain, approximately 20 miles southwest of Butte near the town of Divide. The WMA borders lands administered by the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest (USFS), Bureau of Land Management (BLM), DNRC, and private lands owned by Fleecer Cattle Company. The WMA encompasses parts of Township 1 South, Range 9 West and Township 1 North, Range 9 West.

Figure 3. Location of Fleecer Mtn WMA, site of the proposed action.



6. Project Size: 4,771 acres (FWP and FWP-leased DNRC lands only)

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	0
Residential	0		
Industrial	0	(e) Productive:	
(b) Open Space/Woodlands/ Recreation	0	Irrigated cropland	70
(c) Wetlands/Riparian Areas	1,000	Dry cropland	0
		Forestry	0
		Rangeland	3,701
		Other	0

7. Funding

Costs of this proposed action to FWP aside from routine maintenance and operational costs: \$25 Annual Pasturing Agreement fee to DNRC every 2 out of 3 years when cattle are in the pasture with DNRC land. Anticipated 8 staff-days annually to manage the Fleecer grazing systems and any controlled burns.

8. Other Overlapping of Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities:

- (a) DNRC Grazing lease
- (b) NRCS Wetland Reserve Program Reserved Rights Pilot Warranty Easement

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

1. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives

Alternative A (Proposed Action): Implement a 9-year habitat management program on Fleecer Mountain WMA that includes: 1) a renewal of a fee grazing lease and a modified grazing exchange-of-use (EOU) agreement associated with a coordinated grazing program between FWP, the adjacent landowner (Fleecer Cattle Company, formerly Smith 6-S Livestock), and potentially with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS); 2) a renewal of an exchange-for-services (EFS) agreement on the Fleecer Addition portion of the WMA; and 3) incorporation of controlled burning on an as-needed basis to better manage smooth brome fields on the WMA.

The FWP portion of the coordinated grazing program would consist of an EOU agreement for a maximum of 300 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) in spring. If or when USFS grazing plans can align with this proposed action, an additional 94 AUMs could be utilized in the fall (56 AUMs via EOU and 38 AUMs via a separate fall fee-grazing lease). Spring grazing would occur as intensive grazing in a pasture dominated by smooth brome (Pond pasture) and in a second pasture on the WMA in a rest-rotation basis (Table 3). If exercised, fall grazing would occur in a third pasture according to the rest-rotation schedule. The EOU lessee would rest one pasture on private land or their DNRC lease annually in exchange for spring and fall grazing on the WMA.

The EFS agreement with Moose Creek Ranch on the Fleecer Addition would be renewed with the same terms as the current lease, i.e. up to 120 AUMs of livestock grazing annually divided evenly between spring and fall use through a deferred-rotation system (Table 4) in exchange for maintaining and operating the irrigation system, managing noxious weeds, and maintaining fences on the Fleecer Addition parcel.

Where livestock grazing does not sufficiently remove accumulation of smooth brome, FWP would implement controlled burn to reduce build-up of old grass and promote current year growth. Controlled burning would be done in the spring after elk have moved out of the area and only as needed and when burning conditions allow.

Table 3: Grazing schedule for the FWP portion of the Fleecer Coordinated Grazing Program, 2023-2031. Spring = late April-early June, depending on forage availability; Late Fall = October 1-15; Rest = no use by livestock.

YEAR	PASTURE			
	South	Middle	North	Pond
2023				
2026				
2029	Spring	Late Fall	Rest	Spring
2024				
2027				
2030	Late Fall	Rest	Spring	Spring
2025				
2028				
2031	Rest	Spring	Late Fall	Spring

Table 4: Grazing schedule for the Fleecer Addition exchange-for-services agreement, 2023-2031. Spring=May 1-15, Fall=October 1-15, Rest= no use by livestock

Year	Upland 1	Upland 2	Wetland 1	Wetland 2
2023	Fall	Spring/Fall	Rest	Fall
2025				
2027				
2029				
2031				
2024	Spring/Fall	Fall	Fall	Rest
2026				
2028				
2030				

Alternative B: No Action

This alternative would eliminate livestock grazing on the Fleecer WMA and not allow controlled burning as a tool to manage smooth brome fields. It would eliminate the exchange-of-use agreement with the neighbor and the rested pasture it provides, the fall grazing lease with a second neighbor. In the Fleecer Addition parcel, it would eliminate the exchange-for-services agreement with the lessee which would increase FWP personnel time by 8-10 days to run the irrigation system, maintain fences, and control weeds. In the absence of grazing and controlled burns, the smooth brome fields on the WMA would become overgrown and lead to less forage for wintering elk. Overall, loss of a comprehensive habitat management program on the WMA and FWP’s involvement in a cooperative program across ownerships designed to mutually benefit wildlife and livestock would likely lead to less forage on elk winter range due to fewer rested pastures, reduction of available forage on smooth brome pasture, and less tolerance for elk on private land which would lead to an increase in game damage complaints.

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency

USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) annually monitors the wetland acres of the Fleecer Addition that are encumbered by a Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) easement.

3. Private Property Regulatory Restrictions

Actions described in this environmental analysis do not regulate the use of private, tangible personal property, and therefore do not require an evaluation of regulatory restrictions on private property.

PART III. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?			X			1b
c. Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				
f. Other:						

1b. Some soil compaction would occur from cattle trampling. Hoof trampling can be beneficial for seed establishment in the soil. Compaction can be mitigated by keeping cattle from congregating, especially in riparian areas. Photo points on Fleecer WMA show some impact to riparian areas during the season of livestock use and vegetation recovery during years of rest. Short-term negative impacts to riparian areas from livestock grazing are expected to be minor and mitigated by the light stocking rates and scheduled rest.

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		X				
f. Other:						

3. <u>WATER</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?			X		X	3a
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body		X				

or creation of a new water body?						
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
m. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				
n. Other:						

3a. Some siltation and turbidity into Divide Creek would be caused by cattle going to drink. This impact is expected to be minor as livestock grazing would occur during spring and fall when temperatures are cooler and water needs aren't as great as during summer. The riparian condition where Divide Creek flows through the Fleecer Addition is relatively robust and exhibits few and minor impacts from livestock grazing. Further, there is a lot of beaver activity in the area which may make water more available and protect the immediate banks of the stream.

4. <u>VEGETATION</u> Will the proposed action result in?	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X			4a
b. Alteration of a plant community?			X			4b
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				4d
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			X			4e
f. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?			X			4f
g. Other:						

4a. Livestock grazing and controlled burning in smooth brome fields would remove the build-up of old grass and increase the amount of new growth which is more palatable to wintering elk. Native vegetation in pastures scheduled for grazing that year could be impacted by livestock use. This would be mitigated by timing of grazing, scheduled rest during the growing season, and light stocking rates. This proposed action would provide: 1) high quality potential standing crop of vegetation for wintering wildlife on Fleecer WMA; and 2) improved plant vigor and soil stability across elk winter range.

4b. With low stocking rates, any impacts to the plant community would be minor and temporary. Vegetation would be monitored routinely through permanent photo points and livestock enclosure transects. Such monitoring has occurred on Fleecer WMA since 1986 when systematic livestock grazing began. The WMA in general hosts a variety of desired native plants in desired amounts. Repeat photos and vegetation measurements suggest a stable to increasing trend in health and vigor of the plant communities with the implementation of the cooperative grazing programs on Fleecer WMA.

A complete synopsis of the vegetation data gathered from 1986-2012 for the Fleecer WMA has been reported in "Vegetation Monitoring of Grazing Systems at Mount Haggin and Fleecer Mountain Wildlife Management Areas, Montana: A Historical Review and Assessment" (Horton and Boccadori, 2012).

A study conducted on the Fleecer WMA in 2002 examined how stem height and girth of aspen influenced the selection of stems by ungulates (antelope, deer, elk, and cattle) for browsing, rubbing, and gnawing (Keigley and Frisina 2008). This research, based on the timing of occurrence and the stability of livestock numbers from 1986-2001, found that elk were primarily responsible for the observed impacts to aspen. The same time the wintering elk population on Fleecer was increasing, a significant amount of scarring of aspen stems caused by antler rubbing occurred and growth of young aspen was arrested by intense browsing. When wintering elk numbers were reduced by half, aspen released resulting in a younger age class of trees.

Another study conducted on the Fleecer WMA (Wambolt et al 1997) examined the effects of cattle grazing on the nutritive quality of bluebunch wheatgrass, an important forage plant for elk. The study found no significant difference in nutrient content from bluebunch wheatgrass that is grazed in the spring by cattle over that which is totally rested for one year or never grazed during the growing season. The amount of more desirable current year's growth of bluebunch wheatgrass that is available to elk, however, is likely greater where cattle have grazed versus never grazed areas due to the removal of residual forage. Frisina (1992) said that during early summer, Mount Haggin's WMA elk use increased in pastures that had been grazed by cattle the previous year. Use switched during July and August when cow elk are rearing calves to the rested pasture where more security cover and forage was available.

4d. This proposal is designed to increase the productivity of smooth brome fields for the benefit of wintering elk and other wildlife species. In addition, this proposal has been designed to improve habitat conditions on the WMA to maximize elk use on the public land portion of winter range and shift use away from private land. Use of private land instead of public winter range occurred in the 1980's and was the impetus for the Fleecer Coordinated Grazing System.

4e. Livestock grazing on the WMA poses another possible vector for the spread of noxious weeds, along with wildlife, vehicles, UTVs, bicycles, horses, and other modes of recreation. Weed management would occur on Fleecer WMA whether livestock grazing took place or not. Burn scars would be monitored for noxious weeds and reseeded if necessary. Non-native plants are present on the WMA but in small amounts and are not causing a negative shift in plant composition. Ongoing weed management on the WMA has included both chemical herbicides and bio-control releases in compliance with FWP's Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan.

4f. The Fleecer Addition exchange-for-services agreement involves grazing in one of 2 wetland pastures annually. The wetlands on this parcel have been encumbered with a Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) easement administered by the USDA Natural Resources and Conservation Service (NRCS) since 2013. This is a Reserved Rights Pilot Warranty Easement Deed that allows for limited livestock grazing to occur on the encumbered acres. FWP worked with NRCS in 2018 to ensure our grazing program would comply with the terms of the warranty easement deed.

5. <u>FISH/WILDLIFE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?			X		X	5a
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X			5b
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?			X			5c
d. Introduction of new species into an area?						
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?			X			5g
h. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)		X				
i. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				
j. Other:						

5a. The Fleecer WMA grazing programs have been designed to improve habitat conditions by utilizing livestock at times and locations on the WMA where it is beneficial to the vegetation, i.e. grazing smooth brome to reduce old grass and promote current year growth, light use on native range to set seed through hoof trample, light use on wetlands in the fall only to remove some residual vegetation, and keep cattle from foraging on new growth of woody vegetation along stream banks. Salting and herding would be used to distribute cattle and minimize

congregation. Some siltation and turbidity into Divide Creek would be caused by cattle going to drink. This impact would be expected to be minor as livestock grazing would occur during spring and fall when temperatures are cooler and water needs aren't as great as during summer.

5b. Routine removal of smooth brome either through livestock grazing or periodic controlled burns would increase wintering elk use of these areas and help to reduce game damage on neighboring landowners as evidenced by the past several years under this program.

5c. Small mammals and ground-nesting songbirds could be minimally impacted by spring cattle grazing or controlled burning in the smooth brome fields. This would be mitigated by timing burns and spring livestock grazing to occur prior to the nesting season. Since only one native range pasture on the WMA would be scheduled for spring grazing, the remainder of the WMA would provide cover and habitat for pronghorn and ground-nesting songbirds that utilize Fleecer WMA during the fawning/nesting and summer periods. In 2018, FWP established a permanent monitoring transect along Divide Creek on the Fleecer Addition to obtain a baseline of amphibian and reptile presence and abundance. This survey will be repeated every 4-6 years to monitor wetland conditions. Over the past 5 years of the Fleecer Addition grazing program, long-billed curlew, great blue heron, sandhill cranes, and several species of grassland songbirds have been noted on the property annually.

5g. The human activity associated with spring livestock grazing (putting up fences, pushing cattle, etc.) could disturb elk herds in the area if it occurs prior to elk departure from winter range which typically occurs by May 10th.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to severe or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				
e. Other:						

7. <u>LAND USE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?			X			7a
b. Conflict with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				
e. Other:						

7a. Locally owned ranches would be allowed to utilize portions of the WMA for spring and fall livestock grazing. The proposed grazing programs would have a positive influence on the productivity and economics of existing public and private land use in the area. Grazing the WMA in exchange for scheduled rest on adjacent Fleecer Cattle Company lands with the Fleecer coordinated grazing program and in exchange for services to maintain an irrigation system and weed control on the Fleecer Addition illustrates the compatibility of livestock production and wildlife/recreation-based economies and the impacts this could have beyond WMA borders.

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need		X				

for a new plan?						
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?			X			
d. For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		X				
e. Other:						

8c. Controlled burning would pose a human risk. Burns would be conducted by trained personnel and necessary precautions would be taken to avoid injuries.

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				
f. Other:						

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental		X				

services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:						
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. Define projected revenue sources		X				
f. Define projected maintenance costs.			X			10f
g. Other:						

10f. The proposed action would result in a commitment of FWP funds to maintain the Fleecer WMA grazing program, e.g. fence replacement, as needed. No additional fencing would be required. Any maintenance expenses would be covered by the existing operations and maintenance budget for the WMA. Approximately 8 staff-days would be required to manage grazing related activities on Fleecer WMA annually.

11. <u>AESTHETICS/RECREATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?			X			11a
b. Alteration of the aesthetic		X				

character of a community or neighborhood?						
c. Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)		X				11c.
d. <u>or P-R/D-J</u> , will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				
e. Other:						

11a. Some members of the public may be impacted aesthetically depending on their level of tolerance for the presence of livestock on the WMA.

11c. The presence of cattle would minimally restrict recreational use of the WMA, mainly in the form of opening and closing pasture gates, during those times when grazing overlaps with the WMA being open for public use May 15-Dec 1. While fall grazing is concurrent with grouse and antelope hunting seasons, grazing occurs at low density and for a short period that it would not cause significant restrictions to hunting or other recreational opportunities on the WMA. Cattle would be removed from the WMA prior to the start of big game general season.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u>	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
Will the proposed action result in:						
a. Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		X				
e. Other:						

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				
g. For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		X				

PART IV. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

FWP's proposal to implement a 9-year comprehensive habitat management program on Fleecer Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA) through continuation of two coordinated grazing programs and use of controlled burning on smooth brome where needed is designed to improve range conditions for wintering elk and other wildlife species. This EA found no significant impacts to the human or physical environment resulting from the Proposed Action.

PART V. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public Involvement

The public will be notified as follows to comment on this draft EA:

- Two legal notices in: *Butte Montana Standard*, *Anaconda Leader*, *Dillon Ledger*, *Helena Independent Record*.
- News release will be distributed to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP Region 3 issues.
- Copies of EA notification will be emailed/postal mailed to neighboring landowners, local conservation groups, and other interested parties, including over 250 individuals on the Butte Wildlife Biologist's email distribution list.
- Public notice will be posted on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov> "News", then "Recent Public Notices"). The Draft EA will be available, along with the opportunity to submit comments online.
- Copies of the draft EA will be available at FWP Region 3 Headquarters and Butte Area Resource Office; by phoning 406-494-2082; or by emailing vboccadori@mt.gov.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having few physical and human impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

2. Public Comment Period

The public comment period will extend for (21) twenty-one days beginning June 10 through 5PM on July 1, 2022. Comments can be made on the FWP website www.fwp.mt.gov, emailed to vboccadori@mt.gov or mailed to:

FWP
1820 Meadowlark Lane
Butte, MT 59701
Attn: Fleecer WMA Habitat

PART VI. EA PREPARATION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required?

No, an EIS is not required. Based on an evaluation of the primary, secondary, and cumulative impacts to the physical and human environment, this environmental review found no significant impacts from the proposed action. In determining the significance of the impacts of the proposed project, FWP assessed the severity, duration, geographic extent, and frequency of the impact, the probability that the impact would occur, or reasonable assurance that the impact would not occur. FWP assessed the growth-inducing or growth-inhibiting aspects of the impact, the importance to the state and to society of the environmental resource or value affected; any precedent that would be set as a result of an impact of the proposed action that would commit MFWP to future actions; and potential conflicts with local, federal, or state laws. As this EA revealed no

significant impacts from the proposed actions, an EA is the appropriate level of review and an EIS is not required.

2. Person responsible for preparing the EA:

Vanna Boccadori
Butte Area Wildlife Biologist
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
1820 Meadowlark Lane.
Butte, MT 59701 Phone: (406) 494-2082

3. List of agencies or offices consulted during preparation of the EA:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: Divisions of Fisheries, Wildlife, and Legal
USFS, Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, Butte Ranger District
USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service, Deerlodge District

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