



DECISION NOTICE

Beckman WMA Grazing Lease

May 19, 2023

ACTION

Decision Notice (DN). Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) shall prepare a DN for the proposed action. The DN must identify the agency decision, the reasons for the decision, and any special conditions surrounding the decision or its implementation.

With this action, FWP hereby adopts the Draft Environmental Assessment or Draft EA as final, without modification, and approves Alternative 2, the proposed action.

AUTHORITY: MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT

According to the applicable requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act or MEPA and its implementing rules and regulations, before a proposed action may be approved, environmental review must be conducted to identify, consider, and disclose any potential impacts of the proposed action on the affected human environment. The level of environmental review will vary with the complexity and seriousness of environmental issues associated with a proposed action. The level of public interest will also vary. The agency is responsible for adjusting public review to match these factors. *Title 75, Chapter 1, Parts 1 through 3, Montana Code Annotated (MCA)*.

Based on these factors, FWP determined a Checklist Draft EA constitutes the appropriate level of review for the proposed action. Therefore, to assess and disclose potential impacts of the proposed action, FWP prepared a Draft Checklist EA for public review and comment.

Further, FWP must consider any substantive comments received in response to an EA and proceed in accordance with one of the following steps: determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue an Environmental Impact Statement or EIS; determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue a supplemental EA; or determine the Draft EA adequately addressed the issues raised by the proposed action and make a final decision, with appropriate modification resulting from the analysis provided in the Draft EA and the analysis of public comment received.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The Draft EA was made available for public review and comment from May 1, 2023 through May 15, 2023. A legal Notice was published in the Great Falls Tribune and Lewistown News-Argus, and the Draft EA was

posted on FWP's Public Notice webpage: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/public-notices>. The Draft EA was also made available for public review on the Environmental Quality Council or EQC website: <https://leg.mt.gov/mepa/search/>, by individual request, and through notice to identified interested parties. FWP did not receive any comments on the proposed action during the public comment period.

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

A cooperative grazing agreement between the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and the Roe Ranch has been in existence since 2006, to enhance wildlife habitat on both the Beckman WMA and Roe Ranch for resource, landowner, and public benefit. This project seeks to renew that agreement for the next 3-year period.

PURPOSE AND NEED

FWP proposes to renew a lease incorporating the approximate 6,433-acre Beckman WMA for cattle grazing, to better manage vegetation for wildlife cover and forage. The grazing system would provide periods of rest to native pastures on both the Beckman WMA and the neighboring Roe Ranch, with whom the lease is granted. Grazing on Beckman WMA pastures would occur between April 1st and November 31st each year, in some years beginning later or ending earlier, and would be managed through a rest-rotation grazing system. Grass availability and the lessee's ability to comply with the grazing system will dictate stocking rate. The lessee agrees to allow free public hunting access to their property as a condition of the grazing lease.

Benefits of the proposed project include the following:

- Enhance wildlife habitat on both the Beckman WMA and Roe Ranch for resource, landowner, and public benefit. Specifically, the grazing system is designed to improve habitat quality and quantity for a variety of wildlife species, particularly mule and white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, Merriam's turkeys, and ring-necked pheasants.
- Increase the quantity and quality of cottonwood and willow dominated plant communities, directly benefiting white-tailed deer, mule deer, Hungarian partridge, ring-necked pheasants, Merriam's turkeys, mourning doves, and numerous non-game wildlife species.
- Improve woody species growth and expansion in riparian areas, and improved condition of woody shrub vegetation in woody draws, condition of grassland vegetation, and increased grass residual in the uplands, directly benefiting mule deer, white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and Merriam's turkeys.
- Increased monitoring and treatment of noxious weeds.

In exchange for grazing the Beckman WMA, the Roe Ranch agreed to allow free, unlimited walk-in public hunting on their ranch during Fish and Wildlife Commission-approved seasons, similar to how public hunting occurs on the Beckman WMA.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED

Alternative 1: No Action

Under the no action alternative, the existing grazing lease would not be extended, and no livestock grazing would occur on the Beckman WMA. The cooperating Roe Ranch would not be allowed to graze livestock on the Beckman WMA and none of the benefits described by the proposed action would occur. Additionally, the Roe Ranch may remove free public hunting access on their property. FWP would continue to manage

the Beckman WMA for the benefit of wildlife species and for public access. Current services and maintenance of the Beckman WMA would continue.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

FWP would renew a 3-year lease incorporating the approximate 6,433-acre Beckman WMA for cattle grazing, to better manage vegetation for wildlife cover and forage. The grazing system would provide periods of rest to native pastures on both the Beckman WMA and the neighboring Roe Ranch, for whom the lease is granted. Grazing on Beckman WMA pastures would occur between April 1st and November 31st each year, in some years beginning later or ending earlier, and would be managed through a rest-rotation grazing system. The lessee agrees to allow free public hunting access to their property as a condition of the grazing lease. Benefits of the proposed action are further described in the Purpose and Need statement above.

PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE

No comments were received during the public comment period.

DECISION

Based on the environmental review provided in the Draft EA, and in accordance with all applicable laws, rules, regulations, and policies, FWP determined the proposed action (Alternative 2), will not have significant adverse impacts on the human environment associated with the proposed action and constitutes a reasonable and appropriate strategy to achieve identified objectives. Therefore, preparation of an EIS is unnecessary.

With this DN, FWP hereby adopts the Draft EA as final and approves the Alternative 2, the proposed action.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary Bertellotti". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "G" and "B".

Gary Bertellotti, Region 4 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks