



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

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**Meeting Date:** Aug. 17, 2023

**Agenda Item:** Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA) Grazing Lease renewal, Region 4

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 minutes

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**Background:** The department proposes to renew a cooperative grazing lease on the 6,433-acre Beckman WMA with the adjacent private lands to improve and maintain rangeland and habitat conditions for wildlife. The grazing system, which has been in place since 2006 and expanded in 2021, would involve a grazing rotation on the WMA and the 2,695-acre Roe Ranch. The cooperative grazing system provides livestock grazing on the WMA between April 1 and Nov. 31 each year in return for annually rotating grazing and resting portions of the Roe Ranch property. This lease has operated as an exchange of use arrangement and does not involve a cash payment. The stocking rate on the WMA would vary depending on grazing schedule, with a maximum of 1,702 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) annually.

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.
- Adds substantial grazing rest to the Roe Ranch, to continue to restore cottonwood and willow dominated plant communities, improve shrub growth in woody draws and condition of grasslands, and increased residual grass in the uplands, directly benefiting mule deer, white-tailed deer, sharp-tailed grouse, and Merriam's turkeys.
- Lessee responsibility for maintenance of WMA fences and water systems and monitoring for noxious weeds.
- Through the lease arrangement, the Roe Ranch would continue to allow 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.

As proposed, this grazing lease renewal effectively expands the footprint of the Beckman WMA for habitat enhancement and hunting and recreational access in HD 426.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** An environmental assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project and released for public comment on May 1. Public comments on the proposed action were accepted for 15 days. The public was notified of the proposed action through two legal notices in two newspapers; a department news release and EA notification on the website; 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 May 22, that recommended proceeding with the proposed actions. No public comments were received.

**Alternatives & Analysis:** Two alternatives were analyzed in the EA: proceed with the proposed action or take no action. The grazing lease arrangements serve to improve wildlife habitat while also benefiting a neighboring landowner and the recreating public. These benefits would cease and land maintenance responsibilities for the department would increase if the lease was not renewed.

Alternative A: The commission may choose to approve the Beckman WMA-Roe Ranch cooperative grazing lease.



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

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** The department recommends that the commission approve to renew the Beckman WMA-Roe Ranch cooperative grazing lease for a three-year term beginning in April 2024. This lease renewal would help achieve habitat objectives for the WMA and adjacent private lands in cooperation with a local ranch operation.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the three-year cooperative grazing lease renewal with the Roe Ranch (Alternative A) as presented by the department.