



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION FWP PROPOSAL & INFORMATION SHEET

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**Meeting Date:** April 17, 2025

**Agenda Item:** WMA Winter Closure Date Variance

**Action Needed:** Approval of Winter Closure Date Variance for Gallatin WMA

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

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**Background:** In 2024, FWP completed a consolidation process for the administrative rules that govern public use for all recreation and conservation properties administered by the department. (ARM 12.12.101-140). One component of those public use rules (ARM 12.12.105(5)) provides that “[w]ildlife management areas specifically managed as big game winter range, or portions of, are closed to all public entry from December 1 at 11:59 pm through May 15 at noon each year unless otherwise approved by the commission and posted by the department.”

The commission previously acted at its April 2024 meeting to approve variances for the adjustment of closing dates for several WMAs from the standard May 15 date in ARM 12.12.105(5). The variance requested here is to extend the opening date for the Gallatin WMA to June 15 from the standard May 15 date and add that variance (if approved) to the list of already approved variances that will remain in effect through calendar year 2025.

The Gallatin WMA comprises 8,611 acres of diverse habitats in four units (Porcupine, Buffalo Horn, Taylor Fork, and Elkhorn units) generally located south of Big Sky. The Gallatin WMA properties were purchased in a series of transactions from 1945 through 1999 using Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act and Habitat Montana funding for the purpose of protecting critical wildlife habitat. The area is important winter and calving habitat for elk, making it particularly sensitive to disturbance. The WMA experiences high levels of recreational activities, including dog walking, hiking, mountain biking, and horseback riding. Recreational impacts include an extensive network of social trails that facilitate widespread use of the WMA. Public users are currently allowed to use the Gallatin WMA from May 15 to Dec 1. Extending the winter closure through June 15 would reduce the potential for recreational disturbance to elk during the calving season.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** Public comment on this proposal will be solicited for a 30-day period prior to the April commission meeting. Public comments will be posted online and provided to the commission at least two weeks prior to the April meeting.

**Alternatives & Analysis:**

- A. No action. The commission can choose to not approve the opening date variance for the Gallatin WMA and the WMA would open to public use on May 15, 2025, at noon under ARM 12.12.105(5).
- B. The commission can choose to approve the requested variance, and the Gallatin WMA will remain closed to public use until June 15, 2025, at noon.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** The department recommends the commission approve the requested variance because it would reduce disturbance to elk during the calving season. This proactive measure supports the long-term health of the WMA's ecosystem and aligns with its primary goal of benefiting wildlife.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the requested closure date variance for the Gallatin WMA and add the variance to the existing biennial WMA closure date variance list.