



**ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE**  
NORTH SHORE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA  
AGRICULTURAL LEASE RENEWAL  
MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS  
MAY 20, 2021

**PROPOSAL**

The proposed action is for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to renew an agricultural lease on the North Shore Wildlife Management Area (WMA) for a 5-year period (September 2021-September 2026).

**MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS**

FWP is required to assess impacts to the human and natural environment by the Montana Environment Policy Act (MEPA). The North Shore WMA agricultural lease and its impacts were documented by FWP in the EA to comply with MEPA.

The following alternatives were considered in this Environmental Assessment:

Alternative A: No action. Under this alternative, the agricultural lease would not be renewed.

Alternative B: Proposed Action. This alternative would renew the agricultural lease on 350 acres of cropland for a period of five years. The Lessee would plant, in rotation, a mix of cereal grains, legumes, and seed oils (canola). The Lessee would retain up to 80% of the harvest, leaving 20% standing for the benefit of wildlife, primarily migratory waterfowl and upland game birds. As identified in the 2018 WMA Management Plan, agriculture is a primary tool for achieving WMA management objectives including:

- providing resting and re-fueling habitat for migratory waterfowl during their spring migration;
- promoting habitat for upland game birds, songbirds, and other non-game bird species; and
- providing public opportunities for outdoor recreation, primarily in the form of hunting and bird watching.

Public comments were solicited for 21 days from April 23 through May 13, 2021. Legal notices regarding the proposed action were published in the Flathead Beacon, Daily Interlake, and Bigfork Eagle, and posted on the FWP website.

One comment, submitted by a private individual, was received. The respondent did not clearly state nor imply support for either alternative. However, the individual posited three questions related to

the use of agriculture to achieve WMA objectives and asked whether FWP had considered impacts of conventional farming techniques on ecosystems and ultimately climate change.

Following is a summary of the comment received and FWP's response.

1. Can biologists verify the crops being planted benefit waterfowl and other wildlife overall?

*FWP's response: The 70 acres of leave annually produces over 400,000 pounds of grain consumed largely by waterfowl during their spring migration. The harvested crops also provide "waste" grain, available to foraging waterfowl and other wildlife. The North Shore WMA is juxtaposed adjacent to Kalispell Bay, which is a traditional loafing area for migrating waterfowl. Croplands adjacent to loafing habitat offer an efficient re-fueling opportunity for these migrating birds. The tens of thousands of geese, swans, and ducks seen congregating on these fields is a testament to their utilization. Maintaining energy reserves is essential for waterfowl to complete spring migrations and can enhance breeding productivity.<sup>1</sup> The bioenergetic needs of migrating waterfowl, strategic location of North Shore WMA, high level of use of these fields, and potential for this area to convert to urban development served as the basis for acquiring this WMA and the continued farming of these fields.*

2. Does the lessee have designated spots to leave the crops unharvested that could be displayed visually in Appendix A?

*FWP's response: The location of crops and leave areas change annually. Each winter FWP and the lessee meet to develop planting plans and identify the location of leave areas for the coming season. Plans are dictated by crop rotation cycle and wildlife management objectives. We often utilize leave areas as cover crops to enhance soil conditions with diverse plantings, address weed issues, and create contiguous areas of food and cover for wildlife. For the proposed action – renewal of the WMA agricultural lease – a map illustrating crop and leave locations was deemed superfluous and was not provided.*

3. What is done to the area that is non-cropland, as depicted in Appendix A?

*FWP's Response: The North Shore Wildlife Management Area Management Plan, adopted in 2018, details management objectives for the property and proposes restoration and rehabilitation of non-cropland. Since the plan's approval, we have worked to enhance over 30 acres of non-producing areas, as well as installed thousands of linear feet of buffer strips of perennial grasses, forbs and legumes to provide wildlife cover, break up field blocks, and buffer wetlands and natural habitats from agricultural activities. In addition, we work collaboratively with our lessee to rehabilitate former pasture areas to improve effective wildlife habitat in areas currently dominated by canarygrass, foxtail and quackgrass.*

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<sup>1</sup> Ankney, C.D, A.D. Afton, and R.T. Alisauskas. 1991. The role of nutrient reserves in limiting waterfowl reproduction. The Condor 93:1029-1032.

4. Has FWP considered the impacts of conventional farming on ecosystems and climate change, and why not consider regenerative farming practices being pioneered by private individuals within the State of Montana?

*FWP's Response: FWP's Management Plan for the North Shore Wildlife Management Area details property objectives not just for wildlife, but also soil health, water quality protection, and ultimately sustainability of our stewardship actions. The concerns expressed here are justified, and we share many of them. However, the agricultural practices employed on the WMA are dictated, in-part, by those proposed by producers responding to our request for proposals. FWP competitively bid this lease opportunity back in 2016 and 2017, each time receiving proposals from the same three individuals. The selection process was heavily weighted to favor environmentally friendly practices. As a result, we were not only able to negotiate an attractive lease proportion for wildlife, but also included multiple crop rotation, no-till seeding, and many other best management practices. The current lessee has proven a reliable and enthusiastic partner.*

#### **DECISION NOTICE**

In accordance with the Environmental Assessment process, a decision must be rendered by FWP which addresses the concerns and issues identified for this proposed action. I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

After review of this proposal and public comment, it is my recommendation to accept the draft Environmental Assessment as supplemented by this Decision Notice and changes herein as final, and to recommend proceeding with the proposed renewal of the North Shore WMA agricultural lease.

The Final Environmental Assessment may be viewed on FWP's Internet website: <http://www.fwp.mt.gov> or be obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 1 Headquarters, 490 North Meridian Rd, Kalispell, MT 59901, (406) 751-4580.

Jim Williams

FWP Regional Supervisor, Region 1