



Region 4 State Parks  
4600 Giant Springs Road  
Great Falls, MT. 59405  
(406) 454-5840

**Environmental Assessment Decision Notice  
For Heritage Park East Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project**

**Description of Proposed Action:** NorthWestern Energy approached Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks with the Heritage Park East Wildlife Habitat Improvement Project in mid-2021. As part of NorthWestern Energy's license to operate the Missouri River hydro power projects, they are required to mitigate impacts by enhancing native plants and wildlife populations and their habitats on the lands and waters associated with these projects. The focus of this project is to increase riparian vegetation and bird habitat. The Heritage Park area was selected because of its proximity to the Missouri River, the productivity of the neighboring Giant Springs and River's Edge Trail corridor as bird habitat, and an adjacent existing irrigation system. The area around Giant Springs proper is best described as high-density mature forest. Heritage Park is described as low-density maturing forest. The intent of this project is to develop a high-density vegetative zone that will benefit wildlife species and increase native plants in the Heritage Park area for both park character and wildlife habitat.

The project would encompass an 8-acre parcel of undeveloped land to the east of Heritage Park and will consist of planting approximately 700 trees. Roughly 80% would be cottonwood trees with the remaining being a mix of other native trees and bushes. A temporary large-scale wildlife exclusion fence would be installed around the perimeter of the site to protect against deer grazing. The existing irrigation system would be extended to the site to provide supplemental water to increase survival during the initial planting and during the high stress months, generally June to September. Once the trees are no longer vulnerable to wildlife grazing and their roots have developed enough to survive without supplemental water, the fence would be removed. We estimate that this would take between 7 and 10 years. After that time, that area would be managed as a natural landscape.

**Public Process and Comments:** A draft Environmental Assessment proposing this action was posted on January 3, 2022 in the Public Notice section of the Montana FWP website. A press release was sent out to the media on January 3, 2022. Public comment was accepted for a period of 30 days through February 3, 2022. Two alternatives were proposed in the EA.

**Alternative A: No Action**

The no action alternative would leave the area as it is, an undeveloped section of open land. Impacts associated with the no action alternative would mostly be missed opportunities and include not increasing vegetation cover, quantity, and quality, and not improving aesthetics.

**Alternative B: Proposed Action**

The proposed action is to develop 8-acres of wildlife habitat including planting approximately 700 trees, building an exclusion fence around the area and running irrigation to provide supplemental water. The intention is to remove the fence and inactivate the irrigation system after the trees are established, in 7-10 years.

The following is a breakdown of the comments.

3 Comments were received from two different individuals.

Comments will be addressed individually below.

**Comments Specifically Addressed:**

1) *“Please elaborate on the other 20% of native trees and bushes. I think it is important to note whether the plants will be selected for shelter, foraging on seeds and fruit, or to attract insects for insectivores (or a mixture of all). Please elaborate on what characteristics about the plants will assist in them being selected.”*

Response: The other 20% of native plants will be a mix of buffalo berry, skunk sumac, chokecherry, and juniper. These plants were selected because they are common along the Missouri River and the transition zone to upland areas. Additional factors in selection include providing shelter, seeds, fruit, for birds and wildlife and attracting insects.

2) *“In Part V #1 - a statement describing why the EA is appropriate for not requiring an EIS. Please provide a reasoning.”*

Response: An EA was selected for this project because the associated impacts are not considered significant. In fact, the impacts would mostly be positive in nature and any negative impacts would be temporary. The proposed project area is not developed or

heavily used by the public. A trail does run through the site, but it is not designated and there are adjacent designated trails that connect to the Colter and River's Edge Trail systems. Additionally, the project area was heavily disturbed in the early 2000s during the Department of Environmental Quality remediation of the old Montana Silver Smelter site.

3) *"These seem to be logical actions, however, I have never been impressed with the vitality of the trees planted in the Giant Springs picnic shelter area. If you have water for 7-10 years, then keep watering the trees. Giant Springs proper is a good example of what is appropriate for heavy Public use of Public Parks. The prairie, where the planting is proposed, is grass prairie because that is what grows best in that type of soil and moisture. Grass is the biggest enemy of wind breaks, if a farmer does not cultivate or spray a wind break then, over time, the grass will kill all of the trees and bushes. This planting could be futile once the water is shut off."*

Response: This project has been designed to establish a high-density forest that will not be reliant on supplemental waterings. Native species have been selected to ensure that they are compatible with the local environment, and these plants will be given every opportunity to become established with a fence and initial supplemental water. A future decision could be made to leave the water system in place and continue to provide supplemental water but, that is not the intent. If historical photos are referenced, the Giant Springs proper area was once a prairie landscape, like the Heritage area.

**Decision;** Based on the Environmental Assessment and the public comment, FWP will approve the Preferred Alternative B.

This action is subject to appeal, which must be submitted to the FWP Director in writing and postmarked within 30 days of this decision notice. The appeal must specifically describe the basis for the appeal, explain how the appellant has previously commented to the Department or participated in the decision-making process and how FWP might address the concerns of the appeal.

*Gary Bertellotti*

Gary Bertellotti Region 4 Supervisor

2-11-2022

Date