

Draft Environmental Assessment

Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area Fee Title Acquisition



March 23, 2022



**MONTANA FISH,
WILDLIFE & PARKS**

Draft Environmental Assessment MEPA, NEPA, MCA 23-1-110 CHECKLIST

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to acquire approximately 5,677 acres from the Montana Children's Home & Hospital (doing business as Shodair Children's Hospital) north of Ryegate, Montana. This property would establish the Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

2. Agency authority for the proposed action:

FWP has the authority to purchase or acquire by lease, agreement, or gift, lands that are suitable for game, bird, fish or fur-bearing animal restoration, propagation or protection; for public hunting, fishing, or trapping areas; and for state parks and outdoor recreation per Montana state statute 87-1-209.

FWP would primarily use Federal Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration funds and Habitat Montana funds to purchase this property. Costs/fees associated with the acquisition would also be paid from these sources. The set up and maintenance of this new Wildlife Management Area would be funded with Habitat Montana, Pittman Robertson, and general license funds.

Per state law, 87-1-201(9) MCA, FWP is required to implement programs that address fire mitigation, pine beetle infestation, and wildlife habitat enhancement giving priority to forested lands in excess of 50 contiguous acres in any state park, fishing access site, or wildlife management area under FWP's jurisdiction. This new Wildlife Management Area would be subject to this forest management statute.

3. Name, address and phone number of project sponsor (if other than the agency)

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Region 5 Billings Headquarters
2300 Lake Elmo Dr.
Billings, MT 59105

4. Anticipated Schedule:

Fish and Wildlife Commission Endorsement: August 2020
Public Scoping Period: August/September 2020
Draft Environmental Assessment March 2022
Decision Notice: May 2022
FWP Fish and Wildlife Commission Review: August 2022
Montana Board of Land Commissioners: September 2022

5. Location affected by proposed action (county, range and township – included map):

The property is located 20 miles north of Ryegate, Montana in Golden Valley County (Figures 1-3). The property is adjacent to BLM's Twin Coulee Wilderness Area (6,936 acres) and US Forest Service's Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area (88,696 acres) and is in Deer and Elk Hunting District 535.

Township 10 North, Range 20 East, PMM, Golden Valley County, MT

Section 4: Government Lots 2, 3, 4; S $\frac{1}{2}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$; SW $\frac{1}{4}$ NE $\frac{1}{4}$; S $\frac{1}{2}$

Section 5: Government Lots 1, 2, 3, 4; S $\frac{1}{2}$ N $\frac{1}{2}$; S $\frac{1}{2}$;

LESS AND EXCEPT a tract in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ more particularly described as follows:

Commencing at a point in the southeast corner of said section and thence west along the southerly boundary line of said section 264 feet; thence north at right angles 165 feet; thence east at right angles 264 feet; thence south at right angles and along the easterly boundary lines of said section 165 feet to the place of beginning.

Section 8: All

Section 9: All

Section 17: All

Section 19: Government Lots 1, 2, 3, 4; E $\frac{1}{2}$ W $\frac{1}{2}$; E $\frac{1}{2}$

Section 20: W $\frac{1}{2}$

Township 11 North, Range 20 East, PMM, Golden Valley County, MT

Section 28: S $\frac{1}{2}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$; NW $\frac{1}{4}$ SE $\frac{1}{4}$; E $\frac{1}{2}$ SW $\frac{1}{4}$

Section 32: Government Lots 1, 2, 3, 4; N $\frac{1}{2}$ S $\frac{1}{2}$; S $\frac{1}{2}$ NE $\frac{1}{4}$; SE $\frac{1}{4}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$

Section 33: Government Lots 1, 2, 3, 4; N $\frac{1}{2}$ S $\frac{1}{2}$; N $\frac{1}{2}$

Section 34: W $\frac{1}{2}$

6. Project size -- estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
(existing shop area)		Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/	<u>0</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
Woodlands/Recreation		Forestry	<u>2,500</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian	<u>0</u>	Rangeland	<u>3,177</u>
Areas		Other	<u>0</u>

7. Permits, Funding & Overlapping Jurisdiction.

(a) **Permits:** None anticipated

(b) Funding:

FWP would use Federal Pittman Robertson Wildlife Restoration funds (PR) for 75% of the appraised value of the property and Habitat Montana funds for the remaining 25%. The Yellow Book appraised value is \$1,448 per acre, for a total of \$8.22 million. Due diligence and closing costs are estimated at \$22,000.00, using Habitat Montana funds. The set up and maintenance of this new Wildlife Management Area would be funded with Habitat Montana, PR, and general license funds.

(c) Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities:

Agency	Responsibility
Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission	Purchase Approval
Montana State Land Board	Purchase Approval
Golden Valley County Weed District	Weed Plan
State Historic Preservation Office	Cultural/Historic Inventory

Figure 1. Proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA property boundary in relation to the Big Snowy Mountains.

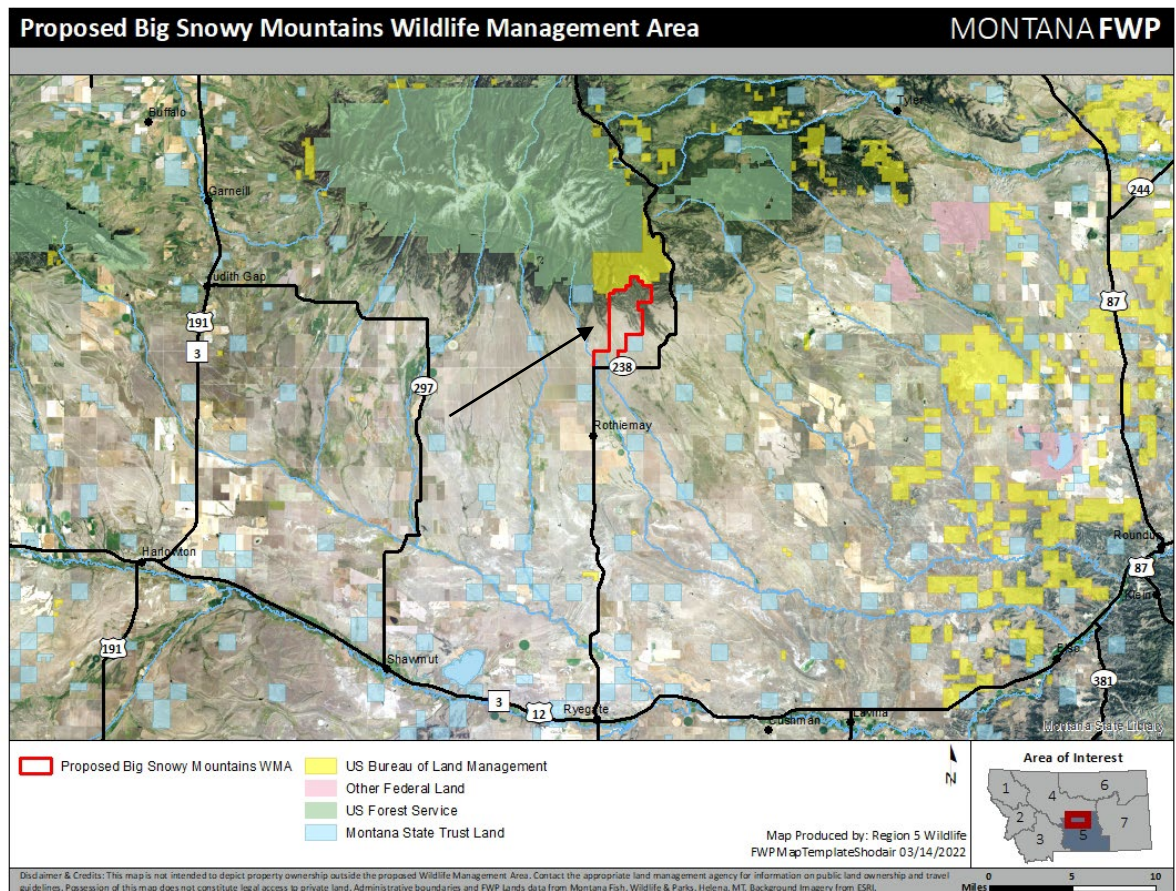


Figure 2. Proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA property boundary.

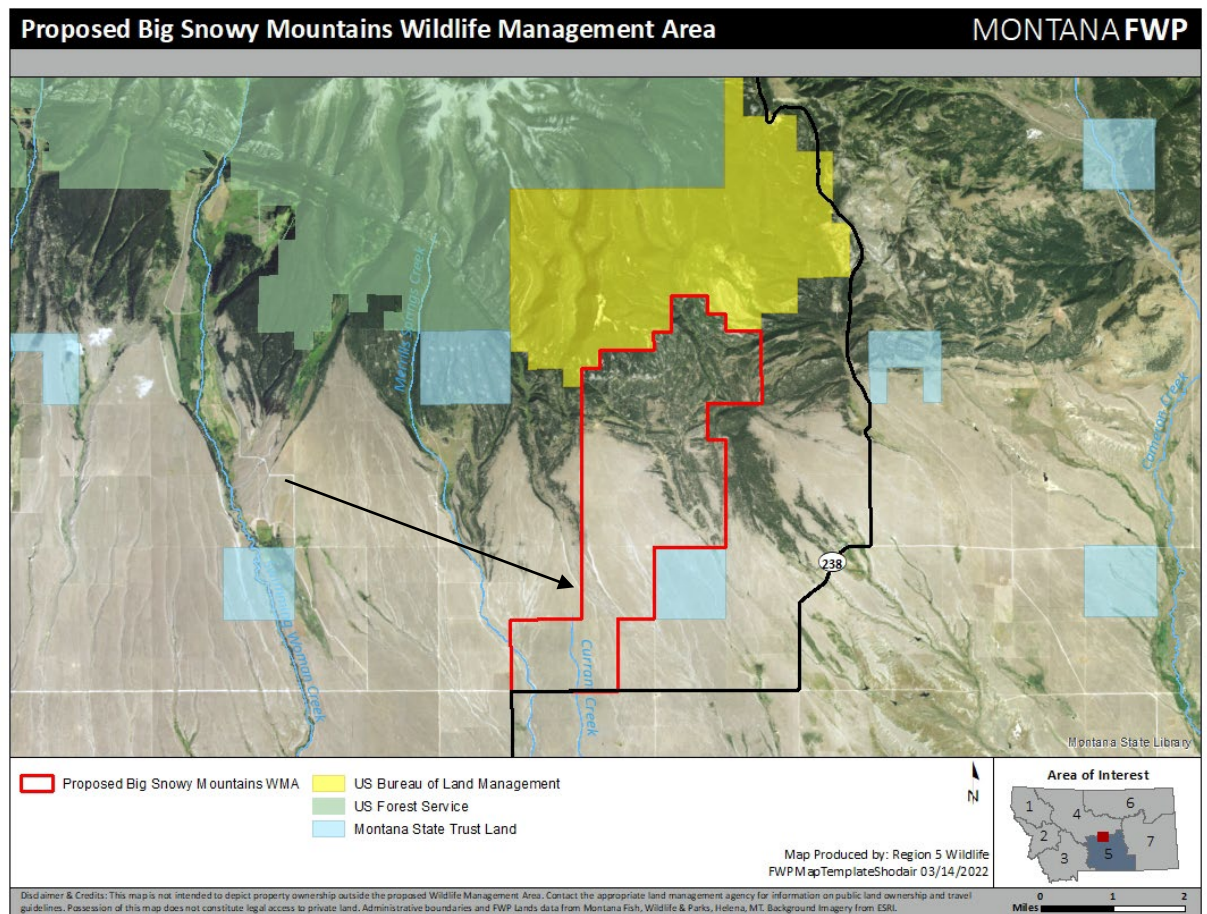
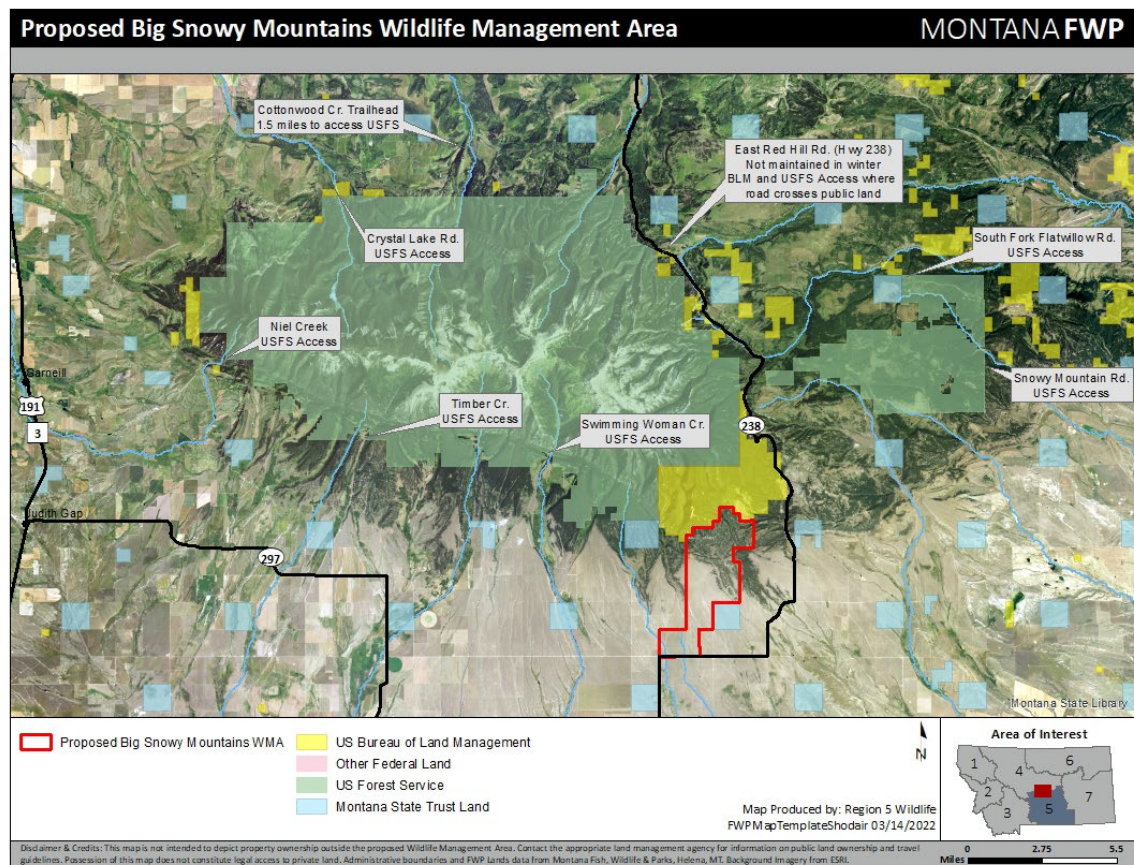


Figure 3. Big and Little Snowy Mountains public land access points.



7. **Narrative summary of the proposed action:** The proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA is in the foothills of the Big Snowy Mountains, an isolated mountain range of public ownership surrounded by privately owned foothills, typical of island mountain ranges in central Montana.

The proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA is entirely native mountain/foothill and prairie grassland habitats at the base of the Big Snowy Mountains. No farm/cropped land occurs on the property. Habitat diversity on the property is evident as it is characterized as including both Middle Rocky and Northwestern Great Plains Ecoregions. Forested habitats consist of ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, Rocky Mountain juniper, and aspen. Large prairie grassland expanses provide winter range for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn. Native grass vegetation is a mix comprised mostly of rough fescue, Idaho fescue, and common forbs interspersed such as arrowleaf balsamroot and yarrow. This native mountain foothill habitat provides habitat for a diverse assemblage of species, including, elk, black bear, mule deer, pronghorn, and other native species populations, including at least 22 “Species of Concern” (Tables 1 and 2). Therefore, these habitats are beneficial in maintaining huntable and viewable populations of game and non-game species, both migratory and resident. Elevation ranges from 4,750 – 6,000 feet.

As proposed, the Big Snowy Mountains WMA would provide excellent wildlife habitat in a species rich area that is largely inaccessible to the public. These private land mountain foothills include large prairie grasslands with conifer dominated forests that provide important year-round habitat for wildlife species such as elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, pronghorn, and the occasional moose. Carnivores such as black bear, bobcat, and mountain lion commonly also use the property and neighboring landscapes. Nongame species such as golden and bald eagles, long-billed curlews, ferruginous hawks, and mountain plovers are also observed. Most of these species utilize the large expanses of native grassland. The property provides habitat for several species of greatest conservation need and Species of Concern (Tables 1 and 2). These forested and prairie grasslands provide winter range for elk, mule deer and pronghorn, which are critical to landscape-level conservation of these native habitats. During 2022 FWP winter elk surveys, 113 elk were observed in the vicinity of this property.

Big Snowy Mountains WMA falls within FWP's Deer/Elk Hunting District (HD) 535, Antelope HD 516, and Bear Management Unit 580. The Big Snowy Mountains are an island mountain range in central Montana that is rich in wildlife, especially elk, but have very few public access points to public land (Figure 3.) The property is surrounded by large absentee landowners who rarely allow recreational opportunities to the general public. The lack of public access to elk is the largest contributing factor to the elk population being roughly 900% over objective.

This property would provide permanent access to public recreation opportunities, including elk hunting. Wildlife viewing, photography, and hiking would be other wildlife-related recreation available on this property. The property would also serve as a gateway to access the adjacent federal property in the Big Snowy Mountains. The central location of this property in Montana and proximity to Billings increases the probability it would receive substantial public use. Demand in this area is high for public access to elk, mule deer, pronghorn, and black bear hunting.

A sale of this property to a private owner would likely mean the ability to provide public access to the property would be lost. Many properties along the Big and Little Snowy Mountains have undergone ownership changes in recent years. These landownership changes are often to buyers primarily interested in recreation over agricultural values, along with associated public access restrictions or outright prohibitions. A growing interest in access to occupied elk habitat in this hunting district makes conservation of this land extremely valuable.

The seller would like FWP to establish a permanent WMA for Golden Valley County residents and visitors to enjoy in perpetuity. This is a rare opportunity that a landowner in this area is willing to go through the long FWP process to ensure this becomes public land. Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation is

facilitating the sale of this property. Fee title acquisition would ensure perpetual conservation and management of the habitat to benefit wildlife, native plants, and related public recreation.

9. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:

Alternative A: No Action – FWP would not acquire the Shodair Children’s Hospital Property

Under the No Action Alternative, FWP would not acquire the property from the Shodair Children’s Hospital. The property would likely be sold in the near term. If sold to a private entity, the opportunity to manage the property for wildlife benefit and public access would likely be lost.

Alternative B: Proposed Action – For FWP to acquire the 5,677-acre property from Shodair Children’s Hospital to create the Big Snowy Mountains WMA

FWP proposes to acquire approximately 5,677 acres from the Shodair Children’s Hospital to establish a new wildlife management area. If completed, the property would be managed for the primary purpose of providing effective wildlife habitat. Public hunting and recreation access to this property, as well as to adjacent federal land, would also be secured in perpetuity.

An existing fifteen-year grazing lease is in effect until April 1, 2031, and FWP would honor the lease. This lease may include maintenance responsibilities related to the grazing system.

WMA Management: A complete Big Snowy Mountains WMA Management Plan would be written within the first year of ownership. If purchased, standard WMA rules would apply. For more information see Appendix 2 for the Draft Management Plan. These rules are subject to change as FWP completes a rule simplification process, including making rules the same across all FWP lands (Fishing Access Sites, State Parks, WMAs).

- Public Use and Access
 - The WMA would be closed each year to public recreation from December 1st through May 15th to allow wildlife undisturbed access to winter range habitat.
 - Motorized use would be restricted to roads designated as open for public use and designated parking area(s).
 - Dispersed camping would be allowed unless posted otherwise.
 - Camping is limited to 16 days in any 30-day period.
 - Install a cattleguard and metal gate on the southern boundary of the property to allow access to a fenced public parking area off the Red Hill Road.
 - Complete construction and fencing to establish a parking area on the southern entrance to the property off Red Hill Road.

- Complete construction and fencing to establish a parking area one mile north of the central entrance on Metzger Road by the northwest corner of the DNRC section.
- Install a cattleguard and metal gate on the Metzger Road boundary of the property.
- Install WMA entrance sign and a sign with a map and rules at the southern entrance off Red Hill Road.
- Install a sign with a map and rules at the central entrance north of Metzger Road.
- Install boundary signs in accordance with FWP WMA boundary sign policy every 500ft along the property boundary.
- Grazing Management
 - A grazing management plan is being created based on the principles of rest-rotation and/or spot treatment grazing to maintain and/or enhance wildlife habitat for the resource and public benefit.
 - A grazing plan would be developed that best suits the property and the goals of the wildlife management area. The grazing lessee would help with maintenance activities as part of the current grazing lease.
 - Four wildlife friendly cross fences, with wildlife passages built in, are proposed for the grazing system.
 - Install up to three and a quarter mile of two-inch water line to stock tanks needed to implement the rest-rotation grazing system.
 - Install three water tanks to implement rest-rotation grazing system.
 - Install solar panels to push water north to stock tank to implement rest-rotation grazing system.
- Noxious Weed Management
 - FWP would document compliance with 7-22-2154, MCA, on weed inspections for land acquisitions.
 - The property would be inspected for noxious weeds by the county weed management district.
 - FWP would implement noxious weed management with guidance from the FWP *Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan* (June 2008) and would utilize properly prescribed chemicals on a prioritized basis. Biological agents, mowing, pulling, and/or other methods would be researched and utilized where chemical control is inappropriate.
 - Limitations on motorized use of the property would be implemented to minimize the introduction and spread of noxious weeds.
 - Weed-seed free feeds would be required.

10. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

Historic Sites: By Montana law (22-3-433 MCA), all state agencies are required to consult with the State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) on the identification and location of heritage properties on lands owned by the state that may be adversely impacted by a proposed action or development project (construction sites). All ground disturbing activities will be subject to SHPO review and may require field reconnaissance and establishing mitigation recommendations by a qualified archaeologist for further consideration by SHPO and FWP to avoid potential impacts. After SHPO review of the proposed parking area locations, a site survey prior to any ground disturbing activities in Township 10N Range 20E Section 20 is required.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

The analysis of the physical and human environments discussed on the following pages is limited to Alternative B, as potential impacts of the No Action alternative are difficult to define because the final decision regarding the potential sale of the property is left to the discretion of the current owners.

Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		X				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?		X				
c. Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				

The proposed action would have no effect on existing soil stability, geologic substructure, or any unique geologic or physical features within the new WMA area.

While public use of this property and adjacent public lands would increase, use would be limited to walk-in or horseback access from the two designated parking areas. Additional roads would not be developed on the property although some road work may be needed to maintain the primary access road on Metzger Road for public use and FWP management purposes. Road work would cause minimal soil and vegetation disturbance because the access road already exists. The gravel-textured soils and flat terrain associated with proposed designated parking areas are not expected to require much if any dirt work, only fencing and signage to designate parking areas and boundaries. One parking area would be located on the southern entrance to the property off Red Hill Road. The other parking area would be located one mile north of the central entrance on Metzger Road, by the northwest corner of the DNRC section. Any grazing that occurs would be managed through a grazing plan designed to reduce

soil erosion, as described in more detail in Appendix 2. There would be no expected increase in erosion or negative impact to soil quality resulting from the grazing lease.

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		X				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regulations? (Also see 2a.)		X				

The proposed action would have no effect on ambient air quality within the property. Motorized and wheeled vehicles would be required to travel on existing, open roads on the WMA (other than administrative use, no motorized off-road travel would be authorized on this property). Public use would be restricted to walk-in or horseback use only from the parking area(s) or the open road. The state highway that would provide the primary means of accessing the property is a gravel road. Increased public visitation to the area could result in increased production of dust. The impact of dust to air quality would likely be negligible.

3. <u>WATER</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		X				
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		X				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
m. For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				

Modifications to grazing practices on the property would have the potential to improve vegetation and water quality. Changes in the livestock grazing system may require the improvement or development of additional livestock water sources.

4. VEGETATION Will the proposed action result in?	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X			4.a.
b. Alteration of a plant community?		X				
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			X		Yes	4.e.
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		N/A				
g. Other:		X				

4. a. Under FWP management, wildlife values would be protected, and where indicated, the productivity of soils, water and vegetation would be improved through managed livestock grazing when and where appropriate on portions of the proposed WMA. There is no prime or unique farmland on the property.

4c. There are no federally listed threatened or endangered plant species or critical habitat known to be present on the property. A list of Plant Species of Concern (SOC) that are either known to occur or predicted to occur on or near the property is provided in Table 1. Under FWP management, plant values, including threatened and endangered species, if they occur, would be conserved, and, in general, the productivity of soils, water, and vegetation would be conserved or enhanced.

Table 1. Plant Species of Concern list for the Townships around the Big Snowy Mountains WMA (9N19E, 9N20E, 9N21E, 10N19E, 10N 20E, 10N 21E, 11N 19E, 11N 20E, 11N 21E) – Montana Natural Heritage Program

Common Name	Scientific Name	Common Name	Scientific Name
Snow Indian Paintbrush	<i>Castilleja nivea</i>	Entire-leaved Avens	<i>Dryas integrifolia</i>

4.e. Limitations on motorized use of the property would be implemented to minimize the introduction and spread of noxious weeds. Weed-seed free feeds for pack animals would be required. FWP would document compliance with 7-22-2154, MCA, on weed inspections for land acquisitions. Weed inspection by the county weed management district has already been requested. FWP would implement noxious weed management with guidance from the FWP *Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan* (June 2008) and would utilize properly prescribed chemicals on a prioritized basis. Biological agents, mowing, pulling, and/or other methods would be researched and utilized where chemical control is inappropriate.

5. <u>FISH/WILDLIFE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?			X positive			
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X positive			
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?			X positive			
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		X				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				5.f.
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?			X			5.g.
h. For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)		X				
i. For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				

5a, b, c. Through a more wildlife-friendly approach to managing the land, additional opportunities would exist for species that utilize grasslands (short grass-grazed, rested – tall, residual grass), and species that utilize riparian areas could increase over time.

5.f. There are no federally listed threatened or endangered species or critical habitat known to be present on the property. A list of wildlife Species of Concern (SOC) that are either known to occur or predicted to occur on or near the property is provided in Table 2. Under FWP management, wildlife values, including threatened and endangered species, would be conserved, and where possible, the productivity of soils, water, and vegetation would be conserved or enhanced.

Table 2. Animal Species of Concern list for the Townships around the Big Snowy Mountains WMA (9N19E, 9N20E, 9N21E, 10N19E, 10N 20E, 10N 21E, 11N 19E, 11N 20E, 11N 21E) – Montana Natural Heritage Program

Common Name	Scientific Name	Common Name	Scientific Name
Hoary Bat	<i>Lasiurus cinereus</i>	Chestnut-collared Longspur	<i>Calcarius ornatus</i>
Little Brown Myotis	<i>Myotis lucifugus</i>	Brown Creeper	<i>Certhia americana</i>
Long-eared Myotis	<i>Myotis evotis</i>	Mountain Plover	<i>Charadrius montanus</i>
Dwarf Shrew	<i>Sorex nanus</i>	Black Tern	<i>Chlidonias niger</i>
Preble's Shrew	<i>Sorex preblei</i>	Evening Grosbeak	<i>Coccothraustes vespertinus</i>
Black-tailed Prairie Dog	<i>Cynomys ludovicianus</i>	Pinyon Jay	<i>Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus</i>
Sprague's Pipit	<i>Anthus spragueii</i>	Cassin's Finch	<i>Haemorhous cassinii</i>
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	Clark's Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga columbiana</i>
Ferruginous Hawk	<i>Buteo regalis</i>	Long-billed Curlew	<i>Numenius americanus</i>
Varied Thrush	<i>Ixoreus naevius</i>	Thick-billed Longspur	<i>Rhynchophanes mccownii</i>
Loggerhead Shrike	<i>Lanius ludovicianus</i>	Greater Sage Grouse	<i>Centrocercus urophasianus</i>
Brewer's Sparrow	<i>Spizella breweri</i>	Great Plains Toad	<i>Anaxyrus cognatus</i>
Berry's Mountainsnail	<i>Oreohelix strigosa berryi</i>		

5.g. The property would be closed annually to public recreational access from December 1 through May 15th to allow wildlife undisturbed access to winter range habitat. The property would be open to public access, hunting and other non-motorized

recreation consistent with standard wildlife management area public use rules the remaining portion of the year. Therefore, wildlife may incur some stresses periodically and temporarily disperse from the immediate area. However, this impact is expected to be minor and consistent with FWP wildlife management. The property is located adjacent to and near a large block of public land (BLM and USFS) which would provide additional habitat for wildlife to disperse to and from (see Figure 1 above).

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?			X			6.a.
b. Exposure of people to serve or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				

6.a. There would be increased use of the area by recreationists, but most of this use would be walk-in based recreation and would not impact noise levels. Most recreational use is expected to occur during hunting season. However, use is expected to be intermittent and dispersed over a large area, and therefore this impact is considered minor. There are no residences that would be affected by the noise.

7. <u>LAND USE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				

The proposed action for the area would be for the property to be managed primarily for wildlife habitat in perpetuity. A livestock grazing plan would be implemented to apply grazing where and when appropriate, consistent with FWP grazing standards.

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?			X		Yes	8.a. & c.
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?			X			8.a. & c.
d. For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)			X			

8.a. & c. Herbicide treatments are part of FWP's weed management plan to limit the infestation of noxious weeds on its properties per the guidance of the FWP *Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan* (June 2008). Weed treatment and storage and mixing of the chemicals would be in accordance with standard operating procedures. Certified professionals would apply permitted chemicals in accordance with product labels and as provided for under law.

9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?			X positive			9c.
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?			X			9d.

The proposed action may have a slight positive economic effect on local communities but would be unlikely to alter the distribution of population in the area.

9.c. Establishing the Big Snowy Mountains WMA through this proposed action would provide additional access for hunting and other forms of recreation, which may provide a slight positive economic benefit to area businesses.

9.d. Establishing the Big Snowy Mountains WMA through this proposed action would increase traffic during certain times of the year on existing gravel county roads that access the property. FWP does not expect the number of visitors to be substantial, but the area will receive more visitation particularly during hunting season. The property would be closed for public recreation from December 1st through May 15th which is when most road maintenance activities would be required such as plowing or repair due to muddy roads. By closing the property to the public during this time the increased road maintenance activities would be reduced. By establishing designated parking area(s) on the WMA potential traffic hazards should be minimized.

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:			X			10.a.
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				10.b.
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. Define projected revenue sources			X			10.e.
f. Define projected maintenance costs.			X			10.f.

10a. FWP would conduct maintenance including fire risk mitigation and wildlife law enforcement on the property. FWP currently monitors and patrols in the area and would patrol the proposed WMA.

10b. By law, FWP pays taxes to counties equal to the amount that a private landowner would be required to pay per Montana Code 87-1-603. There would be no change in taxes received by Golden Valley County as a result of the proposed action.

10.e. Grazing leases can generate revenue. The amount depends on the number of AUMs grazed as well as the amount of maintenance and services provided by lessees in lieu of cash lease fees.

10f. Initial projected maintenance and improvement costs are estimated by FWP of approximately \$714,000, which includes weed management, fence maintenance and construction, parking area construction, road improvements, and signage.

11. <u>AESTHETICS/RECREATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?		X				
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				
c. Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)			X positive			11.c
d. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)			X			11.d

The proposed action would have no affect on any scenic vista or the viewshed of the area or other aesthetic character because no major developments would be implemented on this property under FWP ownership and the viewshed would be protected in perpetuity. The property would be closed December 1st through May 15th to public recreation to provide wildlife undisturbed access to winter range habitat.

11.c The proposed action would increase local recreation, because the property would be in public ownership.

11.d. The proposed action would increase access to the BLM's Twin Coulee Wilderness Area and the US Forest Service's Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				12.a.
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		X				

12.a. No destruction or alteration of any site, structure, or object of prehistoric, historic, or paleontological importance is anticipated while under FWP ownership. FWP's proposed acquisition would have a positive effect on any cultural or historical resources by securing and managing them in public ownership. By Montana law (22-3-433 MCA), all state agencies are required to consult with SHPO on the identification and location of heritage properties on land owned by the state that may be adversely impacted by a proposed action or development project (construction sites). Construction of parking areas and other ground disturbing activities would involve consultation with the State Historical Preservation Office (SHPO) and may also include on-site evaluation of potential cultural resources prior to construction if requested by SHPO.

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. <u>SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</u> Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				
g. For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		X				

13.e. There are varying perspectives pertaining FWP's purchase of interest in land. Whereas the contemplation of making a purchase does result in comments in support as well as, at times, comments against such an action, if the acquisition of a Wildlife Management Area occurs, FWP does not expect ongoing substantial debate or controversy.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

This proposed acquisition would conserve native habitats and benefit area wildlife populations. It would enhance public access to existing public lands and increase recreational opportunities in perpetuity. No subdivision or development would occur on the land. The proposed acquisition would benefit native habitats, wildlife populations, and the public. The proposed action is not expected to cause substantial direct or indirect impacts, nor is it anticipated to be associated with any known cumulative impact over time. No significant impacts are expected to occur with the proposed action.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public involvement:

Additional opportunity for public participation was available in August/September 2020, when the FWP issued a request for public scoping comments about this proposed acquisition. FWP received 559 comments about the project, the vast majority of which were supportive to very

supportive of the project. See Appendix 1. Comments provided during the public scoping process were considered when developing this EA draft.

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: *The Times-Clarion* and *Billings Gazette and the Independent Record*
- One statewide press release;
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov> – *Public Notices*.

Copies of this environmental assessment will be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

A public meeting will be held online on April 12, 2022 from 6:30 pm to 8:30 pm and can be joined at an online address to be announced on the FWP website – <http://fwp.mt.gov> – the day of the meeting, to provide the public a venue to submit comments and have questions answered by FWP staff. This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

2. Duration of comment period:

The public comment period will extend for at least (30) thirty days. Written comments will be accepted until 2:00 pm, April 25, 2022 and can be mailed or emailed to the addresses below:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
ATTN: Big Snowy Mountains WMA Acquisition
2300 Lake Elmo Dr.
Billings, MT 59105

Or comments can be emailed to fwpreion5pc@mt.gov Please use subject line, “**Big Snowy Mountains WMA Acquisition**”.

PART V. EA PREPARATION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)? No

If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action. An EIS is not required. Based on the assessment above, which has identified a very limited number of minor impacts from the proposed action, and based

on the prior comment period which did not identify potential significant impacts, an EIS is not required and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

2. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:

Ashley Taylor, FWP R5 Wildlife Biologist, Judith Gap, MT
Linnaea Schroeer, FWP MEPA Coordinator, Helena, MT

3. List of agencies or offices consulted during preparation of the EA:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks:

Fisheries Bureau, Billings

Habitat Bureau, Helena

Land and Water Unit, Helena

Wildlife Bureau: Billings Regional Office, Helena

Parks and Recreation Bureau, Billings

State Historic Preservation Office, Helena

APPENDIX 1

Public Scoping Results

Montana Code Annotated (MCA) 87-1-218 requires FWP to (a) conduct a public scoping process to identify issues and concerns as the initial phase of an environmental review pursuant to Title 75, chapter 1, part 2; (b) provide the public with sufficient notice of the proposed acquisition and an opportunity to provide input on reasonable alternatives, mitigation alternatives, mitigation measures, issues, and potential impacts to be addressed in the environmental review; and (c) respond to comments received during the public scoping process as part of the environmental review document.

In accordance with MCA 87-1-218, a public scoping period was held from Public scoping for the proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA was open August 21, 2020 through September 19, 2020. Public notice of the scoping period was provided to neighboring landowners, county commissioners and other interested parties. Comments were taken through multiple channels including email, website, hard copy, and phone. A total of 559 public comments were received during the comment period. Fourteen organizations made comments, 162 comments were a form letter and 383 were individual comments. Over 99% of comments were in support of the project.

Common themes that were raised during public scoping:

- Overall support for the project and the unique opportunity
- Increased public access to public lands
- Increased public access to elk
- Conserve wildlife habitat
- Good use of license dollars
- Limit motorized use and distribution of open roads to keep elk and other wildlife on property
- Increased revenue for businesses in local communities
- Maintain livestock grazing for fire management and to minimize financial impact to current grazing lessee
- Buy adjacent property

Concerns that were raised during public scoping:

- Increased fire risk with increased public use
- Overuse by humans camping, driving, etc. pushing wildlife off property since timber habitat is only two miles wide
- Livestock grazing impacts on property during current lease term
- Weed management
- Law enforcement and medical response to remote area
- Traffic speed on Rotheimay Road
- Loss of tax revenue for Golden Valley County
- Lands should be managed as state school lands for revenue generation

APPENDIX 2

DRAFT MANAGEMENT PLAN

Proposed Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area

INTRODUCTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposes to purchase fee-title ownership of lands to establish the 5,677-acre Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area (WMA). This draft management plan discloses FWP's management intent for public review and comment. This document conveys interim management policies and strategies for the property while the long-term management plan is developed. In addition, FWP anticipates the following list of improvements/maintenance that will be needed and the estimated cost for each.

STATEWIDE GOAL FOR WMAS

Montana's Wildlife Management Areas are lands managed by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks to benefit a diversity of wildlife species and their habitats on behalf of the public and provide compatible public access for fish and wildlife related recreation.

WMA GOAL

The primary goal of the proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA is to manage the grassland winter range and forested habitats for the benefit of wildlife with elk being the focal species. The WMA will further benefit a variety of birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. A commensurate goal of the WMA is to provide public opportunity for outdoor recreation, primarily in the forms of hunting, hiking, wildlife viewing, and bird watching.

DESCRIPTION OF WMA

General Description

The proposed 5,677-acre Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is located in central Montana on the south side of the Big Snowy Mountains. It is located in Golden Valley County approximately 20 miles north of Ryegate, MT (See Figures 1 and 2) The property is adjacent to BLM's Twin Coulee Wilderness Area (6,936 acres) and US Forest Service's Big Snowies Wilderness Study Area (88,696 acres) and is in Deer and Elk Hunting District 535. Elevation ranges from 4,750 ft at the southern grassland foothills of the property to 6,000 ft at the northern forested portion of the property.

Property Description

Figure 1. Proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA property boundary in relation to the Big Snowy Mountains.

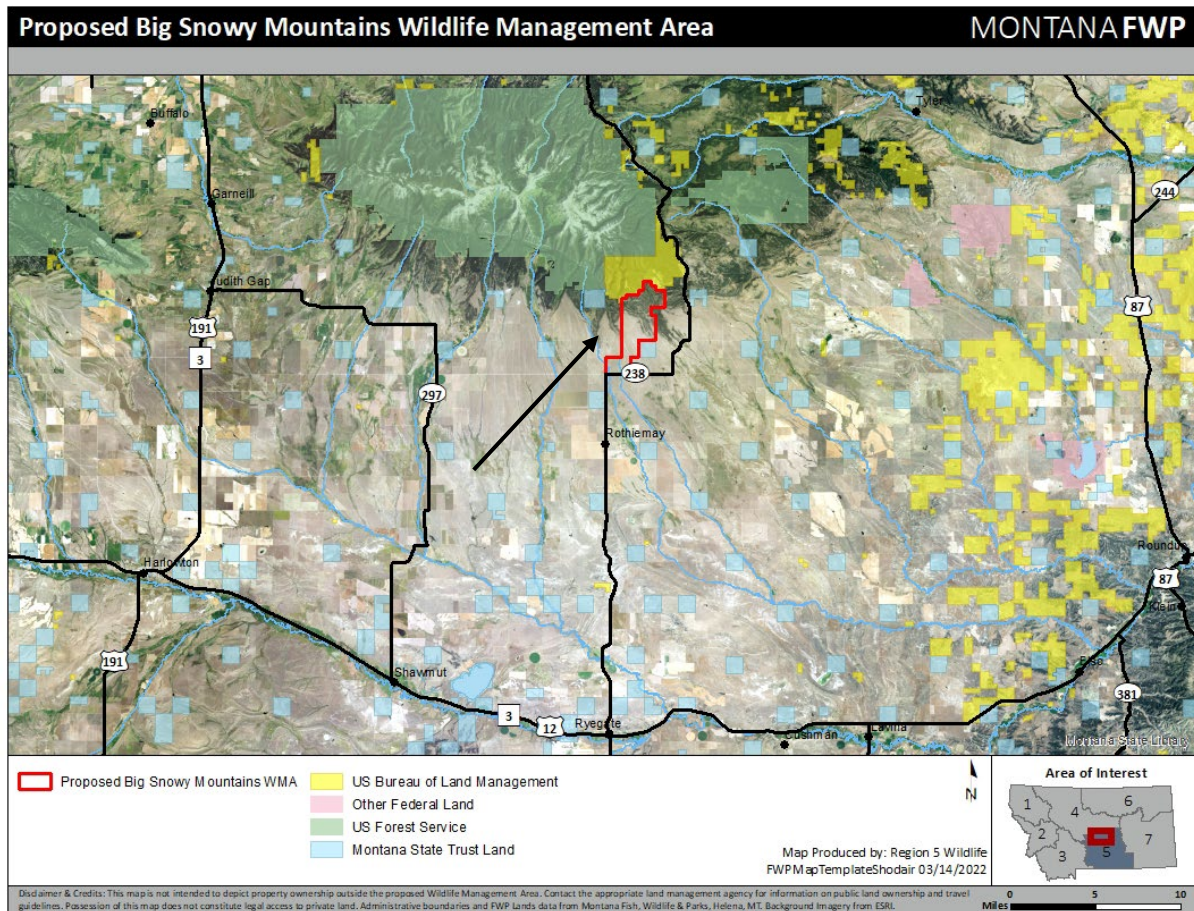
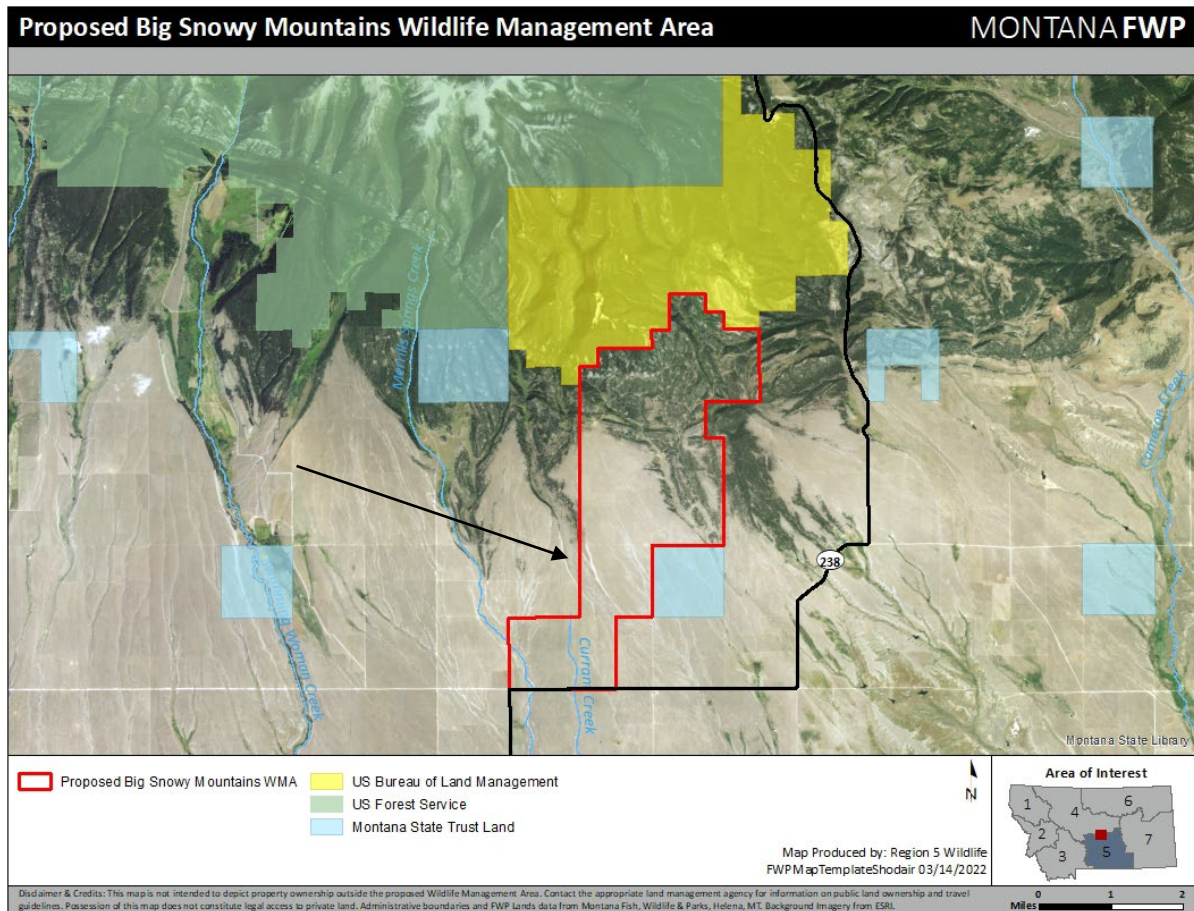


Figure 2. Proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA property boundary.



Acreeage Deeded:

Township 10 North, Range 20 East, PMM, Golden Valley County, MT

Section 4: Government Lots 2, 3, 4; S $\frac{1}{2}$ NW $\frac{1}{4}$; SW $\frac{1}{4}$ NE $\frac{1}{4}$; S $\frac{1}{2}$

Section 5: Government Lots 1, 2, 3, 4; S $\frac{1}{2}$ N $\frac{1}{2}$; S $\frac{1}{2}$;

LESS AND EXCEPT a tract in the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ more particularly described as follows:

Commencing at a point in the southeast corner of said section and thence west along the southerly boundary line of said section 264 feet; thence north at right angles 165 feet; thence east at right angles 264 feet; thence south at right angles and along the easterly boundary lines of said section 165 feet to the place of beginning.

Section 8: All

Section 9: All

Section 17: All

Section 19: Government Lots 1, 2, 3, 4; E $\frac{1}{2}$ W $\frac{1}{2}$; E $\frac{1}{2}$

Section 20: W $\frac{1}{2}$

Township 11 North, Range 20 East, PMM, Golden Valley County, MT
Section 28: S½SE¼; NW¼SE¼; E½SW¼
Section 32: Government Lots 1, 2, 3, 4; N½S½; S½NE¼; SE¼NW¼
Section 33: Government Lots 1, 2, 3, 4; N½S½; N½
Section 34: W½

Acreage Leased by FWP:

There would be no leased acres associated with the WMA.

II. Landforms and Drainage

The proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA is in the foothills of the Big Snowy Mountains, an isolated mountain range of public ownership surrounded by privately owned foothills, typical of island mountain ranges in central Montana. Elevation ranges from 4,750 ft at the southern grassland foothills to 6,000 ft at the northern forested portion of the property. Perennial flowing water does not exist, so no fisheries management opportunity exists.

III. Vegetation

Habitat diversity on the property is characterized as Middle Rocky Ecoregion and Northwestern Great Plains Ecoregion. Forested habitats consist of ponderosa pine, Douglas fir, Rocky Mountain juniper, and aspen. Prairie grasslands are, dominated by a blue bunch wheatgrass/Idaho fescue habitat type and chokecherry, providing winter range for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn.

Land Use:

Historical use of the property has been livestock grazing, and currently grazing is conducted via a grazing lease. A grazing evaluation of the property was completed in 2021. A grazing management plan is being created based on the principles of rest-rotation and/or spot treatment grazing to maintain and/or enhance wildlife habitat for the resource and public benefit. Specifically, this grazing plan would be designed to improve habitat quality and quantity for a variety of wildlife species, particularly elk and mule deer.

Some timber thinning occurred several decades ago. Per state law, 87-1-201(9) MCA, FWP is required to implement programs that address fire mitigation, pine beetle infestation, and wildlife habitat enhancement giving priority to forested lands in excess of 50 contiguous acres in any state park, fishing access site, or wildlife management area under FWP's jurisdiction. FWP would develop and implement forest management plans for this property to comply with this statute.

Vegetation Condition:

The property is mostly native vegetation made up of approximately 49% Prairie Grassland, 49% Conifer Dominated Forest and Woodland (xeric-mesic), and 2% Deciduous Dominated Forest and Woodland. The property is in good condition overall.

WEED MANAGEMENT

Noxious weed infestations are present on the property, especially in the timbered habitat due to ground disturbance associated with previous logging activity (Figure 3). Primary noxious weed species in need of control are spotted knapweed, (*Centaurea stoebe*), Canada thistle (*Cirsium arvense*) and hounds tongue (*Cynoglossum officinale*). Noxious weeds can impact native vegetation used by wildlife for food and cover. Off road travel causes ground disturbance and can be a source for new infestations. Weed management, including distribution mapping and control, will be a high priority.

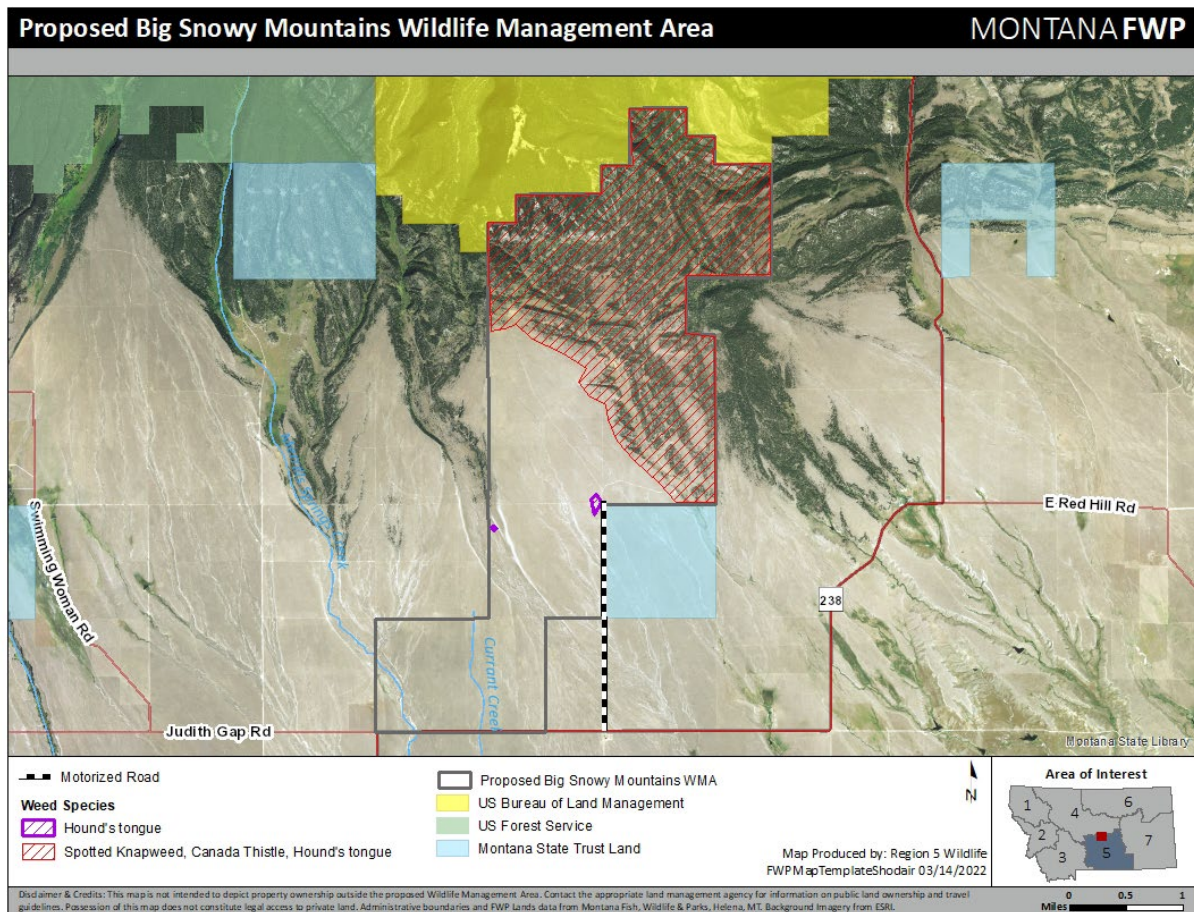
Weed Management Objectives:

Prevent, contain, reduce, and/or eradicate noxious weeds on the proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA and prevent dispersal of weed seed from the WMA.

- Manage weeds in a manner consistent with FWP’s “Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan”. *High Priority.*
- Develop and maintain an inventory of noxious weeds on the WMA. Use GPS mapping of weed infestations during herbicide application. Use photo plots of select treatment areas to show weed control progress over time. *High Priority.*
- Control noxious weeds annually with emphasis on new starts and areas of heavy public use, such as WMA roads and parking areas. Emphasis should also be placed on former logging trails and adjacent ground, in addition to property boundaries. *High Priority.*
- Any weed infestation on one landownership is likely to spread to adjacent lands. Work cooperatively with adjacent landowners and the Golden Valley County Weed Board to control weed infestations across the broader landscape. Use backpack and/or drone delivery of herbicide treatment on property boundary. *High Priority.*

Weeds: A weed inspection and inventory with the County Weed District is scheduled for spring/summer 2022. Once completed, the report will be incorporated into this management plan. FWP would implement noxious weed management with guidance from the FWP *Statewide Integrated Noxious Weed Management Plan* (June 2008) and would utilize properly prescribed chemicals on a prioritized basis. Biological agents, mowing, pulling, and/or other methods would be researched and utilized where chemical control is inappropriate. Limitations on motorized use of the property would be implemented to minimize the introduction and spread of noxious weeds. Weed-seed free feeds for pack animals would be required.

Figure 3. Locations of known weed infestations on the proposed Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area.



Estimated cost to manage noxious weeds is \$26,250 to \$32,812, annually for at least the first three years under FWP ownership.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure on the WMA will include fences, roads, and signs. Fences serve to define WMA boundaries as well as control livestock grazing and two parking areas. The primary access road will serve to provide motorized public and administrative access to portions of the WMA. Signs serve to provide information to the public users. Deterioration of the infrastructure over time through natural processes and from public use requires monitoring and maintenance. The WMA will be maintained according to FWP's Wildlife Management Area Maintenance Standards.

Infrastructure Management Objectives:

Maintain infrastructure on the WMA according to FWP's WMA Maintenance Standards. Maintaining infrastructure on the WMA in functional condition will promote public recreation consistent with purposes of the WMA and help maintain credibility as good neighbors and responsible land managers.

Fences

Currently, the west, south and majority of the east boundaries are fenced, but are in various stages of disrepair. The northern boundary is not fenced because the topography and limited water naturally prevent livestock from going north of the property boundary (Figure 4). Four wildlife friendly cross fences, with wildlife passages built in, are proposed for the grazing system.

- Survey the western, southern, and eastern property boundaries of the property for boundary fence replacement. *High Priority*
- Construct one mile of wildlife friendly boundary fence on the southeast corner of the property adjacent to private property not currently fenced. *Highest Priority*
- Construct 5 miles of wildlife friendly cross fences, with wildlife passages built in, for the grazing system. *High Priority*
- Replace 13.5 miles of boundary fence along the western, southern, and eastern boundary with wildlife friendly design. The northern boundary is so rugged it has never been fenced and does not warrant fencing. *High Priority*
- Annually inspect and maintain approximately 14.5 miles of boundary fence and fencing around parking areas. Open gates in the fall and close them as needed during the grazing season for containing livestock. *High Priority*
- Where chronic problems exist (such as elk crossings), use alternative fencing options. *High Priority*
- Install a cattle guard and metal gate on the southern boundary of the property to allow access to a fenced public parking area off the Red Hill Road. *High Priority*
- Install a cattle guard and metal gate on the Metzger Road boundary of the property. *High Priority*
- Construct fence around the two parking areas to contain motorized use. *High Priority*
- Annually inspect and maintain the condition of gates on the property. *High Priority*

Estimated cost to construct, maintain, and repair the fences is \$237,500 to \$296,875.

Water Development

A review of the DNRC water rights database found no water rights with a place of use for the property. The database also did not include any water rights in the area listed in the landowner's name or in the name of Mr. Allen, the previous longtime owner. A review of the Montana Groundwater Information Center (GWIC) found records for two wells, one completed in 1954 (GWIC #2366) and the other completed in 1961 (GWIC #2365).

- Install up to three and a quarter mile of two-inch water line to stock tanks needed to implement the grazing system. *High Priority*
- Install three water tanks to implement the grazing system. *High Priority*
- Install solar panels to push water north to stock tanks to implement the grazing system. *High Priority*

Estimated cost to install, maintain, and repair the waterline is \$144,800 to \$181,000.

Livestock Grazing

FWP plans to honor the existing grazing lease on the property to graze in a manner to conserve and promote healthy grasslands. Nine years remain on the current grazing lease term. Subleasing will not be allowed without prior approval by FWP.

The grazing lessee is responsible for:

- Fence repair labor and materials.
- Supervising supply of water to livestock.
- Furnishing labor and materials for minor repair and winterization of the water system.
- Furnishing salt and mineral.
- Counting and keeping track of all livestock.
- Following the grazing rotation prescription and returning stray animals to the appropriate pasture.
- Providing loading and unloading facilities.
- Furnishing supplementary nutrition, if needed.
- Controlling noxious weeds associated with the leased pastures.

FWP plans to utilize five pastures to graze in a wildlife-friendly manner (Figure 4). Some portions of the WMA would be managed through rest, some portions would be managed with periodic grazing treatment. Grazing treatments would allow grazing to occur in two pastures sometime between April 15 (± 7 days) and June 5 (± 7 days) each year, to work with natural water sources on the property which are traditionally available only during the spring and early summer. Two pastures of the five would receive a grazing treatment each year while the other three pastures would be rested annually. Grazing in pasture E would occur briefly as livestock are trailed through this pasture to summer pastures. Grazing treatments would rotate to a different pasture annually (Figures 5 and 6).

Figure 4. Proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA grazing system pastures developed with existing grazing lessee.

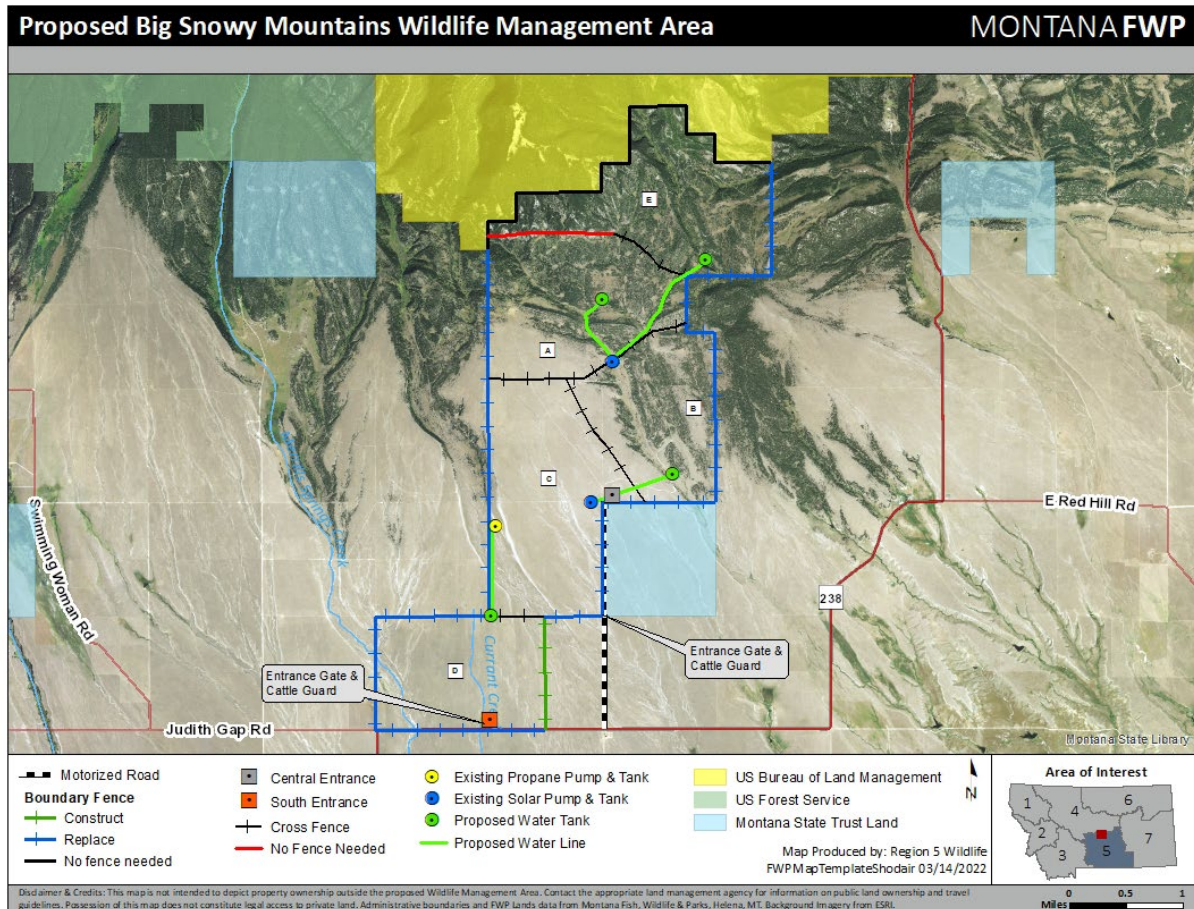


Figure 5. Proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA grazing system pasture Animal Unit Month (AUM) calculations. Source: <https://websoilsurvey.sc.egov.usda.gov/App/HomePage.htm>

PROPOSED BIG SNOWY MOUNTAINS WMA PASTURE AUMs						
Number of AUMs	Pasture A	Pasture B	Pasture C	Pasture D	Pasture E	Total AUMs
	141	236	398	286	Rest	1,061

Figure 6: Proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA grazing system grazing schedule developed with existing grazing lessee.

PROPOSED BIG SNOWY MOUNTAINS WMA GRAZING SCHEDULE						
Year	Pasture A	Pasture B	Pasture C	Pasture D	Pasture E Livestock Trail Through June 5 (± 7 days)	AUMs Available
2023	Rest	Rest	Graze 2nd	Graze 1st	Rest	684
2024	Rest	Graze 2nd	Graze 1st	Rest	Rest	634
2025	Graze 2nd	Graze 1st	Rest	Rest	Rest	377
2026	Graze 1st	Rest	Rest	Graze 2nd	Rest	427
2027	Rest	Rest	Graze 2nd	Graze 1st	Rest	684

Graze: Graze anytime between April 15 (± 7 days) - June 5 (± 7 days)

Rest: No grazing occurs

Roads

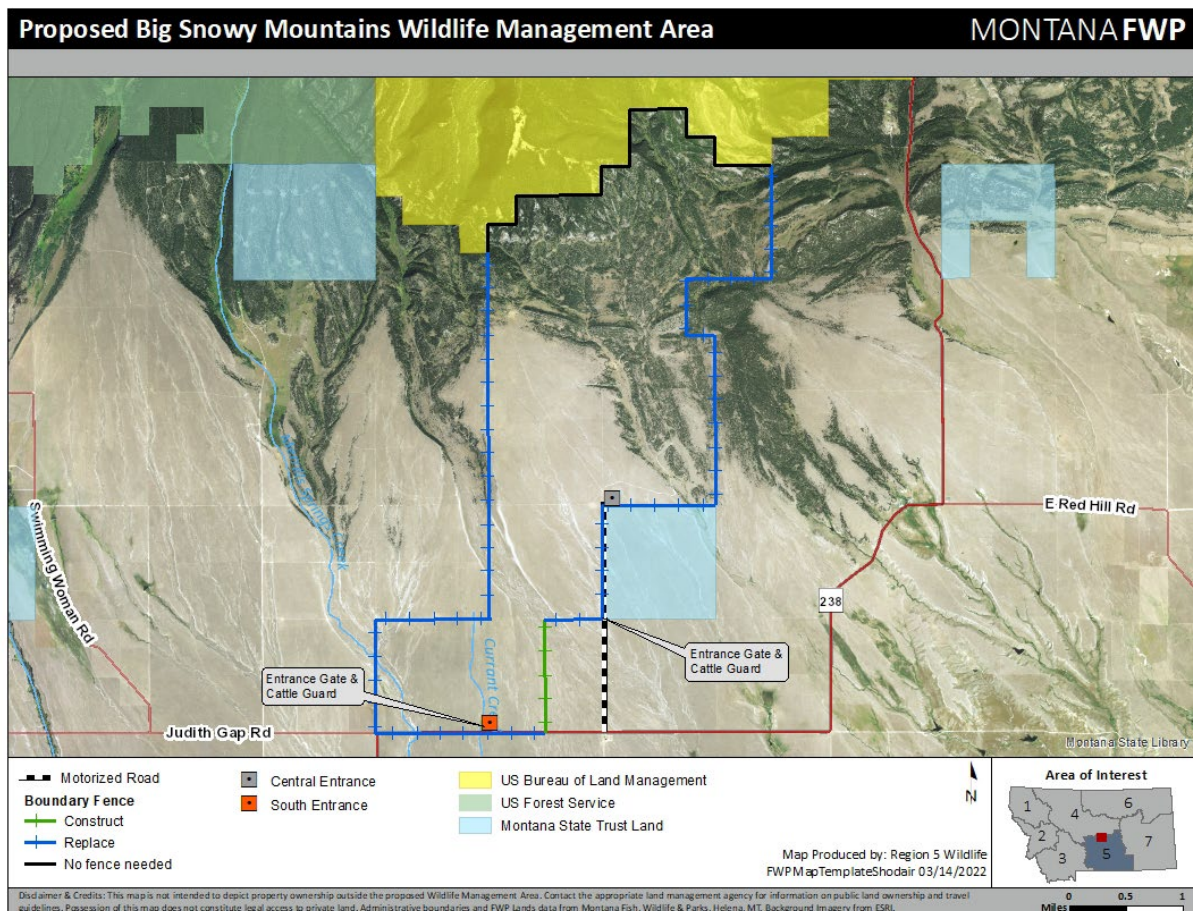
There are no improved roads or parking areas within the boundaries of the property. Several roads would be closed, one main access road would be kept open (Figure 7). Road closed carsonite posts would be installed on all two tracks closed to motorized use. The open road would be marked on the map signs, to be located at both the southern and central entrances. If a road is not designated as open, it is closed to motorized use. Delineation of open trails should increase the amount of security available for wildlife on the property and mitigate some of the other concerns with motorized use.

- Recognize the main access road within the property as a designated open motorized route. If a road is not designated as open it is closed to motorized use. (Figure 3). *High Priority*
- FWP will be evaluating the improvement and maintenance of Metzger Road north of Red Hill Road to the central entrance of the property and will consult with Golden Valley County on the same. The property would be open to the public May 15 to December 1 so year-round road maintenance would not be required. *High Priority*
- Complete construction and fencing to establish a parking area on the southern entrance to the property off Red Hill Road. *High Priority*
- Complete construction and fencing to establish a parking area one mile north of the central entrance on Metzger Road by the northwest corner of the DNRC section. *High Priority*

- Install approximately ten armored crossings and culverts as needed to mitigate water pooling on two miles of motorized road including Metzger Road and one mile of road on the property. *Medium Priority*
- Road grading of two miles of motorized road including Metzger Road and one mile of road on the property. *Medium Priority*

Estimated cost to construct and maintain parking areas and roads is \$152,200 to \$190,250.

Figure 7. Proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA travel management and infrastructure.



Signs

Information for WMA users would be provided on two entrance signs on the southern and central entrances of the property. These signs would display a map and rules to provide sufficient information to WMA users to ensure users know the WMA rules, and to minimize trespass and property damage issues. These signs would be installed as soon as possible at these main entrance points. In addition to these map/rules signs, road closed carsonite signs would be installed on roads that are closed to motorized use.

- Install WMA entrance sign and a sign with a map at rules at the southern entrance off Red Hill Road. *High priority*
- Install a sign with a map and rules at the central entrance north of Metzger Road. *High priority*
- Install boundary signs in accordance with FWP WMA boundary sign policy every 500ft along the property boundary. *High priority*
- Continue to annually inspect and maintain boundary, road, and entrance signs. Signs will be installed and maintained according to FWP WMA maintenance standards. *High Priority*
- Other interpretive signs may be installed if appropriate. *Medium priority*

Estimated cost for the next 10-year period to install and maintain signs is \$10,385 to \$12,981.

PUBLIC RECREATION

Commission rules regarding public use of all WMAs statewide are revised/adopted on a biennial schedule (<http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/wma>). As a general objective, public access to the WMA is intended to be as uncomplicated as possible with the intent of supporting public enjoyment opportunities so long as they do not conflict with FWP rules or the primary purposes of the WMA. Necessary restrictions include no use of motor vehicles off designated routes, overnight camping is limited to 16 days in any 30-day period, bear resistant food storage is required, and fireworks and littering are prohibited. These rules are subject to change as FWP completes a rule simplification process, including making rules the same across all FWP lands (Fishing Access Sites, State Parks, WMAs).

The proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA provides opportunity for outdoor recreation, primarily in the form of hunting and wildlife watching. The property is highly valued for recreation, including hunting, hiking, camping, and sightseeing. Historical public recreational access to the property has been limited. The level of recreational use on the WMA, particularly during summer, is not fully known. Habitat effectiveness, public user enjoyment, and plant community health are dependent in part on responsible use by public users of the WMA, and therefore, effective compliance of WMA rules and hunting regulations is important. FWP is

obligated to address resource concerns that may result from public recreation, which may include establishing additional rules or adjusting allowances for recreation to reduce impacts.

Management Objective – Provide big game hunting opportunities. Provide additional wildlife-related recreational opportunities such as bird watching and wildlife photography from May 15 through December 1st.

- Patrol the WMA, monitor public use, and show an FWP presence. *High Priority.*
- Enforce WMA rules. Enforcement of Montana law and WMA rules helps maintain or improve relationships with neighboring landowners and law-abiding hunters and recreationists. In general, basic rules common to all WMAs should apply to the proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA, unless there are specific circumstances that require additional rules. *High Priority.*

APPENDIX C – Species List

Table 1. Animal and Plant Species of Concern list for the Townships around the Big Snowy Mountains WMA (9N19E, 9N20E, 9N21E, 10N19E, 10N 20E, 10N 21E, 11N 19E, 11N 20E, 11N 21E) – Montana Natural Heritage Program

Ferruginous Hawk	Mountain Plover	Clark's Nutcracker	Long-billed Curlew	Brewer's Sparrow
Sprague's Pipit	Brown Creeper	Cassin's Finch	Golden Eagle	Evening Grosbeak
Varied Thrush	Chesnut-collared Longspur	Thick-billed Longspur	Greater Sage-Grouse	Hoary Bat
Little Brown Myotis	Preble's Shrew	Long-eared Myotis	Black-tailed Prairie Dog	Berry's Mountainsnail
Dwarf Shrew	Great Plains Toad	Snow Indian Paintbrush	Entire-leaved Avens	

Table 2. Observed species records on or within 5 miles of the proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA, – FWP Mapper. * Denotes Species of concern

*Mountain Plover	*Brewer's Sparrow	*Red-headed Woodpecker	*Ferruginous Hawk	*Long-billed Curlew
*Clark's Nutcracker	*Golden Eagle	*Thick-billed Longspur	*Veery	*Chestnut-collared Longspur
*Brown Creeper	*Evening Grosbeak	*Northern Goshawk	*Varied Thrush	*Cassin's Finch
Swift Fox	American Robin	Dark-eyed Junco	Mountain Chickadee	Yellow-rumped Warbler
Hermit Thrush	Mountain Chickadee	Northern Flicker	Pine Siskin	Red-breasted Nuthatch
Swainson's Thrush	Red Crossbill	Western Tanager	Chipping Sparrow	Warbling Vireo
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	Hammond's Flycatcher	Townsend's Solitaire	Hairy Woodpecker	Mountain Bluebird
Red-tailed Hawk	American Goldfinch	Vesper Sparrow	Prairie Falcon	American Kestrel
Common Raven	Black-billed Magpie	Marbled Godwit	Merlin	Horned Lark
Lark Bunting	Red Squirrel	Mountain Lion	Bobcat	White-tailed Jack Rabbit
Elk	Mule Deer	Black Bear		