



**MTFWP Region 5, 2300 Lake Elmo Road, Billings, MT 59105
Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact for the
Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area project**

May 12, 2022

Thank you for your reviews, comments, and suggestions regarding the proposed Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area project by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). As detailed in the draft Environmental Assessment (EA), the objective of this project is for FWP to acquire the 5,677-acre property from Shodair Children's Hospital to create the Big Snowy Mountains WMA.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) PROCESS

The proposal has been analyzed in an Environmental Assessment (EA) to satisfy the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). FWP is required to assess the impacts of the proposed action to the human and natural environment as directed by MEPA. Under the MEPA process, a 33-day public comment period ran from March 24, 2022 through April 25, 2022. Notice was published in the Billings Gazette, Helena Independent Record, and The Times-Clarion, posted on the FWP web page, and notice provided to an electronic list of interested publics.

ISSUES RAISED IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA)

Issues raised by the public included the potential for increased fire risk by increased human use of the area, increased road dust in the area, increased human use of the area changing elk movements, increase in noise levels due to increased human use, concern about the impact of a WMA on a future residence nearby, concern about increased traffic hazards because of increased human use, increased human use causing a need for an emergency response or evacuation plan, increased need for law enforcement, loss of wilderness character, increased human presence causing increased fire risk that could be extremely hazardous if it was to occur, loss of tax revenue for the county, loss of productive range lands for agricultural use, consider game retrieval roads, increased human-use impacts to adjacent federal-land elk hunting, consider lion hunting, timber management, economic impact to local economy and the purchase price.

GENERAL SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

FWP received input from 107 individuals with some representing organizations. Three comments were against the project and 104 comments were in support of the project. Groups responding included:

Montana Sportsmen Alliance, Montana Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, Montana Citizens' Elk Management Coalition, Montana Wildlife Federation, Helena Hunters and Anglers, American Bear Foundation, Laurel Road and Gun Club, Great Falls Archery Club, Traditional Bowhunters of Montana, Anaconda Sportsmen Club, Hellgate Hunters and Anglers, Friends of the Missouri Breaks Monument, Bearpaw Bowmen Archery Club, Bridger Bowmen Archery Club, Flathead Wildlife Inc., Gallatin Wildlife Association, Public Land Water Association, and Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership.

FWP RESPONSES TO PUBLIC COMMENTS

Increased fire risk due to increased human use in the area

A concern was raised for potential increase of wildfire danger resulting from increased recreation associated with the proposed WMA. It is true that increased public use could result in higher wildfire potential. If this acquisition were to take place, FWP would take the following precautions to minimize this potential: First, FWP has rules in place to restrict fires to "portable camp stoves, fireplaces, or self-made fire rings" which must be attended to at all times and must be completely extinguished prior to leaving a site. As the county adopts fire restrictions when conditions and capabilities require, those restrictions would also apply to the WMA. Stage I restrictions would result in a prohibition of any open fires, such as a campfires, on the WMA. As well, FWP prohibits all off-road motorized travel on WMAs and would maintain parking areas to reduce fuel hazard.

Deterioration of ambient air quality

A concern was raised about the impact of traffic dust from the county road deteriorating ambient air quality. The proposed action would have no effect on ambient air quality within the property (EA page 10, 2.a Air). 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.

Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals

The proposed property would be closed to human use annually from December 1 to May 15 to allow elk and other wildlife undisturbed access to winter range habitat. Human use of the area during the remaining portion of the year may occasionally alter daily elk movements but is not expected to alter larger seasonal movements of elk to calving areas. Elk movements during the fall are expected to be different because of the increase in public hunting pressure on this property. These movements may lead to an increase in elk harvest in some areas and elk moving to refuge properties in other areas. Purchasing this property would provide an increase in public hunting access in this local area but is not expected to solve the elk hunting access problem in this hunting district.

Increased noise levels

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 existing residences that would be affected by the noise. FWP located proposed parking-area sites a mile or more from areas where one or more future residences might be developed in the foreseeable future to minimize potential for disturbances. 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 temporary road noise. The impact of temporary road noise would likely be negligible. Minimal initial construction noise is anticipated with this project.

Adverse effects on residence

No residences currently exist near the property. FWP located proposed parking area sites a mile or more from areas where one or more future residences might be developed in the foreseeable future to minimize potential for disturbances. The proposed parking areas are planned to be primitive, consistent with the primary purpose of the WMA to provide for wildlife habitat first and secondarily to support compatible forms of recreation. FWP is not proposing improved campsites and other such facilities that would further attract human recreation.

Effect on existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan

The proposed project is not expected to increase emergency response time or result in changing emergency evacuation plans that would already be subject to adjacent public lands (BLM, USFS, DNRC). Motorized vehicle use would be limited to two primary access points which would be managed to minimize fire risk. In addition, the winter public access closure of the proposed WMA would prohibit public presence for 5.5 months of the year.

Increased traffic hazards

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 all year, but the area will receive more visitation, particularly during hunting season, than it has in the past. The property would be closed for public recreation annually from December 1 through May 15, which is when most road maintenance activities such as plowing or repair due to muddy roads would be required. 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.

Need for new or altered government services

As part of the FWP reorganization effort in the Parks and Outdoor Recreation Division, FWP will have an Outdoor Recreation Manager who will work on the proposed WMA as needed. This position is in addition to the FWP Regional Enforcement and Wildlife staff that will work on the proposed WMA as needed. The reorganization has improved capacity and efficiencies in the Maintenance program. Region 5 has a dedicated Maintenance Manager and associated staff that will be available to address maintenance needs at the WMA. The addition of the Outdoor Recreation Manager and Maintenance Manager position and improved FWP maintenance planning process will allow FWP to better respond to concerns on the WMA and maintain the property which compliments the wildlife and enforcement staff for this site.

Wilderness impacts

Wilderness designation refers to no motorized use. The limited motorized use of the proposed WMA does not increase motorized use of the BLM and USFS Wilderness Areas nearby.

Lion hunting

The primary purpose of the WMA would be to provide effective wildlife habitat, including big game winter habitat that is free of human disturbance. A limited entry lion hunting opportunity may be an option in the future, if FWP determines there is a need to target lion harvest or if there would be a benefit to disperse lions within or out of the WMA. At this time, FWP anticipates such an opportunity would be prescriptive and not a guaranteed part of the annual hunting opportunities.

Easier access to adjacent federal lands ruining existing elk hunting

The proposed WMA may provide somewhat easier access to adjacent public lands. However, starting from the nearest parking area, accessing adjacent public lands would still require nearly 2.5 miles of hiking to get to the BLM boundary, which is a reasonably good effort for most hunters.

Loss of tax revenue

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.

Game retrieval routes

Motorized use is proposed to be limited to two public access points on the WMA. Limiting motorized use reduces wildfire risk, weed infestations, and increases security cover for elk and other wildlife species. Grazing is proposed for the spring and early summer on the WMA therefore the grazing lessee would not be driving past the parking lots during the fall hunting season.

Timber management

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 more than 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.

Loss of grazing

A concern was raised about the loss of productive agricultural range lands to wildlife. FWP plans to honor the existing grazing lease on the property to graze in a manner to conserve and promote healthy grasslands. FWP worked with the current grazing lessee to design the proposed grazing system, which would rotate livestock through five pastures to graze in a wildlife-friendly manner.

Loss of local agricultural economic revenue

As mentioned in the EA, FWP estimates about \$714,000 of initial improvements are needed on the property to make it functional as a WMA. The WMA would continue to support a grazing lease and at

times would accommodate recreation access for hunting, hiking, and wildlife watching. All these improvements and activities are expected to result in expenditures with area businesses. FWP ownership would also continue payment of property taxes at an amount equal to what a private landowner would pay.

Purchase Price

As described in the EA, the purchase price is based on a professional appraisal of the fair market value using a Yellow Book standard, which is a higher standard than most land valuations. FWP is proposing this acquisition for the benefit of conserving native habitats and dedicating this unique property to wintering big game and a variety of other wildlife benefits. The grassland habitats would be enhanced through a prescribed grazing system which would also benefit an area rancher. As proposed, the property also would be open for public hunting and various forms of wildlife-compatible recreation. FWP has conducted an environmental analysis to consider potential impacts on the physical and human environment. It will be up to the Fish and Wildlife Commission and Board of Land Commissioners to determine if this proposal should proceed to completion.

Support

Comments in support approved of FWP purchasing the property to create the Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area. Comments in support spoke to the importance of the increased public access to the Big Snowy Mountains, conserving the wildlife habitat, wildlife focused land management, and livestock grazing managed to benefit wildlife.

DECISION

After considering the public comment, FWP approves the proposed action to acquire the 5,677-acre property from Shodair Children’s Hospital to create the Big Snowy Mountains WMA. Following the Environmental Assessment, I have determined the proposed action will not have negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary. The department will proceed with the Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area project with anticipation of a late 2022 closing. FWP accepts the draft EA as final. The goals of this project will 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. By this Decision Notice, the draft EA is hereby made final.



Mike Ruggles
Region 5 Supervisor
Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks

5/12/2022

Date