DECISION NOTICE

[Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area Floodplain and Slope Wetland Restoration]

[05/23/2024]

ACTION

Decision Notice (DN). Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) shall prepare a DN for the proposed action. The DN must identify the agency decision, the reasons for the decision, and any special conditions surrounding the decision or its implementation.

With this action, FWP hereby adopts the Draft Environmental Assessment or Draft EA as final, without modification, and approves Alternative 2, the proposed action.

AUTHORITY: MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT

According to the applicable requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act or MEPA and its implementing rules and regulations, before a proposed action may be approved, environmental review must be conducted to identify, consider, and disclose any potential impacts of the proposed action on the affected human environment. The level of environmental review will vary with the complexity and seriousness of environmental issues associated with a proposed action. The level of public interest will also vary. The agency is responsible for adjusting public review to match these factors. *Title 75, Chapter 1, Parts 1 through 3, Montana Code Annotated (MCA)*.

Based on these factors, FWP determined a Checklist EA (Draft EA) constitutes the appropriate level of review for the proposed action. Therefore, to assess and disclose potential impacts of the proposed action, FWP prepared a Draft EA for public review and comment. See *Public Participation Process* below.

Further, FWP must consider any substantive comments received in response to an EA and proceed in accordance with one of the following steps: determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue an Environmental Impact Statement or EIS; determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue a supplemental EA; or determine the Draft EA adequately addressed the issues raised by the proposed action and make a final decision, with appropriate modification resulting from the analysis provided in the Draft EA and the analysis of any substantive public comments received. See *Public Comment and FWP Response* below.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The Draft EA was made available for public review and comment from May 9th, 2024 to May 23rd, 2024. The Draft EA was posted on FWP's Public Notice webpage: https://fwp.mt.gov/news/public-notices. The Draft

EA was also made available for public review on the Environmental Quality Council or EQC website: https://leg.mt.gov/mepa/search/, by individual request, and through notice to identified interested parties. FWP did not receive comments during the public comment period.

DESRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP), in partnership with the Montana Natural Resource Damage Program (NRDP) and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), propose to implement an array of restoration techniques to restore degraded floodplains and slope wetlands on the Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area (SDWMA). The proposed action, referred to in this environmental assessment as a single project, will involve many smaller projects implemented in floodplains and slope wetlands across the WMA over time. The ultimate project goal is to restore and enhance the interconnected web of streams, wetlands, riparian areas, and floodplains that are critical to overall ecosystem function on SDWMA and on the larger landscape.

Dozens of miles of streams on SDWMA exist in a degraded state due to a long legacy of livestock grazing, fluctuating populations of native grazers and browsers (e.g., elk and moose), removal of beavers, and invasion by noxious weeds and other non-native plants. These degraded streams and wetlands function well below their ecological capacity, providing minimal habitat relative to their potential for fish and wildlife species that use the WMA. Additionally, these streams and wetlands function below capacity for providing ecosystem services to humans, such as landscape water storage, water quality improvements, and recreational opportunities like hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching. The proposed project would use a variety of techniques to reconnect degraded streams to their floodplains, enhance and expand wetland and riparian vegetation growth, and hold water on the landscape longer into the dry season each year.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The purpose of the proposed project is to restore degraded slope wetlands and sections of streams on SDWMA using a variety of techniques that seek to re-establish natural processes that maintain these habitats in a high ecological state. Restoring these habitats would benefit a wide variety of game and nongame wildlife species as well as improving fisheries and aquatics. Restoration treatments on streams would focus on areas with wide valley bottoms where the potential for eventual occupancy by beavers is high. Restoration treatments on slope wetlands would focus on areas where degradation is ongoing and where the potential for enhancing natural water storage on the landscape is high.

More specifically, projects goals for habitat enhancement include the following:

- Increasing the extent and duration of beaver-mediated habitat modifications on perennial streams that are in areas of beavers' former range.
- Reconnecting perennial streams to their floodplains resulting in expanded areas of wetland and riparian vegetation and development of multi-thread channels and off-channel wetland features.
- Expanding areas of wetland vegetation in and around slope wetlands and halting ongoing degradation.

By implementing and achieving these habitat enhancement goals, FWP seeks the following wildlife benefits:

- Expansion of beaver activity in perennial streams on SDWMA.
- Increasing riparian and wetland bird species abundance and diversity.
- Enhancing instream and adjacent habitats to benefit fish, particularly westslope cutthroat trout.

The proposed actions are expected to benefit vegetative communities as well as aquatic and terrestrial wildlife species and encourage natural stream processes and healthy ecosystems. The proposed project

would benefit people recreating on the WMA through enhanced wildlife habitats that would improve hunting and wildlife-viewing opportunities. The project would also benefit agricultural producers downstream of the project area through increased water storage in the restored floodplain and slope wetland areas.

FWP and NRDP would implement stream and slope wetland restoration on SDWMA starting in 2024 and continuing under an adaptive management framework until restoration goals are met at each individual site. The extent and duration of restoration work would be dependent on need and funding availability. FWP and NRDP have already secured funding for a series of projects on three different streams on SDWMA. Individual projects would not be undertaken until funding is secured to cover initial implementation costs, ongoing repairs and adjustments as needed under the adaptive management framework, as well as monitoring.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED

Alternative 1: No Action
In addition to the proposed action, and as required by MEPA, FWP analyzes the "No-Action" alternative in the EA. Under the No-Action alternative, the proposed action would not occur. Therefore, no additional impacts to the human environment would occur. The No Action alternative forms the baseline from which the potential impacts of the proposed action may be measured.

Under the No Action alternative, the perennial streams and slope wetlands proposed for restoration action would remain in a degraded state with limited natural recovery progressing slowly over time. Habitats associated with these areas would remain below ecological potential. Benefits of the proposed action, including enhanced fish and wildlife habitat and ecosystem services, would not be realized.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action
Under the Proposed Action, perennial streams and slope wetlands on SDWMA would be restored using relatively low-tech and low-cost restoration techniques in partnership with the local beaver population. These techniques would enhance fish and wildlife habitat and bolster important ecosystem services on the WMA and across the larger landscape.

PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE

No public comments were received during the public comment period.

DECISION

Based on the environmental review provided in the Draft EA, and in accordance with all applicable laws, rules, regulations, and policies, FWP determined the proposed action (Alternative 2), will not have significant adverse impacts on the human environment associated with the proposed action and constitutes a reasonable and appropriate strategy to achieve identified objectives. Therefore, preparation of an EIS is unnecessary. FWP hereby adopts the Draft EA as final and approves the Alternative 2, the proposed action.

Sincerely,

Kendra McKlosky

Kendra McKlosky
Region 2 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks