

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE
Aspen and Bitterbrush Enhancement on Mt Haggin WMA
FWP-DN-WL-R3-24-046

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 3, Bozeman
August 14, 2024

Preface and Proposed Action

This Decision Notice has been prepared for MT Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) to enhance habitat conditions on the Willow Creek Addition to Mt Haggin Wildlife Management Area (WMA). There are 27 acres of aspen stands and 165 acres of bitterbrush stands on the parcel whose wildlife habitat value is currently being compromised by expanding Douglas fir. FWP is proposing to hand remove Douglas fir from these aspen and bitterbrush stands to enhance their productivity for the benefit of elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, moose, ruffed grouse, neotropical songbirds, and other small mammal species that rely on these cover types. Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) supported the Willow Creek Acquisition through a generous grant to cover costs of making improvements to habitat on the property. These funds will be used to pay for a portion of this project.

Public Process and Comments

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In compliance with MEPA, an Environmental Assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on 19 July 2024.

Public comments on the proposed action were taken for 15 days (through 2 August 2024). The public was notified of the proposed action through the following avenues:

- News release distributed to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP Region 3 issues.
- Notice of this EA emailed to neighboring landowners, Deer Lodge County officials, local conservation groups, and other interested parties, including over 300 parties on the Butte Area Wildlife Biologist's email distribution list.
- Public notice posted on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page with Draft EA available and opportunity to submit comments online.
- Draft EA made available at FWP Region 3 Headquarters and Butte Area Resource Office.

Four parties submitted comments on the proposal. All were in support including Skyline Sportsmen Association that offered to contribute \$5,000 toward the project. All comments are listed in Table 1 in the order that they were received.

FWP thanks all parties that reviewed the EA and provided comments to the proposed action.

Table 1: Summary of comments received on the Mt Haggin WMA Aspen and Bitterbrush Enhancement proposal.

PARTY	FROM	SUPPORT or OPPOSE	COMMENTS
1. Individual	Sheridan	Support	" I fully support the proposal to remove invasive Douglas Fir from the existing Aspen and Bitterbrush stands on the Willow Creek Addition to the Mt. Hanging WMA. This action will increase the chances of

			growth and expansion of the aspen and bitterbrush to enhance their productivity for the benefit of elk, mule and white-tailed deer, moose, ruffed grouse, various songbirds and other small mammal types that rely on these species for cover.”
2. Individual	unknown	Support	“This seems to be a common sense approach to maintaining habitat and very likely at a lower cost than other alternatives.”
3. Skyline Sportsmen	Butte	Support	Board members voted to contribute \$5000 toward this project.
4. Individual	Butte	Support	<p>“I would like to express my support for the conifer mitigation project on the Willow Creek addition of the Mt Haggin WMA.</p> <p>This project will continue to move the needle in improving the habitat of the WMA, an effort which has been ongoing via numerous projects over the course of many years.</p> <p>I have attended many public events where the subject of conifer encroachment and water resource impact of same has been discussed.</p> <p>The question has come up if there is a mechanism to predict potential for water volume improvement through projects like the proposed action.</p> <p>If practical, could some empirical process be used in this project to count the conifers removed and apply some reasonable value based on tree size for expected water use of these trees to calculate an estimated water balance benefit?”</p> <p>FWP response: The short answer is yes, it can be done. While it would be a crude estimate, it would provide some metric of water savings through conifer removal. It should also be pointed out that in addition to reducing the competition for water, removal of conifers also reduces the competition for soil nutrients and sunlight as well.</p>

Final Environmental Assessment

The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment, it is my decision to approve the proposed action to treat aspen and bitterbrush stands on the Willow Creek Addition to Mt Haggin WMA.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Adam Pankratz', with a stylized flourish extending from the end.

Adam Pankratz
Action Region 3 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks