



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: Apr. 17, 2024

Agenda Item: Biennial WMA Winter Closure Date Exceptions

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: FWP recently completed a consolidation of public use rules that serve all recreation and conservation properties administered by FWP (ARM 12.12.101-140). ARM 12.12.105(5) defines standard public entry closure dates for wildlife management areas (WMAs) that are managed as game winter range or portions of those areas from Dec. 1 at 11:59 p.m. through May 15 at noon each year. Exceptions to this rule require commission approval and are listed as follows. Unless otherwise noted as new or with a ~~strikethrough~~, these exceptions are a continuation of past closure and opening dates:

- A. Mount Jumbo WMA opens May 1 at noon.
- B. ~~Blackfoot-Clearwater WMA closes at 11:59 pm on the day after the end of the general rifle hunting season in deer/elk hunting district 282.~~
- C. ~~Calf Creek WMA opens April 15 at noon.~~
- D. Mount Silcox WMA opens April 1 at noon.
- E. Roundhorn WMA opens May 1 at noon.
- F. Beckman WMA opens April 1 at noon and closes Jan. 1 at 11:59 pm.
- G. Marias River WMA opens April 1 at noon and closes Jan. 14 at 11:59 pm.
- H. Mount Haggin WMA: a portion of Mount Haggin is open to cross-country snowmobile use from Dec. 2 to May 15.
- I. Swan Valley WMA open to public use year-round.
- J. Ray Kuhns WMA opens April 14 at noon.

The Blackfoot Clearwater WMA (BCWMA) historically closed earlier than the standard dates because of a unique game rifle hunting season length in Hunting District 282. That season length regulation has been modified to instead conform with the general rifle season dates, therefore there is no longer a need for a date exception. Calf Creek WMA has historically been opening on April 15. However, in two of the past three years department staff have noted displacement of wintering elk off of the WMA due to recreational activities on the April 15 opener. This conflicts with the primary function of Calf Creek WMA, to serve as a secure, dedicated game winter range. Housing developments on neighboring lands have restricted available winter range for elk. When elk leave the WMA, particularly during spring green-up, conflicts arise on adjacent private lands. FWP is therefore recommending removing these exceptions, shifting to the standard closing (Dec. 1 at 11:59 p.m.) and opening (May 15 at noon) dates for both of these WMAs.

Ray Kuhns WMA serves primarily as white-tailed deer forested winter range. Deer typically disperse from the site before April 14. This proposed earlier opening would allow the public to take advantage of spring turkey hunting opportunities on the WMA.

FWP proposes adoption of these exceptions for the next two years, 2024-2025.

Public Involvement Process & Results: Pertaining to the Calf Creek recommendation, staff have informally visited with recreationists and members of the Back Country Horsemen over the past couple of years regarding moving the spring opening to the standard, noon on May 15. Those conversations have revealed general concurrence with this proposal. The department will solicit public comment for a four-week period beginning

Feb. 27. Public comments will be posted online and provided to commissioners at least two weeks prior to the April commission meeting.

Alternatives & Analysis: The dates that FWP proposes to carry forward have been supported by current and past commissions over the past decade or more. For both the carry-forward and recommended changes, the commission may adopt, modify, or reject any one or all of them. In general, the carry-forward exceptions accommodate unique local circumstances. The BCWMA recommendation would adopt the standard dates, reducing potential for public confusion. The Calf Creek recommendation would also align the opening date consistent with the standard game winter range dates, providing an additional month of wintering elk security and improving the likelihood that elk will remain on the WMA during early spring. The Ray Kuhns recommendation would support turkey hunting opportunities without negatively affecting wintering deer.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends adoption of this proposal as presented. The recommended changes support wintering game needs and, where there is no conflict, allows for additional public turkey hunting opportunity.

Proposed Motion: I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopt as a biennial rule the game winter closure date exceptions as presented by FWP.