

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: February 13, 2019

Agenda Item: Wildlife Management Area and Fish Conservation Area Biennial Public Use Rules

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background

Public use rules for Wildlife Management Areas, Wildlife Habitat Protection Areas, and Fish Conservation Areas are adopted by the commission on a biennial schedule. These rules were established to protect conservation values and to minimize conflicts associated with public use of the affected properties. Over time these rules have been adjusted to address issues of concern, particularly as changes occur with public recreation. FWP proposes retaining existing rules and making two additions. In December 2018, the commission tentatively approved retaining the current rules with one addition specifically pertaining to the Beartooth WMA. That addition to the rules would restrict camping to designated areas and further clarifies the restriction includes the Whitetail Prairie portion of the WMA. This rule is intended to help manage camping activities, reduce user conflicts for some portions of the WMA, and minimize resource impacts/habitat disturbances. The prohibition from camping outside of designated sites is also intended to minimize disturbance of elk on the WMA and to provide equal opportunity among hunters away from designated camping sites. The second proposed addition stems from a public comment, further described below.

Public Involvement Process & Results

The proposed rules were released for public comment from Dec. 10, 2018 to Jan. 18, 2019. FWP received eight written comments: three of the comments expressed general support for the proposed rules; two expressed concerns associated with livestock grazing on WMAs (livestock grazing is not part of the public use rules); one comment inquired about a weapons restriction area; and one comment expressed concern about the various public and FWP uses of the Beartooth WMA but didn't offer a specific recommendation. One comment recommended the 120-acre Mt. Jumbo Wildlife Management Area be included in an "archery-only" weapons restriction area, which would be consistent with adjacent USFS and Missoula open-space lands.

Alternatives and Analysis

Retaining the public use rules that were last adopted in 2017 would be beneficial for consistency. Establishing rules for how camping is managed on the Beartooth WMA is a response to increased popularity of that area and subsequent user conflicts and resource impacts. The recommendation for "archery-only" hunting on Mt. Jumbo WMA would make consistent a weapons restriction where the WMA is a small part of a larger safety zone involving USFS and Missoula open space lands (see map). In addition to safety concerns, this rule involving Mt. Jumbo WMA would reduce confusion where property boundaries are not readily discernable across affected ownerships.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends adoption of the public use rules as proposed in December with the addition of an "archery-only" weapons restriction on Mt. Jumbo WMA. Consistent with past adjustments to rules, these recommended changes would help address user conflicts, reduce impacts to wildlife and habitat resources, and provide for safety concerns.

Proposed Motion

I move the commission approve the Wildlife Management Area and Fish Conservation Area Biennial Public Use Rules as presented by the department.