



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: December 14, 2021

Agenda Item: Big Lake Wildlife Management Area South Side Addition, Region 5

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 5 minutes

Background: Big Lake WMA is part of the Big Lake wetland complex in southcentral Montana. The purpose of the WMA is to provide quality waterfowl nesting and migration staging habitat. Big Lake lies 18 miles north of the Yellowstone River and 23 miles northwest of Billings. The surrounding landscape is a fragmented patchwork of agricultural production, traditional grazing land, native grasslands, and scattered saline wetlands. Big Lake WMA consists of 3,086 acres administered by FWP, 166 acres of BLM land, and 188 acres of state (DNRC) land that surround another 1,347 acres of lakebed. The outer boundary of the WMA therefore encompasses 4,787 acres. This unique prairie wetland habitat provides for a diverse assemblage of species, including waterfowl, shorebirds, upland game birds, grassland birds, antelope, mule deer, prairie dogs, and other native species. The area is estimated to provide habitat for at least 11 "Species of Concern."

Water levels and wetland extent within the lake basin fluctuate dramatically from year to year depending on local precipitation. This proposed acquisition of an adjacent (approximate) 114-acre parcel would allow FWP to build fence along an upland boundary, rather than within the lake basin. Flooding impacts the boundary fence in this area, resulting in chronic fence maintenance and trespass cattle issues. This proposed addition would ensure livestock could effectively be excluded from the WMA, regardless of water level fluctuations, benefiting FWP and the neighbor who is offering this parcel to the department. Incorporating this parcel into the WMA would improve management efficiency and reduce long-term maintenance cost and time obligations for FWP and the neighbor.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP has not sought public comment at this time except for informally checking in with the Stillwater County Commission for their awareness and initial input. The county commission expressed general support for this proposal. Upon endorsement from the commission, the department would proceed with negotiations and conduct appropriate analysis and public review process.

Alternatives and Analysis: Proposal alternatives and analysis would be conducted by FWP if this proposal receives commission endorsement.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends endorsement of this land purchase because of the benefits to habitat, future WMA management efficiency, and to neighbor relations.

Proposed Motion: I move that the commission endorse the proposed Big Lake WMA South Side Addition, allowing the department to initiate negotiations and conduct analysis and associated public review.