



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

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Meeting Date: June 24, 2021

Agenda Item: Calf Creek WMA Habitat Restoration Project (Region 2)

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 15 minutes

Background: FWP sought public review of a draft environmental assessment (EA) for its proposal to conduct habitat restoration treatments on approximately 1,116 acres of forest and grass/shrublands on the Calf Creek Wildlife Management Area (CCWMA), located east of Hamilton in Ravalli County. The objectives of the proposed treatments are: 1) maintain and improve elk and deer winter forage, 2) restore grass/ shrublands through conifer removal, 3) promote stand conditions that would allow fire to burn at low-severity appropriate for the habitat type, and 4) promote aspen growth and regeneration. Treatments would involve the removal of conifer trees (both merchantable and submerchantable) through a combination of mechanical and non-mechanical treatments. The purpose of this project is to improve wildlife habitat; this project would not be proposed if not for a need to conserve and improve wildlife habitat on the CCWMA.

Public Involvement Process & Results: The EA was available for public review and comment on FWP's website from Feb. 5 through March 8, 2021, and this comment period was later extended for an additional 16 days from April 15 to 30. FWP held a public field tour of the project area on April 16, and 11 members of the public attended. FWP mailed 25 copies of the EA (and 56 email notifications of its availability) to adjacent landowners and interested parties (individuals, groups, agencies). Legal notices were published in 4 local, regional and statewide newspapers, and two statewide news releases were issued. FWP received 28 written comments; 26 were from private citizens, one was from a state agency, and one was from a private organization. Eight commenters supported the proposed action, eight commenters opposed the proposed action, and 12 did not specify support or opposition. Several commenters asked questions and/or offered suggestions or changes to the proposal. Based on public comments regarding use of mechanized equipment and reopening old roads, FWP reduced the acreage of areas where mechanized equipment would be used and subsequently removed several road segments from temporarily being reopened.

Alternatives and Analysis: No-action was the only identified alternative to this habitat restoration proposal. Under the no-action alternative, elk and deer winter range would continue to experience conifer expansion and in-growth. Forest succession on the WMA would trend toward increasing canopy coverage, stressing water resources, and shading out important forage grasses and deciduous vegetation. Aspen stands in the project area would continue to be stressed and outcompeted by conifers, with subsequent impacts to nongame wildlife use of the WMA.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends that the commission approve this proposal, in order to benefit wildlife habitat (especially big game winter range) on CCWMA.

Proposed Motion: I move the commission approve approximately 1,116 acres of habitat restoration treatments on the Calf Creek Wildlife Management Area as proposed.