



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

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Meeting Date: August 25, 2022

Agenda Item: Big Snowy Mountains WMA Fee Title Acquisition, Region 5

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: FWP proposes to purchase about 5,677 acres in the foothills of the Big Snowy Mountains near Ryegate. The purchase would provide effective wildlife habitat and compatible public recreation, including hunting, while increasing access to outdoor recreation opportunities on adjacent federal land. FWP would continue the existing grazing lease on the property with some adjustment to the grazing rotation for promoting healthy grasslands, ensuring rested habitats for wildlife cover and forage, and supporting working lands. FWP is partnering with Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) on this project. The property is winter range and year-round habitat for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn, as well as habitat for black bear, white-tailed deer, and other native species.

The appraised value of the proposed Big Snowy Mountains WMA acquisition is \$8.22 million. FWP would use Federal Pittman Robertson Wildlife Restoration funds (PR) for 75% of the appraised value of the property, and Habitat Montana and possibly other funds for the remaining 25%. Due diligence and closing costs are estimated at \$22,000, using Habitat Montana funds. Set up and maintenance of this WMA would be funded with Habitat Montana, PR, and general license funds. Projected initial startup maintenance and improvement costs are estimated to be approximately \$714,000, which includes weed management, fence maintenance and construction, parking area construction, road improvements, and signage. If this acquisition were to proceed, FWP intends to not open the WMA until parking areas and signage are in place, after May 15, 2023. As the WMA represents big game winter range, it would be closed from Dec. 1 to May 15 annually thereafter.

Public Involvement Process and Results: An environmental Assessment (EA) was released for public comment from March 24 to April 25, 2022, and a virtual public hearing was held on April 12. Legal notices were published twice in two local newspapers and the *Helena Independent Record*, and the EA was posted on the FWP webpage. Notices were sent to all adjoining landowners. FWP received 107 public comments, three comments were against the project and 104 comments were in support of the project. All issues raised by those who commented are addressed in the decision document.

Alternatives and Analysis: Two alternatives were analyzed and considered in the EA: 1) Alternative A (No Action) – FWP would not acquire the Shodair Children’s Hospital (SCH) property; and 2) Alternative B (Proposed Action) – FWP would acquire the 5,677-acre SCH property, establishing the Big Snowy Mountains Wildlife Management Area. Acquisition of the property would ensure the property would be managed for the primary purpose of providing effective wildlife habitat. Public hunting and recreation access to this property, as well as to adjacent federal land, also would be secured.

Agency Recommendation and Rationale: FWP recommends the commission approve FWP purchasing approximately 5,677 acres in the foothills of the Big Snowy Mountains. The property provides valuable habitat for wintering big game and other wildlife. The property would also support public recreation and access to adjacent public lands.

Proposed Motion: I move that the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the department's acquisition of about 5,677 acres of land north of Ryegate as proposed and to keep the property closed to public access until May 15, 2023.