



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: December 20, 2022

Agenda Item: Big Lake WMA Addition, Land Project, Region 5

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: FWP proposes to purchase approximately 115 acres as an addition to Big Lake Wildlife Management Area northwest of Billings near Molt. Big Lake WMA is part of the Big Lake Wetland Complex in south-central Montana. The WMA provides quality waterfowl breeding and migration staging habitat and public recreational opportunity. The unique prairie wetland habitats also provide for a diverse assemblage of species, including waterfowl, shorebirds, upland birds, grassland birds, antelope, mule deer, prairie dogs, and other native species populations. Acquisition of this adjacent parcel is critical to the long-term successful management of the WMA. Water levels and wetland extent fluctuate dramatically from year to year depending on local precipitation. This proposed addition would help ensure livestock can be effectively excluded from the WMA regardless of water level. It would allow for construction of a boundary fence on dry land and permanent habitat protection, thereby creating stability for the neighboring landowner, sportsmen, and FWP. The acquisition would improve management efficiency and reduce long-term maintenance cost and time obligations for both FWP and the neighboring ranch.

The appraised value of this proposed WMA addition is \$93,000. If approved, FWP would use State Migratory Bird Wetland Program funds to complete the acquisition. Due diligence and closing costs are estimated at \$15,000, which also would be covered by the wetland program. Maintenance of the new addition would be funded with Habitat Montana, PR, and general license funds. Initial maintenance and improvement costs are estimated to be approximately \$20,000, which includes weed management, fencing, and signage.

Two alternatives were analyzed and considered in the EA: 1) No Action – FWP would not acquire the Big Lake WMA addition property; and 2) Proposed Action – FWP would acquire the 115-acre parcel, using State Migratory Bird Habitat and other funding. FWP would manage the property as part of Big Lake WMA. The WMA boundary fence would be built and maintained on solid ground above the high-water level. Minimal maintenance would be necessary. FWP and the adjacent landowner would not have to deal with chronic fencing issues. Waterfowl nesting habitat quality on the purchased property and existing WMA would generally benefit.

Public Involvement Process and Results: An environmental assessment was released for public comment from July 11 to Aug. 14, 2022. 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 one public comment by email. FWP consulted with the Stillwater County Commissioners who support the proposal.

Analysis and Alternatives: If FWP does not acquire this addition to Big Lake WMA, boundary fence inundation and associated livestock management challenges would likely continue into the future.

Alternative A: The commission may choose to approve purchase of the addition to Big Lake WMA as proposed by FWP.

Alternative B: The commission may choose not to approve the proposed acquisition, keeping this portion of the WMA boundary within the wetland basin where fence inundation will continue to occur.

Agency Recommendation and Rationale: FWP recommends the commission approve FWP purchasing approximately 115 acres adjacent to Big Lake WMA. The property provides valuable habitat for waterfowl and would benefit management of the entire WMA, reducing the workload for both FWP and the neighboring ranch.

Proposed Motion: I move the Fish and Wildlife commission approve FWP purchase the 115 acres to be added to Big Lake WMA as proposed.