



MTFWP Region 5, 2300 Lake Elmo Road, Billings, MT 59105
Decision Notice and Finding of No Significant Impact for the
Big Lake WMA South Side Addition Land Acquisition.

August 22, 2022

FWP appreciates the reviews and comments regarding the proposed Big Lake WMA South Side Addition land acquisition by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP). As detailed in the draft Environmental Assessment (EA), FWP proposes to purchase 115 acres adjacent to Big Lake WMA northwest of Billings, near Molt. Big Lake WMA is part of the Big Lake Wetland Complex in South Central Montana. The purpose of the existing WMA is to provide quality waterfowl breeding and migration staging habitat. Acquisition of this parcel is critical to the long-term successful management of the WMA because water levels and wetland extent fluctuate dramatically from year to year depending on local precipitation. The addition ensures livestock can be effectively excluded from the WMA regardless of water level fluctuations. It provides for permanent habitat protection and a boundary fence on dry land, bringing stability for the neighboring landowner, sportsmen, and FWP. It will improve management efficiency and reduce long term maintenance costs and time obligations for both FWP and our neighbor. This unique prairie wetland habitat provides for a diverse assemblage of species, including waterfowl, shorebirds, upland birds, grassland birds, antelope, mule deer, prairie dogs, and other native species populations

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT (MEPA) PROCESS

The proposal has been analyzed in an Environmental Assessment (EA) to satisfy the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). FWP is required to assess the impacts of the proposed action to the human and natural environment. Under the MEPA process, a 34-day public comment period ran from July 11, 2022 through August 14, 2022. Notice was published in the Billings Gazette, Helena Independent Record, The Stillwater County News, posted on the FWP web page, and notice sent to adjacent landowners.

ISSUES RAISED IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA)

No issues or concerns were raised by the public.

GENERAL SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

FWP received one comment from a private individual. That comment supported the purchase. Several verbal discussions occurred with members of the public, and all were supportive of the proposal. The Stillwater County Commissioners reviewed the project and stated support for the wishes of the landowner and FWP.

FWP RESPONSES TO PUBLIC COMMENTS

The only comment received by FWP expressed support for the purchase and recognized the proposed acquisition as the best solution for cattle management. The comment also suggested the purchase price seemed reasonable

DECISION

After considering the public comment, FWP recommends approval of the proposed action, to acquire the 115-acre parcel from T Bar J Ranch adjacent to Big Lake WMA. Following the Environmental Assessment, I have determined the proposed action will not have negative effects on the human and physical environments associated with this project. I conclude that the EA is the appropriate level of analysis, and the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is unnecessary. Provided the proposed acquisition is approved by the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission, the department will proceed with the Big Lake WMA South Side Addition project with anticipation of a late 2022 closing. FWP accepts the draft EA as final. The addition ensures livestock can be effectively excluded from the WMA and provides for permanent habitat protection and a boundary fence on dry land. By this Decision Notice, the draft EA is hereby made final.



Mike Ruggles
Region 5 Supervisor
Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks

August 31, 2022

Date