



MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

Meeting Date: April 18, 2023

Agenda Item: Lost River Wildlife Management Area Grazing Lease

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: The Lost River Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is located approximately 45 miles north of Havre. The WMA consists primarily of native mixed-grass prairie and riparian habitats along the Milk River and is managed to benefit wildlife and provide recreational opportunities. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks proposes to initiate an eight-year livestock grazing lease on the WMA beginning in 2023 and ending in 2030. Current fencing in the area has resulted in several pastures that include both FWP and School Trust land. The proposed grazing lease would help resolve issues related to these mixed ownership pastures and provide managed grazing on the WMA and periods of year-long rest to both FWP and School Trust lands. Grazing would be allowed on portions of the WMA between May 15 and Oct. 15 and would include periods of deferment and rest for native pastures. The proposed grazing system would comprise approximately 2,857 acres of FWP-owned property and approximately 3,571 acres of adjacent School Trust land.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP prepared a draft environmental assessment (EA) pursuant to the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess the potential impacts of the alternatives to the human and physical environment. The draft EA was made available to the public on the FWP website and notice of the EA was mailed to surrounding landowners. Electronic notifications of the EA's availability were also made to other individuals, agencies, and interested parties. Public notices of the opportunity to comment on the EA were placed in the *Great Falls Tribune* and *Havre Daily News*. The EA was open for a 15-day public comment period that ran from Dec. 23, 2022 until Jan. 6, 2023. There were no public comments received during the comment period. The decision notice was issued on Jan. 17, 2023.

Analysis & Alternatives:

Alternative A: The proposed alternative is to initiate an eight-year grazing lease on the Lost River WMA starting in 2023 and ending in 2030. Grazing under this alternative would occur between May 15 and Oct. 15. Grazing on the WMA would be done using a rest-rotation grazing system that includes periods of deferment and rest. The lessee would be allowed to graze 190-220 animal units and an average of 326 animal unit months each year during this lease. The proposed grazing schedule would also include periods of yearlong rest on adjacent School Trust lands included in the grazing system, benefiting wildlife habitats beyond the WMA. Managed grazing on the WMA would help maintain the productivity and vigor of perennial grasses and forbs, promote forage palatability, and decrease fire risk by reducing litter and fuel loads. The rotational grazing would also provide heterogeneity in plant heights and densities, making habitats attractive to a diversity of species.

Alternative B: The commission could choose to not approve the grazing lease. If the lease is not approved, there would be no lease for livestock grazing on the Lost River WMA. Livestock grazing could still occur on adjacent School Trust lands, but there would be no mandated rest periods and additional fencing would likely be required in order to graze some of these School Trust parcels.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: FWP recommends approving the grazing lease for the Lost River WMA for eight years beginning in 2023 and ending in 2030.

Proposed Motion: I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the Lost River WMA grazing lease.