



DECISION NOTICE

Blackleaf WMA Grazing Lease

May 11, 2023

ACTION

Decision Notice (DN). Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) shall prepare a DN for the proposed action. The DN must identify the agency decision, the reasons for the decision, and any special conditions surrounding the decision or its implementation.

With this action, FWP hereby adopts the Draft Environmental Assessment or Draft EA as final, without modification, and approves Alternative 2, the Proposed Action, to renew the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area (BLWMA) grazing lease.

AUTHORITY: MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT

According to the applicable requirements of the Montana Environmental Policy Act or MEPA and its implementing rules and regulations, before a proposed action can be approved, environmental review must be conducted to identify, consider, and disclose any potential impacts of the proposed action on the affected human environment. The level of environmental review will vary with the complexity and seriousness of environmental issues associated with a proposed action. The level of public interest will also vary. The agency is responsible for adjusting public review to match these factors. *Title 75, Chapter 1, Parts 1 through 3, Montana Code Annotated (MCA)*.

Based on these factors, FWP determined a Checklist Draft EA constitutes the appropriate level of review for the proposed action. Therefore, to assess and disclose potential impacts of the proposed action, FWP prepared a Draft Checklist EA for public review and comment.

Further, FWP must consider any substantive comments received in response to an EA and proceed in accordance with one of the following steps: determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue an Environmental Impact Statement or EIS; determine the EA did not adequately reflect the issues raised by the proposed action and issue a supplemental EA; or determine the Draft EA adequately addressed the issues raised by the proposed action and make a final decision, with appropriate modification resulting from the analysis provided in the Draft EA and the analysis of public comment received.

With consideration for all public comments received, FWP determined the level of environmental review

provided by the Draft Checklist EA is adequate, without modification, and an EIS is not required.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESS

The Draft EA was made available for public review and comment beginning on April 17, 2023 through May 3, 2023. On April 17, 2023, a legal Notice was published in the Great Falls Tribune and the Draft EA was posted on FWP's Public Notice webpage: <https://fwp.mt.gov/news/public-notices>. The Draft EA was also made available for public review on the Environmental Quality Council or EQC website: <https://leg.mt.gov/mepa/search/>, by individual request, and through notice to identified interested parties.

FWP received 5 comments during the public comment period (see *Public Comment and FWP Response* below).

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

The BLWMA encompasses approximately 11,000 acres, all managed by FWP. One of the primary goals for the BLWMA is to emphasize the occurrence of highly productive, diverse plant communities that will provide high quality forage and cover for native wildlife species. In June of 1990, a rotational grazing system was initiated on the BLWMA utilizing livestock from neighboring ranches. The grazing system is designed to duplicate, as nearly as possible, natural ungulate grazing. Analysis of vegetation data indicates a significant increase in overall grass cover and a significant decline in forb/shrub cover on the BLWMA. Range condition has improved to "good-excellent" status. FWP proposes to lease approximately ¼ of the BLWMA annually for cattle grazing to better manage vegetation for wildlife cover and forage. The grazing lease would extend for 8 years beginning June 1, 2024, through December 31, 2031.

PURPOSE AND NEED

The anticipated benefits of the proposed grazing system on the BLWMA would result primarily from the heterogeneity of grazing treatments and periods of rest provided by the rest-rotation grazing system. This strategy, coupled with ongoing hunter access to the property, will result in the following intended benefits:

- Increase the occurrence of highly productive, diverse plant communities that will provide high quality forage and cover for native wildlife species.
- Improve elk management and increase hunter opportunity.

ALTERNATIVES ANALYZED

Alternative 1: No Action

In addition to the proposed action, and as required by MEPA, FWP analyzes the "No-Action" alternative in the EA. Under the No-Action alternative, the proposed action would not occur. Therefore, no additional impacts to the human environment would occur. The No Action alternative forms the baseline from which the potential impacts of the proposed action may be measured.

Under the No Action alternative, the existing improvement of vegetative condition would likely reverse, rough fescue production may decrease, decadent residual vegetation would remain, and the area would become unattractive to mule deer and other game species. Further, mule deer, elk and other big game would likely increase utilization of adjacent private land and there would be concern by some neighboring landowners regarding fire danger from a buildup of vegetation.

Alternative 2: Proposed Action

Under the Proposed Action, vegetation would be managed utilizing a rest-rotation grazing system, soil and plant disturbance would benefit seedling establishment of desirable plant species. The improvement in vegetative condition would likely continue while rough fescue production likely would not diminish. The Proposed Action would also provide for better spring green-up vegetation conditions for elk, mule deer, and other wildlife species thereby reducing usage of adjacent private property. Further, under the Proposed Action, strong relations with local ranchers would continue.

PUBLIC COMMENT AND FWP RESPONSE

All comments received during the public comment period were supportive of the proposed action. The following provides the public comments received and FWP response(s).

1) I have the pleasure of spending a great deal of time each year enjoying the Blackleaf WMA. My observation is that the current grazing plan objectives are being met. I'm pleased to see the cooperative effort between FWP and area ranchers.

Last year was a terribly dry as you recall. I was on adjacent ground this last weekend and was encouraged by the amount of moisture this year over last. I expect it will be a good start for vegetation growth, both grass and browse.

FWP Response: Thank you for your comment.

2) Please consider this email my formal written comments on the Draft EA for the Blackleaf WMA Management Area Grazing Lease. I support the proposed renewal of the grazing lease as described in the EA. My family and I have enjoyed the WMA and surrounding area for decades and we are impressed with how the WMA is managed for the benefit of the wild game. Based on the EA, the future lease appears to be managed in a similar manner as in the past which makes sense as it is working. I also support and recommend the continuation of the lease with the current Lessee as they appear to follow the lease requirements.

I also support the level of assessment and that an EIS is not needed.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input on this project.

FWP Response: Thank you for your comment.

3) I would just like to comment on the grazing lease of the Blackleaf wildlife management area. I think it is beneficial to graze the game range seasonally and I think that keeping the leaser local is good as well. I think the current leaser has been a good steward of the land and is conservation minded from what I have seen personally while frequenting the area.

FWP Response: Thank you for your comment.

4) I am writing in support of the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area (WMA) grazing lease. Having read through the Environmental Assessment (EA), I believe continuing to graze the Blackleaf WMA is in the best interest of native vegetation, big game species and the agricultural community.

Through my experience of hunting and hiking on the Blackleaf WMA, I have noticed the positive effects of grazing the 11,000-acre area. If managed properly, livestock have the ability to mimic natural ungulate grazing. I believe the four-year grazing rotation provides an ample amount of benefits to the landscape. In addition to enhancing habitat, grazing can build soil health, reduce nutrient loss, address drought concerns and sustain rural communities.

I strongly believe in FWP's mission to manage WMAs with wildlife and wildlife habitat conservation as its main priority. As the science suggests, grazing the Blackleaf WMA helps FWP meet these goals. That is why I think the Blackleaf WMA grazing lease should be renewed. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this matter.

FWP Response: Thank you for your comment.

In regards to grazing the Blackleaf game range. The impact of grazing on WMA has more positive impacts to the area and should continue long term. As a sportsman (lifetime) who enjoys hunting in the Blackleaf, I have learned that the Elk love to graze the regrowth were the cattle grazed during the summer. As a rancher (lifetime) the rotational grazing done by the cattle is beneficial for grass management. The native grass species of the area thrives in the rotational grazing program and are healthier now than before when there was no grazing program. As a wildland firefighter (30 plus years) the reduction in one and ten hour fuels should help reduce the risk for wildfires that could spread off of the WMA. In conclusion the positive impacts of grazing are beneficial to the Blackleaf ecosystem and should continue for the foreseeable future. Thanks.

FWP Response: Thank you for your comments.

DECISION

Based on the environmental review provided in the Draft EA, and in accordance with all applicable laws, rules, regulations, and policies, FWP determined the Proposed Action (Alternative 2), will not have significant adverse impacts on the human environment associated with the proposed action and constitutes a reasonable and appropriate strategy to achieve the identified objectives. Therefore, preparation of an EIS is unnecessary. FWP hereby adopts the Draft EA as final and approves Alternative 2, the proposed action

Sincerely,



Jason Rhoten R4 Fisheries Manager / Acting R4 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks