



# MONTANA FISH AND WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

THE **OUTSIDE** IS IN US ALL.

**Meeting Date:** Aug. 17, 2023

**Agenda Item:** Blackleaf WMA Grazing Lease Renewal, Region 4

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 5 Minutes

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**Background:** The Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area (WMA) encompasses approximately 11,000 acres, all managed by FWP. One of the primary goals for the Blackleaf WMA is to emphasize the occurrence of highly productive, diverse plant communities that provide high quality forage and cover for native wildlife species. In June of 1990, a rotational grazing system was initiated on the Blackleaf WMA. The grazing system is designed to duplicate, as nearly as possible, natural ungulate grazing. Vegetation monitoring data indicates a significant increase in overall grass cover and the plant community condition has improved over time to a “good-excellent” status. FWP proposes to renew the grazing lease with the Pollock Ranch where approximately a quarter of the Blackleaf WMA is grazed annually to continue managing vegetation for wildlife cover and forage. For cash-based grazing leases, FWP assigns a “standard” rental rate, which is equal to the most recent private land grazing lease average for Montana, as reported by the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service. For grazing leases where the lessee takes on additional maintenance and related work responsibilities, FWP assigns a reduced rate, which is equal to half of the standard rate. For this grazing lease, FWP would charge the reduced rate. The lessee would be responsible for erecting and taking down temporary electric fence and maintaining boundary fences associated with the grazing unit. FWP proposes to renew the lease, allowing up to 1,500 Animal Unit Months (AUMs) annually for eight years beginning June 1, 2024, through Dec. 31, 2031. Public hunting access on the lessee’s property would also be incorporated as part of the grazing lease agreement.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** An environmental assessment (EA) was completed for the proposed project and released for public comment on April 17. Public comments on the proposed action were accepted for 15 days. The public was notified of the proposed action by a legal notice in the local major newspaper, a department news release and EA notification on the website, emailed to conservation groups and other interested parties, and copies of the draft EA were made available upon request. Five comments were received. A Decision Notice was released on May 11, that recommended proceeding with the proposed action.

**Alternatives & Analysis:** Two alternatives were analyzed in the EA: proceed with the proposed action or take no action. The grazing lease would continue to enhance elk and mule deer winter range while also benefiting neighboring ranches and the public. These benefits would cease and land maintenance responsibilities for the department would increase if the lease was not renewed.

Alternative A: The commission may choose to approve the grazing lease with the Pollock Ranch.

Alternative B: The commission may choose to not approve the lease.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** The department recommends the commission approve the Blackleaf WMA lease for an eight-year term beginning in June 2024. This approach would help achieve wildlife habitat objectives for the WMA while cooperating with an adjacent livestock producer.

**Proposed Motion:** I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the eight-year grazing lease with the Pollock Ranch (Alternative A) as presented by the department.