

LEGISLATIVE AUDIT DIVISION

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MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislative Audit Committee Members
FROM: Angie Grove, Deputy Legislative Auditor
DATE: June 2010
CC: Joe Maurier, Director, Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Art Noonan, Deputy Director
Chas Van Genderen, Administrator, Parks Division
RE: Performance Audit Follow-up (10SP-23): Weed Management at State Parks and Fishing Access Sites (orig. 08P-11)
ATTACHMENT: Weed Management at State Parks and Fishing Access Sites Audit Summary

INTRODUCTION

In December 2008, we presented our performance audit of Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) weed management at state parks and fishing access sites managed by the Parks Division. The audit contained findings regarding weed management efforts by the division. In the audit, we concluded the division had controls in place to manage weeds and comply with the good neighbor policy in Montana state law. The audit also included five recommendations to the division for improving its weed management efforts. In May of 2010, we began gathering information on the progress of recommendation implementation. Follow-up work focused on reviewing regions we examined for the original audit report. This memo summarizes the results of our follow-up work.

Overview

Audit recommendations focused on improving weed management activities at state parks and ensuring weed inspections are completed by county weed control officials for new state parks and fishing access site acquisitions.

Two of the five recommendations to the division are being implemented, one partially implemented, one recommendation was implemented, and one not implemented.

BACKGROUND

A performance audit of conservation easements in Montana was conducted in response to passage of House Joint Resolution 35 (HJR35) during the 2007 Legislative Session. HJR35 specifically requested a performance audit examine FWP compliance with the "good neighbor" policy in state law in terms of weed impacts on adjoining private and public lands. Audit work of FWP state parks and fishing access sites (FAS), which included assistance from county weed district officials, examined status of weed management on lands in the FWP regions. We also asked county weed district officials to compare weed

conditions at state parks and FAS in those two regions with weed conditions on adjoining public and private lands. We concluded that the Parks Division is in compliance with the good neighbor policy. Audit work also indicated the division could improve weed management efforts by prioritizing weed inventories, updating regional weed management plans, improving weed control monitoring, improving the funding process for additional weed management needs, and obtaining weed inspections from county weed districts on new state parks and FAS acquisitions.

The following summarizes follow-up audit work and the implementation status of each recommendation.

Recommendation #1

We recommend the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks prioritize and complete weed inventory efforts at all state parks and fishing access sites.

Implementation Status – Being Implemented

According to the division, this is an on-going task and did not provide a final implementation date. FWP is continuing to work with the Montana Department of Agriculture for funding a seasonal weed intern. Additionally, one region has hired a seasonal weed intern to assist with weed management efforts. Another region has attempted to hire a seasonal weed intern but has been unsuccessful. The region that hired the seasonal weed intern has the most fishing access sites among the Parks Division regions. It appears reasonable that inventory efforts will be an on-going process as eradication of weeds will be unlikely. Consequently, the division will likely need to re-inventory weeds at state parks and FAS on a periodic basis.

While the weed interns are working on formalizing weed inventories, interviews indicate the division continues informal weed inventories in coordination with county weed officials for determining weed management plans and strategies. Management in one region stated it has also developed site-specific weed management plans with counties within the region. County weed officials we interviewed indicated the division works cooperatively to address weed problems on division properties.

Recommendation #2

We recommend the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks require the seven administrative regions update regional weed management plans in the next year to assure compliance and consistency with the department's statewide weed management plan.

Implementation Status – Not Implemented

Fish, Wildlife and Parks has implemented a statewide weed management plan. The division is continuing to work on implementing regional weed management plans that "tier-off" the FWP statewide weed plan. According to FWP, the deadline for regions to update their weed management plans is June 30, 2010.

Recommendation #3

We recommend the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks strengthen weed management by:

- A. Conducting on-site evaluations of state parks and fishing access sites to determine the effectiveness of its weed control efforts and to verify compliance with statewide and regional weed plans.**

- B. Incorporating the results of these on-site evaluations into reports to the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks Noxious Weed Advisory Committee and the Montana Department of Agriculture.**

Implementation Status – Being Implemented

On-Site Evaluations

According to FWP, it is continuing its efforts to implement this recommendation by conducting on-site evaluations of state parks and FAS. According to one regional parks manager, the region selects a sample of 4-5 FAS, or indicator areas, for evaluation of weed management efforts. Communication and coordination with county weed officials is also another means Parks Division personnel use to informally monitor state parks and FAS weed management efforts. County weed officials we interviewed confirmed they had good communication and coordination with FWP. In one region, management stated they had site-specific weed management plans with county weed officials for on-going weed management activities.

Reporting Results of On-Site Evaluations

We verified FWP submits weed management reports to the Montana Department of Agriculture for inclusion in the statewide biennial weed report. FWP reported to the Montana Department of Agriculture it is generally meeting its weed management objectives.

Recommendation #4

We recommend the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks:

- A. Educate and communicate to regional managers the availability of supplemental funds for unexpected weed control costs.**
- B. Establish a process for requesting and disbursing reserve funds.**

Implementation Status – Partially Implemented

Education About Availability of Additional Funds

FWP management stated it has informed all regional parks managers of additional funding available for weed management efforts.

Establishing a Process for Requesting Additional Funds

For fiscal year 2010, the department distributed \$40,000 of one-time-only weed control funding among regions for FAS weed management efforts. The funds were not distributed evenly among the regions; rather, it was distributed based on factors such as the number of FAS located within a region.

The Parks Division still uses an informal process for requesting additional funds for weed management activities for state parks. According to Parks Division management, regional parks managers may verbally request additional funding. The central office in Helena considers requests, considers the availability of funds to determine whether to grant the request, and how much money will be provided for additional weed management on state parks lands for that region.

Recommendation #5

We recommend the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks ensure weed inspections by county weed district officials are obtained and documented to comply with §7-22-2154(1), MCA.

Implementation Status – Implemented

Section 7-22-2154(1), MCA, requires a nonfederal public entity to have a weed inspection completed by the county weed management district before the purchase or receipt of real property. During the audit, we determined the division had not complied with this requirement for acquisitions of new state parks and FAS, and the Parks Division was unaware of the law, which had been passed by the 2005 Legislature. To address this recommendation, FWP now has a two-tiered process for ensuring compliance with the law. For acquisition of new Parks Division lands, the division requires completion of a compliance checklist, which includes steps for contacting county weed officials and development of a weed management agreement. Additionally, FWP's Lands/Outreach Unit requires completion of an acquisition project task checklist which also requires verification of a weed inspection report for fee acquisitions.

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