

**Montana Department
of
Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

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OCT 27 2005

LEGISLATIVE ENVIRONMENTAL
POLICY OFFICE

4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405
October 24, 2005

Ladies and Gentlemen:

You recently received documents (an Environmental Assessment and a Draft Management Plan) relating to the Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks (MFWP) proposal to receive a gift of land from the LeRoy Beckman Estate. Additional documentation including a Department prepared Socio-Economic Assessment and a cooperative Weed Management Agreement with Fergus County are also available. This gift of land (fee title) constitutes 1674 acres known as the Barber Property in Fergus County, Montana. The land is located approximately 12 miles ENE of Denton and is immediately adjacent to the Beckman Wildlife Management Area.

No modifications were made in the documents you received after the public review period. Please consider your previous copies of the Environmental Assessment and Draft Management Plan along with the stipulations of the Decision Notice as final.

Comments received regarding the Beckman Wildlife Management Area Proposal – Barber Property Addition are summarized in the enclosed Decision Notice. No changes have been made to the draft Environmental Analysis after consideration of public input. It is my recommendation to receive this gift from the Beckman Estate and include the property in FWP's region 4 Wildlife Management Area program, subject to approval by the FWP Commission. The FWP Commission will be asked to approve the receipt of this land gift at their November 2005 meeting.

Thank you very much for your interest and involvement.

Sincerely,



Mike Aderhold,
Regional Supervisor

DECISION NOTICE

BECKMAN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA GIFT / ACQUISITION

Barber Addition

Prepared by Region 4, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
October 2005

PROPOSAL

Mr. LeRoy Byron Beckman's Last Will and Testament established the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund to acquire lands for deer and public hunting. Mr. Beckman's Will instructed Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) to assist in locating these lands, and that the lands should be within Fergus, Judith Basin, Cascade, or Meagher Counties; mountain or valley lands; that are partly timbered; that has a stream running through it; and that the lands be comparable in cost to other lands in the area. Trust Funds may only be used towards the acquisition of fee title to these selected properties. Mr. Beckman further instructed that after the land was acquired the title and management be transferred to MFWP.

Within the 4 identified counties, MFWP personnel originally completed a thorough examination of numerous properties that were known to be for sale and that might meet Mr. Beckman's conditions. Of them, the Steiners' Trail's End Ranch, the Fertterer Property and the Green Property were the best matches. Their purchases were recommended by MFWP. The RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund purchased the properties in June 1999, December 2000 and December 2002, respectively. They were then accepted by the Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks Commission as gifts and added to the State's system of Wildlife Management Areas.

Additional property lying adjacent to the new Beckman WMA became available following these purchases. The Barber Property complements the original intent and purpose of the Beckman Will by providing additional deer habitat in a manner similar to the original purchases. It features grassland, riparian and ponderosa pine/Douglas fir-juniper communities and functionally complements the original acquisitions.

Since the Barber Property includes juniper-pine and riparian communities, as well as meets the terms of Mr. Beckman's Last Will and Testament, and further builds upon the ability to produce and harvest deer, the MFWP Region 4 Supervisor recommends that the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission accept transfer of fee title and management of the Property from the RBB Deer Lands Trust Fund, and that the property be added to the Beckman Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS

FWP is required to assess impacts to the human and physical environment under the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). The Beckman Wildlife Management Area Proposal – Barber Addition and its effects were documented by FWP in an Environmental Assessment.

A 42-day public comment period ran from September 2, 2005 through October 14, 2005. The original comment period scheduled to end September 23 was extended. Public notices of the proposed action were placed in area newspapers (Great Falls and Lewistown) and on the MFWP web site. Approximately 50 copies of the Environmental Assessment were distributed to adjacent landowners, sportsmen groups, County Commissioners, and other interested parties at the beginning of the comment period. Informational meetings were held with the Fergus County Commission and with the Denton Rod & Gun Club to explain the proposal and answer questions. Landowners (8) adjacent to or in the immediate vicinity of the Property were also contacted and provided a copy of the documents (EA and Management Plan).

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

Solicitation of public input resulted in receipt of 25 comments. These were received as 6 letters and 19 e-mail responses. These 25 responses came from 4 organized groups and the remainder private individuals. Those advocating the Property acquisition totaled 22 and 3 opposed the action. Following are questions and salient points made in those responses with added FWP response:

One organization addressed its interest in emphasizing native species management over introduced species (ex: sharptailed grouse over pheasant and turkey). FWP believes that both species groups can be addressed and their habitats enhanced and protected without detriment to the other. All three species are resident on the property. Their population and habitat status will be regularly monitored.

Two anonymous individuals wrote against Property acquisition. They both argue that the true cost of the acquisition to the local agricultural community and the local economy has not been considered. Their understanding of the net effect of acquisition differs with the Socio-Economic Assessment released by the Department. Further, management of the Property will continue existing agricultural practices to include livestock grazing, dryland farming and CRP management.

Also writing against acquisition, one of these authors stated a preference that Trust Funds used in the acquisition be diverted to “pay for off-site fencing efforts to protect riparian areas”. Constraints of the Beckman Will and application of funds by the RBB Trust preclude use of monies for that purpose.

One writer opposed the gift and acquisition on the grounds of “too much government ownership of land in Montana”. He also pointed to the land as sitting idle, thus “contributing to non-point source pollution and to increased fire hazards”. Per the

FWP developed Environmental Analysis and draft Management Plan, agricultural practices are scheduled to continue on the property with lease back provisions to the present owners. FWP works with and contributes to the support of local and DNRC fire responders and manages these wildlife management areas with full attention to any fire hazards present.

Several writers commended Mr. Beckman and his direction for using his estate to further acquire lands for deer and public deer hunting. They noted the lack of public land hunting opportunities in the general vicinity of the proposed acquisition and the Beckman Wildlife Management Area and believe this effort will provide some remedy to that end.

STIPULATION OF THIS RECORD OF DECISION DOCUMENT

None.

MODIFICATIONS TO ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

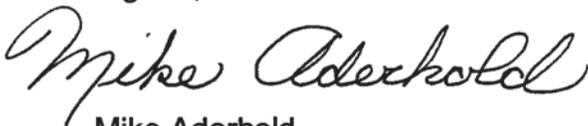
No modifications to the EA or the Management Plan are recommended.

DECISION

Utilizing the Environmental Analysis, Management Plan, and public comment, a decision must be rendered by MFWP that addresses the interests and issues identified for this proposed project. Given results of FWP's analysis coupled with the nature of the public comment, acceptance of this gift of land from the Beckman Estate is warranted.

After review of this proposal and the corresponding public support and comment, it is my recommendation that MFWP receive in fee title the Barber Property subject to approval by the FWP Commission. It will be added to the Beckman Wildlife Management Area.

Signed,



Mike Aderhold,
Regional Supervisor