



# **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

Region 1  
490 N. Meridian Road  
Kalispell, MT 59901

Decision Notice  
and  
Finding of No Significant Impact  
for  
Kootenai-Woods Ranch WMA/Stoddard Grazing Agreement  
Lincoln County, Montana  
Environmental Assessment

April 2, 2007

## **Project Proposal**

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks proposes to allow cattle to graze on the Kootenai-Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in coordination with the lessee's own pastures to maximize forage benefits for wildlife in both areas. A local rancher will provide 90-100 cow/calf pairs for a maximum of 400 AUMs (Animal Unit Month) annually. The lessee will be assessed an annual fee per AUM while they are on the WMA that is equal to the established DNRC rate for grazing on State School Trust Lands. Grazing will be conducted on a rest rotation basis that incorporates three pastures on the WMA and two of the lessee's. Pastures on the WMA will receive complete rest every third year. The duration of the plan will be for six years (two complete grazing cycles). Expected benefits include an increase in the quality of the grasses on the WMA, which are primarily nonnative. Wintering deer, elk, and bighorn sheep will benefit from the improved quality of vegetation and stimulation of fall regrowth.

## **Public Comment**

FWP accepted public comment on the draft environmental assessment (EA) for a 14-day period from March 14 through March 28, 2007. The EA was advertised through media releases and legal notices. Copies of the EA were available from the Kalispell R-1 FWP office, the FWP web site, the Montana State Library, and the Lincoln County Libraries in Libby, Eureka, and Troy. The EA was also mailed directly to a number of interested persons.

Four comments were received. One comment was submitted via e-mail and supported the proposal. A letter was received that opposed the proposal because they believed the cows would remove too much forage and not enough would remain for deer and elk. Two comments were submitted via phone in which concerns were raised regarding 1) overgrazing, 2) the need for tall grass in deep snow years, and 3) the potential for disease to spread from domestic livestock to wildlife, especially bighorn sheep.

**Response to Comments**

The level of grazing proposed for the WMA (400 AUMs annually) is very conservative, given the size of the area. An earlier lessee had been allowed to graze up to 700 AUMs annually, and admittedly some problems occurred during dry years. The level of grazing will be monitored and adjusted, if necessary.

One caller expressed the need to have tall grasses that extend above deep snow to aid wintering deer. Given the level of grazing proposed, a considerable amount of this will occur, even in the grazed pastures. About 12% of the WMA is never grazed and at least one of the 3 main pastures will receive complete rest every year, allowing grasses to achieve maximum height.

The second caller expressed a concern regarding the spreading of disease from cattle to wild animals, especially bighorn sheep. He stated he witnessed such a die-off in bighorn sheep in the Gardiner area in the 1980s, in which large numbers of bighorn sheep died from pinkeye and/or blackleg. Dr. Mark Atkinson from FWP’s Bozeman Lab was contacted regarding this incident and confirmed that a large number of sheep had died from pinkeye in the early 1980s, but no link to domestic animals had ever been made. Blackleg (*Chlostridium* spp.) is a naturally occurring bacterium in the soil. Although domestic sheep are susceptible, it has not been implicated in the death of bighorns, and it is not a disease that can be obtained from cattle. Further, cattle will be grazing the WMA during a time (May – September) when the bighorn sheep are in the high country.

**Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI):**

Based on the analysis in the EA, I find the proposed alternative, to allow cattle grazing on the WMA, to be the preferred alternative. I have evaluated the EA and applicable laws, regulations, and policies, and have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the human environment. Therefore, an environmental impact statement will not be prepared.

The final EA and/or the decision notice and FONSI may be viewed at or obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region One, 490 N. Meridian Road, Kalispell, MT 59901. Please contact FWP Biologist Tim Thier, (406) 882-4697 or e-mail to [tthier@interbel.net](mailto:tthier@interbel.net), with questions or comments.

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James Satterfield, Jr., Ph.D.  
Regional Supervisor

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Date