



**Montana Fish,
Wildlife & Parks**

April 23, 2009

Region Four
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840

Ladies and Gentlemen:

Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region Four, has completed a Draft Environmental Assessment for the Ear Mountain Grazing Agreement with the Salmond and Gollehon Ranches. After reviewing the Draft Environmental Assessment and public comment, FWP concludes that the impacts associated with the proposed alternative would not have a significant impact on the physical or human environment in the area. The Draft Environmental Assessment is therefore the appropriate level of analysis for the proposed action and an environmental impact statement is not required.

There are no modifications necessary to the Draft Environmental Assessment based upon public comment. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Based upon the Draft Environmental Assessment, public comment and the Department's desire to continue to use grazing as a management tool on the WMA, it is my decision to approve the grazing agreement on the Ear Mountain WMA.

Sincerely,

Graham Taylor
Acting Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE for the Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area Grazing Agreement Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks Region 4, Great Falls April 2009

Preface

On March 30 2009, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) Region Four issued a draft environmental assessment (EA) for the proposed Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Grazing Agreement with the Salmond and Gollehon Ranches. A 21-day public comment period commenced at that time. The proposed action would continue a rest-rotation grazing plan for cattle on the Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA).

Proposed Action and Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' proposed action is directed at helping to maintain the vigor of vegetation on the WMA for the benefit of wildlife. The proposal also provides opportunity for adjacent livestock operations for good cattle grazing pasture. Year-round and seasonal forage for mule deer, bighorn sheep and other big game will be maintained. Public hunting access on the lessee's property will also be incorporated within the grazing lease.

Beginning in 1991, a rest-rotation grazing system was established on the WMA with the Salmond Ranch for the 2,120-acre south pasture in order to improve vegetative quality on WMA. In 1992, a similar grazing system was established with the Gollehon Ranch for the 960-acre north pasture. Both pastures have traditionally followed a rest-rotation pattern of grazing one month before seed ripe the first year (June), one month after seed ripe the following year (August) and a year of complete rest the third year. Recent vegetation monitoring surveys (summer and fall 2008) on the WMA continue to show overall good vegetative conditions on the WMA.

Project Proposal Terms

In proposing the grazing agreement on the WMA, FWP seeks to meet the following needs:

- The continued utilization of the proposed grazing plan would allow cattle to be utilized as a management tool to maintain vegetative quality on the WMA by stimulating regrowth of native grasses and forbs for the benefit of wildlife;
- The adjacent Salmond Ranch and Gollehon Ranches would benefit from the availability of additional early and late summer pasture for their cattle;

- Public hunting opportunity would be allowed through each lessee's respective properties;

Montana Environmental Policy Act

Fish, Wildlife & Parks is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. The Montana Environmental Policy Act directs state agencies to ensure that the public is informed of and has the opportunity to participate in the decision making process. Fish, Wildlife & Parks prepared a draft EA and proposed grazing plans for each designated ranch and respective pasture that identified the potential environmental and social impacts of this acquisition.

Description of Proposed Action and Alternatives

Fish, Wildlife & Parks developed two viable alternatives to the proposed action.

No Action - Fish, Wildlife & Parks would not utilize the grazing management plan on the Ear Mountain WMA. Lower and less quality forage production on WMA would be expected over the long-term. The Salmond and Gollehon Ranches would be required to find additional grazing pasture elsewhere.

Proposed Action - Fish, Wildlife & Parks would implement a grazing plan on the WMA. The establishment and maintenance of the proposed grazing plan would allow cattle to be utilized as a management tool to maintain vegetative quality on the WMA by stimulating regrowth of native grasses and forbs for the benefit of wildlife. The Salmond Ranch and Gollehon Ranch would benefit from the availability of early and late summer pasture for their cattle. Public hunting opportunity would be allowed through each lessee's respective properties.

Environmental and Social Impacts Draft Environmental Impacts

Fish, Wildlife & Parks analyzed the environmental impacts of the proposed action and no-action alternatives in the draft EA. The draft EA did not identify any significant environmental or socio-economic impacts from the proposed action. Fish, Wildlife & Parks does not anticipate any significant social or biologically deteriorating development of the property and the land will still be available for public use during the proposed designated grazing periods.

Public Process and Comments

In compliance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, a draft EA and grazing plan were prepared and released on March 30, 2009, for a 21-day public review through 5:00 p.m., Sunday, April 19, 2009. Fish, Wildlife & Parks mailed copies of the draft EA and grazing plan to 33 individuals or entities, including all neighboring property owners, private citizen groups, and other interested parties. Notices were placed in three newspapers (Great Falls Tribune; The Choteau Acantha; and The Fairfield Sun Times) as well as one statewide news release on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page. Copies of the draft EA and grazing plan were made available at the FWP Region four headquarters in Great Falls and at the Freezout Lake WMA field office.

Public participation is a mechanism for agencies to consider substantive comments on a proposal. Only one written comment was received regarding the draft EA. This comment was related to the

strong population of non-hybridized westslope cutthroat that are present in the North Fork Willow Creek (bisecting the north pasture on the WMA). However, we anticipate based on the draft grazing management plan that grazing would not have a significant impact on the riparian habitat and westslope cutthroat population. Continued monitoring of riparian vegetation (i.e, photo points, browse utilization, or residual stubble height) in the pastures could detect if modifications of grazing management would be needed in the future to maintain and protect this robust westslope population.