

DECISION NOTICE

for

Proposed Big Lake Wildlife Management Area Agricultural Lease



*Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
2300 Lake Elmo Drive, Billings, MT 59105*

June 10, 2009

Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to implement a 10-year agricultural lease on a small portion of Big Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Big Lake WMA is located approximately 17 miles north of Columbus in Stillwater County. The purpose of the lease is to formalize a reciprocal agreement with a local rancher for mowing services of an access road used by FWP and the public to decrease fire fuels and the potential for wild fires within the WMA. In exchange for mowing the access road once annually, the rancher will be allowed to cut and bale up to 10 acres of hay annually on the WMA. Haying may occur within two areas encompassing approximately 57 total acres. A mix of alfalfa, clover, tall and intermediate wheat grass were planted on these parcels over a decade ago by FWP to provide dense nesting cover for waterfowl and upland game birds. Periodically haying small portions of these dense nesting cover patches will help to maintain their productivity and increase a diverse cover age structure benefiting upland birds and other wildlife. Specific areas to cut within the areas targeted for haying will be determined annually by the WMA managing biologist. The rancher is required to remove all baled hay from the WMA by August 31 to prevent conflicts with upland bird hunters. Both the mowing and haying will occur between July 15th and August 31st. Payment is to be in services rendered as described above.

The WMA is managed for waterfowl and upland game bird production. Recreation opportunities on Big Lake WMA include hunting for upland birds, waterfowl in wet years, mule deer, antelope, as well as bird watching and photography.

Alternatives and Analysis

Proposed Action: FWP to enter into an agricultural lease with neighboring landowner to reduce wildfire potential and maintain/improve upland bird and waterfowl nesting and wintering habitat on the WMA.

Alternative A - No Action: FWP will continue to manage Big Lake WMA as it currently does. Fire fuels will accumulate on the access road, which will increase the risk of fire within Big Lake WMA. No periodic haying will occur on the WMA to maintain the productivity of dense nesting cover planted by FWP. Over time this will result in decreased waterfowl and upland game bird habitat quality.

PUBLIC COMMENT

In compliance with Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA), FWP completed an EA with a subsequent public involvement process. Public participation is not a plebiscite to measure those in favor of or opposed to a proposal, but is a mechanism for agencies to consider substantive comments.

The public comment period for this EA was from May 15, 2009 through June 1, 2009. Legal notices were published in the Billings Gazette and the Helena Independent Record. The draft EA (electronic or hardcopy) was sent to those on the Region 5 interested parties list. Hard copies of the draft EA were available at the Region 5 Headquarters in Billings. The draft EA was also posted electronically on the FWP website at:
<<http://fwp.mt.gov/publicnotices/default.aspx?d=31>>

No public comments were received.

DECISION

After review of this proposal it is my recommendation to accept the Proposed Action. This agreement will reduce the potential for wildfires while maintaining/improving wildlife habitat and enhancing public hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities.

The draft version of the EA and this Decision Notice serve as the final documents for this proposal.



June 10, 2009

Gary Hammond
FWP Region 5 Supervisor
Billings, MT

DATE