Woods Ranch WMA Grazing Lease
Public Draft Environmental Assessment
April 12, 2013

MEPA/NEPA/23-1-110 MCA CHECKLIST

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) proposes to lease approximately 1,200 acres of the 1,417-acre Woods Ranch Wildlife Management Area (WMA) for cattle grazing to better manage vegetation for wildlife cover and forage.

2. Agency authority for the proposed action:

MFWP has the authority under Section 87-1-210 MCA to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future. In addition, in accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, MFWP is required to assess the impacts that any proposal or project might have on the natural and human environments. Further, MFWP's land lease-out policy, as it pertains to the disposition of interest in Department lands (89-1-209) requires an environmental assessment (EA) to be written for all new grazing leases, lease extensions, or lease renewals.

3. Name of project:

Woods Ranch WMA Grazing Lease

4. Name, address, and phone number of project sponsor: N/A

5. Anticipated schedule:

Annual grazing schedule: June 1 to October 15

Term of grazing: June 1, 2013, to October 15, 2018

6. Location affected by proposed action:

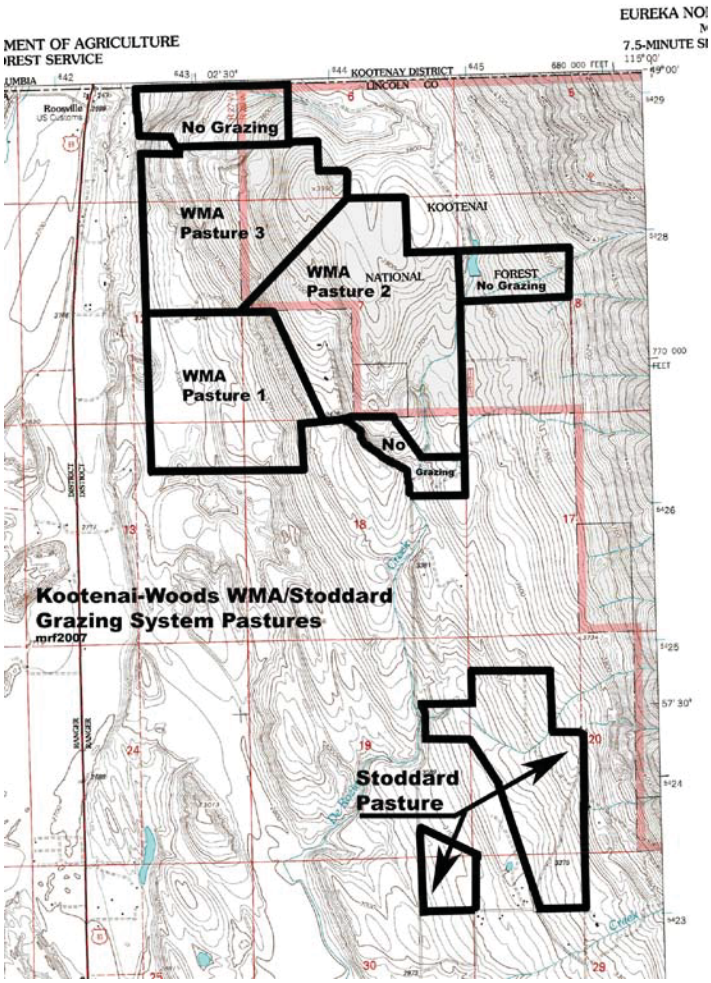
Lincoln County, R26 and 27W, T37N

7. Project size:

	Acres		Acres
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	
residential			
industrial		(e) Productive:	
		irrigated cropland	
(b) Open Space/Woodlands/Recreation		dry cropland	
		forestry	300
(c) Wetlands/Riparian Areas		rangeland	900
		other	

8. Map/site plan:

Map showing Woods Ranch WMA and Stoddard Pastures



9. Listing of any other local, state, or federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction: N/A

(a) Permits: None required

(b) Funding: N/A

(c) Other overlapping or additional jurisdictional responsibilities: None

10. Narrative summary:

Proposed Action:

The proposed action will allow cattle to graze on 1,200 acres of the Woods Ranch WMA in coordination with 277 additional acres of the lessee's private pastures to maximize forage benefits for wildlife in both areas. The lessee will provide the 90-100 cow/calf pairs for a maximum of 400 AUMs annually and will be assessed the established DNRC annual rate for grazing on State Lands. Cattle will graze during the growing season (June 1 – August 1) and be allowed to graze the WMA after seed ripe (August 1 – October 15) on a rotational basis. These pastures will also receive a complete grazing season rest treatment on a rotational basis. Cattle will be rotated between four pastures – three on the WMA and one on the operator's land (see the attached grazing plan). The duration of the plan will be for six years (two complete grazing cycles).

Benefits of Proposed Action:

Benefits include an increase in the quality of grass produced 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.

Purpose of Proposed Action:

The purpose of this proposed action is to manipulate current vegetation with livestock grazing to enhance winter range habitat and forage for elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep, with resultant greater use of the WMA by those species.

11. List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA: None

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

1. Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. LAND RESOURCES **Will the proposed action result in:**	**IMPACT**				**Can Impact Be Mitigated**	**Comment Index**
	Unknown	**None**	**Minor**	**Potentially Significant**		
a. Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?		x				
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?			x			1b
c. Destruction, covering, or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		x				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition, or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		x				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		x				
f. Other:						

1b. The small amount of cattle (90-100 pairs), given the size of the area to be grazed on the WMA (approximately 1,200 acres), will not cause any measurable damage to soils, except possibly where cattle concentrate to travel and locate water.

2. AIR **Will the proposed action result in:**	**IMPACT**				**Can Impact Be Mitigated**	**Comment Index**
	Unknown	**None**	**Minor**	**Potentially Significant**		
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13c.)		x				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?		x				
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		x				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		x				
e. For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		x				
f. Other:						

3. WATER Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality, including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen, or turbidity?		x				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		x				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		x				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		x				
e. Exposure of people or property to water-related hazards such as flooding?		x				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		x				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		x				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?		x				3h
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		x				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?		x				
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		x				
l. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		x				
m. For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		x				
n. Other:						

3h. There is no surface water present within the pastures designated for grazing except for an irrigation ditch in the east pasture (Pasture 2). Water is transported via 2" plastic pipe from the irrigation ditch to several stock tanks located in Pastures 1 and 3.

4. VEGETATION Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity, or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			x			4a
b. Alteration of a plant community?		x				
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		x				4c
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		x				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?			x			4e
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands or prime and unique farmland?		x				
g. Other:						

4a. The grazing design should increase productivity and abundance of most grass species located on the WMA. A temporary loss in grass biomass will occur.

4c. No rare, threatened, or endangered plant species are known to be located within the boundaries of the pastures.

4e. There may be a slight increase in the spread of noxious weeds in some areas due to the movement of cattle and the spreading of seeds in fecal material. However, the grazing system should also help reduce the spread of noxious weeds by increasing the productivity of several grass species. Weeds are monitored and sprayed annually on the WMA.

5. FISH/WILDLIFE Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		x				5a.
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			x			5b
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?		x				
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		x				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?		x				
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		x				5f.
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest, or other human activity)?		x				
h. For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)		x				
i. For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		x				
j. Other:						

5a. The grazing system should improve the quality of habitat for wintering wildlife.

5b. Production of fall regrowth may cause an increase in the number of deer, elk, and bighorn sheep on some portions of the WMA during the winter and spring seasons.

5f. Although grizzly bears and eagles occasionally visit this WMA, no adverse effects to these species are expected.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS **Will the proposed action result in:**	**IMPACT**				**Can Impact Be Mitigated**	**Comment Index**
	Unknown	**None**	**Minor**	**Potentially Significant**		
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		x				
b. Exposure of people to severe or nuisance noise levels?		x				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		x				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		x				
e. Other:						

7. LAND USE **Will the proposed action result in:**	**IMPACT**				**Can Impact Be Mitigated**	**Comment Index**
	Unknown	**None**	**Minor**	**Potentially Significant**		
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		x				
b. Conflict with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		x				
c. Conflict with any existing land use, the presence of which would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		x				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		x				
e. Other:						

8. RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS **Will the proposed action result in:**	**IMPACT**				**Can Impact Be Mitigated**	**Comment Index**
	Unknown	**None**	**Minor**	**Potentially Significant**		
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		x				
b. Affecting an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan or create a need for a new plan?		x				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?		x				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		x				
e. Other:						

9. COMMUNITY IMPACT **Will the proposed action result in:**	**IMPACT**				**Can Impact Be Mitigated**	**Comment Index**
	Unknown	**None**	**Minor**	**Potentially Significant**		
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		x				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		x				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		x				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		x				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		x				
f. Other:						

10. PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health services, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		x				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?			x			10b
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		x				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased used of any energy source?		x				
e. Define projected revenue sources.			x			10b
f. Define projected maintenance costs.		x				10f
g. Other:						

10b. The lessee will be assessed an annual grazing fee by FWP, charged per AUM while on the WMA, which will be equal to the DNRC established rate for that given year. For example, in 2013, this fee amounts to $9.94/AUM. Also, the lessee agrees to perform routine fence maintenance and other services.

10f. Currently, fences are in relatively good condition. Any major repairs are the responsibility of FWP.

11. AESTHETICS/RECREATION Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?		x				11a
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		x				11a
c. Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report)		x				
d. For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails, or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		x				
e. Other:						

11a. The WMA is located in a rural setting. However, people like to visit the orchard area of the WMA for a view of the Tobacco Valley. Given the history of cattle grazing on the WMA, the presence of cattle will not be something new for the public. All cattle will be removed prior to the opening of the general big game hunting season.

12. CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Destruction or alteration of any site, structure, or object of prehistoric, historic, or paleontological importance?		x				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		x				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		x				
d. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12a.)		x				
e. Other:						

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT				Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant		
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		x				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		x				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard, or formal plan?		x				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		x				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		x				
f. For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		x				
g. For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		x				

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW (continued)

2. Description and analysis of alternatives:

No-Action Alternative:

- Grazing would not take place on the WMA.
- Lack of grazing will result in minimal stimulation of fall regrowth of vegetation for attracting wintering wildlife.
- Decadent residual vegetation will remain, and the area will become less attractive to elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep during winter and spring green-up months.
- The lessee will not be able to allow his pastures adequate rest, which will affect forage production and reduce potential use by livestock and wildlife on his private property.
- Tolerance for wildlife on neighboring private land will likely decrease.

Proposed Alternative:

- Grazing will occur on the WMA and lessee's pastures for the duration of the rotational grazing plan (six years), including rest periods.
- Vegetation management, decadent vegetation removal, and fall regrowth stimulation of grass will benefit wildlife, primarily during the winter months.
- Better spring green-up vegetation conditions for elk, mule deer, and bighorn sheep will occur, thus reducing big game usage on adjacent private property during the spring months.
- Some segments of the general public may disapprove of cattle grazing on the WMA.
- Promote continued positive relations with local landowners.

3. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency: None

PART III. EA CONCLUSION SECTION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required?

No. No significant impacts are anticipated.

2. Public involvement:

The draft EA will be available to public on the FWP web site (fwp.mt.gov under Public Notices) and a legal ad will run in the local newspaper.

3. Duration of comment period:

Thirty days, from April 12 through May 13, 2013.

4. Name, title, address, and phone number of the person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:

Tim Thier
FWP Area Biologist
P.O. Box 52
Trego, MT 59934
(406) 882-4697
tthier@interbel.net

Woods Ranch WMA/Stoddard Ranch Grazing Plan
2013 - 2018

The grazing agreement between FWP and Jay Stoddard (Eureka) would be for a 6-year period beginning June 1, 2013, and extending to October 15, 2018. This agreement would involve approximately 1,200 acres on the Woods Ranch WMA and 277 acres of Stoddard pasture being grazed and managed cooperatively to maximize benefits for wildlife. This agreement would incorporate a rest-rotation system that would allow for complete rest of each of the 3 WMA pastures every third year. In addition, it would allow the Stoddard pasture adequate rest during the growing season in order to develop healthy root systems and enhanced plant vigor.

The Stoddard property is probably the most intensively used private ranch by mule deer in NW Montana. It is not uncommon to see over 100 mule deer in a single pasture during the spring months. In addition, it receives considerable amounts of use by turkeys, elk, and white-tailed deer, with approximately 10 cow elk calving on his property annually. A cooperative grazing system will enhance grass palatability and availability for wintering ungulates for both areas.

The Woods Ranch WMA is critical winter habitat for elk, bighorn sheep, and mule deer. Use of the WMA by wintering bighorn sheep has increased in recent years, probably in response to grazing management, primarily in the north pasture (Pasture 3). The number of bighorn sheep observed wintering on the WMA has increased from zero in the early 1990s to up to 90 animals currently. In 2012, it was documented for the first time that several ewes had lambed on the WMA.

Terms of Agreement

1. Under this agreement, the lessee agrees to graze cattle on the Woods Ranch WMA and Stoddard pasture according to the schedule outlined below.

Kootenai/Woods Ranch/WMA - Stoddard Ranch grazing rotation schedule, 2013-2018.

YEAR	WMA2+Stoddard	WMA3	WMA1
2013	*B	*A	C
2014	C	B	A
2015	A	C	B
2016	B	A	C
2017	C	B	A
2018	A	C	B

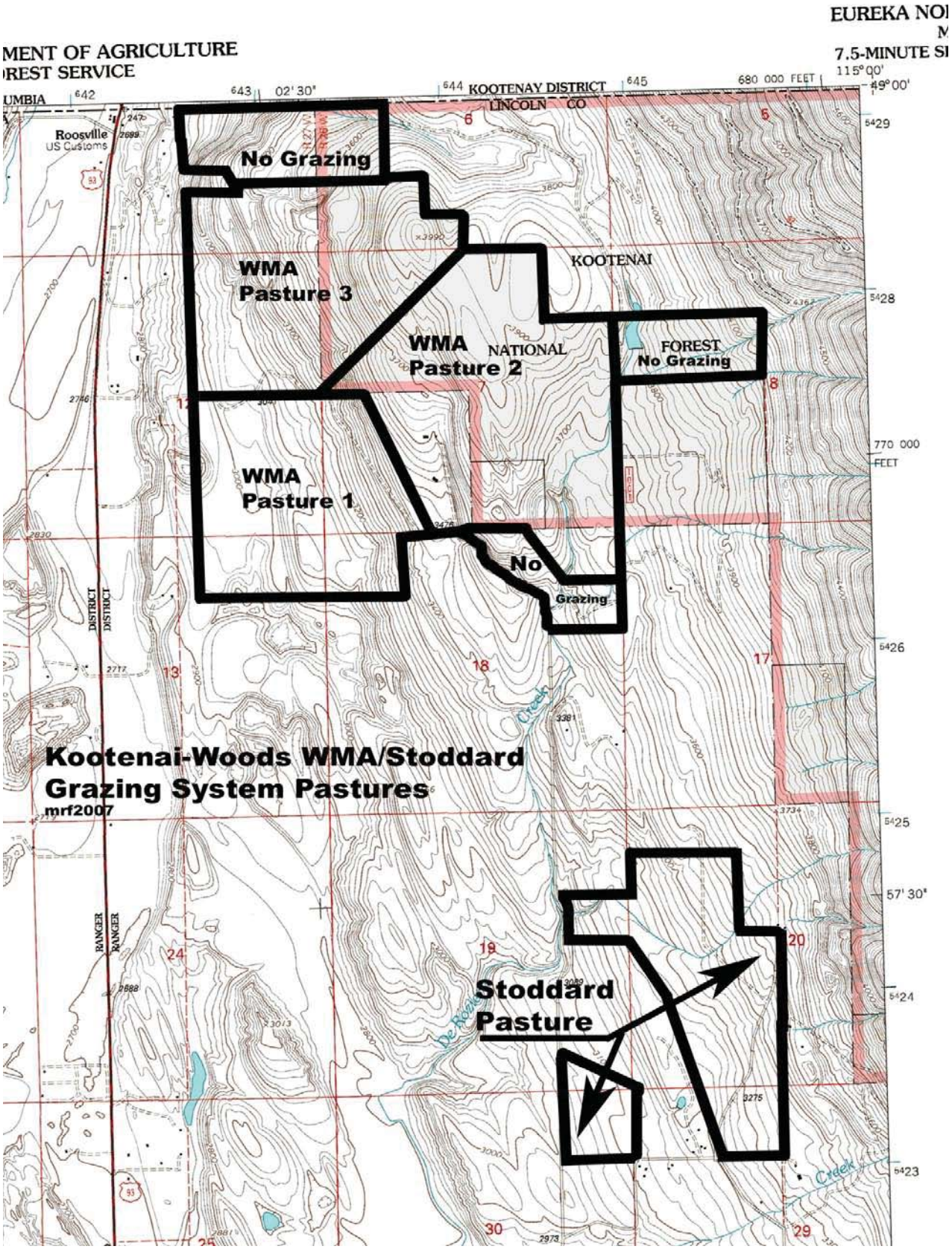
*A=livestock grazing from June 1 to August 1. *B=Livestock grazing from August 1 to October 15. In a year when the Stoddard pasture is scheduled for the B treatment, the landowner can graze later than October 15 at his discretion. (Stoddard pasture is a planted grass field.)

2. Payment to FWP for grazing on the WMA would be the DNRC established rate for AUMs or Animal Unit Months. This amount varies from year to year. If this agreement is approved, the cost per AUM for 2013 will be $9.94/AUM.

3. Up to 400 AUMs will be allowed annually on the WMA.

4. The lessee will be responsible for routine fence maintenance.

5. Major fence repairs or improvements will be the responsibility of FWP.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