

DECISION NOTICE

Upper Missouri River Turkey Transplant

Prepared by Region 3, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

February 22, 1999

PROPOSAL

The proposed action is to trap Merriam's turkeys from other wild populations in Montana and transplant a minimum of 20 birds along the Missouri River on the Canyon Ferry Wildlife Management Area (CFWMA). Included in this proposal is a supplemental release of turkeys during the following year to ensure turkeys are given the best possible chance of developing into a sustainable population.

There are presently no known wild or domestic turkeys in the area. The purpose of this project is to establish a turkey population which would enhance biological diversity and provide additional wildlife viewing, listening, and hunting opportunity.

The CFWMA release site is administered by the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) for the Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation). Reclamation has been consulted with and they have no comments as to the transplant project. CFWMA is managed to "Provide productive habitat for the diversity of wildlife species that utilize the area and provide for consumptive and non-consumptive use of those resources" (FWP 1992). Management direction for CFWMA further promotes the release of turkeys (FWP 1992:35-36).

The Canyon Ferry WMA and adjacent lands along the Missouri River contain the necessary habitat features to sustain wild turkeys. In further support of this, turkeys were successfully transplanted upriver from Canyon Ferry along the Jefferson River near Cardwell, MT during the winter of 1992/93. The turkeys from this transplant have increased in number and expanded their distribution. Habitats along the Jefferson River are very similar to the potential turkey habitats found along the Missouri River portion of the CFWMA.

This project cannot proceed without prior approval of the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission. Given Commission approval, transplant efforts may ensue as early as winter 1998/99 or at a later time as turkeys become available. A turkey hunting season, as authorized by the Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commission, will be initiated if/when population levels reach a sufficient size for sustaining a harvest. Population monitoring will be based on observations and winter surveys at areas of concentration.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PROCESS

Broadwater

FWP is required to assess impacts of the proposal to the human and physical environment. The Upper Missouri River turkey transplant proposal and its effects were documented by FWP in an Environmental Assessment (EA) to satisfy the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA). It was determined that an EA is the proper level of analysis and that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) is not required.

A 20 day public comment period on the EA was conducted from January 27, 1999 through February 15, 1999. Legal notices were placed in the Townsend Star and the Helena Independent Record detailing how to acquire copies of the EA and inviting comment on the proposal. In addition, news articles describing the proposal and opportunity to comment ran in the Great Falls Tribune, Helena Independent Record, and Townsend Star newspapers.

No significant issues were generated during the public comment period and no revisions were made to the Draft Environmental Assessment, which will therefore serve as the Final Environmental Assessment.

ISSUES RAISED IN THE ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT (EA)

The EA lists the issues in detail. These include: a.) possible habitat enhancements; b.) introduction of a new species; c.) increased noise levels; d.) crop depredation; e.) increased viewing opportunities; and f.) increased tourist dollars, and increased demand on government (FWP) operations. In addition, the EA described releasing the Rio Grande subspecies as an alternative to the Merriam's subspecies. It states that a modification to ARM 12.9.105a would be required to accomplish this. We have since learned that this is no longer true, thus allowing release of the Rio Grande subspecies without any additional effort. However, Merriam's will probably be released since they are most readily available. All issues were considered to be minor in impact.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENTS

As of February 15, 1999, the Department received seven written comments. All of the comments were supportive of the transplant.

Comment: One of the seven comments raised a concern about predator populations in the transplant area, particularly golden eagles and red fox, and their effect on the success of the transplant.

Response: Recreational trapping takes place on the CFWMA which helps control predator populations. Golden eagles are uncommon on the transplant area and are more likely to inhabit open foothill/mountain habitat.

Comment: One individual, although supportive of the transplant, was unhappy about the public

involvement process for the federal wolf reintroduction EIS.

Response: Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks is not the responsible agency for this action and it is outside the scope of this analysis.

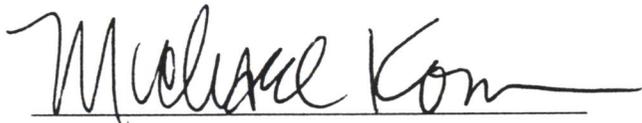
In addition, landowners adjacent to CFWMA were contacted and were supportive or did not object to the proposal. In addition, several landowners upstream from the CFWMA were contacted and were supportive or did not object to the proposal.

DECISION

Utilizing the EA and public comment, a decision must be rendered by FWP which addresses the concerns and issues identified for this proposed project.

Both FWP's analysis and all public input supported this turkey transplant. This action would increase the diversity of wildlife on CFWMA and provide additional wildlife viewing and hunting opportunities.

After review of this proposal, it is my recommendation to approve this transplant subject to approval by the Fish, Wildlife & parks Commission at their **April 16** meeting in Helena..



Michael Korn
Helena Area Coordinator
Helena, MT
February 22, 1999