

FINAL DECISION NOTICE:
MAIDENROCK FISHING ACCESS SITE
LIVESTOCK GRAZING MANAGEMENT PLAN

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59718
(406) 994-6987

PROPOSAL

The proposed action is to implement a livestock (cattle) grazing management plan at Maidenrock Fishing Access Site (FAS) for the purposes of benefiting foraging wildlife by stimulating early season "green up"; to provide a local livestock operator a renewable resource through grazing pasture; to reduce fire danger by eliminating dry grass and forbes (fuel load); and to simply be a good neighbor in the local agriculture based community.

Livestock grazing at this site has been a permitted activity for over 15 years, with few impacts and few complaints. Grazing has always taken place in the winter months when recreational use is at a minimum and when physical damage by cows is greatly limited due to frozen ground and iced over stream banks. In 1993, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks prepared a Grazing Management Plan and an Environmental Assessment on the plan. Both documents were distributed for public comment and subsequently adopted. There has been a grazing lease in place since that time. The current management plan and EA have been prepared with the objective in mind to continue/renew a very similar livestock grazing system at Maidenrock FAS into the future. Essentially, this plan calls for an annual, three pasture rotational system, with the maximum AUM's set at 68 in an eight and half day period during the month of December on approximately 150 acres (refer to Attachment 1 in the EA).

PUBLIC PROCESS AND COMMENT

A public comment period began August 10, 1999 and ran through September 9, 1999. Fifty-seven copies of the EA were distributed, legal notices were published in three area newspapers, and there was one informational posting on the State of Montana's electronic bulletin board. There were six comments received--four in support and two listing concerns. The letters listing concerns were identical so just one set will be addressed below.

Comment: The EA does not address weed control measures.

Response: There are a few different noxious weed species present at this site, but infestations are small and scattered. Since cows are only on the ground for a short period, it's not likely that they are a major source of weed seed. Vehicles, wind, and water are more likely sources of weed seed. Weed growth will be monitored closely by the lessee and by FWP personnel and addressed accordingly. Also, Big Hole River Cooperative Weed Program technicians have identified weeds along the river corridor at this site, and they will continue to apply chemicals to them, where appropriate, for two more seasons. Their work began in 1999. Additionally, it will be stipulated in the lease that if any supplemental feeding is done on site that certified weed seed free feed will be mandatory. In general, FWP's Region Three Weed Management Plan will provide the direction and oversight for all weed control activities.

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Comment: There is no plan in the EA to address stream bank damages that may occur from such intense grazing.

Response: Evidence substantiating stream bank erosion and riparian impacts has not been identified in the past. Since the grazing takes place in December, most years the river banks are frozen and sometimes iced over as well. FWP's Range Coordinator has visited this site and did not observe stream bank damage. Riparian type woody species continue to show excellent health and vigor.

There will, however, be a small modification in the pasture B fence line as was shown in the draft EA. A new fence will be erected in order to eliminate cattle grazing from a back water slough area which is lined with dense woody species. The new fence will also exclude the cows from an old fenced corral, and will help prevent trespass on to an adjacent neighbor.

Stream bank damage will be monitored from year to year by FWP personnel including the area fisheries biologist. Adjustments to the grazing system will be made if necessary.

Comment: The recreating public should not have to camp in cow manure.

Response: To date, there has not been any complaints regarding cow pies in the preferred camping areas. There are no designated camping sites here and most campers can disperse as they wish. Since most of the good forage/grass is far from the high use areas, there is less manure deposited in camping spots. There has been one complaint from a neighbor about manure and it's proximity to their yard. However, there is a clause in the lease which requires the "dragging" of manure deposition areas each spring, and this will be monitored closely and enforced.

Comment: Why allow grazing in Pasture C (an area of high human use), when you could effectively move the cattle through quickly with electric fence?

Response: Since Pasture C allows only one day of grazing with eight AUM's, it is felt that the impacts to the high use area will remain minimal. The parking and camping area could be fenced out fairly easy, but the time and expense would not justify the end effect. Also, there are some good stands of grasses in this area that would be passed over if the cows were pushed through rapidly. Since there has not been any complaints about impacts (i.e., manure) to date, and because the lessee will be required to drag the area in the spring, one day of grazing can be accommodated here.

Comment: There is no explanation of how costs were derived for this plan.

Response: The 1998 Agricultural Statistics Board survey established \$12.60/AUM as the average statewide grazing fee. This is the rate that has been historically charged for grazing on this site and will be used in the future. Using this figure and a maximum of 68 AUM's calculates out to be \$856.80. This is the highest amount we could expect to collect for grazing each year. However, the lessee has seldom used the full stocking rate of 68 AUM's during the allowable grazing period (25 in '98, 55 in '97, 50 in '96). Therefore, a more realistic average for revenues to be generated would be in the 400 to 600 dollar range. Besides the actual cash generated by the grazing, there are also other tangible benefits gained. These include vigilance of the site by the lessee, repair of fences, and general good neighbor/community relations. All of these things have a administrative and management value as well. Other than the time and expense of preparing the grazing plan, the EA and the grazing leases this first year, there will be very little costs associated with maintaining the leases over the next nine years. Cost to the recreating public is completely off set, and then some, by the revenues gained. But to assure that administrative costs do not impact the operations and maintenance (O&M) budget for this site, FWP will charge a \$30.00 administrative fee to the lessee each year regardless of how many AUM's are used.

Comment: How are the cows watered, and do they walk down to the river and damage stream banks? A stock tank might be a better alternative.

Response: There are a few places in the site, along the river, where the banks taper down to waters edge. One of these places is at the boat ramp area. Also, because the grazing is being done in December, the ground along the river banks is frozen. Therefore, damage done to stream banks by thirsty cows is minimal. The expense of a stock tank would not be justified for eight and a half days of grazing. The FWP Range Coordinator has not observed problems with eroding stream banks, and we will continue to monitor this potential annually.

Comment: The agency should not use recreationists' dollars to perform pasture monitoring.

Response: As stated previously, revenues generated will equal or exceed on the ground O&M costs pertaining to the livestock grazing. Additionally, FWP will charge a \$30.00 administrative fee to the lessee each year to help cover such things as monitoring.

Comment: The EA errors in assuming no change in use will occur at the fishing access because of this proposal (grazing plan and lease).

Response: Livestock grazing has been going on at this site for at least 15 years, with little impact and with no complaints and/or boycott by the recreating public. Use at this site, as well as other Big Hole River FAS's, has been increasing each year, and this trend will likely continue. If complaints are received from the public relative to livestock grazing, FWP will re-evaluate this program.

DECISION

Based on the analysis in the Environmental Assessment and of applicable laws, regulations and policies, I have determined that this action will not have a significant effect on the natural or human environment. Therefore, an Environmental Impact Statement will not be prepared.

It is my decision to implement the proposed action (Alternative C), and proceed with leasing livestock grazing at the site as stipulated in the Grazing Management Plan. Grazing will begin in December, 1999 after a new lease is signed.

By notification in this decision notice, the draft EA is hereby made the final EA with the above comments and discussion points included. The final EA may be viewed at or obtained from Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 1400 South 19th Avenue, Bozeman, MT 59718.

Please direct requests or questions to:

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Patrick J. Flowers by G. W.
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10/1/99
Date