



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405

March 19, 2012

Dear Interested Party:

This letter is to notify you that I have made a decision regarding Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (MFWP) implementation of grazing and hay leases on the Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area (WMA). My decision is to move forward with the proposed action. These leases will allow the removal of current vegetation by grazing or haying to be utilized as a management tool to enhance the subsequent availability and palatability of mule deer, elk and antelope fall and spring forage on that portion of the Blackleaf WMA to be treated.

Public comment identified some unanswered questions within the draft Environmental Assessment (EA) on the proposed grazing lease. Two (2) public comments were received. Answers to questions and further clarification are provided in the *EA Addendum* as attached to this Decision Notice. That *EA Addendum* reflects intended modification to the draft EA, and as such completes the EA in Final form. Therefore, the draft EA as amended with the EA Addendum, will now be considered final.

Thank you for your interest in this project.

Sincerely,

Gary Bertellotti
Regional Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Rd.
Great Falls, MT 59405
(406) 454-5840

Blackleaf WM Grazing EA Addendum

Following are issues identified by public comment and subsequent FWP clarification or response to each element. It is intended that these clarifications and comment become part of the Final EA record for the Blackleaf WMA Grazing Lease.

Clarify what the grazing schedule is for 2012 (which pastures): draft EA was in fact confusing and in error. Correctly stated in the grazing scheme matrix (Appendix B), pastures #3, 7, 8a and 8b will be grazed in 2012. Statements addressing pastures 3 and 5 (page 2 map heading) and page 3, item #7 in text were wrong.

Disclose 2012 grazing \$ rate and display recent rates for last several years for comparison:

Montana Private Land Grazing Fee Rates (averaged) per AUM:

2011 = \$19.40 (this becomes the 2012 established grazing Animal Unit Month rate)
2010 = \$18.40
2009 = \$18.00
2008 = \$18.10
2007 = \$17.80

Cost of FWP operations to manage lease: FWP maintains full oversight of livestock grazing operations on the WMA. That said, the lessee is obligated to graze a maximum of 1,500 and a minimum of 500 AUMs; to erect and maintain interior pasture fences in good functional condition (barbed and electric) and provide salt and mineral supplement and move them periodically as designated by the Department representative.

Direct cost to FWP may include any fence materials/supplies including battery powered charger unit(s), cord reels, battery. These supplies have been on hand for each of the last 8 years of similar grazing operation, thus only replacement parts and normal maintenance expenditures are involved from year to year. FWP manpower may include up to two man-days to initiate grazing practices, monthly monitoring (2 man-days each month) and 2 man-day's closing. FWP retains responsibility for exterior boundary fence maintenance throughout the year.

Interior fencing: electric vs. permanent barbed wire: how much of each is necessary to implement grazing lease. FWP prefers and will default to temporary electric fencing (interior) wherever feasible on the Blackleaf WMA. Minimal permanent, wildlife friendly, 4-strand barbed wire fencing exists as interior fence. Approximately 11 miles of interior fencing is used to affect this grazing system annually, with some minimal variation from year to year (depending on pastures grazed). Of that amount, 4 miles of existing permanent fence and 7 miles of temporary, single strand electric fence will be used in 2012. Such a system has proven very effective in containing livestock and allowing wildlife passage during previous years of similar use.

Wildlife benefits. A key management objective of the Blackleaf WMA is to “emphasize the occurrence of highly productive, diverse plant communities that will provide the best possible quality forage and cover for native wildlife species”. Range condition trends from 1979 to 2009 have moved (by NRCS range measurement standards) from ‘fair’ condition to that of ‘good-

excellent'. The *Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area Vegetation Condition and Trend 1979-2009*, by Gary Olson describes in detail and with scientific precision, these vegetation conditions. Further, the healthy presence (distribution and number) of wildlife species ranging from grizzly bear to pronghorn antelope to sharp tailed grouse (and others) remains apparent and is documented with annual FWP seasonal surveys.

Livestock ruin the hunting experience; use prescribed fire: Hunter and non-hunter participation on and use of the Blackleaf WMA shows steady sign of increase. No livestock associated with this grazing lease are present on the WMA after August 31 – often earlier. The suggestion to conduct prescribed burns in lieu of livestock grazing has been and continues to be considered and evaluated. Factors to include cost, management prescription, location, timing, community acceptance, safety and available experienced manpower all need be considered in a prescribed fire approach.