

# **Environmental Assessment**

## **Elk Island Wildlife Management Area Agricultural Lease**

**March 20, 2012**



***Montana Fish,  
Wildlife & Parks***

# Draft Environmental Assessment MEPA, NEPA, MCA 23-1-110 CHECKLIST

## PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. **Type of proposed state action:** Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) purpose to renew an agricultural (crop or hay) lease on the Elk Island Wildlife Management Area for a 1-year period (2012-2014)
2. **Agency authority for the proposed action:** FWP has the authority under Section 87-1-201 Montana Code Annotated (MCA) to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and in the future.
3. **Anticipated Schedule:** The agricultural lease will commence on April 1, 2012, and will expire on March 31, 2013. Agricultural activities will take place from March 31 to April 1 of each year.
4. **Location affected by proposed action (county, range and township – included map):** Approximately 50 acres within T20N, R58E, M.P.M. in Richland County, Montana, Section 21: All lying south and east of main canal. Excluding 2.31 acres in Section 21 as described in deed book A-32, page 158 records of Richland County.



**3. Project size -- estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:**

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
(existing shop area)		Irrigated cropland	<u>70</u>
(b) Open Space/	<u>0</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
Woodlands/Recreation		Forestry	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian	<u>0</u>	Rangeland	<u>0</u>
Areas		Other	<u>0</u>

**6. Permits, Funding & Overlapping Jurisdiction.**

No permits required.

**7. Narrative summary of the proposed action:**

The proposed action is to continue a share-crop agreement with a long-time, competent lessee whereby the lessee cultivates and retains a portion of the hay/ grain crop harvest, leaving the remaining crop standing for wildlife use during winter months. The benefit and purpose is primarily for wintering pheasants, turkeys, and deer, providing forage for approximately 250 white-tailed deer, waterfowl and upland game birds including Canada geese and sandhill cranes. This area is open to public hunting during the archery and general rifle seasons, and provides opportunity for deer, waterfowl and upland game birds.

This agricultural field has been under lease with the same lessee since 2001. The lessee has shown initiative in farming practices to increase productivity including fertilizing and conditioning soil, treatment of noxious weeds, has maintained the fields in good condition and has fulfilled all conditions of previous leases.

Elk Island Wildlife Management Area encompasses 1,227 acres, with the proposed project affecting 70 acres of farm field located in T20N R58E S21.

**8. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives:**

**Alternative A: No Action:** Agricultural lease will not be renewed and agricultural lands will not be cultivated.

This alternative would require FWP to commit resources to manage weeds on the previously cultivated 70 acres of farm fields. Wildlife would be negatively impacted by lack of critical wintering habitat.

**Alternative B: Proposed Action:** Agricultural lease will be renewed for the mutual benefit of lessee, MFWP and wildlife.

## **PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST**

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

### **A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

1. <b><u>LAND RESOURCES</u></b> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
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			
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				

The proposed action would result in no changes to soil conditions since there has been agricultural activities at the location for over 40 years.

2. <b><u>AIR</u></b> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)		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 regulations? (Also see 2a.)		N/A				

The proposed action would not change the ambient air quality at the WMA. Any dust generated from crop management activities would be short in duration and limited to the plot area.

3. <u>WATER</u>  Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
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				
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.)		N/A				
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.)		N/A				

This area has been irrigated for small grains and hay crops since before MFWP acquired the lands. Cultivation includes diversion of water and possible minor impacts to ground-water from leaching of fertilizer, runoff from ditch irrigation is very minor. Irrigation/cultivation here has been in practice for over 40 years therefore renewing the lease will not result in any changes to impacts on surface water, ground water, run-off or other water rights. The agricultural fields are bounded by riparian areas to the North and wetlands to the south, and do not border the Yellowstone River or tributaries.

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

Cultivation of these agricultural fields does not involve any conversion, rather a continuation of current use. Lessee is responsible for weed control (see Appendix B).

<b>5. <u>FISH/WILDLIFE</u></b>	<b>IMPACT</b>					
	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Potentially Significant</b>	<b>Can Impact Be Mitigated</b>	<b>Comment Index</b>
<b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>						
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?		X				
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				
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.)		N/A				
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.)		N/A				

The objective of this lease is to increase use of the area by wintering wildlife. All cultivation occurs after the WMA has been open to the public and wintering wildlife.

## B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to serve 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				

Proposed action will have no impact on noise or electrical effects.

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

The proposed action would continue agricultural use of this portion of the WMA and would not conflict with other uses of the WMA (i.e. hunting, fishing, boating, hiking etc.)

<b>8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u></b>	<b>IMPACT</b>					
	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Potentially Significant</b>	<b>Can Impact Be Mitigated</b>	<b>Comment Index</b>
<b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>						
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. Affect 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)		N/A				

The proposed action would not increase risks or health hazards at the WMA.

<b>9. <u>COMMUNITY IMPACT</u></b>	<b>IMPACT</b>					
	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Potentially Significant</b>	<b>Can Impact Be Mitigated</b>	<b>Comment Index</b>
<b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>						
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				

The proposed action would have no impact on community activities or traffic patterns within the WMA.

<b>10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u></b> <b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>	<b>IMPACT</b>					
	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Potentially Significant</b>	<b>Can Impact Be Mitigated</b>	<b>Comment Index</b>
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, 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				
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 use of any energy source?		X				
e. Define projected revenue sources*		X				
f. Define projected maintenance costs.*		X				

Proposed action will have no impact on public services/taxes/utilities. There is no projected revenue, but please see Appendix A of lease agreement for estimated value of lease and projected maintenance costs. The lessee retains 75% of small grains and 65% of irrigated hay produced for his possession and use. The lessee shall leave 25% of small grain and 35% of irrigated hay produced standing as such payment in full to the MFWP.

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

Since the location of the proposed action has been used for the cultivation of crops for numerous years, the continuation of the agricultural lease would not alter any new areas within the WMA and not interfere with existing recreation activities at the WMA. Under the proposed action, no alteration of the current landscape would occur.

<b>12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u></b> <b>Will the proposed action result in:</b>	<b>IMPACT</b>					
	<b>Unknown</b>	<b>None</b>	<b>Minor</b>	<b>Potentially Significant</b>	<b>Can Impact Be Mitigated</b>	<b>Comment Index</b>
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. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		N/A				

No impacts are anticipated to cultural or historic resources.

### SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. <u>SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</u>  Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
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.)		N/A				
g. For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		N/A				

The proposed lease renewal is a continuation of the ongoing management of the WMA for the benefit of wildlife and for public opportunities. No public controversy is anticipated.

### **PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT**

The action proposed by this environmental assessment is the renewal of a successful agricultural lease that covers 70 acres of the Elk Island Wildlife Management Area. This lease, first entered into in 2001 after the Wildlife Division of MFWP acquired the property, has as its objective increased forage for turkeys, pheasants and white-tailed deer, while allowing production of small grains or hay for local use. At the request of the lessee, MFWP will propose a 1-year lease (2012-2013) to evaluate utilization of the agricultural field by wildlife in both winter and summer.

### **PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**

#### **1. Public involvement:**

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- Two public notices in the Sidney Herald and the Glendive Ranger-Review.
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

Copies of this environmental assessment will be distributed upon request any interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

#### **2. Duration of comment period:**

The public comment period will extend for 20 days following the publication of the legal notice in area newspapers. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., April 16, 2012 and can be mailed to the address below (Part V, 2)

### **PART V. EA PREPARATION**

#### **1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)? NO If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.**

The proposed action will not have a significant adverse impact on the local environment; it is a continuation of an arrangement that has proven beneficial for wildlife habitat and agriculture for the 12 years.

#### **2. Person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:**

Scott Denson  
Forsyth Area Biologist  
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**3. List of agencies or offices consulted during preparation of the EA:**

Montana Fish Wildlife & Parks:

Fisheries Division

Wildlife Division

Lands

**APPENDICES**

A. Legal Description

B. Cooperative management agreement/ Calculation of the value of spring wheat or hay crop left standing for wildlife

C. Elk Island WMA 2012-2013 Agricultural Lease agreement