1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman, MT 59718

April 5, 2013

Ladies and Gentlemen:

The enclosed Decision Notice has been prepared to consider a coordinated rest-rotation grazing program on Wall Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) near Cameron, MT, for a five-year term to extend April 2013 through October 2015. The program, which began in 1982, consists of a spring and fall grazing fee-grazing agreement with the Wall Creek Grazing Association (WCGA).

The proposed grazing program would encompass 6,149 acres owned by FWP, 918 acres that FWP leases from Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), and 300 acres owned by the BLM. There are an additional 9,503 acres of Forest Service land incorporated in this coordinated grazing system. Total acreage affected by the proposed action is 16,870 acres.

Slight modifications to the Draft Environmental Assessment have been made as noted in the FWP response. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

It is my decision, based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment, to approve the implementation of Alternative B for renewal of the grazing lease on Wall Creek WMA for a five year period, and that there will be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. I therefore conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. The Decision Notice may also be obtained from FWP at the address provided above, or viewed on FWP's Internet website: http://www.fwp.mt.gov.

Questions regarding this Decision Notice should be mailed to:

Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Julie Cunningham
1400 South 19th Avenue
Bozeman MT 59718-5496
Or e-mailed to: juliecunningham@mt.gov

Sincerely,

Patrick J. Flowers
Region Three Supervisor
Attachment

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE
for the
Wall Creek WMA Grazing Lease Renewal

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 3, Bozeman
March 2013

Preface

The enclosed Decision Notice has been prepared to consider a coordinated rest-rotation grazing program on Wall Creek Wildlife Management Area (WMA) near Cameron, MT, for a three-year term to extend April 2013 through October 2015. The program, which began in 1982, consists of a spring and fall grazing fee-grazing agreement with the Wall Creek Grazing Association (WCGA).

The proposed grazing program would encompass 6,149 acres owned by FWP, 918 acres that FWP leases from Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC), and 300 acres owned by the BLM. There are an additional 9,503 acres of Forest Service land incorporated in this coordinated grazing system. Total acreage affected by the proposed action is 16,870 acres.

The Wall Creek WMA Coordinated Grazing System allows for landscape level management of elk winter range across ownerships and has demonstrated the compatibility of livestock production and wildlife/recreation-based economies over the past 30 years.

Public Process and Comments

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. An Environmental Assessment (EA) in compliance with MEPA was completed for the proposed project by FWP and released for public comment on February 26, 2013.

The following two alternatives were considered in this Environmental Assessment:
Alternative A: Elimination of livestock grazing on the Wall Creek WMA.
Alternative B: FWP allows spring (prior to June 1) and fall grazing on Wall Creek WMA in the same rest-rotation system in cooperation with the USFS, BLM, DNRC, and local ranching partners as has been occurring for the past 30 years. The grazing association will pay for a grazing lease on the land as well as perform maintenance activities.

Public comments were taken for 21 days (through March 18, 2013). Legal notices were printed in the *Bozeman Chronicle* (Bozeman) and the *Helena Independent Record* (Helena). The Environmental Assessment was also posted on the FWP webpage: http://fwp.mt.gov//publicnotices/.

Six parties submitted comments. Of these respondents, one represented themselves while five represented the following organizations or agencies: Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest, Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Wall Creek Grazing Association, Gallatin Wildlife Association, and Montana Rivers.

Of the six respondents, three stated support for Alternative A. Two parties either stated or implied support for Alternative B. One party, representing the BLM, did not clearly state nor imply support for any of the alternatives.

Following is a summary of the comments received regarding the grazing lease renewal on Wall Creek Wildlife Management Area and FWP's response to them.

Support for Alternative B

Two parties supported this alternative. These parties represented the Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest and the Wall Creek Grazing Association.

The following statements were made in support of continuing the grazing lease on Wall Creek WMA:

- Ken Harris, Madison District Ranger, Beaverhead-Deerlodge National Forest: *"I fully support the renewal of the Wall Creek Wildlife Management Area Grazing lease. The coordinated management between the Forest and Fish, Wildlife and Parks has worked well for over twenty years. The renewal of this Grazing lease will continue to meet the resource needs of the Wall Creek Cattle & Horse allotment and Wall Creek Grazing Association, while supporting the management objectives of the Fish, Wildlife and Parks"*.

- Gary Gustafson, President, Wall Creek Grazing Association: "*The Wall Creek Grazing Association has been partners in the Wall Creek WMA for over 30 years. In those 30 years, the WCGA has been a great contributor to increasing the elk habitat by grazing down the old growth forage and leaving a better new growth which elk prefer. It has been documented that cattle on the WCWMA have helped in getting the range in better condition so that elk can better utilize the range."*

  "The elk herd has increased from 500 head in the 1980's to over 2000 head currently during the winter months. FWP realized after purchasing the ranch, in which the WCMA is part of, that years of no cattle grazing had increased the old growth forage and the elk were not utilizing the WCWMA. Cattle were introduced in the early 1980's to help with eliminating the old growth and having better new growth for the elk. It has been established that the cattle have improved the forage for elk and is proving by the number of elk on the range currently."

Support for Alternative A

Three parties either stated or implied support for Alternative A. One party representing themselves, stated that they supported Alternative A. One party, representing Gallatin Wildlife Association, supported Alternative A or an additional alternative of using prescriptive grazing instead of a rest-rotation program on Wall Creek WMA. One party, representing Montana Rivers, stated support for Alternative A.

The following summarizes comments that were received from respondents that supported or implied support for Alternative A:

1. One respondent commented that goals of this cooperative grazing program were not stated clearly in the draft EA referencing Alt et al. (1992).

FWP's response:

Objectives stated in Alt et al. (1992) are:

-allow for maintenance and enhancement of the soil and vegetative resource.
-maintain high quality forage for wintering elk throughout the entire elk winter range.
-reduce elk/cattle competition on critical elk winter range.
-enhance the desirability of the entire Wall Creek WMA to alleviate game damage problems on adjacent private lands.
-manage the entire elk winter range in a coordinated fashion regardless of ownership.
-provide spring, summer, and fall cattle use.

These objectives were developed as a coordinated effort between FWP, Beaverhead National Forest, and the Wall Creek Stock Association (now WCGA) and are still relevant and should have been stated more clearly in the draft EA.

FWP is currently conducting a systematic review of its grazing leases in order to better define the use of livestock grazing as a management tool. A draft review is expected to be completed in 2013. FWP will work with the lessees to incorporate any changes to the Wall Creek grazing program resulting from this review.

2. Several respondents want to see fair market value received for grazing fees so that the fees cover the costs of FWP evaluation and administering the grazing program (cost/benefit analysis).

FWP's response: The draft EA does not state that this fee is "fair market value." It is the annual Department of Natural Resource and Conservation grazing rate which is being charged. The grazing lease is fee-based set at the annual DNRC rate, as explained in the draft EA (pp. 3,5). There are two grazing rate options that FWP can choose regarding the lease fee. One is the FWP rate, set at $20.50 per Animal Unit Month (AUM) for 2013; the other is the rate set by the Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, which is $9.94 per AUM for 2013. Both rates fluctuate annually depending on market conditions. FWP has chosen to charge the DNRC

rate on the Wall Creek grazing lease with the condition that lessees are responsible for routine fence maintenance and repair. Although this equates to less income derived from grazing fees, in the long run it has proved economical for the department by not having to commit a WMA crew to fence maintenance during the grazing season, freeing them up to spend their time on other WMA-related projects instead.

3. One respondent requested better display of the grazing plan on Wall Creek WMA covered by the draft EA and questioned what modification was made in 2009.

FWP's response:

Table 1. Projected grazing schedule for the FWP portion of the Wall Creek Coordinated Grazing Program, 2013-2015. Spring = May1-June1; Summer = June2-July 14; Fall #1 = September 14-September 23; Fall #2 = September 24-September 30; Rest = no use by livestock.

PASTURE	YEAR		
	2013	2014	2015
Spring Game Range	Fall #1	Rest	Summer
North Game Range	Spring	Fall #2	Rest
Middle Game Range	Fall #2	Rest	Spring
South Game Range	Rest	Spring	Fall #2

Pasture names were unintentionally not included on the map in the draft EA. The Spring Game Range pasture is the mid-elevation pasture in the NW corner of Wall Creek WMA. North Game Range, Middle Game Range, and South Game Range pastures are lower elevation and oriented from north to south as described. The 2009 modification was correction on paper to the grazing schedule. The current grazing schedule is correct and the 2009 modification simply corrected maps that were inaccurately marked in the lease.

4. Several respondents stated that they would like to see FWP complete the Wall Creek WMA management plan.

FWP's response: It is a priority for the Bozeman Area Wildlife Biologist to complete the Wall Creek WMA Management Plan in 2013.

5. Several respondents stated that the objectives for Wall Creek WMA should not focus on livestock but rather on wildlife, including moose, antelope, and mule deer. One respondent stated that the objective of increasing cattle conflicts with increasing wildlife.

FWP's response: FWP agrees that the objectives for Wall Creek WMA and all WMA's should focus on wildlife and wildlife habitat and not on livestock. Indeed this is the case. FWP uses livestock grazing in an intelligent and ecological way as a management tool to improve conditions for wildlife and their habitat, as has been stated in this and other grazing lease

renewal EA's. This includes not only elk but mule deer, white-tailed deer, antelope, moose, small mammals, upland and song birds, and other native species on Wall Creek WMA.

It appears that some of the respondents confused the objectives of the coordinated grazing program, which were mutually agreed upon by the Wall Creek Grazing Association and the public agencies, as being the objectives for the WMA. The objectives listed in 1 above are those of the Wall Creek coordinated grazing program.

Page four of the draft EA discusses how the Wall Creek elk herd grew from approximately 500 animals in the early 1980's to over 2,000 elk today. This increase in elk numbers occurred while the grazing program on Wall Creek WMA was in place.

6. One respondent asked how much of the public land is utilized/rested each year.

FWP's response: See #3 above for grazing schedule for the Wall Creek WMA. For the time period covered in the draft EA (2013-2015), the USFS is scheduled to rest 2 pastures in 2013 (Reservoir and Bobcat English George), one pasture in 2014 (Dry Country), and two pastures in 2015 (Nickerson Dry Hollow and Hyde Creek).

7. One respondent has questioned if the lease agreement has yielded beneficial "landowner partnerships".

FWP's response: FWP believes that entering into a coordinated grazing program with private landowners and other agencies as described in the draft EA meets the objectives described in #1 above. In addition, the individual landowners within the Wall Creek Grazing Association provide free public hunting access to their private land not associated with this system. This is not required by the lease agreement, but FWP believes this is a benefit to sportsman that is derived from these partnerships.

8. One respondent requested that the statement in Alternative A of "no grazing" be changed to "no livestock use".

FWP's response: This has been corrected.

9. One respondent questioned the advantages of having a managed grazing system over the non-use alternative in controlling unauthorized fall use by livestock.

FWP's response: Historical records, dating back to the 1960's, indicate that during many years early fall snowstorms would force cattle down out of the high elevation pastures and onto the lower pastures including Wall Creek WMA. This is still applicable today. Prior to the current coordinated grazing program, FWP personnel spent a large amount of time trying to keep the cattle off of the WMA and keep the fences in repair. With the proposed grazing lease, the lessees are responsible for assuring the cattle are in the correct pasture and that the fences are maintained.

10. Several respondents questioned the impact of grazing on the riparian areas on the Wall Creek WMA.

FWP's response: FWP believes as stated in the draft EA (p. 7) that the status of the riparian areas on Wall Creek WMA will not be negatively impacted by the proposed 3 year grazing lease. FWP Region 3 Fisheries has considered the Ruby Creek drainage suitable habitat for a native cutthroat trout reintroduction in 2013. Cattle are less likely to congregate at riparian areas or aspen stands on the WMA in the spring and fall due to the cooler weather and often presence of snow that provides moisture to cattle. FWP agrees to make riparian monitoring on Wall Creek WMA a priority during this proposed lease.

11. One respondent inquired about the vegetative component and effects of grazing on the plant communities on Wall Creek WMA.

FWP's response: In 1997, a long-term vegetation-monitoring program was established on the WMA. Vegetation data is collected using Daubenmire cover estimation, belt transect, line-intercept, and soil surface assessment techniques. Photo points and photo plots are also used. Eight monitoring sites were established inside and outside existing livestock exclosures. In 2006, three wildlife exclosures were also constructed. Six additional monitoring sites were established at these locations. The vegetation-monitoring project includes 14 permanent long-term vegetation-monitoring sites, 42 transects, 420 Daubenmire quadrats, 70 photo points, and 420 photo plots. Data collection has occurred three times at the livestock exclosures sites: 1997, 2002, and 2007. Data collection at the 2006 wildlife exclosures has only occurred one time, hence limited analysis is appropriate.

Data analysis of the livestock exclosure sites demonstrates a stable plant community dominated by perennial native shrub, sub-shrub, grass, and forb species. Bluebunch wheatgrass, prairie junegrass, Sandberg bluegrass, and threadleaf sedge are the dominant grass species. Fringed sagewort is the dominant sub-shrub and green and rubber rabbitbrush, silver sagebrush are the most common shrubs. The soil surface data shows that soil movement or loss are not a concern at this time. Dense clubmoss is the dominant moss species present, and bare soil is not increasing throughout the WMA.

The rangeland resources of the Wall Creek WMA are healthy and stable. The composition of the plant communities are comprised of desirable perennial native species. Some remnant populations of non-native plants are present (alfalfa and crested wheatgrass stands) but are not negative ecological indicators.

12. One respondent inquired about reseeding or burning areas of nonnative grasses rather than using livestock grazing as a tool to improve vegetative conditions.

FWP's response: There are residual hayfields of smooth brome and crested wheatgrass located on the WMA. Livestock grazing is used to remove the old grass, which is not palatable to elk, so that the grass of the year is more available to wintering elk. In order to reseed these patches with native vegetation, the ground and soil would have to be disced, sprayed, and/or burned and then reseeded for several years, and some form of cover crop would need to be planted. A

positive result would not be guaranteed given the nature of these introduced grass species and the residual seed base that has been built up over more than 50 years. This option would leave the area at risk for weed infestation and is not the desired approach that FWP would like to take.

13. Two respondents felt that the EA did not adequately review the impacts of livestock competing for food, space, and water with native wildlife.

FWP's response: Because of the timing and spatial use of this grazing design, FWP feels there are very few impacts to native wildlife in competition with livestock for resources. In the spring, antelope, deer, and elk are beginning to migrate off the WMA to their fawning/calving and summer ranges. In the fall when cattle are on the WMA, native ungulates have not yet returned to their winter range.

14. Several respondents questioned the impacts of livestock use on weed infestations.

FWP's response: Livestock use of Wall Creek WMA does have the potential to spread weeds. However, even if this grazing program were discontinued, the likelihood of weed spread still exists from recreationists and 1000+ elk that winter on the WMA. FWP has an active weed management program on all WMA's.

15. One respondent felt the EA did not adequately review the impacts of livestock use on disease transmission issues.

FWP's response: There have been no known cases of disease transmission between livestock and wildlife in the Wall Creek WMA area.

16. Two respondents expressed concern over the monitoring and compliance of the Wall Creek WMA grazing program.

FWP's response: The Bozeman Area Wildlife Biologist is responsible for monitoring range conditions, including the spring removal trigger, and ensuring that compliance is occurring. They have and will continue to conduct this compliance work in a timely way.

17. One respondent inquired about the "impasse" with the USFS regarding turnout dates on forest lands.

FWP's response: The USFS fully supports the coordinated grazing program with FWP (see comments above). FWP manages the grazing on the Wall Creek WMA based on plant phenology, and cattle are required to move off of the lower pastures at "boot stage" which typically occurs by June 1st. Cattle can be moved to ready USFS pastures or private land pastures if the forest pastures are not deemed ready. FWP is not forcing the USFS to host cattle before they are ready to except livestock. FWP is adhering to the grazing system that has been in place for 25 years.

18. Two respondents questioned the utility and specifics of spring and fall grazing, stating that:

- Spring grazing is too early; there's spatial competition with wintering/calving elk, mule deer, moose, or antelope; and impacts to ground nesting upland game birds.
- Fall grazing removes cool season grasses which have the potential to regrow in the fall; and negative impacts of the removal of residual cover for nesting/fawning/calving and/or organic matter and watershed protection.

FWP's response: The reasons for spring- and fall grazing on Wall Creek WMA were explained in the EA (p. 4). It should be additionally noted that while Wall Creek WMA is important winter range for elk and mule deer, it does not serve as calving range. Moose are only transitory on the WMA. Some antelope that winter on Wall Creek WMA are resident to the area and do fawn on the WMA or adjacent land. Livestock grazing has minimal impact to antelope fawning because of the timing of grazing with respect to fawning, the dispersed nature of the cattle, and the fact that two thirds of the WMA is not being utilized. Lastly, while green-up of some vegetation does occur during the spring grazing period, impacts to growing vegetation are minimized when followed by rest for the remainder of the growing season.

Vegetation has cured by the time livestock return to graze the WMA in the fall. Any late-season regrowth is minimal at this time, especially given the dry conditions that exist in the Wall Creek area. Duration of grazing is short (1 week per fall grazed pasture), leaving plenty of residual cover on the ground. An additional benefit of cattle grazing at this time of year is that hoof action helps to set seed in the ground for better sprouting potential.

19. One respondent inquired about historical livestock use on Wall Creek WMA.

FWP's response: During private ownership prior to 1960, the Wall Creek area was grazed intensively by cattle. This was mostly continuous, year-round grazing. In 1960, FWP purchased the Wall Creek WMA, and all livestock were removed. In 1967, the Beaverhead National Forest (BNF) implemented a six pasture grazing system in the allotments surrounding the Wall Creek WMA. This system applied some of the rest-rotation grazing principles described in Hormay (1970). During the period of no livestock grazing on Wall Creek WMA, frequent elk game damage complaints were received by FWP. A full time manager was stationed at Wall Creek WMA, and one of his primary duties was to haze elk off of private lands and back onto the WMA. FWP also tried fertilizing native and non-native lands and cut hay meadows to remove residual vegetation to increase desirability for elk. In 1982, to address game damage and in an effort to more responsibly manage the entire elk winter range, FWP experimentally grazed cattle for approximately three weeks on the WMA. This experiment was done in cooperation with BNF and followed the principles of rest-rotation grazing as describe by Hormay (1970). During the period 1984-1987, adjustments were made to the system. Between 816 and 1,039 AUM's were permitted during this period. Since 1988, the current system has been fully implemented. A maximum of 830 AUM's has been permitted during this time. In 2012, the Wall Creek Grazing Association decreased from 6 members to 2. Therefore, the number of AUM's permitted for grazing will likely be less than the 830 that has historically occurred.

20. One respondent requested that term of the lease agreement be for five years rather than three.

FWP's response: FWP would consider a five year grazing lease with the Wall Creek Grazing Association on the Wall Creek WMA. Given the USFS's full support of the coordinated grazing management system and consideration for long term planning and economic impacts to the lessees, FWP believes a five year lease agreement is reasonable.

21. One respondent inquired about the impacts of livestock use to grizzly bear habitat on Wall Creek WMA and across a larger landscape.

FWP's response: Management of livestock on Wall Creek WMA is consistent with livestock management outside the Primary Conservation Area as stated in the Yellowstone Conservation Strategy. FWP believes that the impacts of the proposed actions in the draft EA on grizzly bear habitat are insignificant and do not substantially change the cumulative effects on a broad scale.

Literature Cited

Alt, K. L., M. R. Frisina, and F. J. King. 1992. Coordinated management of elk and cattle, a perspective—Wall Creek Wildlife Management Area. Rangelands 14:12–15.

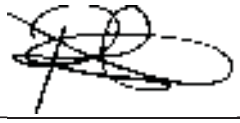
Hormay, A.L. 1970. Principles of rest-rotation grazing and multiple use land management. U.S. Forest Service Training Text No. 4 (2200), U.S. Government Printing Office, 1970 0-385-056. 25 pp.

Final Environmental Assessment

Slight modifications to the Draft Environmental Assessment have been made as noted in the FWP response to comments above. The Draft Environmental Assessment, together with this Decision Notice, will serve as the final document for this proposal.

Decision

It is my decision, based on the Environmental Assessment and public comment to approve the implementation of Alternative B for renewal of the grazing lease on Wall Creek WMA for a five year period, and that there will be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. I therefore conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.



_____ 4/5/2013

Patrick J. Flowers
Region 3 Supervisor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Date