



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

DECISION NOTICE
Elk Island WMA Addition
Region 7 Headquarters
P.O. Box 1630, Miles City, MT 59301
(406) 234-0900

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION:

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks proposes to purchase by fee title approximately 36.5 acres of riparian crop land along the Yellowstone River near Savage, Montana, for addition to the existing 1,525-acre Elk Island Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The property is currently operated as a private irrigated farm; the current landowners approached MFWP with an interest in selling. FWP will manage the property for public recreation (including high-quality hunting for pheasant, deer and waterfowl, as well as wildlife viewing) and managed crop lands to provide food and cover resources for wildlife. FWP will purchase the land from its long-time owner for the appraised value of approximately \$91,250 (approx. \$2,500/acre). Funding will come from the Habitat Montana account or a mix of Habitat Montana and federal sources (State Wildlife Grants), pending U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service approval.

MONTANA ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY ACT PUBLIC PROCESS AND COMMENT:

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess potential impacts of its proposed actions to the human and physical environments, evaluate those impacts through an interdisciplinary approach, including public input, and make a decision based on this information. FWP released a draft environmental assessment (EA) for public review of this proposal (Elk Island Wildlife Management Area Addition) on September 10, 2013 and accepted public comment until 5:00 P. M. on October 1, 2013.

Legal notice of the proposal and availability of the Draft EA was published in the *Sidney Herald* and the *Helena Independent Record*. Copies of the environmental assessment were distributed to neighboring landowners and interested individuals, groups, and agencies to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project. The EA was available for public review on FWP's web site (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "Recent Public Notices" and "Submit Public Comments") from September 10, 2013 through October 1, 2013. An FWP statewide news release was issued September 10, 2013 and posted on FWP's website (<http://fwp.mt.gov/>, "News Releases") the same day.

A public hearing was held in Savage, MT on September 30. Two members of the public were in attendance and both were in favor of the proposed project.

SUMMARY OF PUBLIC COMMENT

FWP received 8 total comments (6 online and 2 during the public hearing) representing 8 people and 1 group (the Richland County Chapter of Pheasants Forever). All comments can be viewed in their entirety in Appendix A. Of the 8 total comments, 7 were in support of the proposal and 1 opposed it.

Seven comments expressed that the addition would enhance recreational opportunities on Elk Island WMA. Four comments expressed that Yellowstone riparian/cropland complexes provide important habitat for wildlife and opportunity for hunters. Four comments expressed that the acquisition would help alleviate overcrowding and reduce conflicts with adjacent landowners. Two comments expressed concern about Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks purchasing land.

RESPONSE TO PUBLIC COMMENT

Below are FWP responses to comments. For ease of response, similar comments are grouped together if they express a similar view (comment numbers correspond to the numbering of the individual commenters and paragraphs in Appendix A).

Comment #1: Although I am generally against the Montana Fish and Game buying up whole ranches that people could utilize, since this area is already in use, it might be a good idea to expand it a bit.

Comment #6: I do not agree with the possible purchase of the additional land to extend the Elk Island WMA. This is noted to be cropland and it should remain as such.

FWP Response: Plans are for the majority of the proposed acquisition to remain in cropland in the future. Some of the land that is closest to the river is marginal crop ground due to poor soils and may be planted with a wildlife cover mix or native riparian vegetation and allowed to recover. However, most of the area would be farmed through a sharecrop agreement with a local producer, with a portion of the crop left standing for wildlife winter food and cover. General discussion regarding FWP purchasing lands is beyond the scope of this EA.

DECISION NOTICE

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

FWP's analysis supports acquiring the parcel for addition to Elk Island WMA as proposed.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

After review of this proposal, it is my decision to accept the draft EA as supplemented by this Decision Notice as final, and to recommend the acquisition of the parcel for addition to Elk Island WMA.

The Final EA may be viewed on FWP's Internet website: <http://www.fwp.mt.gov> or be obtained upon request from Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Region 7 Headquarters, P.O. Box 1630, Miles City, Mt. 59301 (406) 234-0900.



October 1, 2013

Brad R. Schmitz
R7 Regional Supervisor

Date

APPENDIX A
PUBLIC COMMENTS – ELK ISLAND WMA AGRICULTURAL LEASE
SEPTEMBER 10-OCTOBER 1, 2013

COMMENT #1:

From: bigskyhal@excite.com
To: Foster, Melissa
Subject: Public Comment: Elk Island WMA Addition Project EA
Tuesday, September 10, 2013 3:12 PM

Although I am generally against the Montana Fish and Game buying up whole ranches that people could utilize, since this area is already in use, it might be a good idea to expand it a bit.

COMMENT #2

From: otisranch@wispwest.net
To: Foster, Melissa
Subject: Public Comment: Elk Island WMA Addition Project EA
Tuesday, September 10, 2013 5:47 PM

Dear Fish Wildlife & Parks Commission,
I support Alternative B - the purchase of 36.5 acres of Jorgensen Property for a "Great" Addition to the Elk Island WMA. The property couldn't fit into the WMA any better, and to have a willing seller wanting it to go to the public is awesome.

Thank You
Bert Otis
PO Box 60
Emigrant, MT 59027

COMMENT #3

From: garyinmt@q.com
To: Foster, Melissa
Subject: Proposed acquisition to add to the Elk Island Wildlife Area.
Wednesday, September 11, 2013 12:22 PM

Dear Ms. Foster,
Add my name to the list of persons strongly in favor of the proposed acquisition. I have hunted Elk Island for birds for a number of years and it is one of my favorite places in Eastern Montana along with Seven Sisters. Habitat is great but a better food source would enhance the area for both birds and deer. Acquiring cropland next to this area would be of great benefit to wildlife. I really hope you are able to complete this acquisition. If there is anything I can do to help it get approved, please let me know.

Thanks, Gary Schnicke, 2117 Kyd Rd., Three Forks, MT 59752

COMMENT #4

From: Galen Haslid [gman3327@gmail.com]
To: Foster, Melissa
Subject: elk island wma
Wednesday, September 11, 2013 10:06 PM

i think this is a great thing will cut down on hunter landowner conflicks

COMMENT #5

From: ROBERT B CROOKS [rnjcrooks@msn.com]

To: Foster, Melissa

Subject: Elk Island WMA addition

Thursday, September 26, 2013 10:36 AM

Dear FWP,

I'm writing to encourage you to purchase the new "Jorgensen Addition" and add it to Elk Island WMA. I've hunted this WMA many, many times and can state that it's a productive and popular area for hunters. In fact, with all the new development near Sidney, Elk Island is getting too popular and crowding is becoming an issue. The addition of this parcel, though small, would help alleviate some of these over crowding issues.

Of all lands in that Sidney area, the riparian lands along the Yellowstone River have the highest value to wildlife. These 36 acres fit that criteria and are further reason to proceed with this purchase. I encourage you to do so, and count ourselves lucky to have such high value wildlife lands available to add to the WMA.

Thanks,

Robert Crooks

COMMENT #6

From: Linda [lindapres@q.com]

To: Foster, Melissa

Subject: Elk Island WMA

Wednesday, September 25, 2013 6:58 PM

Dear Ms. Foster:

I do not agree with the possible purchase of the additional land to extend the Elk Island WMA. This is noted to be cropland and it should remain as such.

Thank you,

Linda Prescott

Glendive, MT