

**North Shore Wildlife Management Area
5-Year Farm Lease
Draft Environmental Assessment
May 2016**



***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 & Parks (FWP) proposes to lease approximately 359 acres of the 429-acre North Shore Wildlife Management Area (WMA) for a period of five years for the purpose of increasing wildlife cover and forage.

2. Agency authority for the proposed action: FWP has the authority under Section 87-1-210 MCA to protect, enhance, and regulate the use of Montana's fish and wildlife resources for public benefit now and into the future. In addition, in accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, FWP is required to assess the impacts that any proposal or project might have on the natural and human environments. Further, FWP's land lease-out policy, as it pertains to the disposition of interests in Department lands (87-1-209) requires an environmental assessment (EA) be written for all new agricultural leases, lease extensions, or lease renewals.

3. Anticipated schedule:

Public comment period:	May 27 – June 19, 2016
Decision notice:	June 21, 2016
FWP Commission final consideration:	July 14, 2016
Lessee selected:	August 26, 2016
Lease begins:	September 16, 2016
Lease ends:	September 15, 2021

4. Location affected by proposed action:

The North Shore WMA in northwest Montana is located southeast of the town of Kalispell on the north shore of Flathead Lake adjacent to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Waterfowl Production Area. The North Shore WMA comprises 429 acres in Township 27N, Range 20W, northern portions of Sections 21 and 22, Flathead County.

5. Project size:

	<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>0</u>
(b) Open Space/	<u>0</u>	Dry cropland	<u>359</u>
Woodlands/Recreation		Forestry	<u>0</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian	<u>0</u>	Rangeland	<u>0</u>
Areas		Other	<u>0</u>

6. Listing of any other local, state, or federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction:

(a) **Permits:** Permits will be filed at least 2 weeks prior to project start.

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Permits</u>
None	

(b) **Funding:** There would be no cost to the agency to continue to lease the property.

(c) **Other overlapping or additional jurisdictional responsibilities:**

<u>Agency Name</u>	<u>Type of Responsibility</u>
None	

7. Narrative summary of the proposed action:

The North Shore WMA was purchased by FWP to:

- Protect the area's surface and ground water to benefit water quality in Flathead Lake and on-site aquatic habitats.
- Conserve, maintain, restore, and enhance riparian/wetland habitats to restore ecological functions and provide additional wildlife habitat and benefits.
- Maintain/enhance and potentially expand native upland habitat, e.g., ponderosa pine stands with native understory for nesting birds.
- Use/manage agricultural lands in a manner that provides a variety of wildlife habitats and improves wetlands and water quality.
- Provide public recreation opportunities including hunting.

The fields in the proposed project area (Appendix A) have traditionally been utilized for agriculture, and for the several years FWP has leased them to multiple growers in exchange for property services and leave crops to support wildlife. With existing leases expiring in September 2016, the proposed action will unify property management by developing a single-grower, five-year agricultural lease. As proposed, the lessee would cultivate and plant agricultural crops and retain a portion (up to 85 percent) of the grain crop harvest. The lessee will leave stubble and the remaining crop standing for wildlife to utilize as food crop and cover during winter and spring migration, primarily to benefit waterfowl and upland game birds. In addition, the lessee would be responsible for weed control and management.

The proposed action directly affects only the existing cropland portions (359 acres) of the 429-acre North Shore WMA. During the five-year lease agreement, FWP anticipates gradually decreasing the cropland area as habitat restoration projects are implemented, which could potentially reduce the cultivated area by as much as 92 acres.

8. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives (including the no action alternative) to the proposed action and a discussion of how the alternatives would be implemented:

Alternative A - No Action:

Under the No Action Alternative, FWP would no longer lease the WMA for agricultural purposes. Farming activity on the property would cease after September 15, 2016.

- Prime agricultural lands would be taken out of production.
- Noxious weeds may spread within the property boundaries and threaten adjoining properties.
- FWP would be required to commit additional resources for weed management on the previously cultivated acres.
- Spring forage for migrating waterfowl would decline.
- Forage and cover for other wildlife species, including upland game birds, would decline.
- Wildlife habitat values and hunting opportunities on the WMA would suffer.

Alternative B - Proposed Action:

Under the Proposed Action, FWP would lease a portion of the WMA for agriculture for a period of five years for the mutual benefit of the lessee, FWP, and wildlife. The lease opportunity will be publically advertized and lessee selected through a competitive bid process.

- Waterfowl would be provided a food source and cover over winter and during spring migration.
- Upland game birds would benefit from increased forage and cover.
- Noxious weeds would be treated and controlled through common farming practices.
- Prime agricultural lands would contribute to the economic viability of agricultural production within the Flathead Valley.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

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

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> 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			1b.
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				
f. Other:						

1b. Under the Proposed Action, there would be minor impacts to topsoil during the farming process. The farming process will help maintain fertility of the soils through the current crop rotation strategy.

2. <u>AIR</u> 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 13c.)			X			2a.
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 regs? (Also see 2a.)			X			2a
f. Other:						

2a. Under the Proposed Action, there would be minor impacts to air quality from farm equipment emissions and possibly spring burning of residual grain stubble.

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			3h.
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.)		X				
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.)		X				
n. Other:						

3h. Under the Proposed Action, the potential for minor impacts to water quality exists with the use of herbicides and pesticides. The lessee must comply with all provisions of federal and state laws regarding the use of such substances, which will minimize any potential impacts.

4. VEGETATION Will the proposed action result in?	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X Positive			4a.
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 Positive			4e.
f. For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		X				
g. Other:						

4a. The fields proposed for cultivation have been farmed for many years. Continuing the agricultural production on the WMA under the Proposed Action will provide increased crop abundance for wildlife usage and ensure a mixture of crops are available on the property each year.

4e. Under either alternative, noxious weeds would be treated and controlled on the property. The Proposed Action alternative will decrease the cost of weed control on the properties because common farming practices reduce the spread and occurrence of weed species.

5. <u>FISH/WILDLIFE</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X Positive			5b.
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?			X Positive			5c.
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. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , 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.)			X Positive			5d.
i. <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				
j. Other:						

5b./5c. The primary purpose of the proposed lease is to increase winter food resources for wildlife and food and habitat for waterfowl during their spring migration. Winter is generally considered the season when food is most limited for many wildlife species. For waterfowl, spring migration is a critical time when birds seek high energy food sources to fuel migration and egg production. Ensuring the availability of these food sources at critical times of the year is likely to increase the abundance and density of game birds and waterfowl. Nongame species likewise benefit from additional food resources and cover and are also expected to increase in abundance.

5d. No T&E species likely use this property consistently; however, one management goal is to protect the area's surface and ground water to benefit water quality in Flathead Lake, which will ultimately benefit bull trout in Flathead Lake.

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			6a.
b. Exposure of people to severe 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				
e. Other:						

6a. Sound from operations of farming equipment will be heard while in use; however, noise levels will be similar to what is created in the surrounding areas that are also farmed and will be sporadic and short-term.

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				7a.
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use, the presence of which would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				
e. Other:						

7a. Under the Proposed Action, existing land uses would continue for another five years. No known or anticipated conflicts related to land usage would occur as a result of the Proposed Action.

8. RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
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			8a.
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.)		X				
e. Other:						

8a. Under the Proposed Action, there is the potential for minor impacts from the use of fertilizers and pesticides. The farmer will comply with all provisions of federal and state laws governing the usage of these substances in order to minimize risk.

9. COMMUNITY IMPACT Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
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 Positive			9c.
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				
f. Other:						

9c. Under the Proposed Action, prime agricultural fields would be farmed, contributing to the viability of the local agricultural economy.

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
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				10e.
f. Define projected maintenance costs.			X			10f.
g. Other:						

10e. Under the Proposed Action, there is no monetary revenue projected for the project. As payment under the agricultural lease, the lessee is required to leave a minimum of 15% of the crop standing for wildlife use.

10f. Under the Proposed Action, additional costs to FWP associated with periodic monitoring of agricultural production and weeds will be minimal since the WMA is routinely monitored by FWP.

11. <u>AESTHETICS/RECREATION</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
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			11c.
d. For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails, or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				
e. Other:						

11c. Under the Proposed Action, wildlife food plots should increase the opportunity for public enjoyment of wildlife on the properties through hunting and wildlife viewing.

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

These properties have been farmed for decades, and therefore, no new or added impacts are anticipated under the Proposed Action. Intensive inventories in 2015, that covered 350 acres of the property, found no cultural resources on the property.

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.)		X				
g. For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		X				

Under the Proposed Action, there would be no direct cumulative or secondary impacts.

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

These properties currently limit public access from March 1 to July 15, consistent with the current closures on the neighboring federal Waterfowl Production Area. Gates and fences around the WMA prevent vehicle access to most portions of the farmed fields to ensure crops are protected. Existing infrastructure and WMA rules help mitigate the public's use of this area during the growing season to ensure that no environmental degradation or significant impacts occur to farming operations or fish, wildlife, and their habitats. Farming practices will be limited to seasons that minimize wildlife disturbance as much as possible.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

This analysis did not reveal any significant impacts to the human or physical environment. No additional construction or improvements of any kind are included in this proposal. The current management plans and WMA rules provide for seasonal closures and additional restrictions. Future habitat restoration proposals will be subject to future draft EA and public review process.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public Involvement for this project:

The public will be notified in the following manner to comment on this draft EA:

- Public notices to the Flathead Beacon, Bigfork Eagle, and Daily InterLake.
- One statewide press release.
- Public notice on the FWP website: <http://fwp.mt.gov>

In addition, the draft EA is available at Region One FWP headquarters in Kalispell and copies were also distributed to neighboring landowners, current farming contractors, and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

Duration of Comment Period:

This draft will be out for a 3-week public review through June 19, 2016.
Comments can be mailed to the address below:

Nancy Ivy
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
490 North Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

Or email: nivy@mt.gov

PART V. EA PREPARATION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? No

Based upon the above assessment, which has identified a limited number of minor impacts from the Proposed Action, an EIS is not required and an EA is the appropriate level of review.

2. Persons responsible for preparing the EA:

Franz Ingelfinger, Restoration Ecologist, Kalispell, MT
Jessy Coltrane, FWP Area Wildlife Biologist, Kalispell, MT
Alan Wood, FWP Wildlife Mitigation Coordinator, Kalispell, MT
Kris Tempel, FWP Resource Specialist, Kalispell, MT

3. List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Parks Division
Wildlife Division
Fisheries Division

Montana State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) was consulted on the original EAs for the acquisition of the WMA, which included the proposal to continue agricultural production.

APPENDIX

A. Property Map

Appendix A: North Shore Wildlife Management Area Property Map



Legend

-  Property Boundary
-  Cropland
-  Wetlands
-  Upland

