Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Region 1
490 N. Meridian Road
Kalispell, MT 59901

NINEPIPE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA PROPOSED WILDLIFE VIEWING STATIONS DECISION NOTICE

June 9, 2016

Description of the Proposed Action

Ninepipe Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is managed to conserve and enhance habitats that emphasize pheasants and waterfowl, while also benefiting a variety of nongame wildlife, and to promote public hunting and other compatible wildlife-related recreational opportunities. Parking areas are well-distributed around the WMA and walk-through fence gaps along all public roads make the land very accessible. However, during the comment period on the Ninepipe WMA Management Plan the public expressed concern that parking areas were not ideal for wildlife watching and that there were no elevated areas that presented unobstructed wildlife viewing opportunities of wetlands.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposed to create two elevated wildlife viewing sites that meet the grade and dimensional standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act, as well as improve the parking at an additional location. The proposed action would help accommodate the increasing demands at Ninepipe WMA for safe and easily accessible wildlife viewing opportunities.

FWP proposes to accept Alternative B, the proposed action of the Ninepipe WMA Proposed Wildlife Viewing Stations draft environmental assessment (EA).

Public Involvement

The Ninepipe WMA Proposed Wildlife Viewing Stations draft EA was released for a 30-day public comment period on May 2, 2016. FWP posted a public notice on its webpage: http://fwp.mt.gov, a news release was prepared and distributed to a standard list of media outlets interested in FWP Region 1 issues, and the draft EA was available at FWP R1 Headquarters in Kalispell and the FWP State Headquarters in Helena. Additionally, public were notified with two notices in the *Lake County Leader* and the *Char-Koosta*. Notice of this EA was also distributed on cards to neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed action.

Summary of Public Responses

FWP received 12 responses to the draft EA. The responses were generally positive in nature with 7 supporting the proposed action and only 2 supporting no action. Two responses were inquiries for additional information and one referenced an error in the link printed on the notice card. Responses focused on ADA/project details, viewing opportunities, site disturbance/wildlife disturbance, and habitat. One responder provided a suggestion, which is also addressed below.

FWP Responses to Public Responses

1. **ADA/project details:** One individual sought clarification regarding Site 3 and access to the field and ditch. Two others wanted additional information regarding the actual specification of ADA sites. An additional 2 individuals did not want to see towers.

   FWP response: The design of the project is such that viewing stations will be approximately 2 feet or less above the current grade at the highest point and close enough to provide excellent viewing experiences with little-to-no disturbance and without any towers or wooden structures. FWP engineers designed each viewing station to meet the Americans with Disabilities Act Accessibility Guidelines. Viewing stations and paths will be firm and stable and comprised almost completely of compacted gravel. For Site 2 the cross slope is less than 2%. The running grade is less than 5% and, therefore, is not considered a ramp and handrail is not required. Additionally, no handrail is required where drop-offs are less than 30 inches. Site 1 is designed to be a vehicle pull-out and intended for individuals to observe from their vehicles.

2. **Viewing opportunities:** Two individuals believed that the existing wildlife viewing area directly off of Highway 93 may be adequate.

   FWP response: During the public comment period of the Ninepipe WMA Management Plan the public expressed concern that existing parking areas and viewing areas were not adequate or safe for wildlife watching. FWP strongly supports every opportunity for wildlife viewing and responded by developing the proposed project to address the public's concerns.

3. **Site disturbance/wildlife disturbance:** One individual was concerned with the increase in the number of people, trash, and wildlife disturbance.

   FWP response: FWP recognizes this individual's concerns. FWP feels that if the number of people does increase over time, these stations will provide us with better ways to manage where people concentrate, which will reduce potential disturbance to wildlife and address the safety of the recreating public simultaneously. Currently, wildlife viewers can spread trash over several miles of road in the WMA. We feel that by concentrating individuals to designated viewing areas, we will better be able to manage littering. We also intend to use existing FWP employees to keep sites clean and reach out to user groups like Audubon to assist with site cleaning.

4. **Habitat:** One individual was concerned about destruction of habitat when creating the viewing stations.

   FWP response: FWP designed these areas to have minimal impacts to wildlife habitat. Materials for this project will come from an area near Site 1. The habitat at the material collection site will be improved by the removal of material for platform construction.

5. **Suggestion:** One responder suggested placing a screen or blind structure at the corner of Site 3 over concerns that birds may be flushed by users on the dike.

FWP response: FWP recognizes these concerns; however, we do not foresee adding any permanent screen or blind structure because of our need to conduct periodic dike and canal maintenance. FWP will explore options in the form of temporary screen structures that can be placed at this location during periods of high wildlife use on the pond.

FWP FINAL DECISION

In reviewing all the public comments and other relevant information, and evaluating the environmental effects, I hereby approve Alternative B, the proposed action of the Ninepipe WMA Proposed Wildlife Viewing Stations draft EA.

Through the public review process described above, FWP found no significant impacts associated with the proposed action. Noting and including the responses to public comments, FWP will move forward with the completion of the proposed action. FWP believes the completion of this action will provide a safer environment and increase the wildlife viewing opportunities at Ninepipe WMA.

Jim Williams
Regional Supervisor

6/9/16
Date