



MONTANA STATE PARKS AND AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

RECREATION BOARD

Meeting Date: August 18, 2016

Agenda Item: North Shore WMA/SP Agricultural Lease

Division: Parks

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 minutes

Background: Wildlife Division and Parks staffs are proposing a 5-year lease on 359 acres of the 429-acre North Shore WMA on the north Shore of Flathead Lake adjacent to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Waterfowl Production Area. A 160 acre parcel, referred to as the Miller Parcel, of this site is a joint WMA/SP that was acquired in 2009 with Access Montana money. During winter and spring migration, waterfowl flock to the fields to forage on food plots and waste grain. The property has a long history of crop production, and been farmed specifically to support wildlife since its acquisition. With the existing lease expiring in September, 2016, the region seeks to develop a five-year agricultural lease to continue this successful management approach. As proposed, the contractor would plant, cultivate, control weeds, and retain a portion (up to 85 percent) of grain crops, leaving stubble and the remaining crop standing for wildlife during winter and spring migration, primarily to benefit waterfowl and upland game birds.

Public Involvement Process & Results: FWP has contracted for farming on this parcel for several years, and the public has been involved and supportive throughout that process. The public comment period on the EA for the proposed action closed on June 19 and a Decision Notice was signed June 23. Staff received nine written comments; six in support of the agricultural lease. Supporters stated their approval for the project because it would benefit wildlife, particularly waterfowl and upland game, the local agrarian economy, and public recreation. Three comments were received expressing concern that the 5-year contract duration was too long and would unduly restrict management. The lease may be cancelled by the department at any time.

Alternatives and Analysis: Under the “No Action” alternative, agricultural lands would not be cultivated and Wildlife Division staff would need to commit resources to manage weeds on the previously cultivated 359 acres of farm fields. Wildlife would be negatively impacted by lack of cover and winter and spring forage for migrating waterfowl. A multi-year lease for the entire 429 property increases the attractiveness of the contract opportunity and by extension the terms the department can negotiate. The net result will be improved wildlife benefits including larger leave areas, additional food plots, and buffer strips – all contributing to improved habitat and hunting and recreation opportunities. In addition, as explained in the Draft Environmental Assessment, the lease terms will provide the flexibility to implement restoration during the agreement period, potentially reducing cropland area by upwards of 92 acres. Thus, the department derives the benefits of multi-year agreement without hampering our ability to implement habitat improvements.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale: Because of the importance of these properties to migrating waterfowl, weed control, and the zero cash cost to the agency, MSP recommends that the Board approve the proposed course of action as it pertains to the 160 Miller Parcel.

Proposed Motion

I move that the Board approve the five-year agricultural lease for the 160 acre Miller Parcel.