

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: April 19, 2018

Agenda Item: Land Exchange with Cross Canyon Ranch on Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area (R1)

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Final

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 10 Minutes

Background

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to exchange lands between FWP and the adjacent Cross Canyon Ranch (CCR). All exchange parcels are located in T9N, R8W, in Powell County. The exchange would involve approximately 460 acres of land within Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area (SDWMA, located NE of Deer Lodge), for approximately 438 acres held by CCR. The exchange would consolidate each entity's holdings and facilitate management of both the ranch and the WMA. Of special importance to FWP is the opportunity to enhance public access between the eastern and western portions of the WMA, which currently is hindered by checkerboard boundaries. While the number of acres is not equal, the overall value of the lands being exchanged is comparable. All parcels considered for exchange are classified as dry grazing land, which is valued at approximately \$600/acre in this area. At this valuation, the parcels FWP would be exchanging to CCR would be worth \$275,736 and the worth of the parcels FWP would be receiving is \$263,004, a difference of \$12,732. As the savings in fencing from the proposed exchange is estimated to be \$86,250, FWP would realize an overall financial gain of \$73,518 from the proposed action, in addition to the other benefits. FWP has updated (2018) its management plan for SDWMA and the plan is available from FWP upon request.

Public Involvement Process & Results

FWP scoped the public for issues prior to preparing the EA, from September 7, to October 6, 2016. Issues raised during the scoping process were incorporated in further negotiations between FWP and CCR prior to arriving at a final negotiated land exchange proposal, and were reflected in the draft EA that was provided for public review and comment. FWP mailed 64 copies of the EA, and emailed approximately 120 notifications of the EA's availability, to adjacent landowners and interested individuals, groups and agencies. The EA was available for public review on FWP's website from January 16 to February 14, 2018. A public hearing was held in Deer Lodge on February 7 at the Deer Lodge Community Center, where 10 members of the public attended. Overall, a total of 10 commenters supported the land exchange, 3 commenters opposed the land exchange, and 2 commenters did not indicate support or opposition.

Alternatives and Analysis

No action is the only viable alternative, which would leave the current ownership pattern in place. This would increase fencing costs for the department and would result in a greater likelihood of chronic trespass livestock issues on the WMA. No action would also eliminate the option in this area for legal public access to both the east and west sides of the WMA.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends completing the proposed land exchange. This proposal has benefitted from the input of an informed public and the private landowner has been accommodating in defining an exchange that benefits the WMA and the private landowner as well as the public through reduced costs and improved access across the WMA.

Proposed Motion: I move the Fish and Wildlife Commission approve the land exchange with Cross Canyon Ranch to consolidate holdings within and next to the Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area as proposed by the Department.