

## **FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET**

**Meeting Date:** October 17, 2018

**Agenda Item:** Beattie Gulch Area Bison Hunting Closure for Montana License Holders

**Division:** Wildlife

**Action Needed:** Final

**Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation:** 30 minutes

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**Background:** FWP proposes to close a small portion of HD 385 in the Beattie Gulch area to hunters holding a Montana FWP license (a.k.a. “state hunters” as distinguished from Tribal hunters) to address hunter safety issues. In recent years 200-300 bison are harvested each year within the approximately quarter-mile-square area at the mouth of Beattie Gulch proposed for closure and the density of hunters has increased beyond what FWP considers safe. It is common for 20-30 or more hunters to shoot simultaneously as groups of bison cross the boundary. The objective of this proposal is to implement measures for hunter safety while maintaining hunter opportunity and success in the rest of the hunting district. This closure will only apply to state hunters. FWP has limited ability to regulate the exercise of off-reservation treaty hunting by tribes. Forty FWP licenses valid for the Gardiner Basin portion of HD 385 were issued for the 2018 season, which opens Nov. 15. The rest of HD 385 would remain open thus maintaining hunter opportunity across the hunting district.

Bison hunting was re-established in Montana in 2005 after a 14-year hiatus. The bison season structure was based on guidelines as required by MCA 87-2-730 and within the provisions of the Dec. 22, 2000 Interagency Bison Management Plan. The intent of FWP under the guidance in MCA 87-2-730 and the 2004 Bison Hunt EA (revised in 2008) was to allow hunters to harvest wild bison under fair chase conditions without endangering the bison population or creating public safety issues.

The primary corridor for bison migrating north of Yellowstone Park is through Beattie Gulch, and hunters congregate here to take advantage of migrating groups. Both state hunters and tribal hunters exercising their treaty rights hunt in the area. State hunters have successfully harvested bison in the proposed closure area in past years and have also been successful harvesting bison elsewhere in the district, with 68% average hunter success. Though this closure will impact hunter opportunity, it is unknown whether hunter success will be negatively impacted. If FWP and the tribes exercising their off-reservation treaty hunting rights are successful in working out safety measures acceptable to all parties, FWP will reconsider the safety closure.

**Public Involvement Process & Results:** Because the bison hunting season opens on Nov. 15 there is limited time to institute the closure and get the information out to hunters. Public comment was taken from the time of the FWP press release about the closure up to 5:00 PM on Oct. 12 through a variety of ways including email, surveymonkey, letters and other means and during the Oct. 17 Commission meeting.

**Alternatives and Analysis:** The alternative is to not close this small area, which would continue the recurring unsafe situation in Beattie Gulch.

**Agency Recommendation & Rationale:** FWP recommends the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopt the proposed Beattie Gulch closure area.

**Proposed Motion:**

I move that the Fish and Wildlife Commission adopt the Beattie Gulch Closure Area as recommended by FWP. All other aspects of the bison hunting regulations and season structure are to remain unchanged.