WILDLIFE HABITAT IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

REPORT TO THE ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY COUNCIL

MONTANA FISH, WILDILFE AND PARKS

Photo credit: Shawn Stewart, FWP

WILDLIFE DIVISION

AUGUST 2020

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This report provides an overview and update of accomplishments by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) pertaining the Montana Wildlife Habitat Improvement Act during the reporting period of July 1, 2018 through June 30, 2020, including new projects and status of active projects, as well as a program summary since the Act's passage during the 2017 Legislature. This report to the Montana Environmental Quality Council follows the outline laid out in MCA 87-5-807(c) and 5-11-210, as required in advance of the 2021 Legislative Session. This report is available electronically on the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program web page:

http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/habitat/wildlife/programs/whip/

OVERVIEW

The Montana Wildlife Habitat Improvement Act (the Act), sponsored by Rep. Kelly Flynn, was passed into law during the 2017 Legislature. The purpose of the Act is to restore ecologically-important wildlife habitats by managing noxious weeds at watershed or landscape scales, typically involving collaborative efforts over multiple landownerships. The Act makes available up to $2M annually in federal Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration (P-R) funds through a competitive grant process. The Act is structured to support habitat restoration efforts across private, state, and federal lands that will have demonstratable benefits for wildlife. Grant applicants are responsible for providing non-federal matching funds. For each dollar of non-federal match provided for eligible activities, the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) can provide three dollars of grant funding. Program funds can be used to pay for herbicides and additives, biological control agents, materials for vegetation restoration and reseeding, infrastructure materials for establishing grazing improvements (barbed and permanent electric fence), and related contracted services for applying treatments and installing restoration enhancements.

The process for awarding grants is described in statute (MCA 87-5-804) and administrative rule (ARM 12.9.1603-1606). The process includes opening a grant application period in the fall, review and recommendations by the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program Advisory Council (see Table 1), a decision by the Director of FWP for which proposals will move forward, based on formal input from the WHIP Advisory Council, and then further consideration by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service through their separate grant application process. Awarded grants require two agreements with the project sponsor, a program agreement and a sub-recipient agreement, both described below in Program Development. Once the agreements are signed, this marks the start of a grant project. In addition to completing habitat restoration activities, the project sponsor is responsible for monitoring grant compliance and effectiveness of

treatments and submitting bills for reimbursement, semi-annual progress reports, annual performance reports, scheduled vegetation monitoring reports, and a final report.

Currently, FWP has seven active WHIP projects that successfully made it through the award process and two more 2020 projects that are working through this process. The map below (Figure 1) provides an overview of the nine WHIP projects, year awarded, and their location throughout the state. More detailed information on these projects is in the Reporting Period and Overall Accomplishments sections of the report.

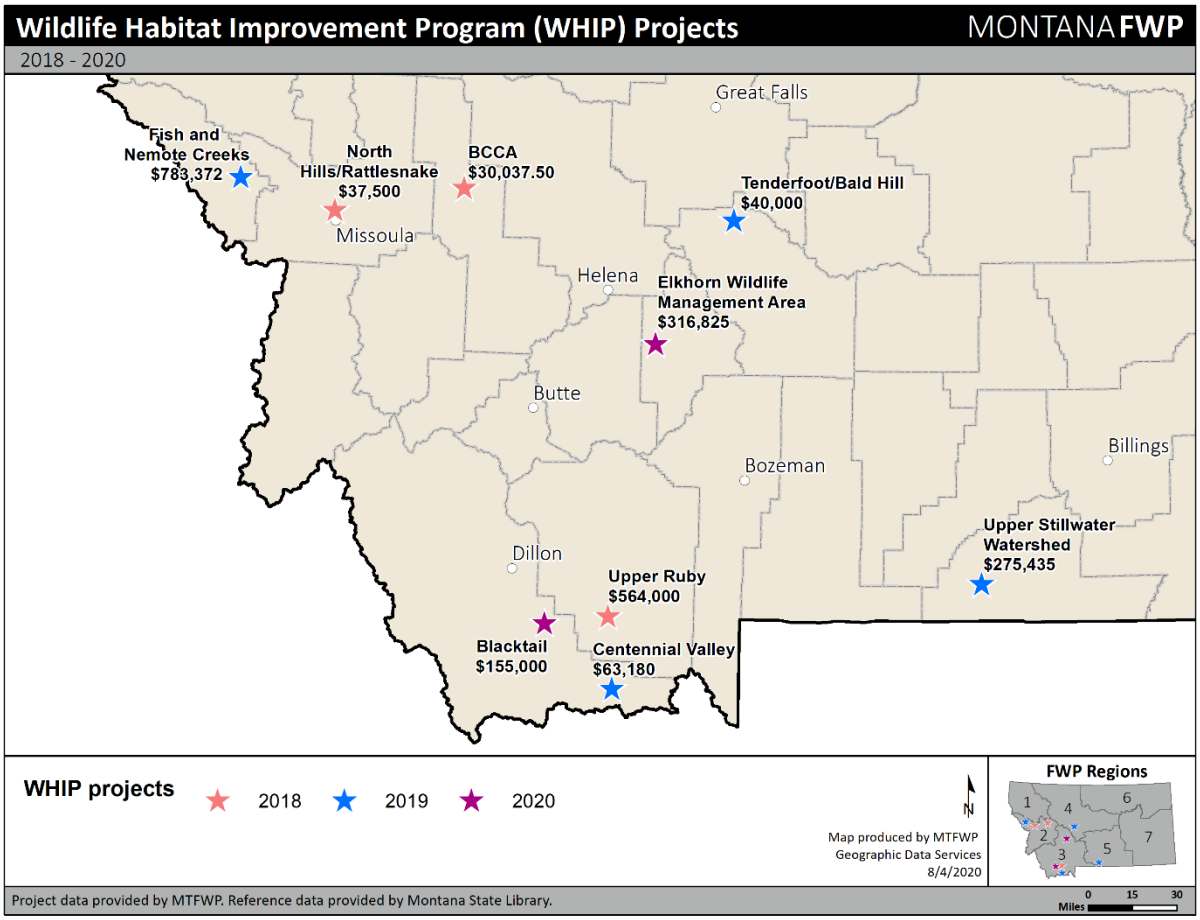

Figure 1. Location of all awarded Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program projects to date, 2018-2020. The 2020 project are in the process of establishing a grant commitment.

Table 1. Membership on the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program Advisory Council.

First Name	Last Name	City Mailing Address	Organization	Representing
Amy	Adler	Forsyth	Rosebud County	Eastern Montana County Weed District Supervisor
Julia	Altemus	Missoula	Montana Wood Products Association	Timber Industry
Amber	Burch	Dillon	Beaverhead County	Montana Weed Control Association
Kelly	Flynn	Townsend		Livestock Producer
Karen	Laitala	Deer Lodge	Powell County	Western Montana County Weed District Supervisor
Chris	Marchion	Anaconda	Montana Wildlife Federation	Hunting Organization
Dean	Pearson	Missoula	Rocky Mountain Research Station	Biological Research and Control Interests
Rick	Sandru	Twin Bridges		Farming
Ray	Shaw	Sheridan		Commercial Herbicide Applicator
Ron	Trippet	Kalispell	NW Montana Back Country Horseman	Multiple Use Recreation Organization
Dale	Becker	Pablo	Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes	Tribes
Jasmine	Reimer	Helena	Department of Agriculture	Montana Weed Coordinator
Jessica	Larson	Malta	US Fish and Wildlife Service	US Fish and Wildlife Service
Michelle	Cox	Missoula	US Forest Service	US Forest Service
Taryn	Preston	Helena	US Bureau of Reclamation	US Bureau of Reclamation
vacant		Helena	Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation	Dept. of Natural Resources and Conservation
Wendy	Velman	Billings	US Bureau of Land Management	US Bureau of Land Management

REPORTING PERIOD ACCOMPLISHMENTS (FY 19-20)

Program Development

WebGrants – The WHIP grant cycle has been transitioned from paper to an online grant management system called WebGrants. All processes of grant management are now web based, which includes submitting grant applications, advisory council review and scoring, grantees submitting reimbursement claims, status reports, and vegetation monitoring reports.

WHIP Agreements – Project sponsors of approved WHIP grants have two agreements to sign before approved weed treatments can start. The first document is the *subrecipient agreement* that covers the federal requirements for the awarded grant funds and cash match. The term of the subrecipient agreement is up to five years. The *program agreement* addresses additional project sponsor cash match above the 25% requirement, vegetation monitoring and reports, and can have a term of up to 12 years.

Vegetation Monitoring – A vegetation monitoring protocol was developed to ensure consistent monitoring across all WHIP projects and to help project sponsors evaluate change in plant communities over time. Vegetation monitoring is a required component for each WHIP project. Project sponsors select monitoring sites at representative locations within treatment areas. A transect is established at each monitoring site (Figure 2) and monitoring data is collected and reported yearly. Each site is monitored on a standard schedule, which differs by treatment type. Herbicide and reseeding projects require monitoring out to 3 years post-treatment. Weed treatments that have a slower plant response time, such as prescribed grazing and biocontrol, require longer monitoring periods of up to 10 years post-treatment. Biocontrol monitoring also documents the ongoing presence of biocontrol agents on the target weed.

Figure 2. Vegetation transect established in the Fish & Nemote Creeks WHIP Project.

Grant Application Schedule – Since program inception, FWP has conducted three grant application cycles. The first grant cycle in 2018 was affected by rule making and establishing program agreements and accounting processes. FWP accepted applications in the winter of 2018 and the Advisory Council recommended applications for funding in May 2018. Currently, the grant cycle starts with a call for applications from September to November, which allows land management agency staff, county weed districts, landowners, and weed contractors who are busy during the summer/fall field season to assemble grant applications after the weed control season has concluded. The Advisory Council meets in early January, which includes applicants providing a short presentation on their proposal, answering questions from the Council members, and a Council discussion and vote on each grant proposal resulting in funding recommendations to the Director of FWP. The successful applicants then complete an environmental assessment (EA) for their project and submit it to the WHIP Program Coordinator. FWP submits a grant application for each selected WHIP proposal to the USFWS in June, with the anticipation of grant funds being available for fall weed treatments.

WHIP Grant Projects Awarded (FY19-20)

2019:

FWP opened an application period from October to mid-December and received 4 grant applications, requesting a total of $1.16 million. The Advisory Council voted to fund all four applications for their full amounts. Director Williams concurred with the Council's recommendation. Following is a brief summary of the four WHIP projects:

- Centennial Valley WHIP Project

This application was submitted by the Centennial Valley Association. The project area is immediately south of the Upper Ruby Project area, which was funded in 2018. Priority wildlife habitat supports elk, pronghorn, mule-deer, and sage-grouse.

  - Total Project: 449,375 acres
  - Priority Wildlife Habitat: 43,368 acres
  - Weed Treatment Area: 1,050 acres
  - WHIP Funds Requested: $63,180
  - Cash Match Funds: $35,000
  - Grant Length: 5 years

- Fish and Nemote Creeks WHIP Project

This application was submitted by a partnership comprising FWP, DNRC, USFS, and Mineral County. The project involves FWP State Parks, Fishing Access Sites, and Wildlife Management Area lands, intermingled with DNRC lands, adjacent USFS lands, and small private ownerships. Priority habitat supports mule and white-tailed deer, elk, moose, black and grizzly bear, and many species of concern.

  - Total Project: 127,775 acres

- Priority Wildlife Habitat: 127,775 acres
- Weed Treatment Area: 24,844 acres
- WHIP Funds Requested: $783,373
- Cash Match Funds: $261,127
- Grant Length: 5 years

Figure 3. FWP wildlife biologist, Liz Bradley and a Missoula County Youth Weed Crew member releasing spotted knapweed seedhead weevils, Larinus minutus, in the Fish & Nemote Creeks WHIP project. Biological control agents along with herbicide and reseeding are all included in the weed treatment plan for this project.

- Tenderfoot/Bald Hills WHIP Project

This application was submitted by USFS pertaining newly acquired lands, Lewis and Clark National Forest. The grant would help deal with weeds while USFS develops a rest rotation grazing system, which will help support restoration of native perennial vegetation. The priority wildlife habitat is year-round (including winter) habitat for elk, moose, and both species of deer.

- Total Project: 27,000 acres
- Priority Wildlife Habitat: 10,000 acres
- Weed Treatment Area: 4,435 acres
- WHIP Funds Requested: $40,000
- Cash Match Funds: $46,320
- Grant Length: 5 years

- Upper Stillwater Watershed WHIP Project

This application was submitted by the Stillwater Valley Watershed Council. Landownership involves private foothills, wildlife habitats within the Sibanye Stillwater Mine facility (which supports bighorn sheep), and USFS lands. Priority wildlife habitats support wintering elk and bighorn sheep and other lower elevation, foothill grassland wildlife species (e.g., blue grouse nesting habitat).

  - Total Project: 220,000 acres
  - Priority Wildlife Habitat: 220,000 acres
  - Weed Treatment Area: 3,700 acres
  - WHIP Funds Requested: $275,435
  - Cash Match Funds: $215,000
  - Grant Length: 5 years

2020:

FWP opened an application period from September to mid-November and received 3 grant applications, requesting a total of $5.39 million. The Advisory Council voted to fund two applications for their full amounts totaling $471,825. Director Williams concurred with the Council's recommendation. FWP submitted grant applications for both of the approved WHIP projects to the USFWS. As of the writing of this report, the Elkhorn Wildlife Management Area WHIP project received an award letter from USFWS and FWP is awaiting the second award letter for the Blacktail WHIP project. Below is a brief summary of the two WHIP projects:

- Elkhorn Wildlife Management Area WHIP Project

This grant proposal was submitted by the Broadwater County Weed District. This project area includes the Elkhorns Wildlife Management Unit and is located approximately two miles west of Townsend. The project represents three public land agencies (BLM, USFS, and DNRC), the National Guard, and 20 participating private landowners. The priority wildlife species to benefit from improving this priority habitat are elk and mule deer.

  - Total Project: 152,000 acres
  - Priority Wildlife Habitat: 152,000 acres
  - Weed Treatment Area: 8,865 acres
  - WHIP Funds Requested: $316,825
  - Cash Match Funds: $105,608
  - Grant Length: 5 years

- Blacktail WHIP Project

This grant proposal was submitted by the Beaverhead County Weed District. This project borders the Upper Ruby WHIP project funded in 2018 and the Centennial Valley WHIP project funded in 2019. The Blacktail project will enhance noxious weed treatments over a broad landscape, impacting a combined 1.04 million acres (see Figure 4). Priority habitat supports elk and mule deer, antelope, sage-grouse, grizzly bear, and moose.

  - Total Project: 241,306 acres
  - Priority Wildlife Habitat: 155,351 acres

- Weed Treatment Area: 1,875 acres
- WHIP Funds Requested: $155,000
- Cash Match Funds: $69,647
- Grant Length: 5 years

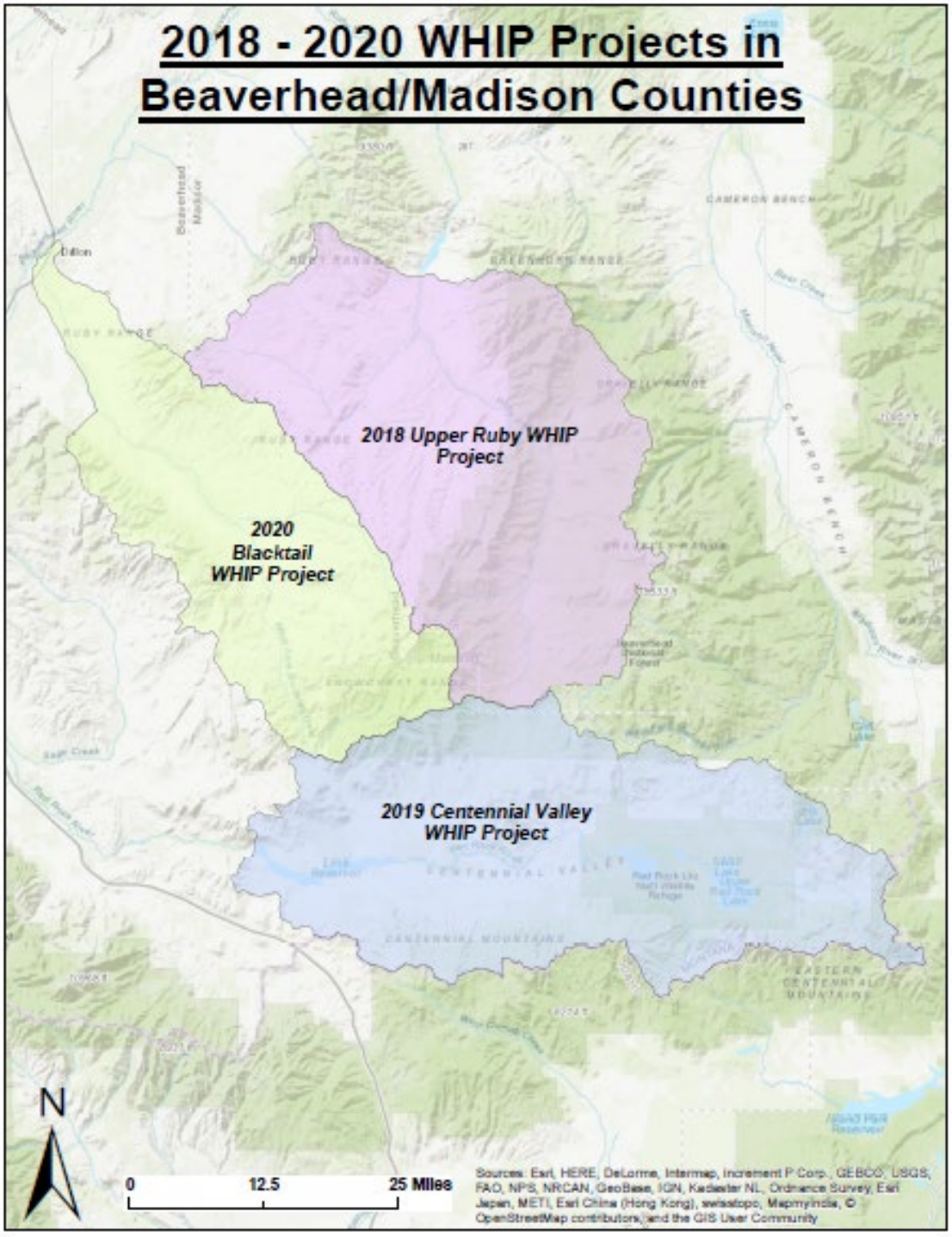

Figure 4. Three years of separate WHIP projects underway in southwest Montana with a cumulative project area of 1.04 million acres.

OVERALL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Summary of Improvements to Wildlife Habitat

This section of the report is a requirement of MCA 87-5-807. Improvements to wildlife habitat are based on three different measures:

1. Directly **treated acres**, involving some combination of herbicides, biocontrol, reseeding, or changes in grazing management. This will be reported as a cumulative acreage for each grant year cohort.
2. Acres of **priority wildlife habitat** that benefit from WHIP projects. This is estimated by the project sponsor based on treated acres corresponding to a larger wildlife habitat landscape. That is, wildlife that use the treated areas and surrounding habitats are part of a larger habitat landscape. And, if treatment areas were left untreated, these surrounding habitat areas would likely be impacted by continued weed expansion. The larger landscape that benefits from WHIP project treatments is represented by this acreage figure.
3. Actual changes in plant community composition and cover, based on **vegetation monitoring** results.

Treated Acres - For this report, treated acres only includes information from the 2019 field season. That was the program's first field season, and results from the 2020 field season will not be received by FWP until after this report is submitted.

2019 spray season accomplishments:

2018 grant projects: 1,242 acres of weed treatments

2019 grant projects: no acres treated, agreements for the projects were signed and weed treatment work began this spring.

Priority Wildlife Habitat – The sum of estimates of priority wildlife habitat acres benefiting from WHIP projects are listed by grant year:

2018 – 258,024 acres

2019 – 401,143 acres

2020 – 307,351 acres

Total – 966,518 acres of priority wildlife habitat impacted by noxious weed treatments

Vegetation Monitoring Results - Transects have been established on the 2018 and 2019 WHIP projects, however only pre-treatment data has been collected. The monitoring reports due this fall (2020) will have year 1 post-treatment data, which will be compared with pre-treatment data to determine changes in representative plant communities. The 2022 report will have more information in this section.

Summary of Past and Current Funding

This section provides a summary of funding commitments for all WHIP projects to date, 2018-2020. As of the end of this reporting period, all awarded grants remain active, no projects have been closed.

PR dollar amounts awarded:

2018 - $ 631,537.50 (3 projects)
2019 - $1,161,987.00 (4 projects)
2020 - $ 471,825.00 (2 projects)
Total - $2,265,349.50 (9 projects)

Photo credit: Mike Thompson, FWP