

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

ROCKY MOUNTAIN FRONT WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREAS MAY 15 OPENING AT TWELVE O'CLOCK NOON

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. **Type of Proposed State Action:** Open the Sun River, Ear Mountain and Blackleaf Wildlife Management Areas (WMA) at 12:00 noon on May 15th each year.
2. **Agency Authority for the Proposed Action:** FWP Commission Regulation and Rulemaking, and FWP authority as provided in 87-1-304 b.
3. **Name of Project** ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR CONSIDERATION OF AN ANNUAL TWELVE O'CLOCK NOON OPENING ON MAY 15TH FOR THE SUN RIVER, EAR MOUNTAIN AND BLACKLEAF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREAS
4. **Name, Address and Phone Number of Project Sponsor (if other than the agency)** N/A
5. **If Applicable:**

Estimated Construction/Commencement Date N/A

Estimated Completion Date N/A

Current Status of Project Design (% complete) N/A

Location Affected by Proposed Action (county, range and township): The Sun River Wildlife Management Area lies in Lewis and Clark County (T21N, R8W); Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area is located in Teton County (T24N, R8W); Blackleaf Wildlife Management Area is in Teton County (T26N, R8W).

7. **Project Size: Estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected:** (see Attachment A). Total size = approximately 34,300 acres (21,022 Sun River WMA; 3,080 Ear Mountain WMA; 10,200 Blackleaf WMA).
8. **Map/site plan:** see attached map (Attachment A)
9. **Narrative Summary of the Proposed Action including the Benefits and Purpose of the Proposed Action.**

The purpose of the proposed action is to change the uniform opening hour to public entry on May 15th each year for three WMA's that lie along the Rocky Mountain Front, which include Sun River, Ear Mountain and Blackleaf. Each Wildlife Management Area is closed to public entry from December 1 to midnight, May 15 annually. This closure period provides quiet and secure winter ranges for big

game species common to these WMA's. It encourages these species to use and reside on the Area, minimizing disturbance and depredation on adjacent private lands. These Areas provide significant winter forage for attendant wildlife species.

Prior to 1998 the public could enter any of these 3 WMA's at midnight on May 15th. As antler hunting became more popular, numbers of people seeking access to the Sun River WMA increased. This resulted in crowd control and vehicle parking problems, altercations among the public and disturbances due to alcohol use – all during the late evening hours before Department personnel opened the gates at midnight. In 1998 FWP made the decision to open the Sun River WMA at noon on May 15th in order to better control the growing numbers of antler hunters and to reduce potential accidents enhanced by darkness. Ear Mountain and Blackleaf WMA's retained their midnight opening hour.

In the past 10 years, numbers of the public accessing Blackleaf WMA at midnight May 15th have increased dramatically, mainly due to an increasing number of bull elk shedding antlers in the area during March and April. Thirty to fifty vehicles are commonly waiting for gates to open at midnight on May 15th. Black bear hunting season also begins on WMA's on May 15th, and Blackleaf is a popular area for hunters to pursue bears, resulting in additional traffic to the Area. Antler hunters, sometimes afoot, sometimes on horseback, routinely use spotlights, flood lamps, headlamps, flashlights and lanterns to locate antlers during the hours of darkness.

Ear Mountain and Blackleaf WMA's are integral components of FWP's spring livestock carcass redistribution program. It is designed to minimize grizzly bear presence at private livestock bone yards. In March and April each year livestock carcasses stockpiled from calving and winter losses are retrieved from local ranches with chronic grizzly depredation problems. Relocation of carcasses helps keep the bears away from livestock, and human residences and from dispersing further away from the forested Rocky Mountain Front. Livestock carcasses from area ranches are randomly placed on Blackleaf and Ear Mountain WMA's, helping to reduce livestock depredations and human/bear interactions.

In 2005 FWP began a long-term research project to assess population trend in grizzly bears in the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem. The project requires that female grizzlies be radio collared and monitored for several years to determine birth rates and mortality. Grizzlies utilize the Blackleaf area in the spring, summer and fall months, making it a prime area for capture, release and monitoring of research bears. Most of the trapping effort (over baits) occurs in April and early May when bears most actively utilize the WMA.

The Blackleaf and Ear Mountain WMA's are currently available for public access at midnight on May 15th each year. This provides ample opportunity for human/bear interaction and raises safety concerns. Since livestock carcasses are randomly distributed throughout the area, the likelihood of an antler hunter encountering a bear in the dark is apparent. Grizzlies are often very protective of cubs and food sources, both of which could create safety issues for a public allowed to traverse the area on foot or horseback after dark. Livestock carcasses are generally fully utilized by bears during April, but remnant bone piles do exist and can be routinely checked out by bears into May.

This Assessment is prepared in order to consider the impacts of changing from a midnight opening on May 15th each year to a 12:00 noon opening on three Wildlife Management Areas along the Rocky Mountain Front.

10. Listing of any other Local, State or Federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction.

None

11. List of Agencies Consulted During Preparation of the EA:

USDA Forest Service – Rocky Mountain Ranger District

State of Montana – DNRC

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

1. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives (including the No Action alternative) to the proposed action whenever alternatives are reasonably available and prudent to consider and a discussion of how the alternatives would be implemented:

A. No Action: Maintain the current midnight opening on Blackleaf and Ear Mountain WMA's.

B. Allow public access to the WMA's beginning at 12:00 noon on May 15th each year.

Benefits of a noon opening: Alternative B (Preferred Alternative):

- (1) Potential human/bear conflicts are reduced because the public will not be allowed into the WMA's during hours of darkness.
- (2) Accidents involving vehicles, horses and rough terrain will be minimized during daylight hours as compared to darkness.
- (3) Antler hunters will all have equal availability to the WMA's at noon rather than during darkness. Some members of the public prefer not to roam around in the dark searching for antlers because of safety concerns.
- (3) Black bear hunters will be able to access the areas at the same time as antler hunters, preventing staggered access times for different types of recreation.
- (4) All three wildlife management areas along the Rocky Mountain Front will have a standard opening time, which minimizes public confusion.
- (5) Wildlife will have adequate time to disperse from and to accommodate sudden increases in human activity with a noon opener. For example, during darkness, elk can panic if startled while using open parks or prairie habitat where they might be bedded or foraging, resulting in a mass movement on to adjacent private lands and/or tearing out fences.
- (6) FWP will be required to spend less time and manpower monitoring human activities during daylight rather than during hours of darkness.

2. This environmental review addresses alternatives A and B. Within the Physical and Human Environments checklists (Tables 1 & 2) the letters A and B correspond to the particular Alternative (listed above) to indicate that Alternative's potential impact.

Table 1. Potential Impact on Physical Environment.

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Below Or On Attached Pages
1. Unique, endangered, fragile, or limited environmental resources				A, B		
2. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats				A, B		
3. Introduction of new species into an area				A, B		
4. Vegetation cover, quantity & quality				A, B		
5. Water quality, quantity & distribution (surface or groundwater)				A, B		
6. Existing water right or reservation				A, B		
7. Geology & soil quality, stability & moisture				A, B		
8. Air quality or objectionable odors				A, B		
9. Historical & archaeological sites				A, B		
10. Demands on environmental resources of land, water, air & energy				A, B		
11. Aesthetics				A, B		

Table 2. Potential Impacts on Human Environment.

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Below Or On Attached Pages
1. Social structures and cultural diversity				A, B		
2. Changes in existing public benefits provided by wildlife populations and/or habitat			A, B			2.1
3. Local and state tax base and tax revenue				A, B		
4. Agricultural production				A, B		
5. Human health			A, B			5.1
6. Quantity & distribution of community & personal income				A, B		
						7.1

7. Access to & quality of recreational activities			A, B			
8. Locally adopted environmental plans & goals (ordinances)				A, B		
9. Distribution & density of population and housing				A, B		
10. Demands for government services			A		B	10.1
11. Industrial and/or commercial activity				A, B		

2.1 Alternative B provides for a safer, more orderly opportunity for the public to access wildlife management areas along the Rocky Mountain Front. Alternative A may result in dispersed animals less available to the public.

5.1 Alternative B provides a safer alternative for the recreating public, allowing access during daylight hours. Alternative A allows access during darkness, which can result in accidents and/or bear encounters, all human health issues.

7.1 Alternative B provides for a more consistent recreational experience because the public will all be allowed in at mid day, rather than Alternative A, which can result in some people wandering around in the dark, while others prefer to wait until daylight. Large numbers of people traveling WMA's after dark can result in large-scale movements of wildlife to adjacent private lands.

10.1 Alternative A requires more effort to monitor the public because of the hours involved. Alternative B will require less manpower and time.

3. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

FWP has the responsibility to provide public recreational opportunities on wildlife management areas. Part of that responsibility involves public safety to insure an enjoyable recreational experience. Rules created to insure safety and an enjoyable recreational experience are within the purview of the agency.

4. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? YES / NO. If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action:

Based on an evaluation of impacts to the physical and human environment under MEPA, this environmental review found no significant negative impacts from the proposed action involving the Sun River, Ear Mountain and Blackleaf Wildlife Management Areas opening at noon on May 15th each year. Thus an EIS is not necessary and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of analysis.

5. Describe the level of public involvement for this project, if any and, given the complexity and the seriousness of the environmental issues associated with the proposed action, is the level of public involvement appropriate under the circumstances?

Antler hunters, black bear hunters, and other recreationists using the WMA's have been interviewed over the past 2 years. As a result of these discussions, rules will be drafted to address public safety and

access in the Sun River, Ear Mountain and Blackleaf Wildlife Management Areas.

A public meeting will be held at the Choteau Public Library (Alice Gleason Room) on February 26th, 2007, from 7:30 – 9:30 PM, and at the Conrad Community and Senior Center (106 South Delaware St.) on February 27, 2007, from 7:00 – 9:00 PM, to address comments on the EA.

6. Duration of comment period if any:

This environmental assessment will be open for public comment from February 15, 2007 to March 19, 2007 at 5:00 PM. Comments can be mailed to: Gary Olson, MT FWP, 514 South Front ST., Suite C, Conrad, MT 59425, or e-mailed to: grolson@3rivers.net.

7. Name, title, address and phone number of the Person(s) Responsible for Preparing the EA:

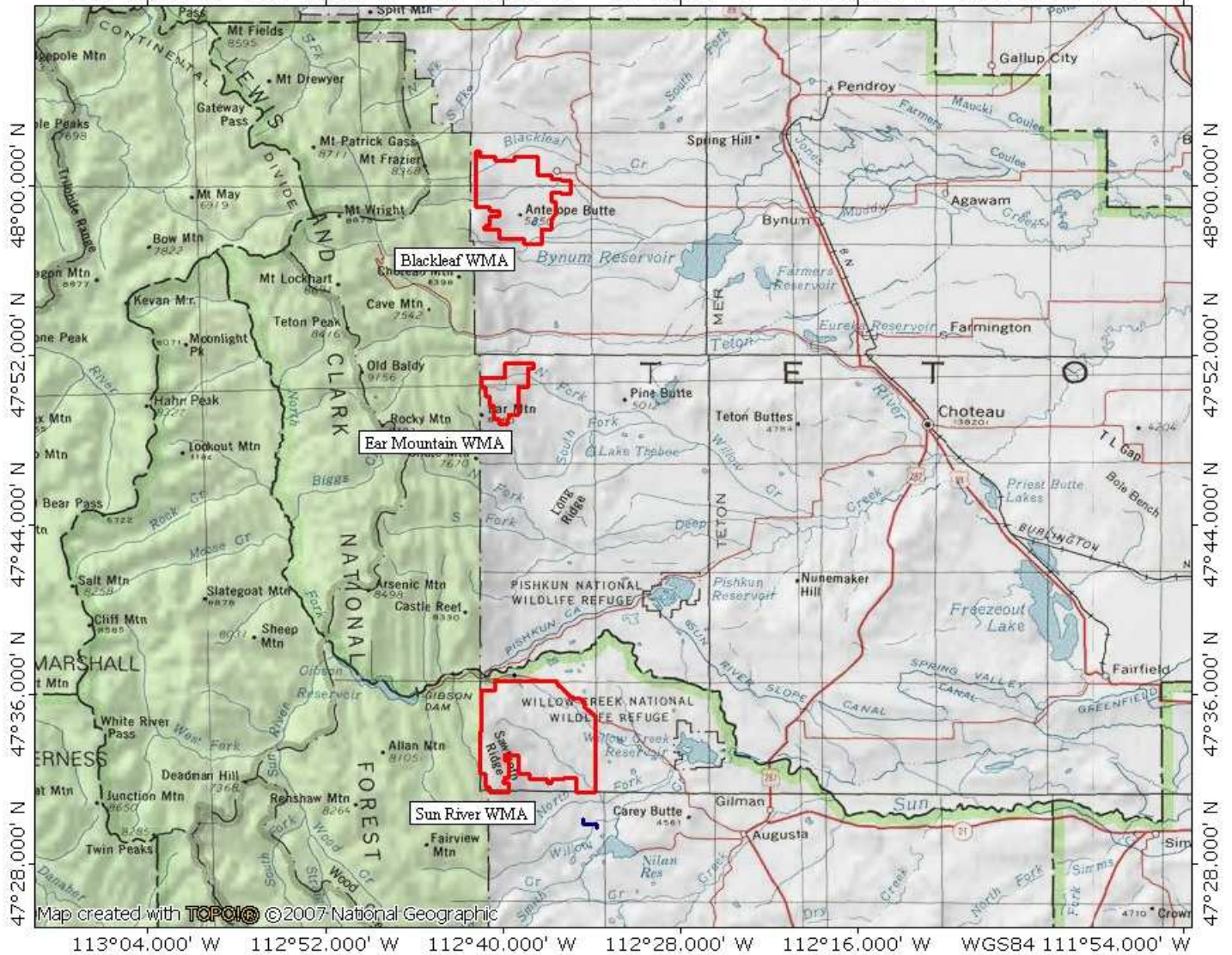
Gary Bertellotti, Regional Supervisor, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 4600 Giant Springs Road, Great Falls, MT, 59405.

Graham Taylor, Regional Wildlife Manager, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, 4600 Giant Springs Road, Great Falls, MT, 59405.

Gary Olson, Wildlife Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, 514 S. Front St., Suite C, Conrad, MT 59425

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113°04.000' W 112°52.000' W 112°40.000' W 112°28.000' W 112°16.000' W WGS84 111°54.000' W



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