

Item #25: Wildlife Habitat Improvements

Evaluation Objectives: To evaluate wildlife habitat improvements.

Methods: Terrestrial wildlife habitat improvement accomplishments for the 1998 - 2010 period are reviewed and compared to expected implementation rates.

Evaluation: Habitat improvements for terrestrial wildlife species are provided for Item #25. Improvements are categorized as either wildlife or threatened and endangered species (TES) and as an acre or structure accomplishment. Wildlife accomplishments are generally directed at elk, deer, moose, waterfowl, etc; while TES accomplishments are directed at grizzly bears, gray wolf, bald eagle, loon, lynx, etc. Acre accomplishments are treatments that occur over an area that include burning, planting, seeding, slashing, etc; while structure treatments occur at a site and may include installation of gates or berms on roads, development of nesting platforms for loons, etc. Habitat treatments are funded through annual wildlife appropriations such as, Knutson-Vandenburg Act funding, state Sikes Act funding, and indirectly with other resource appropriated funds. Partnerships have occurred with the Montana Loon Society, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Hungry Horse Dam Mitigation, Children for Wildlife, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Plum Creek Timber Company, Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, Montana Conservation Corps, and numerous private individuals.

Table 25-1 displays accomplishments for years 1992-97. Table 25-2 displays accomplishments for years 1998-2007. Table 25-3 displays accomplishments for the years 2008-2010. Additional acres accomplished with non-wildlife funds that should show improvement for terrestrial wildlife species are shown as integrated accomplishments. There are numerous studies that show a negative relationship between open roads and habitat effectiveness and use by species such as elk and grizzly bear. Thousands of acres of terrestrial wildlife security habitat have also been improved for species with large home ranges through achieving access standards for grizzly bear management subunits (Table 25-4). Much of these acres have been derived from road decommissioning since 1995 which is displayed in Table 25-5. In addition, between 1995 and 2010, there are 390 fewer miles open to motorized traffic yearlong.

Table 25-1. Habitat Improvements for Wildlife 1992-1997

YEAR	Wildlife		TES	
	acre	structure	acre	structure
1992	1069	20	250	24
1993	507	55	250	24
1994	340	53	360	20
1995	1168	26	390	23
1996	712	17	400	54
1997	1054	0	906	35
Total	4850	171	2556	180
Ave/yr	808	29	426	30

Table 25-2. Habitat Improvements for Wildlife 1998-2007

YEAR	Wildlife		TES	
	acre	structure	acre	structure
1998	1625	0	900	0
1999	3433	2	4000	20
2000	1360	12	3000	12
2001	1150	0	320	0
2002	1735	10	765	35
2003	1300	5	517	21
2004	400	0	3150	32
2005	100	0	2080	15
2006	1541	0	1865	3
2007	433	0	516	0
totals	13077	29	17113	138
Ave/yr	1308	3	1711	15

Table 25-3. Habitat Improvements for Wildlife 2008-2010

	Wildlife		TES		Integrated
	acre	structure	acre	structure	Acres
2008	2756	0	1394	2	5,823
2009	4213	0	3350	11	11,714
2010	30	0	3084	4	13,296
Total	6999	0	7828	17	30,833
Ave/yr	2,333	0	2,609	5	10,278

Table 25-4. Existing Grizzly Bear Security Core on the Flathead N. F.

	1995		2007		2010	
	Core Acres	% Core	Core Acres	% Core	Core Acres	% Core
70 GB Subunits 2,223,677 ac (includes 16 mostly non-wilderness subunits (3 subunits with minor Forest ownership are not included)	1,401,926	63	1,530,653	69	1,559,733	70%

Table 25-5. Flathead N. F. Road Decommission Mileage since 1995.

Year	Miles of Road	Cumulative
1995	69.97	
1996	40.38	110.35
1997	28.40	138.75
1998	18.36	157.11
1999	109.20	266.31
2000	37.24	303.55
2001	1.25	304.80
2002	56.54	361.34
2003	36.43	397.77
2004	41.52	439.29
2005	28.09	467.38
2006	46.66	514.04
2007	42.09	556.14
2008	48.44	604.58
2009	22.43	627.01
2010	54.84	681.85
Total	681.85	

The habitat improvement program is intended to help maintain habitat productivity, vegetation diversity, and help mitigate effects to wildlife or habitat from other Forest uses.

Accomplishments less than proposed in the Forest Plan or individual project decisions may result in lower forage production on big game winter ranges or reduced habitat effectiveness for many species due to inadequate access management or nesting structures. Analysis of total amount of habitat improvement acres is difficult because the acres may come directly from wildlife funding and/or indirectly from a combination of KV, state, or private conservation groups. The forest wildlife records are not always clear on which acres were tracked in the past. All in all, the number of wildlife habitat improvement acreage is well above the annual +/-200 to 300 acres Forest Plan estimate.

Additional habitat diversity is created annually with wildfires and fire use situations. Additional conversion of acres due to timber management, wildfire or fire use objectives may be of benefit for certain wildlife. These acres are not included here but are reported elsewhere. Biologists help coordinate these other activities and potential benefits or mitigation measures by being on interdisciplinary teams, wildfire resource advisory and burned area emergency recovery teams.

Recommended Action: Continue reporting habitat improvements in the annual Fish, Wildlife and Rare Plant Report Database as improvements derived from wildlife and partnership funds. Some additional acreage is also reported annually as integrated improvement acres resulting from expenditure of non-wildlife funds provided for prescribed burning, weed control management, and access management projects.