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Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest Withdraws Controversial Big-game Measure, Citing Sportsmen's Suit

Montana hunters and anglers commend Forest Service's responsible management decision

HELENA, Mont. – A coalition of Montana sportsmen's groups commended the Helena-Lewis Clark National Forest's recent decision to withdraw a controversial forest plan amendment that could have negatively impacted big game habitat, potentially greatly reducing public hunting opportunity.

The amended plan would have changed how big game habitat is managed on the Divide landscape west of Helena, particularly the amount of hiding cover and secure habitat for elk and other big game. Decades of studies around the West demonstrate that secure habitat is critical if elk are to survive on public lands.

The Forest Service approach conflicted with the best available science and was developed with inadequate consideration of its impacts and of possible alternatives. After exhausting other options, a coalition of Montana-based sportsmen's groups challenged the agency's decision in court.

The Forest Service announced its change in course in response to the lawsuit filed by the Montana Wildlife Federation, Montana chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers, Helena Hunters & Anglers Association, Clancy-Unionville Citizens Task Force and Anaconda Sportsmen's Club.

"We're pleased that the Forest Service listened to our concerns and recognizes the importance of maintaining habitat security for healthy elk herds and ample hunting opportunity," said Dave Stalling, MWF Western field representative. "This is good news for elk and good news for those of us who hunt elk."

Following the Forest Service's decision, the forest's previous big game security standard – Standard 4a – is reinstated, fulfilling a key goal of the sportsmen's suit. Developed by wildlife biologists, Standard 4a includes a hiding cover component and other protections important to big game species as well as other sensitive species.

“The Forest Service made the correct decision,” said Matthew Bishop, attorney with the Western Environmental Law Center, which represented the groups. “In short, the Forest Service was on the verge of breaking a promise it made to the Montana sportsmen regarding managing wildlife habitat with the best scientific knowledge. We’re glad they chose to rectify the situation before it was too late.”

Montana sportsmen were heavily engaged in development of the Forest Service plan, participating in every step in the planning process to try to influence the content and implementation of the Big Game Security Standard Amendment. After that process was completed, they filed a formal objection to the plan – the only option available at that point for submitting additional input – according to Forest Service procedures. Helena Hunters & Anglers and the Montana chapter of BHA filed “objection resolutions,” both of which were denied on Aug. 24, 2015. Once the final objection letter was issued, litigation was the sole avenue remaining for requesting changes to the plan.

“The implications of the Forest Service’s actions set a precedent that could extend far beyond the borders of the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest,” said John Sullivan, chair of the Montana chapter of BHA. “Our suit represented a last-ditch attempt to sustain wildlife populations and opportunity for hunters, both immediately and in the long term. The stakes were high, and we’re grateful that the Forest Service made the right call here – benefiting sportsmen, wildlife and our public lands both immediately and in the long term.”

The Divide landscape on the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest is valuable biologically, providing important big game habitat and critical habitat for threatened Canada lynx, and is considered a key movement corridor or linkage zone for native carnivores, including grizzly bears.

“Properly defining and managing for big game habitat will be a key issue for the Forest Service during the upcoming Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest Plan revision process,” said Gayle Joslin of Helena Hunters & Anglers. “Hunting organizations look forward to working with the Forest Service to conserve the priceless wildlife habitat found on our national forests.”

Backcountry Hunters & Anglers is the sportsmen’s voice for our wild public lands, waters and wildlife.

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