

A Decade of Habitat Change on the Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area

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The Spotted Dog Wildlife Management Area (WMA) is a 38,000-acre property northeast of DeerLodge, MT. Lentic, lotic, and upland habitat conditions were evaluated across the WMA in 2011 and 2014 using the Ecological Health Assessment (EHA) methodologies developed by Ecological Solutions Group. The 2011 and 2014 EHAs determined that many habitats were degraded from current and historical grazing practices, recent timber harvest, and noxious weeds. In 2014, grazing was removed from the WMA to allow recovery from habitat degradation. In 2018, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks started an exchange-of-use grazing system on a small portion of the WMA to evaluate the use of targeted grazing to enhance rough fescue grasslands for wildlife. Following five years of this grazing system and ten years from the last EHA, a subset of the 2011/2014 EHAs were assessed in 2023 to determine habitat trend and conditions. The results from the 2023 assessment determined that ecological health had significantly improved across all sampled habitats. Most notable was a 26% improvement in overall ecological health scores of riparian habitats. Wetland, forest, shrubland, and grassland habitat health scores improved by 6%, 23%, 12%, and 18%, respectively. Grazed and ungrazed rough fescue grasslands involved with the exchange-of-use grazing program on the WMA also significantly improved in ecological health. However, no difference in overall ecological health scores were detected between grazed and ungrazed grasslands. This talk will present further details of these habitat improvements related to vegetation and soil stability, and management implications.