



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
4600 Giant Springs Road  
Great Falls, MT 59405

July 10, 2020

Dear Interested Party:

The enclosed draft Environmental Assessment (EA) has been prepared regarding a proposal to reintroduce marten to the Little Belt Mountains in central Montana. Marten were historically present in the Little Belts but were likely extirpated by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Habitat models and biologists predict that there is extensive high-quality marten habitat in the Little Belts and marten currently occur in adjacent mountain ranges.

FWP proposes to initially capture up to 60 marten in southwest MT over the next two winters. The intent of the reintroduction is to establish a self-sustaining and genetically diverse population of marten in the Little Belt Mountain complex.

Additional copies of the draft EA are available at Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks in Great Falls at (406) 454-5840. The draft EA is also available on the FWP website at <http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices/>. A 21-day public review and comment period will be available July 10 – July 31, 2020. Written comment should be delivered to the following address:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks  
PO Box 527  
White Sulphur Springs, MT 59645

Or email comments to: [jkolbe@mt.gov](mailto:jkolbe@mt.gov)

Thank you for your interest and involvement,

Sincerely,

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Great Falls, MT  
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# Reintroduction of Marten to the Little Belt Mountains



**July, 2020**

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# Chapter 1: Project Proposal

## A. Proposed Action

This proposal is to restore a self-sustaining and genetically diverse population of marten (preferably *M. caurina*) to the Little Belt Mountains of central Montana. The Little Belt Mountains are an island range located 30 miles southeast of Great Falls. The range is approximately 1.2 million acres in size, 910,000 acres of which are managed by the U. S. Forest Service (Figure 1). Topography is generally rolling with significant areas of mesic mid-elevation forest.

Figure 1. Montana's Little Belt Mountains. Lands depicted in green are managed by the U. S. Forest Service.



Marten were likely extirpated from the Little Belts during the last 100 years. Under this proposal, at least 60 martens (> 30 female) would be captured in southwest Montana during winter and translocated to areas of the Little Belts that habitat models and biologists predict have extensive suitable habitat.

The Little Belts are currently open to regulated marten trapping, therefore FWP would also ask the Commission to temporarily close the Little Belt Mountains to recreational marten trapping for a period during and following the translocations to allow marten populations to become established.

## **B. Purpose, Need, and Benefits**

In 2014, the Fish & Wildlife Commission directed FWP to develop a project that would restore marten to the Little Belt Mountain complex. The project's stated objective is to "increase species diversity and facilitate marten range expansion back into the mountains of central Montana".

Marten were present in the isolated ranges of central Montana, Wyoming, and S. Dakota since the late Pleistocene, including in the Black Hills, Crazy Mountains, and Big Belt and Little Belt Mountains (Gibilisco 1994, Buskirk 2002). Specimen records from the Black Hills indicate martens persisted in that range until they were extirpated by unregulated trapping and predator control by 1930. Martens are currently present at low densities in the Big Belt Mountains to the west of the Little Belts and in the Crazy Mountains to the south.

Although we are unaware of historic specimen or trapping records for Montana's Little Belt Mountains, due to their presence in adjacent isolated ranges with similar habitat it is reasonable to believe that martens were recently extirpated from the Little Belts. Extensive snow-track, camera trap, and genetic surveys conducted by the USFS and FWP have failed to confirm marten presence in the Little Belt Mountain complex.

Martens are poor dispersers and are behaviorally incapable of moving through certain habitats. Martens generally will not disperse across non-forested areas below timberline wider than 5-10 km (Hawley and Newby 1957, Buskirk and Ruggiero 1994). Therefore, once extirpated, martens are unlikely to reoccupy previously occupied but spatially isolated habitats.

Marten populations have been successfully reestablished across their historic North American range following translocations. Thirty-two (72%) of the 44 attempted North American marten reintroduction efforts (with known outcomes) conducted prior to 2012 were successful (Powell et. al. 2012), including 2 in island ranges east of the Rocky Mountains. Nine martens (4M, 5F) were translocated into the Big Belt Mountains in 1956 and FWP has detected the species there using camera traps since 2016. Similarly, a total of 125 martens (78M, 47F) were released in two areas of South Dakota's Black Hills in 1980 and again from 1990-1993. The marten population in the Black Hills is now self-sustaining and well connected (SDGF&P pers. comm. 2020).

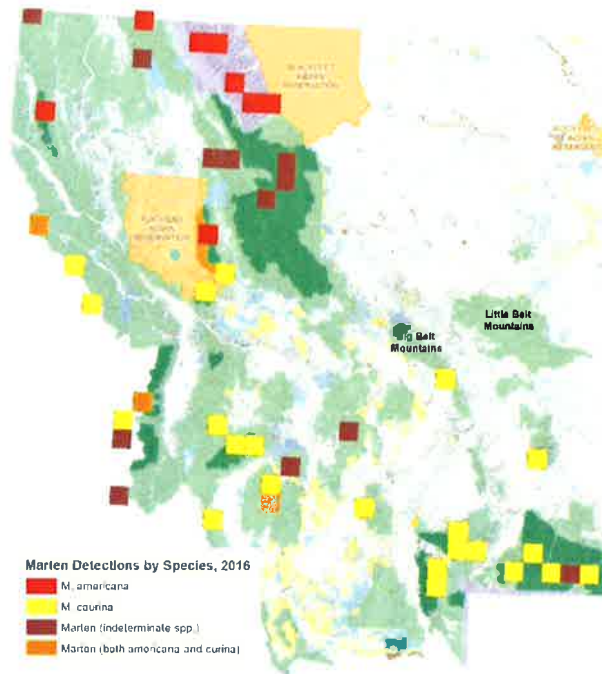
The purpose of this project is to re-establish a self-sustaining marten population in this portion of their historic range (the Little Belt Mountain complex) by translocating a minimum of 60 *M. caurina* (>30F) from various locations in southwest MT (FWP Region 3). FWP has identified two proposed initial release sites within the Little Belts using a predictive habitat model and local knowledge. These release sites include land primarily managed by the U. S. Forest Service. The two release sites are connected by contiguous forest cover and we expect that there will be genetic exchange between the two areas over time.

While the overall goal of this project is to restore a native species to its historic range in central MT, the project is also intended to provide recreational viewing and eventual marten harvest opportunity, both of which are currently lacking in the Little Belts. We believe these goals fulfill core FWP management responsibilities and mission.



### C. Location, Size, and Scope of the Proposed Action

Figure 2. Distribution of Marten (spp.) detected during a 2016 genetic survey (FWP).



Wright (1953) classified marten in Montana as a single species (*M. americana*) due to morphological evidence suggesting extensive hybridization of the two previously recognized North American species (*M. americana* and *M. caurina*). However, recent genetic and phylogeographic studies suggest the possible occurrence of 2 distinct North American marten species, both of which occur in Montana (Dawson and Cook 2012). Despite hybridization and past translocations, these varieties appear to be relatively discrete within the state. For example, when marten DNA was collected coincident with a 2016 wolverine survey, *M. americana* were predominately detected in northwest Montana while *M. caurina* occurred in the west-central and southwest portions of the state (Figure 2). If the two varieties of marten are distinct, *M. caurina* most likely occupied the Belt mountain complex prior to extirpation and southwest Montana should be the source area.

The success of past marten reintroduction efforts was most influenced by 3 primary factors: 1) habitat quality, 2) the number of individuals (primarily females) released, and 3) the number of release sites (Powell et. al. 2012).

To describe statewide marten habitat, FWP and the Montana Natural Heritage Program developed a predictive habitat suitability model for marten in Montana (MNHP 2019). This model incorporated 10 years of marten harvest locations and 18 statewide biotic and abiotic GIS layers into a Maxent marten habitat model. The model indicates that the Little Belt and Castle Mountains include some of the highest quality unoccupied marten habitat in the state (Figures 3, 4).

The more marten (especially females) that are released into an area, the higher the likelihood that a self-sustaining population will become established. A large and diverse founding population helps ensure a high effective population size and improves initial genetic diversity within the population. Because of post-release mortality, variation in individual breeding success, and the need for heterogeneity in isolated populations, a minimum of 60 individuals (with an equal or female-biased sex ratio) should be translocated into an insular area. However, individual releases can be conducted over several years without significantly affecting the ultimate success of a reintroduction effort (Jachowski et. al. 2016). Periodic supplemental reintroductions can then

help maintain the genetic diversity of those isolated populations.

Marten pelt prices are currently very low (2020 average of \$25). Therefore, we expect to actively partner with skilled private Region 3 marten trappers to assist with marten capture. FWP staff may also supplement trapping effort outside of the fur harvest season. Marten give birth beginning in late March and breeding season extends through August— captures would therefore only occur between September and February each year. Live (cage) trapping and transport methods are well described in the literature. “Hard” releases (without holding animals for at the release location) appear to be as effective as “soft” (extended) release methods. We expect the initial restoration effort to be accomplished in two subsequent winter field seasons.

FWP biologists, as well as one 4-month/yr. technician, would conduct the necessary field work.

Near and long-term monitoring would be accomplished using extensive and systematically-placed baited camera traps and track surveys. Genetic samples would be collected at camera sets (consistent with current FWP multi-species monitoring protocols) to document individual survival, reproduction, and movement. FWP and partners may also monitor marten presence and genetic diversity by collecting eDNA from snow tracks.

FWP anticipates this project would be funded using NGO’s and private grants, in addition to FWP-administered Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration funding.

Figure 3. 2019 MNHP Maxent predictive marten habitat model and 2007 – 2018 marten harvest locations.

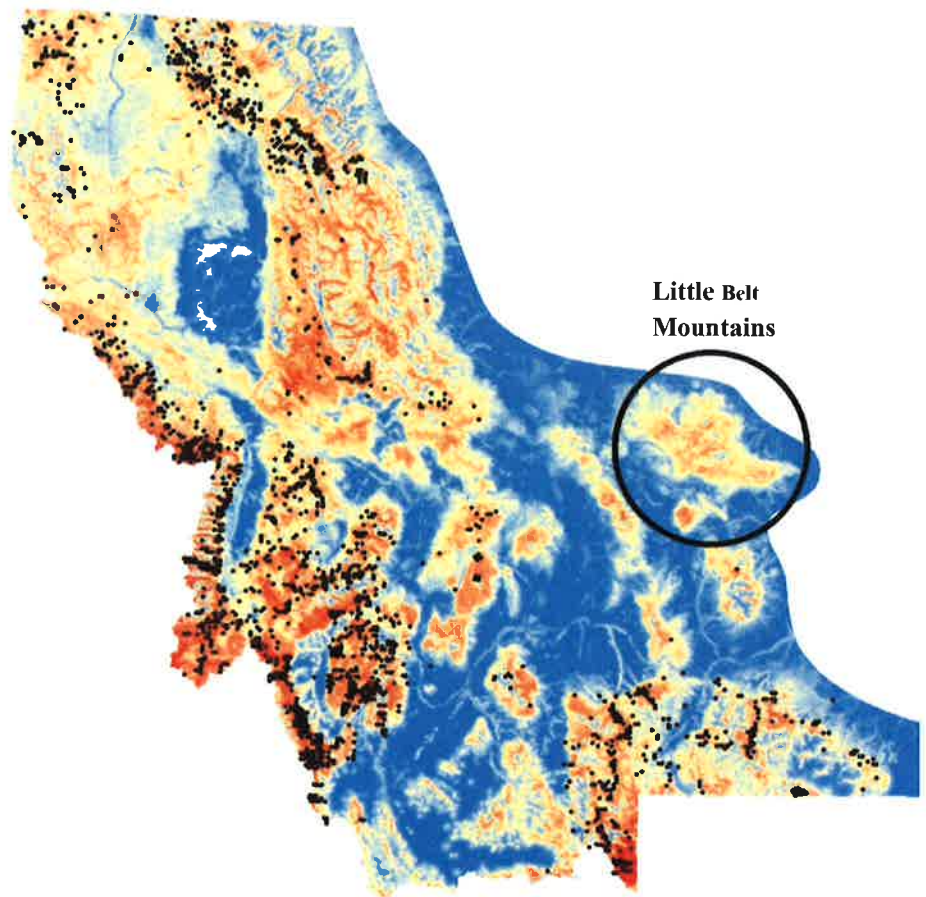
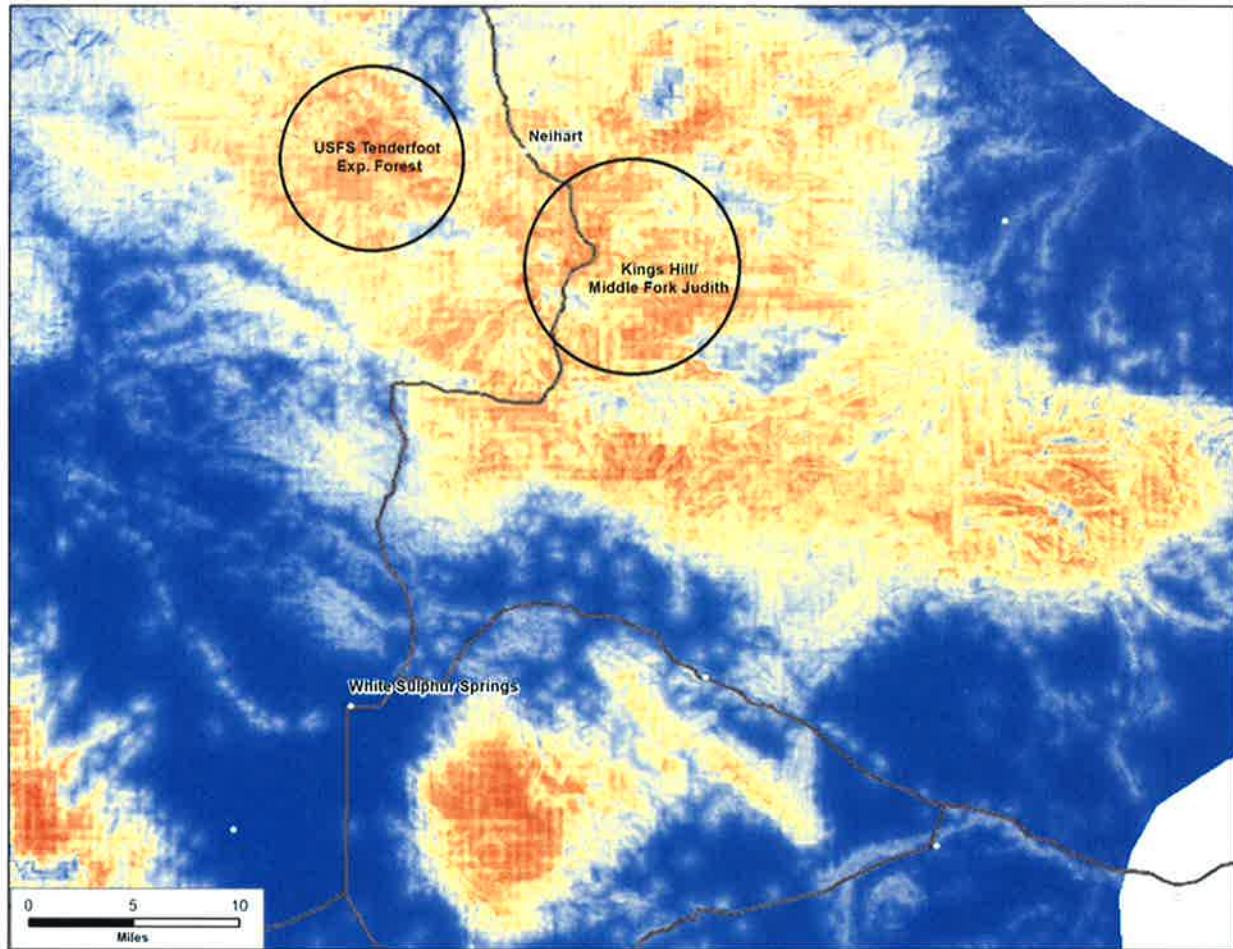


Figure 4. Potential marten release sites in the Little Belt Mountains.



#### **D. Agency Authority for Proposed Action**

FWP policies and guidelines are directed by state laws (MCA 87-5-701 to -721) which provide for the importation, introduction, and transplantation of wildlife. Specifically, Montana Code Ann. § 87-5-711(2) provides that transplantation or introduction of any wildlife is prohibited unless the FWP Commission “determines, based upon scientific investigation and after a public hearing, that a species of wildlife poses no threat of harm to native wildlife and plants or to agricultural production and that the transplantation or introduction of a species has significant benefits”.

Transplantation is defined as the “release of or attempt to release, intentional or otherwise, wildlife from one place within the state into another part of the state” (MCA 87-5-702(11)).

#### **E. Anticipated Schedule**

FWP will accept public comment on this draft EA for 21 days beginning July 10. FWP will provide news releases to area newspapers, media outlets, County commissions, other agencies,



NGOs, and others. The EA will also be available on FWP's website. By August 4, the public comment period will conclude, the draft EA will be revised based on accumulated comment, and the final EA will be written. Based on public input, a decision notice will be released by the FWP Region 4 Supervisor. The final EA and the decision notice will be submitted to the Fish and Wildlife Commission for consideration and review. The Fish and Wildlife Commission will render a final decision to support or deny the proposal at their regularly scheduled August 13, 2020 meeting where public comment will also be accepted.

If the proposal is approved, initial translocations could occur as soon as late fall 2020. Additional translocations to the initial or other release sites could occur, as necessary and as supported by the public, in future years.

## **F. Purpose of the Draft EA**

The purpose of this draft EA is to describe the proposed project, list and discuss in detail major issues and concerns that have been identified up to this point, and stimulate further public input and discussion of existing or new issues. The draft EA will be distributed to interested parties and will be available upon request. At the end of a public comment period, any new public input will be summarized and incorporated into a Final EA. Both the Draft and Final EA are documents that will provide the Decision Maker with the best available information to assist in evaluating the project and deciding whether to approve, not approve, or modify the proposed action in a Final Decision Notice. In this case, the decision-making authority is the FWP Region 4 Supervisor.

## **G. Environmental Impact Statement Determination**

Based on the analysis completed in this EA, FWP has determined an EA is the appropriate level of analysis because the proposed action is anticipated to have few to no impacts to the existing environment such as soil, water, vegetation, wildlife and social resources. Anticipated impacts may be minor, manageable, or mitigable.

## **Chapter 2: Alternatives**

### **A. Alternatives Analyzed**

#### **Alternative A — (No Action)**

Under the no action alternative, martens would not be reintroduced to the Little Belt Mountains at this time. Alternative A represents the current baseline condition and responds to those who oppose marten reintroduction, including respondents wishing to postpone any release of marten. Under this alternative marten would likely never repopulate their historic range in the Little Belt Mountains.

**Alternative B — Approve reintroduction of marten to the Little Belt Mountains**

Alternative B represents the preferred Alternative. This alternative describes restoring a sustainable population of martens to the Little Belt Mountains. Under this Alternative, the Fish and Wildlife Commission would generally approve an active marten restoration program for the Little Belts, beginning with a specific project to transplant 60 martens from southwest Montana to the Little Belt Mountains beginning as soon as fall/winter 2020/21.

**B. Comparison of Alternatives' Effects**

Under alternative A it is unlikely that a self-sustaining and genetically diverse marten population will become established in the foreseeable future. Alternative B would direct FWP to initiate active restoration of marten using translocations. Because Alternative B already identified a source, destination, and funding for translocated marten, initial translocations could proceed as soon as fall/winter 2020/21.

**Chapter 3: The Affected Environment and Consequences**

**A. Physical Environment**

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Geology and soil quality, stability and moisture				X		
2. Air quality or objectionable odors				X		
3. Water quality, quantity and distribution (surface or groundwater)				X		
4. Existing water right or reservation				X		
5. Vegetation cover, quantity and quality				X		
6. Unique, endangered, or fragile vegetative species				X		
6. Terrestrial or aquatic life and/or habitats				X		
7. Unique, endangered, or fragile wildlife or fisheries species				X		
8. Introduction of new species into an area				X		
9. Changes to abundance or movement of species			X			

Reintroduction of marten with the intent to reestablish a self-sustaining population in the Little Belt mountain complex, if successful, would restore one native mammal species to its historic range. The interaction of newly established martens with other wildlife species in the Little Belt complex would be unlikely to cause a negative cumulative effect on any other wildlife species.

## B. Human Environment

Will the proposed action result in potential impacts to:	Unknown	Potentially Significant	Minor	None	Can Be Mitigated	Comments Provided
1. Noise and/or electrical effects				X		
2. Land use				X		
3. Risk and/or health hazards				X		
4. Community impact				X		
5. Public services/taxes/utilities				X		
6. Potential revenue and/or project maintenance costs				X		
7. Aesthetics and recreation						X
8. Cultural and historic resources				X		
9. Evaluation of significance				X		
10. Generate public controversy				X		

There is no regional or per-trapper marten harvest quota in FWP Region 3, where marten for this project would be sourced; therefore, removal of marten for translocation will not diminish trapper opportunity there. Although FWP will likely propose a temporary closure of recreational marten trapping in the Little Belts until the species is well established, overall recreational opportunity, for trappers and the wildlife viewing public will increase over time.

This work is intended to have positive aesthetic and recreation value in the form of recreational viewing and marten trapping opportunity, both of which are currently lacking in the mountain range.

## C. Cumulative Effects

The addition of another self-sustaining population of marten in Montana would improve the overall condition of the species in the state. U. S. Forest Service land management activities, such as prescribed burns, timber harvest, thinning, and recreation management are not expected to be effected by this proposal. FWP accepts that the political and environmental landscape can change quickly, but notes that this is the case for any action we pursue. FWP will work to minimize the number and scale of potential issues through public outreach and agency coordination.

## Appendix A. Tentative Budget

The following budget does not include additional, and expected, private funding support.

<b>BUDGET</b>	<b>FY2020</b>	<b>FY2021</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Supplies</b>			
Snowmobile gas/oil	2,000	2,000	4,000
(20) Cameras and associated supplies	4,000		4,000
DNA sampling supplies	500		500
Lure and bait	500		500
<b>Travel and Transportation</b>			
Vehicle mileage	5,000	5,000	10,000
<b>Technician</b>			
	16,000	16,000	32,000
Housing	1,000	1,000	2,000
<b>Contract Services</b>			
Traps and supplies	5,000		
Marten capture	6,000	6,000	12,000
DNA lab work (sex, heterozygosity, spp., monitoring samples)	5,000	5,000	10,000
Snowmobile repair	1,500		1,500
<b>Miscellaneous (10% each year)</b>	<b>4,650</b>	<b>3,500</b>	<b>7,650</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>51,150</b>	<b>38,500</b>	<b>84,150</b>
<b>SCI Contribution</b>			<b>25,000</b>
<b>FWP Cost</b>	<b>51,150</b>	<b>38,500</b>	<b>59,150</b>



## List of EA Preparers

This EA was prepared by FWP Biologists Jay Kolbe (Region 4), Claire Gower (Region 3), and Robert Inman (Wildlife Division, Helena).

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