



Indispensable

BY TOM DICKSON

Last year Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks produced a series of posters featuring key department positions. One that shows an administrative assistant on the phone reads, “My job description: know everything.”

It’s an exaggeration. But just barely.

Montana FWP is filled with unsung employees who do great work but rarely get recognized by the public. Among them are the administrative assistants and office managers employed at FWP’s headquarters in Helena and regional and area offices across the state.

“Administrative assistant” hardly conveys the vast knowledge and expertise these women and men bring to their jobs each day. Many come to FWP with years of experience in marketing, sales, and customer service, or in running a ranch or small business. Some have college or technical school degrees. All are indispensable, the behind-the-scene gears essential for FWP to successfully do its work.

Administrative staff are human databases. They know—or can quickly find—information about hunting, fishing, and trapping seasons, dates, limits, and district

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boundaries, not to mention knowledge of every FWP program. They can answer questions about aquatic invasive species, wildlife diseases, fishing access sites, boating and snowmobiling regulations, camping opportunities, state parks, and off-highway vehicle use. They can explain the difference between resident and nonresident licenses, and how special permits and lottery drawings work.

When homeowners call FWP for advice on dealing with nuisance wildlife—skunks, bats, snakes, raccoons, and the like—it’s usually an administrative assistant or office manager who helps them out.

In addition to being walking Wikipedias for all things FWP, administrative staff help register furbearers, mountain lions, and black bears that hunters and trappers bring in to the office. One day they might have to crawl underneath a boat parked outside and look for zebra mussels, and the next day carry severed deer heads submitted for chronic wasting disease sampling.

As part of the FWP team, administrative staff serve on committees covering internal communication, department safety, grizzly bear management, and the agency’s long-term vision. They assist with FWP hunter education workshops and fishing clinics, and support Block Management teams.

Administrative assistants and office managers unlock the doors and turn on the lights every workday at 8 a.m. (many show up much earlier), then shut down the building at 5 p.m. When FWP offices are open,

they are always there. Though not literally chained to their desks, administrative staff—especially those working the front desks—can’t always come and go as they please. Sometimes even a simple bathroom break requires scheduling a backup.

In the office, they help manage contracts to ensure that heating and cooling systems work, bathrooms stay clean, security cameras and alarms function, copiers copy, and credit card machines operate. Their working knowledge of computer software, programs, and systems and pretty much anything else electronic is remarkable. When something doesn’t work—a beeping smoke alarm, a dead telephone line, a blank computer screen—everyone turns to the office staff and yells, “Help!”

They see to it that sidewalks are shoveled, parking lots are plowed, and lawns are mowed. They maintain office supplies and equipment. They assist with budgeting, permitting, and environmental assessment paperwork, and help administer the use of FWP vehicles. They help set up public meetings, then record and transcribe comments. When there’s a video or telephone conference, it’s an administrative assistant or office manager who likely sets up the computers, microphones, and cameras.

While at FWP headquarters in Helena recently, I listened in as one front desk worker explained to a frustrated hunter how the elk shoulder seasons work. His tense body language gradually relaxed as she patiently and clearly explained the complexities and details of late-season hunts. She then gave him names and phone numbers to call for more information.

“Anything else I can help you with?” she asked as he gathered up an armful of maps, regulations, and brochures.

“No thanks,” he replied. “You’ve been real helpful. I always find what I need when I come in here.”

Then, as he headed for the door, he