

**Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks UGBEP CAC Meeting
Minutes & Meeting Summary -- Final
September 12-13, 2022, Great Northern Hotel, Malta.**

Council Members: Doug Bonsell, Rob Brunelle (absent and rotating off council), Tom Condon, Jeff Cornell, Sen. Jason Ellsworth (absent), Rep. Tom France, Lynn Glock (absent), Jay Hanson, Tom Keegan, Trent Kleppen, Rick Sojda, and Art Soukkala.

FWP Employees, Conservation Partners, and members of the public: Heather Brower, Brett Dorak, Erin Fairbank, Heather Harris, Drew Henry, Debbie Hohler, Justin Hughes, Sen. Mike Lang, Ken McDonald, Dave Nikonow, Rick Northrup, Ken Plourde, Haylie Shipp, Matt Strauch, Thomas Sutton, Scott Thompson, Martin Townsend, Hunter VanDonsel.

Special Guest: Sen. Mike Lang, Malta

Special Tour Guests: Conni and Craig French, Malta

Monday, September 12

Trent began the meeting at 8:30 am. Introductions were made along with sharing of backgrounds and interests. Trent asked the Council about the minutes format, showing preference to include dialog in the minutes.

Motion to approve March 28 – 29, 2022, minutes. Rep. France moved, Jeff Cornell seconded. Motion carried.

Purpose of the UGBEP Council and a brief history of the UGBEP (Northrup)

Legislation sponsored by Sen. Ed Smith, Dagmar, in 1987. Initially, the program was geared towards pheasant releases but not intended to be “put & take.” The next legislation included the habitat component. For the next 10 years, UGBEP had a balance with money mostly going to CRP. Following an audit in 2009, new legislation required a council, dedicated staff, and a strategic plan.

The program has come a long way since 1987.

- Dedicated staff
 - Program coordinator – Debbie Hohler
 - Three habitat specialists—Ken Plourde, Matt Strauch, Justin Hughes
- Council
 - The council is program-grounded and continues to help the program evolve in a positive way. Council meets spring and fall to hear program plans for the field season and to see what is on the ground (fall tour).
 - Strategic plan development, updates
 - Program direction
 - Legislative involvement

Rick Sojda asked about the Prison's pheasant release. Ken answered that the focus of the \$2M/biennium is for pheasants to be raised by the prison system. Focus is to release on WMAs, but eventually could also be on other FWP lands and DNRC lands through agreement. Purpose is strictly R³. Ultimately, prison is expected to release around 50k birds.

Question regarding whether prison birds could be used for the UGBEP pheasant release program. *Ken will look into that.*

Sen. Lang: He went to the prison. It was difficult to get equipment due to COVID. Tony Fowler, Conrad, sold equipment to the prison. He noted staff at the prison were very dedicated and feels birds should be released across the state.

Doug disagrees with "put and take" but supports releases. The releases can build relationships.

Overview of UGBEP Program Summary for FY22 – Debbie Hohler

Debbie provided information about the program and summarized the accomplishments.

- How program is funded
- Revenue and Expenditures – admin, habitat, and pheasant release expenses – savings account has been spent out so annual expenses are limited to annual revenue.
 - Sen. Lang suggested changing the term "obligated" to "contracted" to help convey the money is no longer available for projects.
- Voluntary Public Access – Habitat Incentive Program (VPA-HIP): a no-cost extension request has been submitted to NRCS
- Provided contractual and balances for the 8 Cooperative Partner Positions – NWTF, PF
- Reviewed enrollment summaries, project types for new projects enrolled in habitat and VPA-HIP
- Provided a summary of all active contracts as of August 2022
- Cost List will need a review and update given the increased cost of materials. We will present these figures at the spring meeting for Council input. Lease payments will also need to be reviewed.
- The director's office is looking to do a Human Dimensions Research project tied in with the youth pheasant releases. Not much information is known at this time.

Council requested that the presentations be available online. Debbie will set this up on the Council web page.

Rep. France suggested keeping UGBEP and Block signs consistent. Use "green signs" for both programs.

Strategic Plan revision discussion once the plan goes out for public comment.

Motion that FWP review comments and if deemed appropriate, council will hold a special session before final adoption. Rep. France moved, Tom Condon seconded. Motion carried.

UGBEP regional updates for 2022 field season (Matt, Ken, Justin)

Habitat Specialist Presentations

Justin (R7) – Justin gave an overview of the region’s strategic plan, spring 2022 accomplishments and summaries, and the types of projects. Re-enrolling projects is part of the regional strategy and important to maintain good relationships with cooperators.

Matt Strauch (R4) – Matt is new to his position and gave an introduction of his background. He is looking at expiring and active contracts with a special focus on habitat work funded by UGBEP on Freezout WMA, Marias WMA, an NRCS TIP. He is working with Jenna (NRCS Ft. Benton) to develop a TIP for the Highwood area. The first proposal was not accepted. The proposal was split into two proposals, conserving riparian habitat restoration and protection for (1) ruffed and (2) sharp-tailed grouse. Matt is also meeting landowners and partners.

Ken Plourde (R6) – overview of strategic plan and focus areas in R6. Ken summarized enrollment acres for habitat projects this year and a cumulative project summary. Monitoring occurs annually but takes up a significant amount of time given the number of projects to monitor. Ken gave an update on the status of birds and this year’s hunting outlook.

David Nikonow – NWTF Partner Bio. Dave gave an overview of his work, including goals and focus areas for the work done on National Forests. He summarized the number of acres accomplished (primarily burns) during the past year. Dave has been in his position since 2015, and in that time, nearly 12,000 acres of habitat has been restored, using \$115,000k in grants for implementation.

Martin Townsend – PF Coordinating Biologist. Martin gave an overview of where the biologists are located and the vacancies. There are 2 Access Coordination positions in Miles City, and another one will be located in Lewistown. In 2022, nearly 325,000 acres were affected by staff in 9 different NRCS offices. In R6, he’s doing a lot of work with grazing systems and grass seedings. USFWS and World Wildlife Fund (WWF) help with reseedings. Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP) aimed at migration and habitat improvements, using grass seedings and grazing management. Focus area is all counties touching CMR. Implementation began last year.

Precision Ag update. Phase II is continuing pilot program with Rick Sojda. Currently there is some amount of interest and good potential for habitat, but the question remains on how to fund for a full time person. Rick Sojda will be coming up with a final report in the coming months. There is a funding issue as NRCS is not interested in spending more. Nationwide, SD and ND are continuing with precision ag. Nationally, precision ag is skyrocketing. There are full time positions in many different places. In Montana, we’re not sure how could be funded. MSU hired 3 or 4 new positions that are working on precision ag. There is interest in possibly working together –PF and MSU?—possibility of joint funding down the road. John Deere may be interested in finding additional farmers who would participate.

Tour Plan

Leaving at 1:00 pm, the group will head south of Malta to look at a long-term Conservation Lease Agreement. We'll meet the landowners Conni and Craig French. Next, we'll look at an Open Fields project. If there's time, we'll head north of Malta to Cree Crossing and/or north of Saco to look at a Habitat Management Lease/Mig bird project.

Buffet at 6:00 pm at the hotel.

Tuesday, September 13

Tour discussion and highlights

We started with Craig and Conni French's property. They have a long-term lease and actively involved with RSA. Demonstrating a strong partnership. Next stop was the Robison project enrolled in Open Fields. There is also a CRP seed cost-share on another project site. Last stop was the Hartman project north of Saco. Habitat work includes food plots and pipeline, using UGBEP and Mig Bird funding, respectively.

Art: Partnerships are great. Success depends on the landowner and who they are comfortable working with.

Rick N: Question to partners. How easy is it to get UGBEP/FWP projects. Any issues? Martin likes the short form of Mig Bird. With UGBEP, it takes the right producer for access and grazing system requirements.

Rick Sojda: Unmet demand—address in Strategic Plan.

Trent: we have limited funds, main reason for not meeting demand.

Art: How do we communicate to hunters to be respectful of private land?

Doug: He would like a schematic on how funding/partners come together

Rick N: We don't want to overwhelm producers with lots of agencies/programs. Staff on the ground should be figuring out which program best fits the proposed project for funding purposes.

Jeff— impressed with the French's ranch. They put their heart into it and opened up to talk about their work and challenges.

Jay— why do people say no about access?

Discussion: Landowners assume hunters will be a problem and will be "stuck" with issues for 15 years. There is also fear of the unknown, loss of control. Some landowners assume floodgates

will open. Staff's response is to dive into the details to counter fear, assure the issues can be handled.

Rep. France: Outward facing public – it make sense for simplification with signing and use of acronyms. Make communication outward facing rather than inward. He observes a dramatic change working with landowners (wide urban divide), but in legislature, there is concern that the relationships aren't there.

- Recommends more legislators be a part of these tours to make them aware; greater involvement from Farm Bureau, Montana Stockgrowers Association (MSGA) and **United Property Owners of Montana (UPOM)**. Lobbying groups that make a difference – they have no idea or suspect that these things are going on.
- Communications strategy around the UGBEP, including pheasants. He feels there will be opportunity to grow these programs.
- Likely more funding will be coming through farm bill.
 - Doug: The Habitat Specialists proved they could amp up enrollment if funds were available.

Discussion: What is the role of Council with outreach? Rep. France suggest an open house at the spring meeting during the legislature. Focus on getting word out to legislators.

Trent talked about working group compared to the CAC. Trent went to the Open House in R6. He feels the council is not a working group but council member should be more vocal for the program. We need people to have relationships with organizations. Trent quoted Andrew McKean, "We're bad at telling our story." Trent has been approached by podcasts to talk about the UGBEP.

Dave Nikonow: We need to engage the right stories of the right people.

Rep. France: The audience should be the legislature and public, not just the hunters.

Rick: It's oftentimes difficult to engage with the legislature. We have reports submitted but are they read? We rarely hear follow-up. Outreach shouldn't be done twice a year; it needs to be continuous. Outreach can be challenging-- we have trouble keeping our website updated.

Producers can tell the stories better and have more influence. It would be great to engage the right producers.

Ken McDonald – We're trying to quantify this program– is there demand for this program? From a hunter standpoint – you bet. Legislators want data and figures that demonstrate enrollment demand.

Rep. France – We have the story and message. There are a lot of landowners that are taking satisfaction from programs; the programs are working. The story is the fact we have lots of cooperators for whom FWP is a partner, and there is a demand for this. Certainly, there's a message that the legislature and Governor's office needs to hear. Based on relationships, communities, we can puncture the idea of a divide.

Rancher Stewardship Alliance – Martin Townsend

What it is? Started in early 2000's as a result of outside entities coming in buying ground.

The conservation committee came out later. Ranchers want to create a group to be left alone and they began working together.

In 2017, RSA worked with Partners Fish & Wildlife, applied for NFWF funding to tackle conservation projects around expiring CRP.

The goal is to reduce barriers to ranching. Ranching, conservation, community – it's a winning team.

Staff from agencies came with leftover and hard to fund projects, presented to the group and resulted in multiple projects.

In 2019, there were many different projects that were funded through collaboration in RSA .

Partnerships helped get projects funded.

Two areas of conservation investment emphasis

Grassland birds – incentivize grazing, grazing improvements, cropland seedings

Big game funding – wildlife friendly fencing

Investing in communications and outreach. Haylie is a full-time communications specialist. RSA struggles to reach ranchers and the goal is to make RSA accessible. RSA has brought together the network of partners for conservation projects

Education is also important

Webinars – started with 84 people, now over 1,000 participants

Communications – It's been a struggle to get out RSA's story. The story needs to be clear without confusion (conservation can be complex). Relay what is available to ranchers. Haylie is RSA's full-time communications person. She is reaching out to wildlife groups, but mostly the struggle is to reach ranchers. The goal is to take wildlife knowledge and translate it to ranchers.

Availability of funding has increased through better communication.

Proposals have to be approved by board. Approach is locally driven and approved. Not a threat to ranching because it's vetted through a group of ranchers.

Staff turnover is a problem and challenge as relationships are important.

Drought has been a driver. Ranchers are looking for help with water conservation. It's been challenging to meet the demand for wells, pipelines, tanks, and material availability. Costs all play a part in the challenge.

Division/Legislative update (Ken McDonald)

Last week (Sept. 8 – 9) was EQC. If EQC supports proposed legislation, the proposals will go to the Legislature. 15 legislative proposals from FWP including the following:

- 1) Increase cap for Block Management from \$15,000 to \$25,000. Increase H-D payment is also in discussion by the Commission.
- 2) WHIP – grant program for doing landscape scale weed management for enhancing wildlife habitat has a sunset for 2023. The proposal is to lift the sunset.
- 3) UGBEP – eliminate 15% requirement to set aside for bird planting activities. The proposed 15% set-aside may be used for pheasant planting. FWP proposal is to repeal that section of all together. Next step is to work with legislative services to find a sponsor. The proposed legislator revision was not supported by the department.

There was a new requirement to review reports at EQC . There were comments from legislators that challenge the funding and purpose of UGBEP. It may be of value if council members talk to legislators. It's likely Council will have a bigger impact rather than hearing from department staff.

Other updates:

- Habitat conservation lease program: a super high priority, landscape scale initiative to conserve up to 500,000 acres of priority habitats over the next 5 years through 30-40 year leases. The initiative was launched about a month ago. Currently FWP is accepting proposals. Funding will be through PR and Habitat MT funding.
 - These long-term leases will be another tool in toolbox. There is still options for conservation easements. Habitat MT is still available for Conservation Easements. There needs to be overt local support and county commission support.
 - Acquisitions – 800 acre addition to Mt. Haggin just squeaked through.
 - Sideboard of leases: No ground disturbance, including tillage, energy development, mineral rights, subdivision, building development, etc.
 - All agreements come with an access component. Size of ranch (3,000 acres or less) may be 1-2 Recreation-Day (R-D) for every 100 acres. R-D may be spread out over the year.
 - Currently taking applications now.
 - Challenge: current staff do not have the capacity to review leases. Three Habitat Specialists will be hired to work in capacity. Positions will be located in Lewistown, Malta, and Miles City.
 - Payment structure is based on DNRC appraisal of lands guide.
 - USFWS concerned that FWP's new leases might undermine other conservation programs or Conservation easements.
 - Leases are attached to the deed. The lease agreement has a buy out clause, which is pro-rated plus 25% penalty.
- Big Snowy acquisition – 6k acres will potentially be a WMA. It will be reviewed before the land board in October.

- Youth Pheasant Stocking – Highlight on youth pheasant and waterfowl openers. The initiative is to increase excitement. The plan is to hold events to meet with mentors.
- Pheasant releases – Approximately 8,000 to 10,000 birds are set to be released this fall.
- Budget: Message from Governor’s office is no new FTE. FWP can do “modified FTE” (example the Habitat Specialists for Conservation Leases). FWP will eventually try to make modified FTE “base.”
- HB701 (last session) – \$10 million per year is estimated. Earmarked portions for Nongame (4%); Habitat MT (20% for habitat).

Region 6: Outreach activities aimed to engage youth in hunting, fishing, and recreational opportunities. (Marc Kloker, R6 Information and Education Program Manager)

We played “UGB Bingo” for starters.

Marc went over his background. Born and raised in eastern Montana. He went to college to be a biologist. Undergrad second degree in secondary science education. He’s been on the job for almost 8 years. He focuses on:

- News releases (about 70 annually)
 - Includes newspapers, radio, tv, and website
- Facebook – over 10,000 people annually, he adds content that humorous and informative
- Website
- FWP app

Youth engagement: Marc participates with children using programs such as Hooked on Fishing, Kids to Fish (rod loaner program), and educational events.

Upcoming in R6: Youth pheasant/waterfowl weekend. There will be pre-events/promotions and a follow-up for effectiveness (survey). The focus will be on hunting day youth, with activities including:

- Shoot trap, with shells and 20 ga provided.
- Open House
- Access team, providing the UGBEP access guide and info on WMAs
- Booth – how to ask permission to hunt?
- Waterfowl and UGBEP identification
- Bowhunter education
- BLM, Hunt Planner, options for 3rd party apps, bear aware
- Wardens available to answer questions
- HiLine Sportsman Giveaway
- Hotdogs and hamburgers available

If this event has a good turnout, it will be rotated around the region.

Questions:

- Question about research. Who wouldn't have gone anyway seems an important question.
- Declining rates in upland game bird and waterfowl hunting-- is this positively influencing that?
- What about the ranching and farming kids as a target audience?
- Rep. France – extensive literature of kids falling out, but what is the cause of the decline? It's likely related to a lot of things that is beyond whether they have harvested a bird or not.
 - Recruitment may not be the issue, retaining interest tends to be more substantial.
 - Mentorship program discussion.
- Suggestion – Survey: Do participants demonstrate understanding the perception of releasing birds versus value of habitat and wild birds.
- What is Pheasants Forever's stand on put and take birds?
 - Hunter: PF does not support prison birds but supports R³ activities. PF is encouraging chapters to engage and support wild bird hunting. Hunter added feels showing up on Saturday does not condone prison birds.

Council discussions

Art and Tom (R1): Releases at Ninepipe – there's a board with Tribal, stating FWP did not present releases before the board. Only a few people wanted the releases but majority did not. The board is very effective.

Mission Valley Conservation Alliance is trying to get more partnerships with agencies.

Water compact – redoing the compact. Area may get more center pivots.

UGBEP funding and access requirements make implementation difficult. Most effort/implementation is through work done by Liam through partnerships.

Fixed set-aside that is dedicated to UGBEP revenue – 30 years ago, the \$2 was "maybe" 1% of the license cost. Today, 2% is a mere fraction. There is understanding that any increase to UGBEP will take from other programs.

Trent: Thinking about Ken's message at EQC. They don't perceive the fiscal situation.

Tom K.: We need to educate the legislature as Rep. France suggested. To Ken's point, it's more influential when information comes from the council.

Rep. France (R2) – He is on "stand-by" and is impressed with the program and its potential growth.

Rick Sojda (R3) – He has strong opposition to stocking program. BMA and UGBEP guides can't be merged into 1 guide. Quality of hunting, especially pressure, is an important concern. He is concerned with out-of-state hunters. The opener should be reserved for residents.

Jeff Cornell and Jeff Hanson (R4) - Hunting pressure is a state-wide issue. Dog training is an issue that is trending, and DNRC is also seeing interest. Encouraged continued efforts to fence off certain areas such as drainages or seeps. Continued work with ranchers on grazing improvements is key.

Trent (R6) – He encouraged council members to hunt on project areas. We need to look on the ground, review of high use times, including training during summer and early fall. More public access options seems to be needed. He also encouraged council members to review their regional strategic plan and MCAs that govern this program.

Dog training is largely a problem in one county (Daniels). Although it's not part of UGBEP, the council will need to revisit dog training. Places are bought to train dogs but consider private property rights. We have a responsibility to native game birds.

- Trent referenced the woes of the bob-white quail in Texas. They chose to be proactive rather than reactive. Jay added that all is for naught if we don't take care of the young birds.
- Rep France feels the council should make a recommendation to legislature and develop a proposal.
- Trent advised that we've been trying to get ear-marks changes and should not rock the boat.

Tom Condon and Doug Bonsell (R7) – Big shout out to Justin. Pheasant numbers are good. Everything is nice and green.

Doug – He is glad for the time to serve on the Council and for the people on the council. Doug will be on council until his seat is filled.

Helena Meeting: March 27th and 28th

General Agenda items

- State Lands opportunity and discussion
- Dog training
- Statute revision update
- Update from Jason Kool and Stephanie Brown, Access & Landowner Relations Bureau Chief
- Conservation Lease updates
- Sage-grouse
- Strategic Plan - finalizing