

Region 6 Citizens Advisory Council Minutes
Sept. 23, 2008
Tin Cup Bar & Grill, Malta

CAC members present: Connie Iversen, Darlyne Dascher, Bernie Hart, Dustin Hill, John Crohn, Steve Sukut, Tom Burch, Robert Smith, Scott Billingsley, Les Schaaf, Carl Totman

CAC members absent: Dennis Idler, Fran Buell, Bill Buckley, Rich Stuker

FWP staff present: Pat Gunderson, Woody Baxter, Harold Wentland, Mike Herman, Ron Selden, Ann Engstrom, Dirk Paulsen, Mike Lee, Mark Sullivan

Guests: FWP Commissioner Willie Doll, Bryce Christensen, Stan Lund, Jim Carver, Roy Ereaux, Jack Billingsley, Barron Crawford, Rich Adams, Walt Arends

Pat Gunderson welcomed the group -- including new CAC members Les Schaaf and Bill Buckley (absent) and reappointed members Darlyne Dascher, Fran Buell, Tom Burch and Dustin Hill -- and reviewed agenda.

Public comment: None

Ron Selden discussed the history and function of citizens advisory councils.

FWP Program Updates

Pat Gunderson announced that Steve Dalbey of Helena has been appointed as the new Region 6 fisheries program manager. He starts Oct. 6.

FISHERIES: Ron Selden provide a brief description of program activities, including the status of the pallid sturgeon telemetry project, the pending loss of the fishery at Dry Fork Reservoir near Chinook due to low water, Fort Peck Hatchery funding issues and 2008 Fort Peck Reservoir fish monitoring. Scott Billingsley inquired about the status of doing more fish stocking in rural ponds, especially considering that not all anglers have the equipment, the time, or the money to fish Fort Peck Reservoir.

COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION: Ron Selden went over upcoming changes in the Hunter Education program, which will pilot an online course by early 2009. To start, the course will only be available to students 18 or older. Discussion of certification issues, possible August or September deadlines for instructors to finish their classes each year, and potential incentives to attract and retain instructors.

Ron also reviewed the fishing rod loaner program, which is being expanded to at least another 12 sites across the region, and the Hooked on Fishing program for school-aged children. Bernie Hart suggested that fishing rod donations could probably be solicited

from folks who are for whatever reason quitting the sport. Ron added that several unsolicited gear donations have already been made in the Glasgow area.

Along with regularly issuing news releases about various FWP activities, the weekly outdoor reports with KATQ Radio in Plentywood have been restarted.

Steve Sukut advised that there is a lot of suspicion among some members of the public about how FWP conducts business. He suggested that the agency make more of an effort to explain its actions, especially when regulations are being changed. He thinks that better communication would foster a more-trustful relationship with the general public.

Bernie noted that local media outlets are excited about covering events involving children. He said the agency should increase its efforts to publicize various youth activities, including the special youth hunts. He added that it would be good to get more of the local outdoors groups helping with these types of events.

Carl Totman asked if FWP does anything to promote archery in the schools. Not formally, but Ron said the agency does at times serve as a clearinghouse for information about such programs when asked.

WILDLIFE: Harold Wentland discussed elk populations in the Missouri River Breaks and the Bear's Paw Mountains. In some areas, elk numbers are twice as high as envisioned under management objectives. The overall goal is to maintain a total of about 2,400 elk in Region 6.

Thirty-two elk recently escaped from a Saskatchewan game farm. All but two of the animals were captured immediately. One of the remaining elk was shot in Region 6 this fall. The other presumably remains at large.

This year the number of moose, deer and elk head collection sites for chronic wasting disease monitoring will be increased. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service at the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR) will be helping FWP with the effort.

There are 286 Block Management cooperators this year in Region 6. Those areas total more than 1.2 million acres. The acreage is about the same as last year, even though some large contracts were not renewed. That's because other smaller properties were added in their place this season.

Two cooperative management units with mixed land ownership will be up and running this year for hunters. A 4,500-acre unit is in the Larb Hills, and a 4,300-unit is in the Three Buttes area near Culbertson.

The statewide prairie dog population survey, the largest of its kind in Montana, is nearly completed. Region 6 biologist Ryan Rauscher is coordinating the study. Various other non-game surveys are still underway, as well as the Canadian border antelope study in the Bowdoin gas field.

Regarding sage grouse, the agency is attempting to locate all leks in Region 6. So far, 156 active leks, or habitual breeding sites, have been found. While sage grouse are struggling in other areas of the West, their numbers appear strong in Region 6. Much of the best sage grouse habitat in Region 6 is on private land, but Harold said there is also good habitat on state and federal ground around the area.

The three-week antlered deer season in Hunting District 640 was enacted several years ago without public comment. FWP has concluded that the change from a five-week buck season has not produced the results proponents had hoped for. It has created additional problems for landowners located outside HD 640 boundaries. That situation helped drive a tightening of the district's boundaries for the 2008 season.

Harold also reviewed existing and pending conservation easements and/or land transactions on the Cornwell Ranch, Olsen Ranch, the North Cree Crossing property, and other parcels totaling about 34,000 acres and more than 12 miles of frontage along the Milk River.

Tom Burch, noting that Harold plans to retire at the end of 2009, asked if an understudy is being groomed to take his place. Harold said that he's aware of several people being interested in the position, but no one person is being groomed, per se.

Scott Billingsley asked if any exit surveys are conducted when cooperators leave the Block Management program. If so, he'd like to see them. Harold explained that one of the main reasons landowners leave revolves around money. Several potential scenarios are being looked at with an eye toward increasing cooperator payments as soon as possible.

Scott noted that there are no Block Management Areas open for spring turkey hunting. Are there any plans to open any? Harold said the issue is being reviewed, and he's not opposed.

PARKS: Woody Baxter noted that the second recreational season was recently completed at Brush Lake, the region's only state park. Visitation was up slightly over last year, and there was an increase in nonresidents that paid the day-use fee. A small campground, around 12 sites and possibly some equipped with electricity, is planned at the park, likely on either the east or west side of the lake. This improvement is planned for 2010 or 2011.

Fishing Access Site (FAS) update: Snowden Bridge, just completing first full season; Whitetail Reservoir, upgrade of interior road and boat ramp was completed; Rock Creek, new well drilled this year to provide water for the fish-cleaning station; Alkali Creek, where FWP acquired land in July and initial improvements will be made in 2009; Bear Paw Lake; this was the first year with hosts all season and visitation was up one-third; Fresno Tailwater, where improvements are to be completed this fall.

A potential new state site is still being considered at Nelson Reservoir near Malta, which is currently managed by the federal Bureau of Reclamation. Discussions are continuing on this possible transfer.

Woody reminded the group that a wide variety of state and federal grant programs are available for community and recreational development projects.

Guest Jim Carver thanked FWP for continuing the fish-stocking program at Saddlebrook Pond in Malta. He'd also like to see a small boat ramp at the FAS at Alkali Creek. Woody responded that the ramp option was looked at, but there are no plans to add one at this time.

Tom Burch asked if an earlier issue with unsanitary conditions at the Intake Dam FAS in Region 7 had been cleared up. Woody replied that he would again ask R-7 officials to look into the concerns.

Steve Sukut asked if the Milk River is considered "navigable." It is and is therefore covered by the state's Stream Access Act.

ENFORCEMENT: Warden Captain Mike Herman reviewed the Region 6 Enforcement Division, which at full-force includes six field wardens, a sergeant in Havre and himself. Unfortunately, he said, this region experiences very high turnover with enforcement staff.

Tom Burch asked why. Mike said part of the problem is a large number of recent retirements. Another reason is relatively low pay, which is gradually being addressed. Overall, however, the pool of people wanting to be wardens is shrinking all the time.

Connie Iversen said she thinks the lack of mountains in our area is one reason it's tough to recruit folks to Eastern Montana. She added children from this area need to be groomed early to entice them to stay.

Mike also addressed the loose Canadian game-farm elk and recent reports of possible mountain lion sightings in the Glasgow area, none of which have been confirmed. Darlyne Dascher said she's heard reports of horses being attacked by lions in her area. Mike said landowners are allowed to protect their livestock as they need to in such cases.

Elk Archery Advisory Committee Overview

Jack Billingsley, the outfitting industry's representative on the committee, went over the group's progress in developing common ground among its highly diverse membership. The volunteer committee is charged with examining recent regulatory changes and their impacts in 23 state hunting districts outside the Missouri River Breaks. The panel's final meeting is in October.

FWP Commissioner Willie Doll noted that many people were opposed to the regulation changes. One of the main questions was what constitutes overcrowding in the field.

That's a very subjective issue, depending on who you talk to. Pat Gunderson asked whether the committee will be making recommendations to the FWP Commission, and if so what will they likely entail?

Jack Billingsley said the group wants the Commission to consider everything that will be impacted when they alter regulations – from changes to hunter opportunities, to access issues and impacts to businesses that are tied to hunting. He expects there will be some “tweaking” of the current rules after the committee submits its findings.

Scott Billingsley explained that hunters are allowed up to leave up to three tree stands on the CMR, which means one person can tie up a large chunk of habitat, even if they're not actively hunting.

Willie Doll said public land should be available to all citizens equally, and in his opinion, tree stands and other equipment should be required to leave with the hunter. Allowing equipment to be left behind is part of what's driving perceived overcrowding in the Breaks, he said.

Pending Federal Wilderness Proposals

Rich Adams of the Bureau of Land Management reviewed the history of wilderness proposals in Region 6. Two federal Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) are in his planning area --- the 60,000-acre Bitter Creek area in Valley County and the 14,000-acre Burnt Lodge area in southeastern Phillips County.

The designations are based in federal mandates developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s that said eligible federal parcels 5,000 acres or larger must be inventoried. After review, the agency determined that the Bitter Creek WSA didn't meet all the standards to include it in the federal wilderness system. The Burnt Lodge WSA was determined to meet the standards. Congress, however, has not acted on either recommendation, and these lands must continue to be managed as if they were designated wilderness until final decisions are made.

Tom Burch asked if the Burnt Lodge WSA borders other lands formally proposed as wilderness. He and others expressed concerns about access into these tracts, especially for older hunters and the disabled.

Rich explained that motorized travel is prohibited on these lands. He added that it is also illegal to drive off-road on other BLM lands, even to retrieve game. Steve Sukut asked how many more roads BLM is planning to shut down around the area and if grazing is allowed in WSAs. Rich said grazing is permissible, and it is up to Congress to develop the overall guidelines for these areas. Then BLM is expected to draw up more-detailed management plans.

Tom asked if game carts are prohibited in the WSAs. Rich said they are generally considered to be mechanical devices, like bicycles, but he's not sure if BLM enforcement would cite someone for using them.

Barron Crawford of the CMR said the U.L. Bend area is the only designated wilderness area under his jurisdiction. But there are 15 other proposed wilderness areas totaling about 155,000 acres within the refuge. All wilderness or WSA boundaries stop at the high water marks on Fort Peck Reservoir, he said.

Barron said refuge managers can grant "minimal-tool" directives governing what can or can be used. The CMR allows game carts on proposed wilderness lands, but not in the U.L. Bend area.

Under the threat of a lawsuit, CMR managers in 2002 closed 44 miles of roads on proposed wilderness lands. Those same roads are still closed today. Barron explained that when the 1964 Wilderness Act was established, there was no concept of how much motorized use there would be today.

While not everyone favors wilderness, he reiterated that agencies still must manage these lands for their roadless qualities and all federal natural resources for every conceivable interest. Only 170,000 of the CMR's 950,000 acres have wilderness restrictions, he said, and 85 percent of the refuge is accessible by vehicle.

Tom asked what the general public seems to think about wilderness. Barron said about 50 percent support and 50 percent are against. During recent management plan scoping, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service received 24,000 comments – about 23,000 of those from advocacy groups.

Barron and Rich discussed past congressional actions on wilderness bills. Rich said the best success comes when representatives from the states where the land is located stand behind the proposals.

Tom reiterated that the main issue to him is the public having access to their lands. More restrictions on private land, he said, are pushing more people to public lands. He'd still like the CAC to pass a resolution opposing additional wilderness in Region 6. Support for the proposed resolution was voiced by Robert Smith and Bernie Hart.

CAC Roundtable

Connie Iversen, Culbertson – Folks in her area are very upset about the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) came out against "emergency" haying rules on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) lands. Some landowners say they'll close their property to hunters over the issue, and that they plan to ask folks coming to their doors whether they are NWF members. She added that it's been very dry this year around Culbertson.

Pat said he just talked to Rick Northrup, FWP's game bird coordinator, about the CRP issue. Northrup said NWF sued because the Farm Services Agency allegedly failed to follow National Environmental Policy Act procedures when putting the provisions in place in 2002. FWP was not involved in the lawsuit. Ron added that the Montana Wildlife Federation, a NWF affiliate, says it did not support the action and wasn't involved in the legal action, either.

Connie added that another issue is damage at irrigation pump sites from increased boat use and their wakes. She said this is apparently triggered by new access sites on the Lower Missouri River. The pump sites also attract floaters who want level places to land their craft. The only problem is that they're trespassing. Woody said he would look at options, including possibly posting signs at our access points.

Darlyne Dascher, Fort Peck – She's also heard complaints about the CRP restrictions but doesn't know of any landowners in her area closing property. But she said folks are continually upset about people trespassing and leaving garbage on their land.

Bernie Hart, Hinsdale – There are a lot of deer around, especially does. He hears from a lot of out-of-state hunters who think doe tags are too expensive. What can be done?

Pat explained there is a proposal heading to the 2009 Legislature dealing with this. In the short term, Region 6 is trying to reduce the cost of second, non-resident, antlerless white-tailed tags this fall in an attempt to reduce deer numbers, especially in the Milk and Missouri river corridors. Hunters will be able to have a maximum 7 "B" tags this year, and a nonprofit program is in the works to transfer extra deer meat to area food pantries. Les Schaaf said he knows of a lot of deer that were wasted last year in the Saco and Hinsdale areas.

Darlyne questioned whether there will be enough hunter access to make a meaningful dent in deer numbers. Connie said that in her experience, landowners are more likely to let people on if they're willing to shoot does.

Dustin Hill, Scobey – The CRP haying issue has surfaced around Scobey, too. A recent youth Green Wing event by the local Ducks Unlimited group was quite successful.

John Crohn, Dagmar – John said FWP should perhaps consider putting out a news release on the CRP matter to clear the air about who was involved and who was not. He added that he's seeing far less garbage on his place since he joined the Block Management program.

Steve Sukut, Glasgow – Steve expressed concern about Block Management funding. He suggested FWP sell a BMA stamp to raise additional funds, like the warm-water stamp is used to pay for Fort Peck Hatchery operations. He's an officer with the Montana Bowhunters Association. Ninety-four percent of the group says they support such a stamp and 77 percent says they'd pay \$20 for it. The support drops off considerably as the price goes up.

Steve also discussed bobcat trapping. He said pelts bring about \$800 each. He's heard rumors that when the quota is reached in Region 7, trappers move to other regions so they can keep their operations running. He believes trapping should be managed on a regional basis with a regional license.

Steve added that he does a lot of antelope hunting, and he's noticed that animal numbers in south Valley County haven't fully recovered. He thinks there should be decreased harvest in Hunting District 630. Bernie agreed.

Steve raised the issue of Fort Peck Hatchery funding, and Tom went through the hatchery's history. Pat added that some action may take place in the 2009 Legislature. A non-FWP bill is being drafted that would lift the current species restriction, phase out the warm-water stamp and have the hatchery be run like all the others in the state system.

Steve asked if it is possible for more help to be hired at the regional office. Nearly every time he calls, he has to leave a message. Pat said he'd look into adding help, but it wouldn't likely be more than part-time.

Tom Burch, Fort Peck – Tom again raised the wilderness issue and asked for a show of hands regarding feelings among CAC members about how to proceed. Most members said they were against formal wilderness designation; Steve Sukut and Scott Billingsley disagreed. Tom also asked Willie Doll how he thought the FWP Commission and the governor leaned on the issue. Willie said he wasn't sure, but he invited Tom to get the matter put on a future agenda.

Robert Smith, Poplar – Robert had questions about geese bag limits. He also requested that Jack Billingsley be invited back after the archery group submits its recommendations.

Scott Billingsley, Glasgow – Scott asked why turkeys are the only bird that can be shot with a rifle. He also questioned why hens can be taken in Region 6 when the turkey population is not very large.

Scott asked why there isn't an earlier season on doves, since they typically migrate out of the state soon after the season starts. Harold said he'd personally support such a proposal. But it took the Legislature to get a dove season in Montana, and current law says the season can't open any earlier than the upland bird season. So any changes would have to come through legislation, and not just through the FWP Commission.

Scott said he was impressed with the recent list of the top landowner-sportsmen issues compiled by the Private Lands, Public Wildlife Council. He suggested that all CAC members read it. He added that he was in Washington state earlier this year and had a chance to review their hunting regulations, which are much more restrictive than ours are. We should be grateful for what we have here.

Les Schaaf, Saco – He wondered if most of the issues raised by CAC members today are coming from themselves or other people who have solicited them. Members said both.

Before adjournment, Pat went through the list of pending legislative bills supported by FWP.

The next meeting is tentatively set for January 20 in Culbertson.

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