

**Region 6 Citizens Advisory Council Minutes**  
**June 2, 2009**  
**Fort Peck Hatchery, Fort Peck**

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

CAC members absent: Bill Buckley, Dennis Idler

FWP staff present: Gary Bertellotti, Pat Gunderson, Woody Baxter, Harold Wentland, Mike Herman, Ryan Rauscher, Charlie Bridgham, Ron Selden

Guests: Walt Arends, Hinsdale; Gene Mendel, Malta

Pat Gunderson welcomed the group. Council membership terms were discussed. Ron and Mike will represent FWP on the selection committee. CAC representatives are Fran and Connie; Rich and Darlyne will be alternates. Fran offered to ask Rep. Bob Bergren to serve as one of the two citizen members; Carl Totman could contact Rep. Wayne Stahl; Rich could contact either Rep. Wendy Warburton or Sen. Ken Hansen.

During the public comment period, Walt Arends praised the department for doing a good job managing the area's natural resources.

Gary led a detailed discussion about the FWP's ongoing reorganization. He said CACs will be relied upon for input as the administrative changes progress. Steve Sukut ask for details on the need for new top positions in the department. Gary explained that there will be no net change in staff numbers.

Tom Burch asked how the FWP Commission has reacted to the reorganization. Gary said he didn't know exactly what discussions have taken place with the Commission. He added that reorganization details have to be approved by both the governor's office and the state auditor's office before the changes can be finalized.

Rich Stuker asked for more details about the administrative changes, especially the top management slots. Gary explained that Chris Smith's position was redrawn and he is now working on special projects. Gary is currently serving as the acting chief of the Fish and Wildlife Division. He said administrators will soon be chosen to manage the new Parks Division and the Fisheries Bureau.

Fran expressed concern that trapping may be supported less in the reorganized agency. Gary replied that unlike many states, trapping in Montana has a strong constituency.

Fran also asked whether there will be a public comment period to help guide the internal management changes. Connie asked whether the reorganization has to be approved by the

legislature. Gary replied that the matter has been discussed before the Environmental Quality Council, which is largely comprised of state lawmakers, but he is unaware of any further public review.

Gary also presented a legislative update and reviewed a list of resource management bills that were acted upon during the 2009 session, including a new funding formula and other positive changes for the Fort Peck Hatchery.

Pat said one of the new upland bird management positions created in House Bill 499 will be based in the northeastern corner of Region 6. Harold added that 75 of the 110 upland bird projects in the Region are in the Plentywood area.

### **FWP PROGRAM UPDATES**

**WILDLIFE:** Harold said at least part of the Region 6 Habitat Enhancement Program is on hold until other statewide land management priorities are met. Staff is instead focusing their efforts on improvements at the Brazil Creek conservation easement and the recently acquired FWP property north of Nelson Reservoir at Cree Crossing, among other locales.

Gary confirmed that the Milk River Initiative “has moved down in the priority list,” and that it will take a few years to build back funding for land acquisitions that fall outside of the top-of-the-list parcels now being obtained.

Harold noted that the biennial season setting for big game begins this fall. Public scoping sessions will jump-start the process across the state. He also gave an update on the international antelope study that is looking at use patterns in the Bowdoin gas field and along the U.S.-Canadian border.

Harold said sage grouse numbers seem to be up this year, according to the most-recent round of surveys. Three seasonal technicians are working on studies of reptiles, bats, amphibians and small mammals. A softshell turtle survey is also being planned.

Renewal letters for participation in the Block Management program recently were sent out. Contractors will see a \$1 increase in per-hunter payments this year. Expect about the same BMA acreage as last year.

Harold reviewed the Region’s two cooperative access projects in the Three Buttes area near Culbertson and in the Larb Hills south of Saco. Suggestions for other land parcels that could potentially be part of the program are always welcomed.

Recent survey datum for mule deer, white-tailed deer, elk and upland birds and proposed changes in mountain lion quotas were reviewed. John Crohn asked what 2009 quotas for whitetails will likely be. Surveys show the numbers should remain about the same as last year.

Pat said FWP is again looking at reducing the cost of some second (and subsequent) nonresident “Deer B” licenses. Steve Sukut asked if the number of “B” tags could be increased during the regular rifle season, instead of relying so much on late management hunts to control deer.

Tom suggested that hunting districts with high numbers of does could perhaps have “B” licenses that are automatically allocated when a “Deer A” license is purchased. Steve suggested that hunters should perhaps be required to earn a buck license by harvesting a set number of does beforehand. The proposal would need to be approved by the legislature before going into effect.

**ENFORCEMENT:** Warden Captain Mike Herman reviewed regional staffing. Warden Shawn Briggs has officially moved to Lewistown; Todd Tryan will move to the Glasgow area from Havre in August; Ann Engstrom is no longer the Plentywood-area warden. Because of vacancy savings and other hiring issues, it’s unclear when the Plentywood position can be filled again.

There have already been four walleye tournaments in the Region this year, and several more are on the horizon. Walt Arends asked why FWP Enforcement is involved in tournaments. The main reasons are pre-tournament violations, which are typically licensing issues, littering and trespassing violations.

Mike said the paddlefish season on the river was very busy, and there was a related felony arrest on the CMR that was connected to commercial activity. Les asked about federal officers doing state fish and wildlife enforcement work. Mike explained they can investigate cases through a cooperative agreement.

The 2009 Legislature approved changes in the shooting preserve regulations, as well as in the rules governing the loss of hunting and fishing privileges. Mike also reviewed the past winter’s game damage, which was extensive in some areas.

**PARKS:** Woody went over agency reorganization as it relates to Parks issues and personnel. His work is now overseen through FWP’s Helena headquarters, instead of through the regional supervisor.

Potential sites for youth fishing ponds are being looked at in Scobey and Havre. Brush Lake State Park will have a number of improvements completed this summer. Property that was being looked at for potential purchase by FWP at the confluence of the Milk and Missouri rivers has been sold to another area landowner who may be interested in having part of the site open for public access. Negotiations with the same landowner for a potential fishing access site (FAS) on the Milk River west of Glasgow have started.

There was a recent meeting with the Bureau of Reclamation to again discuss potential future FWP management of the Nelson Reservoir recreation site. Improvements are underway at the new Alkali Creek FAS near Malta, as well as at Faber Reservoir south of

Chinook. A new state statute says property violations at state property, including all recreation areas, can result in the loss of hunting and fishing privileges.

Scott Billingsley asked about the status of a potential FAS near the hospital in Glasgow. Woody said that the area might not be suitable for a full-blown FAS, but he'd nonetheless like to work with city officials to improve the spot, which is already used by the public.

**FISHERIES:** Steve Dalbey shared his personal and professional background with members. Among his top priorities as the regional fisheries manager are Fort Peck Reservoir levels; native species recovery, in-stream flows and fish passage issues on the Milk River; and expanding and enhancing the Region's pond fishing opportunities. He'd also like to conduct more research on area catfish populations.

Steve gave updates on the 2009 paddlefish season, pallid sturgeon recovery efforts, the Fort Peck walleye spawn, and the status of area walleye and Chinook salmon stocking.

Tom Burch asked about paddlefish mortality and injury from errant hooks after the harvest seasons are closed. Steve explained that paddlefish have shown great resiliency after being hooked and released. Smaller snagging hook sizes have undoubtedly helped.

**COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION:** Ron provided updates on regional Hunter (HE) and Bowhunter Education (BHE) programs. Many spring classes were overflowing, and an additional course had to be added in the Havre area due to increased demand.

The online HE program is now up and running. The service, which charges an administrative fee, is open only to students who are 18 and over, and they must arrange to complete a separate field day.

There has been good progress in Helena catching up with a backlog of HE and BHE recordkeeping. There may be a women-only HE class this summer in the Glasgow area, and a Becoming an Outdoors Woman shotgun and bird hunting workshop is planned in September.

The Hooked on Fishing and Kids to Fish programs are thriving. The Comm-Ed summer intern, Josh Van Woert, will be helping with the delivery of loaner rods and tackle to sites across the Hi-Line, as well as work on youth fishing activities at the Governor's Cup walleye tournament, the Fort Peck-Glasgow Walleyes Unlimited fishing day and at least one clinic planned at Glasgow's Home Run Pond.

Applications for candidates to fill expiring Region 6 CAC terms will be accepted through June 15.

Ron plans to attend fairs in Havre, Glasgow and Plentywood this summer. Several CAC members again offered to help staff booths and tables. As the Region 6 Crossing the

Barriers representative, Ron recently attended a conference on accessible recreation led by the U.S. Forest Service's national program director.

## **PRAIRIE DOG RESEARCH**

Region 6 nongame biologist Ryan Rauscher gave a presentation on last year's statewide prairie dog survey. The Montana Prairie Dog Working Group previously came up with the management objective of 90,000 to 140,000 acres of occupied habitat, but Ryan said that even though the objective used the best information at the time, more-accurate methods of estimating occupied acres had yet to be developed.

This survey was the first time that black-tailed prairie dogs, which are considered a "species of concern" in Montana, have been fully inventoried on a statewide basis. The survey was conducted county-by-county in the areas the animals were already known to occur.

A percentage of the flown transects were followed up by ground-truthing to determine exactly what was being observed from the air. In all, Ryan said more than 35,000 miles of air transects were run, and about 600 colonies of the animals were detected.

The survey estimated that the statewide acreage of active, occupied black-tailed prairie dog habitat is actually about 193,866 acres. He said another prairie dog survey will likely take place in three years.

## **CAC ROUNDTABLE**

**Robert Smith, Poplar** – Robert has spoken to a person who would like to be involved in FWP's adopt-a-fish program, especially concerning the tracking of walleyes. He's seeing lots of pheasants around his area, but not a lot of deer. As a communication tool to reach a younger audience, FWP should consider having an online presence on the Facebook Web site.

**Rich Stuker, Chinook** – There are a lot of deer around his place, especially mule deer. Some of his neighbors would like to see an increase in hunting opportunities there. Some people in his area are saying FWP isn't contributing enough for weed control. Not many pheasants around. Rich would like to see more public/sportsmen education focusing on landowner relations.

**Dustin Hill, Scobey** – He's not seen any fawns yet in the Scobey area. Upland birds appear to be nesting now. Quite a few deer died in town during the winter.

**Steve Sukut, Glasgow** – More deer tags are needed during the regular rifle season. This would take the emphasis off game management hunts, which now take place when many folks have quit hunting for the year. FWP should further reduce the price for extra tags, as well as offer more youth-only licenses. Steve also would like to see mandatory big

game harvest reporting instated in Montana. That would reduce the amount of staff needed to conduct the current phone surveys, as well as improve the quality of the data.

Steve inquired about the status of the proposed Cornwell Ranch conservation easement. Pat said the project has been removed from statewide priorities. Steve also requested details about a recent bighorn sheep case in the Missouri Breaks. Mike Herman said no information can be released because charges are pending.

**John Crohn, Dagmar** – More doe hunters are needed in his area. By the time game damage problems became severe this past winter, it was difficult to access many off-road areas because of deep snow. John thanked FWP for the help he received controlling deer. Nonetheless, he still had 40 to 50 deer die on his property. There are a lot of waterfowl nesting in his area now.

**Carl Totman, Malta** - This is Carl's last CAC meeting, and fellow member Dennis Idler also will not be seeking reappointment. FWP staff thanked both men for their service. Carl had several questions about Fort Peck Hatchery operations. Hatchery Manager Charlie Bridgham provided an update.

**Bernie Hart, Hinsdale** – There was no apparent loss of deer or pheasants in his area during the winter. Pheasants now seem to be nesting in natural cover, instead of in cultivated alfalfa fields.

**Tom Burch, Fort Peck** – Tom would like to see Region 6 publish a fishing pond booklet like the one distributed annually out of Region 7. Steve Dalbey replied that enhancing area pond fishing opportunities is a high priority, and several options are being looked at to get word out to the public, including a potential statewide data base that would be accessible through the FWP Web site.

**Scott Billingsley, Glasgow** – Scott reiterated his support for improving pond fishing sites across the Region. Youth fishing ponds need to have special attention when it comes to stocking. With the Fort Peck Hatchery now able to raise trout, it should be much easier and more economical to plant more fish across the Region.

Scott said the Block Management program needs to be analyzed to determine what is working and what is not. The largest abuse he's seen comes from illegal off-road vehicle use. The CAC could have a larger impact on the way the Block Management program is run. One idea would be to gather a list of cooperating landowners' biggest concerns.

John Crohn suggested that FWP should erect more signs concerning allowable and banned off-road use.

Scott updated the group on the recent Region 6 turkey transplants. He also discussed the American Prairie Foundation's (APF) programs and his concerns that APF lands now open for public access will be shut down in the future.

Rich Stuker agreed that APF's activities need to be closely watched. Regarding Block Management violations, he feels that local justice officials in his area are too easy on violators.

**Fran Buell, Gildford** – Fran reminded the group about the 2009 youth trapper camp. She also reviewed the Montana Trappers Association's (MTA) involvement in trying to prevent an anti-hunting initiative from getting on the ballot. MTA has hired an advisory group called PAC/WEST to help. MTA may need assistance from other groups in coming months.

**Darlyne Dascher, Glasgow** – Darlyne agreed that more doe deer need to be harvested. She's seeing a lot of antelope fawns, but many are singles, instead of the usual twins. She's also noticing a lot of geese around, perhaps more than ever.

**Connie Iversen, Culbertson** – Some sharp-tailed grouse leks have been found on their property. She's also seeing a lot of pheasants. Russian olive trees are listed as a noxious weed, but they serve as important food source, especially for wintering birds. They also will grow where many other types of vegetation won't. Connie agreed that game damage hunts should take place earlier whenever possible.

**Les Schaaf, Saco** – He's hearing some concerns from neighboring landowners about future management of FWP's newly acquired property in the Cree Crossing area. Harold replied that enhancement projects there are already underway.

Les said there are still lots of deer around in the Saco area. He also inquired about the history of the current Bureau of Reclamation recreation site and campground at Nelson Reservoir.

Pat distributed a report on tribal relations. Bridge access issues were also discussed, as well as the potential for increased CAC involvement in a wide variety of FWP issues. Gary and Darlyne suggested that the CAC draw up a priority list for future activities.

The next meeting was set for Saturday, Aug. 22 in Malta.

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