

**Region 6 Citizens Advisory Council Minutes**  
**August 22, 2009**  
**Great Northern Inn, Malta**

CAC members present: Fran Buell, Jason Deming, Les Schaaf, Don Groven, Stan Lund, Connie Iversen, Tom Burch, Steve Harada, Bernie Hart, Darlyne Dascher, Scott Billingsley, Rich Stuker

CAC members absent: Steve Sukut, Dustin Hill, Robert Smith

FWP staff present: Pat Gunderson, Harold Wentland, Mike Herman, Tyler Haddix, Cody Nagel, Mark Sullivan, Ron Selden

Guests: Ron Moody, Fish, Wildlife & Parks Commissioner, District 3, Lewistown; Andrew Jakes, University of Calgary

Pat Gunderson welcomed the group. New members Jason Deming, Don Groven, Stan Lund and Steve Harada and reappointed member Scott Billingsley were recognized. No public comments were offered.

Pat noted that Harold Wentland is retiring at the end of the year, so this will be his last CAC meeting after 28 years as the regional wildlife manager and a total of 41 years of service with the agency.

Information officer Ron Selden reviewed the role and duties of the CAC and staff fielded questions from the new members. Ron Moody further discussed the importance of advisory groups and explained that increased CAC input to the Commission would be looked upon favorably.

Representatives of the Rancher's Stewardship Alliance were unavailable to make their presentation and will be rescheduled at a future meeting.

University of Calgary doctoral student Andrew Jakes gave an update on the international pronghorn study, now in its second year along the U.S. and Alberta and Saskatchewan borders.

Andrew noted that remaining native prairie comprises only about 20 percent of the landscape in Saskatchewan and only about 40 percent of the landscape in Alberta. Pronghorn are considered to be one of the northern prairie's primary indicator species, meaning that their complex biological requirements are intertwined with many other plants and animal species, thus serving as a marker for overall ecosystem health and function.

Andrew explained that plans are in place to approximately double the number of natural gas wells in the Bowdoin Gas Field in north Phillips County, and one aspect of the study

is to examine what impacts, if any, increased development will have on pronghorn habitat selection and migration movements in the area. Pat Gunderson followed with a presentation on the Northern Sagebrush Steppe Initiative, a partnership between FWP and wildlife agencies in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Along with research and management of pronghorns, the initiative group is monitoring other issues of mutual concern, including sage grouse, mule deer, swift fox, non-game species, chronic wasting disease and energy development. Increasing the accuracy of cross-border mapping is also an issue that should be resolved.

### **FWP PROGRAM UPDATES**

**PARKS:** Pat discussed a number of parks-related issues, including the recent purchase of a potential Park property at the confluence of the Milk and Missouri rivers by another private party.

**ENFORCEMENT:** Warden Captain Mike Herman reviewed regional staffing. Warden Ryan Linder is transferring from Havre to Plentywood, and Todd Tryan is continuing his work in the Fort Peck district now that he's moved to Glasgow.

Mike said one more defendant remains to be sentenced in the Bergtoll poaching case, which involved longtime abuse of FWP's landowner-sponsored license program. Several other unrelated wildlife cases will soon be working their way through the court system.

Don Groven inquired about the perceived lack of enforcement at Fresno Reservoir. Mike replied that if more wardens were available, the area would certainly receive additional attention.

**COMMUNICATION AND EDUCATION:** Ron provided updates on regional Hunter and Bowhunter Education programs and issues revolving around the new online systems, especially regarding field day requirements. An instructor appreciation event is being scheduled for the Havre area. Others will follow.

There are now more than 300 fishing rods available to borrow across the Hi-Line through the "Kids to Fish" program, which has been expanded to more than 30 sites. Summer intern Josh Van Woert was a key player in completing the expansion. Josh also helped with youth fishing events sponsored by Walleyes Unlimited at Fort Peck Reservoir, at Tiber Reservoir, at a free clinic at Glasgow's Home Run Pond, and with Wolf Point summer school classes.

"Hooked on Fishing" schedules for the 2009-10 school year are being developed in Havre's public system and in the St. Jude's School. Wolf Point may also be joining the program this year.

A "Beyond Becoming an Outdoors Woman" shotgun and bird hunting workshop, co-sponsored by the BLM and the National Wild Turkey Federation, is set for Sept. 12 at the

Glasgow Trap Club. So far about half of the workshop's quota of 20 participants have signed up.

Ron and other FWP employees staffed fair booths in Havre, Glasgow and Plentywood this summer.

**WILDLIFE:** Mark Sullivan thanked Harold for all his years of service. He noted that the Havre biologist position is being held open for vacancy savings. It is not yet known how long the Region 6 wildlife manager position will remain unfilled after Harold retires.

Mark reviewed recent big game survey findings. Pronghorn numbers look good overall, despite the hard winter. Decreases were observed in some northern areas, although the declines were not as large as expected. The pronghorn quota in Hunting District (HD) 600 was reduced from 900 to 700 animals.

White-tailed deer numbers remain very high across the Region. While there were some winter impacts, the animals appear to have rebounded. That's prompted another surge of additional antlerless "Deer B" licenses being available this year. Instead of conducting them later in the year, two deer management seasons will instead coincide with the general season this fall in a number of districts.

Mark said mule deer numbers appear to be mostly stable in the Region, with some increases noted in the Plentywood area and some decreases observed around Havre. Regarding elk, numbers are still high in the Bear's Paw Mountains and in portions of the Missouri River Breaks, especially in HD 622, which includes the Larb Hills. Limited hunter access is still the biggest issue there.

An open house for the public to discuss proposals for the 2010-11 hunting seasons is set for 6 – 9 p.m. August 27 at the Valley County Courthouse in Glasgow.

Upland bird numbers generally look good in the Region, except in parts of the eastern end, where severe winter weather clearly had impacts. Sage grouse counts in Valley County were way up over past years. But the West Nile virus, which becomes more prevalent this time of year, remains a threat.

There are 296 Block Management program cooperators this year covering about 1 million acres in Region 6. Improvements are being made at the newly acquired 400 acres of Milk River bottom in the Cree Crossing area.

Projects include tearing down old structures, managing grain and cover to benefit game, non-game animals and birds and constructing three parking areas. Access to the Cree Crossing WMA will be walk-in only. Mark also reviewed the pending translocation of swift fox to the Fort Peck Indian Reservation.

Don Groven inquired about elk issues and the availability of outfitter licenses. Rich Stuker asked why several former Block Management cooperators were not in the

program this year. Andrew Jakes asked about elk from the Bear's Paw Mountains being harvested on the Rocky Boy's Indian Reservation.

**FISHERIES:** Tyler Haddix reviewed the history of pallid sturgeon in the Missouri and Yellowstone river basins and presented updates on ongoing research. He noted that there has been no documented natural spawning of native pallids in these dam-affected reaches during the past 40 years. Tyler also discussed Intake Dam issues on the Yellowstone River and the Corps of Engineers' decision to remove that obstruction while apparently delaying flow testing on Fort Peck Dam that might also be a major benefit to pallids.

Mike Ruggles, the Lower Missouri River fisheries coordinator, has recent relocated to a biologist position in FWP Region 5.

Stan Lund asked how irrigators would get water if Intake Dam is removed. Tyler explained the proposed design, which would preserve flows while creating a diversion. Connie Iversen is deeply involved in Missouri Basin issues and offered to give regular updates to the CAC if the group desires. Tom Burch inquired about impacts to paddlefish snagging at Intake if the dam is pulled out. Tyler surmised that the changes could be substantial if the fish no longer stack up there in the spring.

Scott Billingsley and Steve Harada asked for more details about the proposed study of Fort Peck release-water temperatures. Steve also had questions about the condition of saugers below Fort Peck Dam. Tyler noted that saugers do well in available habitat in the lower river, but growth is slowed by the cold water being released at the dam.

Havre biologist Cody Nagel went over summer pond sampling data from Phillips and Valley counties. About 50 ponds have been completed so far this year. BLM is providing four aeration systems that are being installed on area impoundments.

Cody also reviewed 2009 young-of-year sampling data from Nelson, Beaver and Fresno reservoirs. He said abundant moisture has helped create a very good year for forage fish in these water bodies. Sampling of adults there will take place in September.

Steve Harada had questions about walleye year classes and natural recruitment in Nelson Reservoir. Fran Buell asked about the impacts of pelicans on game fish populations. Ron Moody noted that the issue of pelican predation was raised at a recent meeting of biologists and managers from Montana, Wyoming and Idaho. Despite beliefs to the contrary, he said pelicans are typically selective feeders.

Scott Billingsley had several questions about stocked ponds in Region 6. While there has been a lot of sampling on the western end, ponds located in the eastern end haven't gotten as much attention. When he was growing up in the Glasgow area, a variety of stocked ponds that were good for fishing were never more than a half-hour away. That is not true today.

Don Groven added that many of these ponds are hard to find. There should be better signs and maps. Pat noted that a number of changes in regional pond management will be forthcoming.

### **CAC ROUNDTABLE**

During the roundtable discussion, several members mentioned that based on their experience and what they've heard from others, the Block Management program is one of the department's best.

A number of members also said they thought running this year's deer management seasons concurrently with the general big game season was a good idea, in part because deer are still in good shape then and fewer bucks will be taken because they still have their antlers attached.

**Fran Buell, Gildford** – Fran said coyote, fox and badger numbers in area appear to be increasing. These animals cause a variety of problems for producers. Hungarian partridge broods seem to be way down this year.

Fran also updated the group on the anti-trapping initiative now being reviewed by the Montana Attorney General's office. Proponents contend the measure would only have financial impact of \$47,000 on the state's trapping business. Fran said the actual impact would be far higher. She added that the proposed initiative would make state agencies responsible for all nuisance animal complaints.

**Stan Lund, Plentywood** – Stan went over his personal and professional background for the group. Sheridan County contains a lot of good upland bird habitat, but weather is probably the biggest limiting factor. Stan discussed the ongoing dispute over HD 640 boundaries.

**Rich Stuker, Chinook** – Some producers in his area won't allow pheasant hunters on their land until deer season opens because of fears that deer will be pushed off and not be harvested. Weeds also remain a big concern when out-of-area hunters show up.

Rich disagrees with recent FWP deer estimates in the Chinook area. He believes the numbers are considerably higher than what the department has estimated. As a result, he thinks licenses should be increased in HD 600, not reduced.

Rich is seeing a lot of turkeys on his land now but wonders about future management. Harold said no further transplanting is planned in that area at this time.

Rich said some producers change from Block Management to outfitters because they can get the same money or more and have fewer problems. He'd like to see BMA restrictions put on the front of the sheets hunters receive at the sites, instead of the area maps.

Ron Moody discussed the issue of hunter behavior, both positive and negative. He also talked about the hunter stewardship program he's been shepherding that may be launched on the FWP Web site this fall.

Rich added many fish and game cases end up with weak sentences or the perpetrators get off completely. Perhaps there should be mandatory minimums enacted for those convicted of such crimes.

**Steve Harada, Wolf Point** –The draft Upper Missouri River Management Plan will soon be coming up for public comment. Perhaps the Region 6 CAC should weigh in, especially on getting the 20 walleye-per-day limit reduced. The CAC also could potentially review the Russian olive issue and develop management recommendations based on the fact that the plant is classified as noxious yet can be highly beneficial to upland birds and wildlife.

**Don Groven, Havre** – Don said he's pleased to be appointed to represent the Havre area on the CAC, because the largest community on the Hi-Line needs to have more say in resource management issues.

He's hearing of good numbers of elk and mule deer in the Bear's Paw Mountains, but he agreed that the lack of public access there is an issue that needs more attention. Don would like to see more outdoor education in the public schools, especially concerning hunting and fishing. Perhaps more videos for classroom use could be developed.

**Bernie Hart, Hinsdale** – Upland bird and white-tailed deer numbers appear to be good in his area. He's been appointed to the new Upland Game Bird Enhancement Program Advisory Council, created by the 2009 Legislature. He'd appreciate input from other CAC members to help him with his work on the panel.

**Jason Deming, Sidney** – Jason had several questions about elk management south of the Missouri River and north of Highway 200. It appears that having a general elk season there has a heavy impact on elk numbers. Pat replied that the liberal regulations are designed to keep elk populations at a minimum where landowner tolerance for the animals is low. There is also the issue of trying to minimize the potential for chronic wasting disease spreading from elk in Saskatchewan and keeping North Dakota elk movements from east to west at a minimum.

Jason also asked about discrepancies regarding how some tracts of isolated public land can be reached, especially from neighboring fence corners. It also seems like there isn't a lot of private land in his area enrolled in Block Management, and that the Sidney area seems to be a "forgotten corner" of Region 6. Harold explained the Block Management enrollment process and reviewed program criteria. He added that there is always a waiting list of landowners wanting to join the program.

**Scott Billingsley, Glasgow** – He's hearing continued complaints about hunters setting up and leaving tree stands in the CMR earlier and earlier each year. There are also a number

of folks who are still not happy with the changes made to the archery permit system last year.

Scott said he's also bothered by Russian olives being listed as a nuisance species, and that classification should be changed. He's hearing good reports on upland bird hatches in the Glasgow area, including the turkeys that were transplanted along the Milk River earlier this year.

Scott reiterated his concerns about the American Prairie Foundation's (APF) activities in Region 6. While much of the group's lands are open for public access now, he fears those opportunities will eventually be shut down.

He understands that FWP doesn't want to be in the land business, but something needs to be done to see that as much land as possible remains accessible across the state. He also believes there should be increased surveying of Block Management cooperators to gather more of their viewpoints about the program.

Ron Moody said people who are worried about APF and similar organizations should become more involved in the BLM planning process, because ties to surrounding federal land are a key factor when these types of acquisitions are being considered. He agreed that as an agency, FWP doesn't want to be a large landowner. Part of this reluctance stems from strong opposition from the state's agricultural community. But a lot of people don't realize that FWP still pays property taxes on land it owns.

Rich Stuker added that many agricultural producers are looking at conservation easements more favorably than they did in the past.

**Les Schaaf, Saco** – Despite the tough winter, he's seeing a lot of antelope around. Les questioned whether the recent changes in archery-hunter management in the Breaks reduced crowding. Pat explained that last year's archery license sales in the affected districts were set the same as the previous year. But this season the license numbers will decrease a bit.

Les also asked for more details about the Block Management program and how lands are chosen.

**Darlyne Dascher, Fort Peck** – She agrees that having the deer management seasons earlier is a positive step for the department. She's hearing good fishing reports from Fort Peck Reservoir. She also recently saw a boat being washed down at a car wash in Glasgow. That shows that the public education message about aquatic nuisance species is finally catching on.

**Connie Iversen, Culbertson** – Connie is in favor of making field days mandatory for students who complete their Hunter Education course online. She added that some conservation districts do public education work, especially revolving around water issues.

**Tom Burch, Fort Peck** – Tom asked whether FWP funding for CACs was being cut. Pat replied that some money was held back from regional budgets this year to cover vacancy savings, but that money had not been specifically earmarked for CACs.

While Tom supports the change in management season timing, he still maintains that purchasers of a “Deer A” license in Montana should be given a free “Deer B” license. That might prove to be the best way to reduce antlerless deer numbers, especially with hunter numbers continuing to decline across the nation.

He noted that in California last year, less than 1 percent of the state’s population bought a hunting license. And in Great Falls, camouflage hats can’t even be worn in the public schools.

**CAC WORK PLAN:**

A discussion took place on the role of the CAC and what projects the group might want to become involved in during the coming year.

Tom said that it sometimes seems that the information flow at CAC meetings is backward from what it should be – meaning that most of the allotted time is used for agency presentations, rather than gathering input from members of the council.

Connie suggested that the roundtable section should perhaps be expanded by a half-hour at each meeting. Steve said it would be helpful to have information packets distributed beforehand. Scott said he’d like to see the Commission gather more advice from CACs, which operate in each of FWP’s seven regions. Ron Moody reiterated the need for such input.

Members and staff briefly discussed items on a previous priority list. Members will contact Ron with other priority issues. Potential January dates for the next quarterly CAC meeting, to take place in Havre, will be forwarded in coming weeks.

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