

**Region 6 Citizens Advisory Council Minutes**  
**September 14, 2010**  
**Fort Peck Fish Hatchery**

CAC members present: Jim Carver, Connie Iversen, Don Groven, Steve Harada, Darlyne Dascher, Bernie Hart, Mark Peterson, Fran Buell, Henry Gordon, Stan Lund, Scott Billingsley

CAC members absent: Les Schaaf (submitted written comments); Jason Deming (submitted written comments); Tom Burch, Dustin Hill

FWP staff present: Steve Dalbey, Mike Herman, Kelvin Johnson, Ron Selden, Woody Baxter, Michael Nye, Charlie Bridgham

Guest: Aaron Johnson, Fort Peck Field Station Manager, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge

Steve Dalbey welcomed the group and reviewed the agenda. Jim Carver of Malta, Mark Peterson of Havre and Henry Gordon of Chinook were welcomed as new members; incumbent members Connie Iversen and Bernie Hart are starting second terms.

**FWP PROGRAM UPDATES**

Region 6 program managers submitted written updates to members prior to the meeting. Fran had questions about a proposal to provide sage grouse for translocation to Alberta and what FWP's position is on potential listing of the bird on the federal Endangered Species Act.

Kelvin explained that we do extensive monitoring of sage grouse in Region 6. Bird numbers are strong in this part of the state, and the FWP Commission in August gave preliminary approval to the Alberta proposal. Fran said she still has concerns that we're doing the right thing.

Henry said he'd like to sage grouse hunting closed in Montana so populations could increase. He feels they are easy to wipe out, primarily because they're not very wary. Sage grouse numbers today are nothing like when he was growing up. Mark said he would agree with a ban on hunting them, at least temporarily.

Steve Harada said he reviewed the latest Fort Peck Reservoir sampling data. He's heard that walleye fishing has been very good this year and the fish are very healthy. He praised local fish managers for their accomplishments. He also asked how this year's data looks when compared to long-term trends. Steve Dalbey said he'd get that information to him.

Darlyne had questions about a pending mountain lion study on the CMR and whether FWP is going to take a more aggressive stance in lion management in light of cat numbers seeming to increase in Region 6.

Aaron said ongoing study of lions in the Little Rockies indicates lots of movement. CMR is now going through the collection-permitting process with FWP to begin a study there. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's stance is that lion hunting won't be allowed on the CMR until they have a better population estimate.

Bernie said he's heard a number of ranchers saying that they think lion numbers are increasing, especially in areas south of Malta. He thinks FWP will be surprised at the actual numbers once we gather more data. Fran noted that trappers in Eastern Montana have had more incidental catches of lions in recent years. Mark said there have been numerous lion sightings over the past five years in the area where he lives north of Havre.

Steve Dalbey asked if Region 6 has any long-term trend information on lions. Kelvin said nongame biologist Ryan Rauscher has done some habitat plotting. Other than that, not a lot has been done at this point.

Darlyne thanked Woody for the recent improvements at the Rock Creek Fishing Access Site (FAS) on Fort Peck Reservoir. Woody said he's still trying to encourage the Corps of Engineers to build a new campground in that area.

### **CAC ROUNDTABLE**

**Steve Harada, Wolf Point** – Steve recently noticed that the U.S. flag in front of the hatchery was tattered. Hatchery manager Charlie Bridgham said new flags are ordered, and he'll ensure that all staff members keep a closer eye on their wear.

**Don Groven, Havre** – FWP has said the highest priority for fisheries management will be on the larger water bodies that are closest to the state's population centers. There are news releases put out when perch get moved to ponds, but no public notice is given when any stocking takes place at the large reservoirs, including Fresno. The perch fishing at Fresno isn't very good. Don would still like to see perch transplanted there from Lake Mary Ronan in western Montana.

Don also expressed concern about a specific enforcement case at Fresno. Mike Herman said each warden decides for themselves whether or not to issue citations in a given case.

**Henry Gordon, Chinook** – He wants to find new opportunities to get kids out hunting, especially in the Bears Paw Mountains. Access continues to be tight there, even though there are a lot of deer and elk. He has 400 to 500 deer on his place. Unfortunately, not many hunters want to harvest does.

**Mark Peterson, Havre** – Maybe there's some carryover from the days when deer hunting was bucks-only in some areas, and people got used to not shooting does. On

another issue, when FWP opened up general elk hunting on the north side of U.S. Highway 2, a lot more road hunters started showing up.

There's been a good response to the extra pressure from our wardens, but more tickets need to be written for wasting meat. He's seen too many animals shot by out-of-area hunters and then not properly taken care of.

Mark said he'd like to see a longer dove season in Montana, because most of the birds are usually already gone by Sept. 1. He also feels that mule deer numbers are down in the Breaks, especially in parts of the CMR.

Mark would like to learn how fish stocking is managed in the Region, especially in regards to deciding how many fish are stocked where. Steve Dalbey explained the process in a later discussion of fisheries issues. Mark praised the Fresno Chapter of Walleyes Unlimited for pushing for federal recreational use designation for that reservoir and encouraged FWP to get more campsites on Fresno's north end.

He's not seeing very many bird hunters around in his area anymore. There's lots of food and cover, but he's not sure about bird numbers because he doesn't see that many around.

Regarding landowner relations, Mark said FWP "needs to work with BLM to be more open and honest with landowners" about resource management issues. There shouldn't be so many surprises.

The group discussed the controversy over the U.S. Department of Interior "Treasured Landscapes" memo. Ron said that FWP has no position on the issue, in part because there isn't even a formal proposal being advanced at this point. CAC member Les Schaaf had inquired about the issue in written comments.

Mark said that while he appreciates what FWP does and tries to do, we need to keep in mind that all of our actions have an effect on someone.

**Jim Carver, Malta** – Jim added to the national monument discussion. He later asked for an update on McNeil Slough near Nelson Reservoir, which Steve Dalbey provided.

**Stan Lund, Plentywood** – Stan discussed the economic importance of upland bird hunting in the northeastern corner of the Region. He's seeing more antelope in his area and would like someone give him an update on the cross-border pronghorn study.

He'd like to come up with some new ideas for getting more deer does harvested. Maybe allocating some licenses directly to landowners could help make it easier for hunters. Deer numbers look pretty good in his area, but big-game hunter numbers seem to be decreasing. Stan said he's personally used outfitters several times in the past, and he feels they provide a needed service for hunters and they shouldn't be criticized so much.

**Bernie Hart, Hinsdale** – Deer numbers look very good around the area, especially in the Milk River Valley. A special youth deer hunt is scheduled for the two days they're not in school during the annual MEA convention in October. Wet weather this spring affected pheasant numbers in his area, and many birds seemed to have had second hatches to compensate. He asked why FWP doesn't sell three-day non-resident bird hunting licenses. Mike Herman said that non-residents traditionally get them in their combination license packages.

Bernie serves on the Upland Game Bird Enhancement Advisory Council and he's always looking for input. The group's next meeting is October 5 in Helena. He also discussed an incident where BLM agreed to remove fencing that was put up near a sage grouse lek.

Mark Peterson asked if part of game bird license revenue goes toward raising birds. Bernie said 15 percent of the revenue goes to raising birds and feeding them if needed during harsh winters. Mark also inquired about a new law regarding the feeding of wild animals. Mike Herman explained the supplement feeding regulation.

**Fran Buell, Gildford** – Despite having paid signature gatherers, I-160, the anti-trapping proposal, didn't make it on the ballot this year. She predicts anglers and hunters will be targeted next. She thanked the CAC members for voting to oppose I-160, but was unclear why the paperwork didn't get pushed through to have the group formally listed as an opponent.

The Montana Trappers Association (MTA) has decided to take a legislative route to combat the anti-trapping movement. She said a related bill may be introduced in the 2011 session by state Sen. Taylor Brown (R-Huntley Project).

Fran said she also wants to see more kids hunting. Maybe it would be a good idea for FWP to sponsor hunter and bow hunter youth camps like the MTA does each year for trapping. She's working with FWP staff in Helena to update the trapper education manual.

Trappers are happy about having the new season for swift fox. Fran is seeing a few deer around her place, but no fawns. Antelope numbers also seem to be down.

She expressed concern about the American Prairie Foundation (APF) and its land acquisition program in Region 6. She's fearful that APF property will no longer be open for public use.

**Connie Iversen, Culbertson** – She's seeing lots of deer and antelope fawns in her area, but pheasant numbers appear to be down. There are lots of concerns in the Culbertson area about talk of a new national monument potentially being created. She asked whether the Kids to Fish rod loaner program is taking place anywhere else in the state. Ron said Region 4 has tried a limited version but it is unknown if the program is still going there.

Connie received a request to get more information about the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) teaming with FWP to put some kind of incentives on land that's coming out of the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP).

**Darlyne Dascher, Fort Peck** – The fishing has been good on Fort Peck Reservoir this summer. She's also hearing from a lot of ranchers about bison issues and talk of a potential national monument in the area. Aaron Johnson noted that even though they get lumped into the discussion, no CMR lands are being considered for inclusion into any national monuments. Henry asked for clarification about various federal land designations in regards to the CMR and the existing Upper Missouri River Breaks National Monument.

**Scott Billingsley, Glasgow** – He has a lot of concerns about I-161, which would abolish outfitter-sponsored big game licenses. He's asked to have a presentation about the issue at this meeting, but that request was denied.

He keeps hearing reports of turkey numbers continuing to increase in the Glasgow-Hinsdale area, thanks to transplanting that took place two winters ago. The National Wild Turkey Federation soon plans to request another translocation of birds in the Hinsdale area, he said, adding it makes a lot of sense to build up turkey numbers here because there's a lot of public access available.

Scott also voiced his ongoing concerns about APF and predicted that the BLM will eventually do some sort of land swapping with the group. APF is also tied to the World Wildlife Fund, which is an anti-hunting organization.

**Jason Deming, Sidney** – In written comments, Jason inquired about the status of Kuester Lake. He tracked down some ownership information about the site, as well as more details about the status of the dam.

## **FISHERIES UPDATE**

Steve Dalbey reviewed details about ongoing pond sampling across the Region. Nineteen ponds have been surveyed so far this year, and multiple batches of crappie and perch have been transplanted.

A good water year has definitely helped production at many of our small reservoirs and ponds, which provide fishing opportunities for youngsters, families, people with disabilities and other anglers who can't or don't prefer to utilize the Region's larger water bodies.

Steve said Region 6 pond survey data will soon be put into a booklet format similar to what's being done in Region 7. The long-term plan is to also have this information available on the FWP Web site soon after the data is gathered.

Steve presented details on this year's fish surveys on Fort Peck Reservoir and discussed the outlook for chinook salmon. Overall, we're seeing good survival and growth this year in gamefish stocks, in part because of reservoir water levels continuing to rise. He noted that Fort Peck Reservoir's management plan expires next year, and that there will be many opportunities for the public to weigh in on any proposed changes.

Aaron Johnson inquired about BLM ponds in the area. Scott Billingsley said there used to be a lot more ponds around, but many have dried up over the years. Others weren't stocked regularly, so they grew out of favor with the public. Mark Peterson said there are so many check dams in his area that natural runoff has essentially been stopped. Steve added there is now some funding available to repair the dam at the highly productive Cow Creek Reservoir south of Chinook.

Steve also updated the group on the aquatic invasive plant species that have recently been found near Canyon Ferry Reservoir and in the Dredge Cuts.

Charlie Bridgman gave production updates for the Fort Peck and Miles City hatcheries and noted that cold weather throughout the spring and summer made it difficult to raise enough walleyes to fully meet statewide stocking requests. He also noted that the growing season for fish is very short here, and it doesn't help that many of the local game species spawn at about the same time.

Steve Harada asked what the future plans are for the Fort Peck hatchery now that operational funding has been at least partially smoothed out. Charlie said he'd like to eventually raise crappie, largemouth bass, sunfish and other types of warmwater fish. But there are no formal requests for those species right now. Mark Peterson asked if these species would detract from the other fish that are currently being raised. Charlie said they would not.

Charlie also explained the upcoming changes in the hatchery's funding formula once the state's warmwater fishing stamp expires.

Bernie Hart asked about the status of sauger in the area. Steve said not a lot is known because very little data has been collected on the species. Scott Billingsley asked about Fort Peck water level predictions for the coming year. Steve explained that three years of "front-loading" on the walleye fishery doesn't necessarily mean good fishing next year. That's because a strong forage base can keep fish full of feed and not biting.

Steve Harada said there's been some good perch fishing recently in Fort Peck. He asked what could be done to keep perch numbers up. Charlie said he would work with the lake fisheries crew to come up with a plan. Steve Dalbey noted that we're at the northern limits of their range for some panfish species, including crappie, bluegill and sunfish.

## **BISON & WOLVES**

Kelvin discussed the current legal status of wolves in regards to the federal Endangered Species Act and presented information about FWP's preliminary scoping efforts on bison. He noted that the environmental impact statement process would need to be triggered if things were to progress any further.

Bernie Hart said the key to him is to keep bison classified as domestic livestock. Then they could be more tightly controlled. Kelvin said neither the CMR nor the BLM have bison in their current management plan, and they're differing to FWP on the issue.

Kelvin also detailed a number of partnerships FWP has with a variety of non-governmental organizations in Region 6. These include the cross-border antelope study, ongoing swift fox translocations and a mountain lion study in the Little Rockies with the World Wildlife Fund and APF assistance while FWP biologists survey elk in the Breaks. Such partnerships make sense, he said, in part because FWP has very limited funding and staff for projects.

Henry Gordon had questions about an FWP conservation easement on the former Cowell Ranch now that APF has bought the land. Jim Carver also asked why it isn't a "double-dip" if landowners with such easements also receive money from the Block Management (BMA) program. Kelvin explained that the issue has already been resolved through a legislative audit, and it was determined that such payments are proper.

### **BLOCK MANAGEMENT UPDATE**

Michael "Mikey" Nye said there were more than 66,000 hunter-days last year in Region 6 BMAs. The BMA hunter access guides will again be available on our Web site this year, as well as most maps for individual tracts. This year we have more than 300 BMA cooperators signed on for more than 1 million acres in the Region. She's planning to organize "rancher-appreciation" volunteer work project events with some of these landowners.

Scott Billingsley asked what the main reasons are for landowners pulling out of the BMA program. Mikey said the reasons include leasing to outfitters, land being sold and political issues where landowners want to make a statement. Aaron Johnson asked how potential BMA properties are chosen, and Mikey went through the steps of the ranking process.

Aaron also led a lengthy discussion on the CMR's Draft Comprehensive Conservation Plan. Darlyne noted that public comments on the plan can come from anywhere and anyone, not just from neighboring ranchers and communities. Aaron said he often has to remind folks that public lands in the federal system have 310 million owners, the approximate population of the entire United States.

### **FWP STAFF ACTION ITEMS:**

- Provide Fort Peck Reservoir historical walleye trend data for Steve Harada

- Provide update on Kuester Lake access issues for Jason Deming
- Provide an update on the cross-border antelope study for Stan Lund
- Follow-up with Fran Buell regarding I-160 correspondence from the CAC
- Follow-up with Connie Iversen about NRCS and FWP offering some type of incentives for outgoing CRP lands
- Follow-up with Henry Gordon on whether \$500,000 worth of FWP fencing on the former Cowell Ranch was pulled out after APF bought the property

The next CAC meeting is scheduled for 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on January 14 at the Fort Peck Hatchery. Please submit potential agenda items to Pat Gunderson or Ron Selden.

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