Region 6 Citizens Advisory Council Minutes
January 10, 2012
Cottonwood Inn, Glasgow

CAC members present: Jim Carver, Connie Iversen, Henry Gordon, Bernie Hart, Mark Peterson, Stan Lund, Terry Stoppa, Steve Harada, Jason Holt

CAC members absent: Don Groven, Bob Waldron, Jason Deming, Scott Billingsley, Steve Schindler

FWP staff present: Pat Gunderson, Mike Herman, Mark Sullivan, Steve Dalbey, Ron Selden

Guests: Milton Berglee, Wolf Point, bow hunter education instructor; Jack Billingsley, Glasgow-area landowner and outfitter

During the public comment section, Berglee noted that big game numbers are way down in many areas across the state. He realizes there are many reasons behind the downturns, but FWP needs to nonetheless considering decreasing even more harvest quotas so the animals are able to adequately recover.

At the same time, he said, FWP should increase the number of available licenses for mountain lions, wolves, bears and other predators. Steve Harada and Bernie Hart agreed. That led to a discussion about mountain lion numbers in Region.

Pat Gunderson noted that FWP is receiving a lot more calls about lion sightings. He also said the CAC could make a recommendation about lion quotas. The group was key in providing advice about the Fort Peck Hatchery, as well as voicing support for the warm-water fishing stamp that helped pay for the hatchery's annual operating expenses.

Gunderson added that the CAC's resolution from the last meeting recommending that no bison be transferred to FWP Region 6 was sent to the Director's office and was entered into the official record.

Some members expressed disappointment that the CAC recommendation wasn't publicized, which led to a discussion about whether a news release should be sent out to the media after such votes take place.

Gunderson provided an update on the issue of quarantined Yellowstone National Park bison that may be moved to the Fort Peck and Fort Belknap Indian Reservations. Mark Peterson said that once these bison are set free there, all outside control will be lost. Henry Gordon related stories of existing Fort Belknap bison escaping last winter and causing damage to area landowners. Connie Iversen, whose family has private land next to Fort Peck's current bison herd, said one of the biggest issues surrounding any further transfer of the animals will be enforcement of any agreements between the state and the tribes.

There was also continued discussion about how the animals will be tagged and tested, how damage mitigation would be handled, what would happen if the Fort Peck tribal herds unintentionally mix, and what would happen if animals escape from their impoundment. Terry Stoppa added that the main issue will be accountability.

WILDLIFE UPDATE

Wildlife Program Manager Mark Sullivan reviewed the 2011 hunting seasons, went through the current season-setting process, reviewed post-season deer surveys and gave an early preview of the 2012 seasons. Hart said he thinks deer hunters should be kept away from the areas that were hardest hit last year by the outbreak of epizootic hemorrhagic disease (EHD).

FISHERIES UPDATE

Fisheries Program Manager Steve Dalbey briefed the group on the positive and negatives impacts of the 2011 floods on the Milk and Missouri Rivers, gave an update on the pallid sturgeon recovery program, and reviewed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' 2012 annual operating plan for Fort Peck Reservoir.

Harada asked if any data was collected regarding the number of fish that were flushed out of the reservoir into the Missouri River via the Fort Peck Dam's spillway. Dalbey said fish definitely flushed through the system, but it's hard to know how many. Some sampling was done below the spillway, but not a lot of game fish were captured. More will be known when the Fort Peck walleye spawn gets underway this spring.

CAC ROUNDTABLE

Terry Stoppa, Havre – Terry said he's heard from several people in the Havre area with FWP-related management questions. They are:

1) Why can't big game hunting regulations be simplified?
2) Why does FWP allow game bird farms when other game farms were outlawed?
3) Bear Paw Lake has a three-trout limit. Some people think the limit there should be increased.

Dalbey said the fish limit was set during past drought years, when the fish needed added protection. Mike Herman noted that big-game farms aren't allowed because of the potential spread of chronic wasting disease. Bird farms in Montana can only use eggs that are certified to be disease-free.

Sullivan added that most of these farms raise pheasants that are purchased by FWP for release into the wild. While stocked bird survival is lower than naturally reared birds, Peterson said they do provide additional hunting opportunities.

Bernie Hart, Hinsdale – Bernie said he's been seeing a lot of snowy owls around his area. Also a lot more coyotes and beavers than usual.

Mark Peterson, Havre – Mark said there are virtually no deer on his place, very few pheasants, and about half the number of antelope than normal. Hungarian partridge and sharp-tailed grouse numbers seem to be fine, however. He noted that there have been quite a few wolf sightings being reported from the Missouri River Breaks, as well as some from around the Havre area.

He'd like to see FWP create more hunting opportunities for single parents, especially where fathers are out of the picture. Mark also praised the Havre-area wardens: "They have a large area to cover, and they do a great job."

Connie Iversen, Culbertson – Connie asked if wolves can be shot on sight if they're found bothering livestock. Gunderson said he'd get the wolf management rules out to members.

Connie said some folks in her area are advocating that the five-week deer season be cut by three weeks this year because of the low animal numbers. Regarding bison, a lot of people think the state has been arrogant in its handling of the issue.

Stan Lund, Plentywood – They're still seeing a large reduction of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) land in his area, in part because farming is a lot more profitable than it has been in the past. He noted that because of the oil boom, there's no place for visitors to stay overnight in the Plentywood area. That's going to impact hunter numbers. Antelope numbers are way down, and coyote numbers are way up.

Jim Carver, Malta – Road access around Fort Peck Reservoir needs to be improved, he said, because many areas are inaccessible to most people. There was good elk hunting in the Breaks last year, he said, and also good fishing on the reservoir.

Jim also asked if bighorn sheep populations are high enough in Hunting District 622 to raise the quota. Gunderson said a lot of the best habitat there is on the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge, and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has been reluctant to endorse any higher harvests.

Steve Harada, Wolf Point – Steve agreed that there needs to be better access on Fort Peck Reservoir, as well as along the lower Missouri River below Fort Peck Dam. He noted that the boat ramp at the Lewis & Clark Fishing Access Site is severely damaged, but people are still using it.

Steve added that big game regulations need to be simplified. There's also too many application deadlines. There should only be one deadline for all types of drawing applications, he said.

Henry Gordon, Chinook – He strongly supports the new hunts where youths are allowed to hunt for a few days before the general seasons. Antelope numbers are very low in his area, but there was very little impact on his land from the EHD outbreak that hit hardest farther down the Milk River toward Malta and Glasgow. Quite a few people in his area are talking about the bison issue. He also has some poaching on his property over the past year. FWP should consider having a special license for people who can't eat beef but still want to consume meat.

Jason Holt, Hinsdale – Some people are saying the FWP released wolves near Havre last year. Gunderson and Sullivan said that's not true. Jason had a question about whether it's illegal for someone to disturb legally set furbearer traps. Herman said that is a violation.

Jason said deer can be very hard on vegetation like chokecherries and buffalo berry. With deer numbers down, it might be a good time to enhance plantings of these cover and food species. It would also be good to have more range expertise within FWP. Sullivan noted that Malta-area biologist Scott Thompson has a master's degree in range management. Peterson said Hill County lost a third of its CRP lands last year, which equates to a lot of lost wildlife habitat.

Jason also thanked FWP wardens for doing such a good job of patrolling in his area.

Gunderson led a group discussion on the immediate impacts being caused by an increase in oilfield workers in some areas of the Region. Connie said they have a lot more problems in the Culbertson area now, especially with trespassing cases, more traffic, and more animals getting killed on the roadways.

Stan said the increase in traffic is probably the largest apparent change, which probably means there's more poaching going on, too. With increased oil and gas development, more roads get plowed in the winter. And that, in turn, increases access.

The next CAC meeting is scheduled for June 12 at the Fort Peck Hatchery. Please submit potential agenda items to Pat Gunderson or Ron Selden beforehand.

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