

Region 6 Citizens Advisory Council Minutes
Sept. 11, 2012
Fort Peck Hatchery

CAC members present: Steve Harada, Bob Waldron, Mark Peterson, Terry Stoppa, Connie Iversen, Jason Holt, Steve Schindler, Henry Gordon, Jim Carver, Carla Hunsley, Bryce Christensen, Dennis Jorgensen

CAC members absent: Bernie Hart

FWP staff present: Pat Gunderson, Mike Herman, Mark Sullivan, Steve Dalbey, Andy Fuerst, Scott Thompson, Ron Selden

Guests: Aaron Johnson, Fort Peck station manager, Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge (CMR); Ron Garwood, Nashua-area landowner; Lesley Robinson, Phillips County Commission; Randy Perez, water resources program director, Fort Belknap Tribes.

Gunderson welcomed new members Hunsley, Christensen and Jorgensen and reviewed the CAC charter. Harada noted there's no link to the FWP Commission in the document. He thinks that should be changed so members can serve as advisors to the commissioners, too. Carver agreed.

Gunderson said CACs weren't set up to perform that function. Peterson asked if the group has a link to the commission through the regional supervisor. Gunderson said he answers directly to Fish & Wildlife Division Administrator Dave Risley and the director's office. Schindler added that any formal recommendations from the CAC would have to be approved by the commission, since it sets policy and oversees the agency.

The commission, Gunderson said, could choose to set up its own advisory council. Schindler said he think commission members wouldn't want to share their power, and "that rankles a lot of people." Stoppa noted that CAC members are free to comment to the commissioners as private citizens. Peterson asked if CAC meeting minutes are sent to all the commissioners. In the past they have only been forwarded to Ron Moody.

Sullivan discussed this year's attrition in the Region's block management program. Only a small number of landowners pulled their land out of the program due to concerns over bison. Many of the properties that were removed simply went through a change of ownership, with the new owners deciding not to sign up.

Holt said his family's Horse Ranch south of Hinsdale remains open to public hunting, even though they're no longer block management cooperators. All people have to do is ask permission, he said.

Sullivan reviewed the season outlooks for big game and upland birds. He added that there are still many concerns about the impacts of West Nile virus on sage grouse populations. Jorgensen said sage grouse numbers appear to be strong from Zortman to the CMR's U.L. Bend.

Peterson said pheasant numbers are down in the Havre area, but sharp-tailed grouse numbers look good and Hungarian partridge numbers remain highly variable. Iversen said bird numbers are generally good in the Culbertson area, but turkeys remain scarce. Hunsley asked for more details about this year's pheasant closure on the Fort Peck Reservation. Herman gave an update.

Sullivan said Hunting District 640 is the only Region 6 district with a liberal number of mule deer doe tags this year. The regional antlerless white-tailed deer tags known as 06-699s have been sharply reduced again, and only 1,000 will be issued. Iversen said there are very few white-tailed deer along the lower Missouri River, but mule deer numbers seem to be fine. Holt noted that low deer numbers across the area have been beneficial to many types of vegetation.

Schindler said lots of folks are upset that FWP is selling any white-tail "B" tags in the Glasgow area, because there's not enough deer. Some people think the extra licenses are being sold just to pay FWP's bills. Antelope numbers are also very low, and FWP should close the season on them.

Sullivan said FWP staff directs people away from low game-population areas through direct contacts and notations in the regional block management guides. Most hunters won't waste a lot of time pursuing deer or antelope in areas where they know numbers have sharply declined.

Gunderson reviewed the status of three pending land transactions – purchase of the Milk River Ranch north of Havre, donation of the Spring Coulee property on the Missouri River below Loma, and the Buffalo Coulee conservation easement. Final purchase of the new Bailey Reservoir Fishing Access Site (FAS) southwest of Havre is underway.

Peterson asked if FWP will still pay the taxes when it acquires private land. Gunderson said if the agency owns fee title, the taxes are still paid. Peterson also asked if the elk herd on the Milk River Ranch property will be destroyed. Gunderson said he expected management of elk in the area to continue the way it is.

Peterson said some people in his area think FWP is going to try and put bison on the Milk River Ranch property if the deal goes through. Many area landowners are against the purchase, he added.

Gunderson gave background on the conservation easement still in effect on the Page-Whitham South Ranch. The easement terms remain in effect even though the American Prairie Foundation (APF) has purchased the land.

Carver asked if FWP plans to put a boat ramp at the Alkali Creek FAS near Malta. That is not likely because of the bank configuration there and the constantly shifting course of Milk River. Carver added that public access on the upper end of Fort Peck Reservoir needs improvement. Johnson from the CMR said the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is always open to suggestions about new sites, but any improvements would also have to be coordinated with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE), which manages the reservoir.

Hunsley said access also needs to be improved along the Missouri River between Fort Peck Dam and Wolf Point. Gunderson said the mouth of the Redwater River is being looked at again as a possible site.

Waldron asked about the status of the controversy over whether the area between Fresno Dam and FWP's Tailwater FAS should be re-opened to the public. The area was closed by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Dalbey said the bureau has not yet changed its stance.

Dalbey also went over the recent spill of water from Fort Peck Reservoir. The event was used to test the integrity of repairs on the reservoir's spillway. Schindler asked if FWP has ever tried to get some type of mitigation from COE for native fish losses caused by construction and operation of the dam. Dalbey said there's no doubt about the losses. Numbers have been discussed with the Corps, but at this point no decisions have been made about mitigation.

Dalbey also that the Fort Peck Reservoir fisheries crew had difficulty with beach seining young-of-the-year fish last summer because of the encroachment of Eurasian watermilfoil, a highly invasive plant species.

Gunderson gave an update on the pending environmental impact statement on statewide bison conservation. Some sites currently being looked, such as the CMR and the Bitter Creek area, are largely managed by federal agencies outside of FWP's control. Garwood, who farms near Nashua, said most people around the area strongly oppose the translocation of any more bison.

Perez and Robinson presented varying viewpoints of the pending settlement terms of the Fort Belknap Reservation's federally-reserved water compact now being considered in Congress. Schindler restated his concerns that non-tribal sportsmen will suffer a loss of public access if the current proposals are approved.

FWP PROGRAM UPDATES

Region 6 program managers submitted written updates to members prior to the meeting. There were no major points of discussion.

CAC ROUNDTABLE

Mark Peterson, Havre – He thinks FWP should rethink having all of the CAC meetings at the Fort Peck Hatchery. Public participation is diminished because the location is not convenient for many people. He added that mountain lion sightings seem to be increasing in his area. There were two reported sightings of wolverines near Rudyard. Numerous swift fox have also been seen. Fresno Reservoir fishing has been very good this year. He's been asked about potential slot limits on Fresno fish. Regarding public access on Fort Peck, he said employees from oil and gas companies have been using up many of the camping sites.

Terry Stoppa, Havre – Someone recently asked him why archery hunters can't use glowing or fluorescent nocks. Schindler, the current vice president of the Montana Bowhunters Association, said the issue is whether the lighting is battery or otherwise electrically charged.

Herman noted that the restriction is only in effect during the archery-only season. Stoppa asked whether bow hunter education certification from another state is valid in Montana. The answer is yes. Someone reported seeing a wolf north of Gildford last year.

Henry Gordon, Chinook – He wonders if “free-roaming” bison would be taxed. Gunderson said any translocated bison would be considered to be wildlife, just like deer and elk. Gordon noted that Ted Turner's bison are taxed, however. Christensen said that's because those animals are classified as livestock, just like cattle.

Gordon said he's seeing lots of white-tailed deer on his property, including does with two or three fawns apiece. But he's seeing very few antelope.

Jim Carver, Malta – FWP biologist Cody Nagel recently told the Fresno chapter of Walleyes Unlimited that the agency might stop planting walleye into the reservoir every year. The Fort Peck Hatchery has lots of support from around the region, and Carver said there's an obligation for the hatchery to regularly stock fish wherever it can. Dalbey said Nagel is looking at walleye sustainability issues on both Fresno and Nelson reservoirs, which each have substantial natural reproduction of walleye.

Carver said the CAC needs to be updated more on the status of aquatic invasive species issues. He was stopped this summer at an inspection station, and the staff was very polite. He then got stopped at another station. Neither stop was a hindrance, however.

Bryce Christensen, Malta – He's here to learn and appreciates being added to the CAC. He also reviewed the terms of APF's purchase agreement on the Page-Whitham property.

Dennis Jorgensen, Zortman – He also appreciates the opportunity to serve on the CAC. As part of his work with the World Wildlife Fund, he recently reviewed fencing on the west boundary of Fort Belknap's main bison pasture. New fencing is being constructed there, and the top wire will be electric.

Steve Schindler, Glasgow – He'd like to see Chinook salmon planted at additional sites on Fort Peck Reservoir. Then they'd presumably show up in more places when they were old enough to spawn. This would help spread out fishing pressure, as well as opportunity.

Schindler also asked about the requirements of landowner elk licenses. Gunderson and Herman said the landowner must own at least 640 contiguous acres, and the land must already be used by elk. The landowner is put into the drawing two times, but the licenses can't take up more than 15 percent of the total number of licenses made available each year.

Steve Harada, Wolf Point – FWP needs to increase boat ramp development, especially on the Milk and Missouri rivers. Kiwanis (Downstream) Campground below Fort Peck Dam and other sites in the area were very busy this past year. Maybe the Flat Lake area of Fort Peck Reservoir could be expanded?

Connie Iversen, Culbertson – She's noticed a lot more hunters coming from the Dakotas this past year. She was also told that the fish cleaning station at the Pines was closed over the recent Labor Day weekend. That was because it got plugged up sometime shortly before then and hadn't yet been repaired.

Landowners in her area have a lot of concerns about the potential spread of fires during the upcoming hunting seasons. Salt cedar was found in the Missouri River bottoms this year. A mountain lion was also spotted by someone who leases her family's land.

Regarding bison, there's been a lot of talk about how well the herd in the Henry Mountains of Utah is doing. A private group recently went there to see for themselves, and they felt like comparisons with the situation here and the situation there were unfair.

Jason Holt, Hinsdale – Along with the CAC, he serves on the CMR's community working group. They're taking a range tour on Sept. 20. He's seeing a lot of badgers and porcupines in his area. The big sage bushes are also looking very good this year. Buffalo berry bushes, however, are now into their second consecutive years without fruit. He said Valley and Phillips counties have been working on rural roads this summer and fall, so access for hunters should be good.

Carla Hunsley, Fort Peck -- As the representative for the Missouri River Country state tourism office, she agrees that recreational access needs to be improved anywhere it can. There aren't any formal hiking trails around the area, and that's another thing that could be improved. Gunderson noted that FWP has some grant money available for trails. Region 6 continues to only have one state park. There certainly could be more.

The next CAC meeting is set for 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Jan. 8 at the Fort Peck Hatchery. Please submit suggested agenda items to Pat Gunderson or Ron Selden.

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